

At Chandler Ranch, a creek and river converge

Guest ranch that flourished in 1930s, then closed for 30 years, reopens to visitors.

TRAVEL By Pam LeBlanc - American-Statesman Staff

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Guests hang out on the patio at Chandler Ranch as the sun sets in July. Pam LeBlanc/American-Statesman

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Highlights

- Chandler Ranch flourished as a guest ranch in the 1950s.
- In the mid-1960s, the ranch operated a nine-hole golf course on the property.
- The ranch re-opened to the public as a guest ranch in 2016. Rates include meals and lodging.
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I'm wading through a chest-deep stretch of Independence Creek in West Texas, my feet slipping a little on velvety, algae-covered stones as I pass carp swirling along the banks.

This pristine, spring-fed ribbon of green slices through historic Chandler Ranch, where I'm hanging my hat for the night. I'm a huge fan of West Texas, but I'm always searching for new windows into its soul. This ranch near Sheffield, founded by Texan Charlie Chandler more than a century ago, is giving me an eyeful.

Chandler ran cattle, sheep and goats here, before his son and daughter-in-law opened it to the public as a fish camp and guest ranch in the 1940s. It flourished in that capacity for several decades, but by the 1980s, a devastating flood and a shift in travel trends took their toll.

Today, a new generation of Chandlers has reopened the property to visitors who paddle, hike, swim and socialize on the patio, where strings of golf ball-size lights glow as the sun fades behind hills. A stay at the 2,500-acre ranch, situated at the environmentally crucial confluence of Independence Creek and the Pecos River, which is protected by a Nature Conservancy easement, means time slows down.

I met Anne Rowes just after arriving on a warm July afternoon. Anne, who now lives in Austin, grew up here, and her brother Joe A. Chandler has spearheaded efforts to bring the guest ranch back to life.

"The vision is for a place where people can live slowly, where they can disconnect from the world and reconnect with each other," Anne's husband, Jeff Rowes, tells me. "It's a place people can walk and fish and sit and wait for the sun to set. This isn't a hotel. This is a family legacy, and people are invited to share in family traditions that have been observed for decades."

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Jeff Rowes loads up a pair of kayaks and we head down to the Pecos River, which serves as the border along one side of the ranch. As we paddle, a leggy blue heron flies ahead, guiding us down a narrow, reed-lined channel that broadens beneath tall limestone bluffs. After an hour, we pass the river's confluence with Independence Creek, pull our boats ashore and start hiking up the creek.

When we return to headquarters, Richard Jasso, the on-site chef, is checking on smoked ribs, brisket and sausage, stirring up potato salad and putting finishing touches on a tres leches cake and buttermilk pie. I sit down with the Rowesses, who explain a little more of the ranch history to me. Charlena Chandler, granddaughter of ranch founder Charlie Chandler, sits down for a spell, too, adding her lifelong perspective. (Charlena and her sister JoBeth Elrod now own the ranch.)

Charlena's parents, Joe B. and Mildred Chandler, turned the property into a guest ranch in the 1940s. Guests spent days fishing and swimming on the river, or rambled over the hills and canyons on horseback. The remnants of Hurricane Alice caused a flood that washed everything away in 1954, but the family rebuilt, and the ranch reopened. In the mid-1960s, the family even installed the only nine-hole golf course in the county, which drew tourists but probably wasn't the most environmentally friendly amenity.

The ranch's popularity faded by the 1980s, though, and in 1991 Joe B. Chandler signed a conservation agreement with the Nature Conservancy of Texas that helped keep it afloat.

"At the time it was like going to bed with the devil, but it was the only way he could ensure it would remain intact," Anne Rowes says of the agreement, under which the creek area can never be sold or divided. The golf course was closed and grass allowed to take over. Income switched from tourism to hunting leases.

I learn something else, too. A stash of gold might be buried somewhere on the ranch.

According to legend, members of Black Jack Ketchum's train-robbing gang buried a cache of gold and silver coins worth \$30,000 somewhere on the ranch in the early 1900s. Charlena Chandler remembers a man coming to the ranch repeatedly to search for the stash when she was a little girl. The loot never turned up, and some folks believe it's still hidden in the hills or caves that dot this rugged land.

Anne's brother Joe A. Chandler, who also grew up at the ranch, revived the idea of a guest ranch three years ago. He says he had such great memories growing up there that he wanted to reopen it to share its beauty and uniqueness with others who love nature.

"As a kid, it was the only ranch that you would get up in morning and one day cut the greens, the next day mow the fairways and the third day get on a horse and round up (livestock)," he says. "It was a really strange combo of being a rancher and golfer."

He reopened the facility in 2016 with three cabins that house between four and six people each. There's still no TV, and guests entertain themselves by swimming, hiking and just chilling out. By the end of next summer, he plans add another cabin and a main house, with a new dining hall, congregating area and hotel-style rooms. In all, the ranch will sleep about 30 people.

"We have so much history there — we've owned the ranch more than 100 years," says Joe A. Chandler. "The water that runs through that ranch is like the blood that runs through our veins. The water really drives people to it. Without that water we'd just be another ranch in that part of the world."

The next morning, I climb into an all-terrain vehicle with Anne Rowes, who drives me around the property, pointing out sites like the shady grove of trees where visitors once camped, the cracked cement slab along the river where they danced under the stars, and a high ridge where we get a bird's-eye view of ranch headquarters.

We turn back when we notice dark clouds building on the horizon. We're lucky. Mother Nature is brewing up a rare desert rainstorm, and as we eat lunch, the skies open up.

When the sun pops back out, I find cousins Ashton and Jordan Stavley, 18, of Brownwood, and Percy Stavley, 15, of Del Rio, swinging together in an oversize hammock near the 1940s-era swimming pool. This marks the third summer they've come to the ranch with their families to swim, hike, kayak, hangout and play billiards in the game room, the oldest building on the property.

"We just really enjoy spending time together," Jordan says, adding that she likes to write, and the ranch provides plenty of inspiration for creative work.

I can relate. I'd like to hole up here for a summer.

Could someone please inform my boss?

IF YOU GO

Chandler Ranch is located 26 miles south of Interstate 10 near Sheffield, at 535 Independence Creek Road. Rates start at \$275 for a cabin that accommodates four people and includes all meals and activities. For more information, call 713-703-6615 or visit chandlerranch.com.

