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## Local News

### Dinner at The Ranch

By B.J. Pollock

Friday, March 21, 2008 11:24 AM CDT

Now not only the sights and sounds of the 1800s can be experienced at George Ranch Historical Park, but the tastes as well.

Step back into time and experience an eight-course meal prepared by the park's chef, Nick Castelberg, and dine with Col. William Ryon (aka Matt Driggers) in the home he shared with his wife, Polly.

From the moment guests walk down the coal-oil lantern-lit path and step across the threshold of the Ryons' home, they find themselves time travelers of sorts, with every detail taking them back to the 1860s.

They're greeted at the front door by Ryon/Driggers, who leads them to the parlor for a visit, chatting about the decade in which he lives as they stand around the pump organ or gather at the fireplace.

The colonel tells of his marriage to Polly in the early 1840s and the loss of most of their nine children the following decade, and how the remaining few pick cotton on the family farm. He also tells of the Civil War's affects on life in Fort Bend County.

Welcoming guests to the library, where a chess table, desk, fireplace and other amenities await, Ryon says his generation is unique in this area with its production of tobacco and sugar cane for large profits.

The Ryons' ranch encompasses about 40,000 acres, the colonel says, and is home to herds of horses and mules used for hauling equipment and for breeding. Cattle graze on a huge portion of the ranch, and crops provide both food and income for the family.

It was just such assets that precipitated a prenuptial agreement between William and Polly. Prior to their marriage, she inherited a great deal of land and cattle, so the agreement stated it was to remain hers.

Equally unusual is the fact that both Polly and William work their ranch.

Candles burn throughout their home - there is, of course, no electricity - and another cozy fireplace greets guests in the dining room. Meanwhile, Castelberg is busy cooking the entire meal on a wood-burning stove.

On occasion, Polly joins her husband and their guests for dinner.

Driggers only breaks out of character about half-way through the meal, if guests have questions about the modern-day park and ranch or its rich history.

Within three years, he says, Polly Ryon suffered three major tragedies: the deaths of her husband and daughter in 1875 and 1884, respectively, and a fire that destroyed their home in 1888.

According to Polly's diary, which Driggers said "is very vague," the blaze started when servants were placing logs in one of the burning fireplaces and sparks ignited the rug.

"It's difficult to put out a fire when you've only got one well and no neighbors nearby," Driggers said.

"She was really, really smart," he said of Polly Ryon. "For her to be able to run a ranch from 1875 to 1888 pretty much on her own was a great accomplishment."

Driggers literally grew up on the George Ranch, where his grandmother worked for many years. When he heard the 60th anniversary of the parents of a friend he met at the ranch was approaching, Driggers suggested they be the first to give the new 1860s Evening Meal a try.



The honorees, Bill and Doris Boyd, were accompanied by their son, Billy; daughter, Barbara Kettler; grandson Brandon Boyd; and friends Allison Peyton, Phil Ward, Rocky Parr and others.

They experienced a dinner party typical of a successful plantation family in this area, complete with an elegantly set table with ornate candelabras, and were served a meal that included pumpkin soup and venison sausage quiche - foods that were readily available in the 1800s.

For the trial run, Driggers and Castelberg did everything just as they will for each 1860 Evening Meal.

Castelberg formally greets the dinner guests and announces each course as it is served, reviewing the ingredients and his preparation techniques.

"In times of yore, it was very typical for the head chef to come out and introduce each course," he explains.

Castelberg has been the George Ranch head chef since 2001 and has earned the Directors Award for Outstanding Creativity.

"This has just been a godsend for me," he says. "I get to do what I love to do."

The same can be said for Driggers, who has been a volunteer with the Fort Bend Museum since 1995. Not only is he a docent, but also a member of the archeological society who served on the board.

The meals will be held the third Wednesday of every month, with other nights available for private events.

"One goal -it's a lofty goal - is to be sold out 36 months in advance," said Castelberg, who hails from England.

"We're entertaining the idea of adding afternoon tea as well," he said. "I can envision this becoming very popular with women's bridge clubs, mother-daughter outings, Girl Scouts and the like.

"We want people to come out here and have a very unique experience and tell everybody about it," said Castelberg, adding he hopes the meals will further generate interest in the ranch as a whole. "We're all about living history, and there's not much better way to celebrate history than to eat it."



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