

{ *Real* BBQ + FORT WORTH *Foodies?* }

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# Texas Highways

THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

## *Dance Halls*

STILL ALIVE *and* KICKIN'





**GRUENE HALL**  
 BUILT IN 1878 AS A SALOON AND SOCIAL HALL FOR AREA COTTON FARMERS, THIS IS BELIEVED TO BE ONE OF THE OLDEST DANCE HALLS IN TEXAS. CHRISTIAN HEPP (1854-1917) BUILT THE HALL UNDER THE DIRECTION OF TOWN DEVELOPER HENRY D. GRUENE, FOR WHOM MANY OF THE FARMERS WORKED. THE CENTER OF THE COMMUNITY'S SOCIAL LIFE FOR OVER A CENTURY, THE LARGE ONE-STORY STRUCTURE FEATURES A "FASSÉ FRONT" ENTRY WITH ASYMMETRICAL WINDOW AND DOOR ARRANGEMENTS.  
REGISTERED TEXAS HISTORIC LANDMARK — 1988

# { Come Together }

## A CULTURAL TOUR OF TEXAS DANCE HALLS

TEXT BY Gail Folkins    PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. Griffis Smith

Summer evenings are a great time for dancing at Luckenbach's dance hall. Opposite, a glimpse inside historic Gruene Hall, which was built in 1878.



**I**T'S A LATE AFTERNOON at Club Westerner, an 84-year-old dance hall in Victoria, and musicians with The Scott Taylor Band are setting up their instruments for the night's show. The sounds of tuning guitars and microphone checks bounce off the walls, just as they have for decades. In the hours to come, dancers will fill the historic hall, absorbing the country music and skimming across the shiny oak dance floor in a counterclockwise motion. It's a ritual that has taken place at dance halls across Texas for more than a century, and judging by the diversity of halls and their fans, it's a tradition that shows promise to persevere as a hallmark of Lone Star culture.

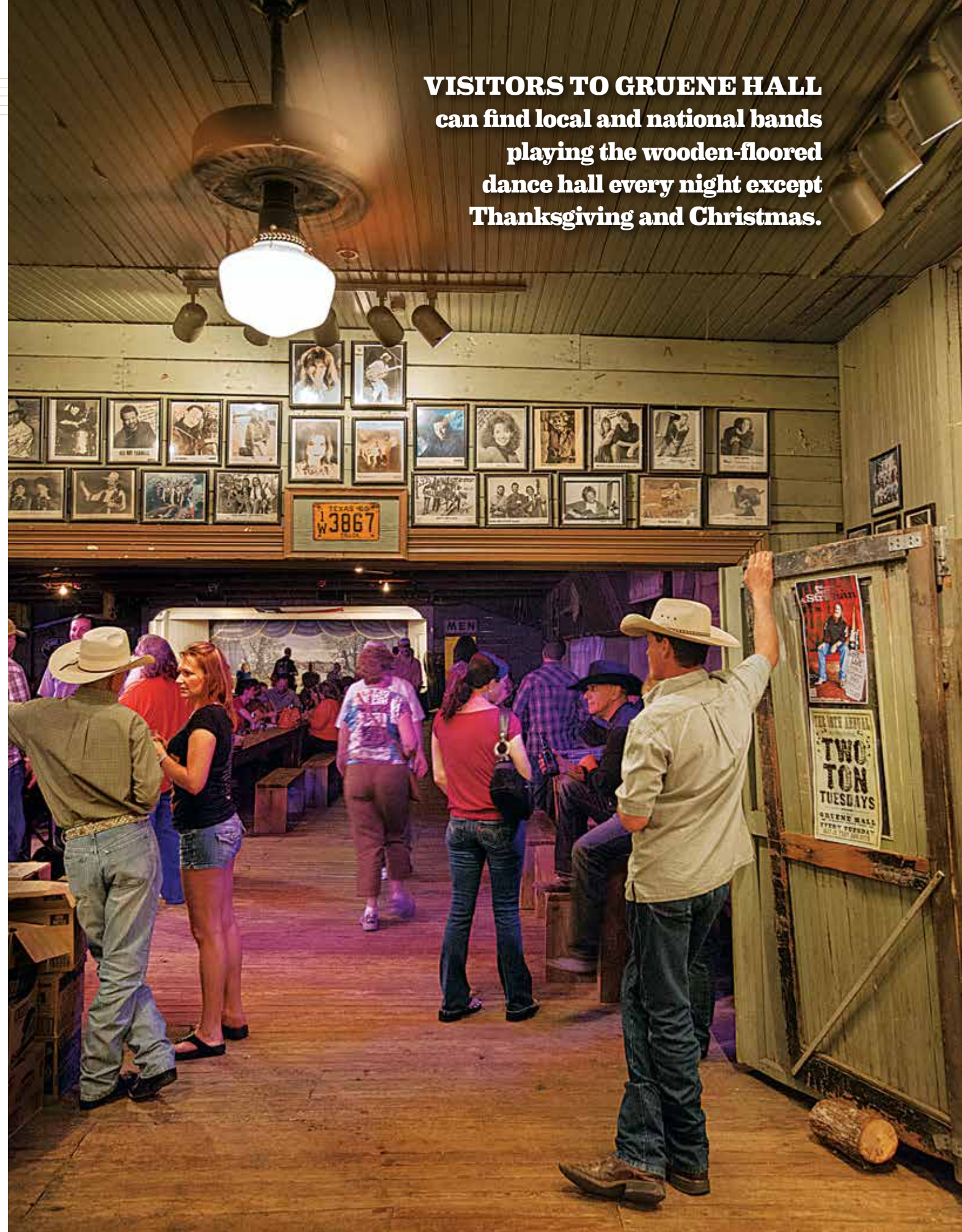
Texas dance halls offer a history as complex and varied as the musical notes drifting through their open doors. Located throughout the state, the halls have their origins in Texas' German, Czech, Polish, Tejano, and African-American cultures. German and Czech immigrants built dance halls throughout Central Texas in the mid- to late 1800s, while in the mid-1900s Mexican-American dance halls sprang up throughout South Texas. Across ethnic groups, these structures provided a venue for people to hold community meetings, as well as a space for relaxation with music and dance. The halls were open in nature, which encouraged cultural crossover, exposed visitors to diverse musical styles, and even fostered the development of new forms of music, such as conjunto.

