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Texas Back Roads Scholar shares love, knowledge of Hill Country

by Laurel Robertson

He holds class in a Chevy Suburban rambling along Hill Country back roads. His students come from around the globe and, by the end of the day, they'll know more about this little part of Texas than most people who live here.

Howie Richey, owner and expert guide of **Texpert Tours**, makes the Hill Country landscape come alive for Texas tourists (and the occasional residents) that take advantage of his sweeping knowledge of all things Texan. On any of Texpert's many tours, Richey weaves together the geology, biology, anthropology, archeology, ecology, botany, and history of the area into an entertaining whole.

Participants of his Hill Country tour can expect to learn the source of Onion Creek, the area's newest crop, how seashells got to the top of that limestone bluff, and what the LCRA is.

"It's a hobby that got out of hand," Richey admits from under his wide-brimmed straw hat. His career began with helpful hints for his high school choir trips, growing into college slide shows and informal classes in community schools and the Texas Union. "I signed up for every course about the state in the UT catalog," he remembers, "and finally graduated with a degree in geography." In the last ten years, his wide-ranging interests have flourished into a full-time business of tour design, workshops, and consultation.

Besides the Hill Country, **Texpert Tours** take visitors on adventurous forays to San Antonio and surrounding missions. **Texpert** offers several different Austin tours, including a Pubs and Clubs Nightlife Tour and a full day's excursion around Austin, from the Capitol Building to Lake Travis. Special interest outings can be arranged, such as TV studio and radio station tours, canoe and raft trips, tours of artists' homes and architects' mansions, or hikes into the Barton Creek Greenbelt and other nature preserves. Every **Texpert Tour** features refreshments, maps, souvenirs, and printed schedules.

Known as "the Texas Back Roads Scholar," Richey has been exploring hidden corners of the state his whole life. "As long as I could remember, I always wondered what mystery and romance awaited me down those rough side roads. Since everyone else



wanted to race by on freeways that all look alike, I considered it my bound duty to explore those secret places where history and scenery still lurk. Got my dad to thank for this. He frequently took us down those side roads."

"I grew up in Corpus Christi with sand dunes, salt water, and flat landscapes. For vacations, my dad would take the family to the Hill Country where, even at a very young age, I discovered that this part of Texas was different. The water was fresh. The rocks and ground rose up into the sky. I thought to myself, 'if these two parts of Texas are that different, what's the rest of it like?'"

Richey also benefited from the exploits of his father's brother, Uncle Elmore. "He called himself the Marco Polo of Texas and traveled to every County Courthouse in the state." (How many counties in Texas? "Two hundred fifty-four, of course!" quips Richey.)

Uncle Elmore also introduced his young nephew to the book, *Texas History Movies*, with cartoons that illustrate famous events in Texas history. "As a kid, when we'd go to San Antonio to visit, I'd just devour that book. I could not get enough."

Besides guiding **Texpert Tours**, Richey also serves as the nature program director at Rancho Richey Refuge, a family-owned preserve near Belmont. On its 183 green acres along the Guadalupe River, the Rancho hosts group camping, day hiking, bird watching, nature study, wildlife photography, canoeing, parties, corporate retreats, reunions, and weddings. Its most unusual feature, the Texpert Yurt—a Mongolian-inspired plywood tent, is available for overnight stays. Campers that arrive by canoe or bike enjoy an admission discount.

Summing up his fascination and love for his native state, Richey observes that "Texas has just about everything, but not too much of anything."

For more information or to make reservations, call 512-383 TXXT or visit www.TexpertTours.com.