The impact of Texas dance halls on community, music, and culture continues today. While some historic halls have been closed or repurposed, others still serve as spaces for public and private events. Today's dance hall visitor can experience the cultures of these historic halls and the diverse communities they helped form. »



PHOTO BY MICHAEL AMADOR

**VISITORS TO GRUENE HALL can find local and national bands playing the wooden-floored dance hall every night except Thanksgiving and Christmas.**





Sefcik Hall, Seaton

**TOM SEFCIK HALL**  
*"Established in 1923"*  
 GAMES BILLIARDS COLD DRINKS OPEN EVENINGS 5:00PM TILL ? 254-985-2356 MUSIC DANCING HALL RENTAL



Stephen Dean, co-founder and board member of the nonprofit Texas Dance Hall Preservation Inc., says dance-hall culture is more prominent in Texas than anywhere else. "Dance halls were the lifeblood of small communities as immigration spread across Texas and an integral point of the town's social fabric," he says, adding that visiting dance halls is one of the best ways to help preserve them.

**The first Czech** immigrants settled in Central Texas, particularly in the Fayette County area. Another wave of Czech immigrants established commu-

nities in the north-central region of Texas. While many Czech settlers held dances in their homes, fraternal organizations in the late 19th Century spurred growth of area lodges, or dance halls.

You'll find one of the best examples of a Texas-Czech dance hall at Sefcik Hall in Seaton. Tom Sefcik built the hall in 1923, and his daughter, Alice Sulak, greets patrons these days—when she's not playing saxophone for Jerry Haisler and the Melody 5. Sefcik's features a downstairs bar and a dance hall on the second floor, complete with an elevator for hauling bar supplies and musicians' gear. The

hall is draped with multicolored strings of decorative lights—Sulak put them up one holiday season and decided to leave them—and 1930s-era, backlit glass signs advertising beer, feed, and banking line the walls. Dances, with music ranging from country to polka, take place on weekends.

Alice says music provides the biggest enjoyment of her life, although running a dance hall has its challenges. "It's fun to see the people have a good time and enjoy themselves," she says. "There's also a limit to the beer business; you have to be sensible. When people get rowdy, I put my foot down. Some things you have to swallow, and sometimes you have to tell them how it is."

In La Grange, the Fair Pavilion (formerly the Round-Up Hall), located on the Fayette County fairgrounds adjacent to the Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center, hosts private bookings and community events. Czech settlers originally held weekend dances in this early-20th-Century hall, which features open sides and ample room for dancers and those who want to sit and socialize. Public functions at the hall and surrounding grounds include the Fayette County Fair, which takes place over Labor Day weekend, and the Best Little Cowboy Gathering, held the second full weekend in March.

Outside of La Grange, the KJT Hall in Ammannsville takes its acronym from *Katolická Jednota Texaská* (Catholic Union of Texas), a fraternal Czech organization formed in 1889. Ammannsville and

neighboring communities of Dubina and Hostyn were among the first Czech settlements in Texas, and the vast majority of the settlers were Catholic. The barn-like, white wooden structure with a metal roof and a large "KJT" on its front serves as a community hall for the local St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. Its biggest event is the annual Father's Day parish picnic, featuring polka bands, fried chicken, and bingo.

**German immigrants** arriving in Texas during the early to mid-19th Century settled in the south-central part of the state, later expanding to north-central and west-central Texas. The dance halls they built served as meeting spaces and social centers for fraternal organizations such as the Sons of Hermann.

Scholz Garten in Austin is a restaurant and beer garden that is also home to a dance hall owned and run by Austin Saengerrunde, a singing group established in 1879. With a name that means "singer in the round," Austin Saengerrunde was one of many singing clubs formed by German immigrants to Central Texas in the late 19th Century. August Scholz built the hall in about 1870. Needing a larger space to host their events, Austin Saengerrunde purchased the downtown Austin venue in 1908. In addition to the dance hall, the locale includes a historic six-lane bowling alley, its gleaming floors integrated into the hall itself.

About 50 miles south of Austin lies New Braunfels and the historic district



**YOU'LL FIND ONE OF THE BEST examples of a Texas-Czech dance hall at Sefcik Hall in Seaton. Tom Sefcik's daughter, Alice Sulak, greets patrons these days—when she's not playing saxophone for Jerry Haisler and the Melody 5.**

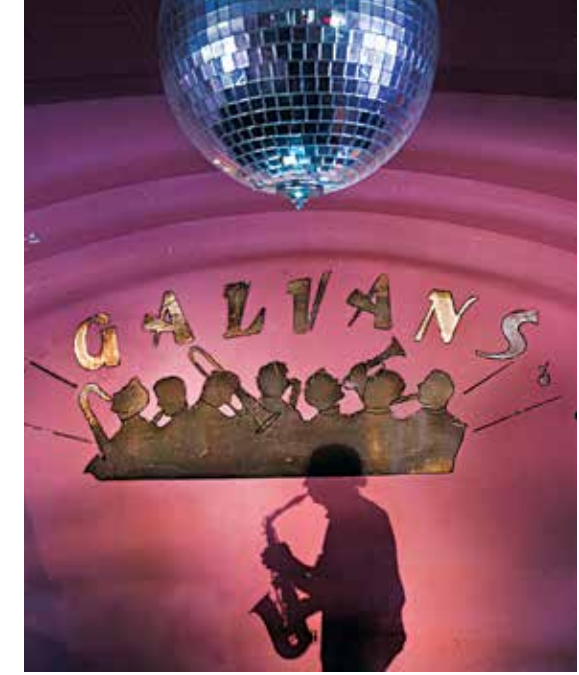


PHOTO BY MICHAEL AMADOR

LEFT: Wright's Park in Schulenburg hosts a Juneteenth celebration and other community events. TOP: In Luckenbach, Cameran Nelson participates in a pickin' circle.

LEFT: Polka bands keep the dancers twirling at the KJT Hall in Ammansville. TOP: The Galvan Ballroom in Corpus Christi.

TH ESSENTIALS

## Texas Dance Halls

TEXAS is home to hundreds of dance halls. To learn more, visit Texas Dance Hall Preservation Inc., [www.texasdancehall.org](http://www.texasdancehall.org). More information on sites mentioned in the story follows.

**Sefcik Hall**, 800 Seaton Rd., Temple, 254/985-2356.

**KJT Hall**, FM 1383 in Ammansville.

**The Fair Pavilion**, 250 West Fairgrounds Rd., La Grange, 888/785-4500; [www.czechtexas.org](http://www.czechtexas.org).

**Saengerrunde Hall**, 1607 San Jacinto, Austin, 512/288-1994; [www.saengerrunde.org](http://www.saengerrunde.org).

**Gruene Hall**, 1281 Gruene Rd., New Braunfels, 830/606-1281; [www.gruenehall.com](http://www.gruenehall.com).

**Luckenbach**, 412 Luckenbach Town Loop, Fredericksburg, 830/997-3224; [www.luckenbachtexas.com](http://www.luckenbachtexas.com).

**Wright's Park**, 1301 James Ave., Schulenburg, 979/212-1128.

**Club Westerner**, 1005 W. Constitution, Victoria, 361/575-9109; [www.clubwesterner.com](http://www.clubwesterner.com).

**Galvan Ballroom**, 1632 Agnes St., Corpus Christi, 361/654-2582.

Little Joe y la Familia and Ruben Ramos. Villafranca's daughter, Debbie Escalante, grew up at Club Westerner and is now a co-owner. She has memories of youngsters sleeping on chairs around the dance floor, using jackets and tablecloths as blankets, as their parents danced the night away. The historic character of the club keeps people coming back, she says. "We've had dances where people will come back 30 years later, and tell us they came here when they were 16, and met their wife or husband. Now they're coming back with their kids and grandkids," Debbie says. "It's nostalgic." **TH**

*Austin writer GAIL FOLKINS is the author of Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit, published in 2007 by Texas Tech University Press. As a steel guitar player, TH Photography Editor GRIFF SMITH enjoys visiting Texas dance halls. But he thinks twice before asking anyone to dance.*

of Gruene, home of Gruene Hall, one of Texas' best-known live-music venues. Henry D. Gruene constructed the hall to serve as a host for community social activities, especially dances, in 1878. In 1975, Gruene Hall was placed in the National Register of Historic Places. That same year, Pat Molak purchased the hall, leading to its continued preservation and the rebirth of the community of Gruene. Today, visitors can find local and national bands playing the wooden-floored dance hall every night except Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Another of Texas' most prominent dance halls is at the Luckenbach store, southwest of Fredericksburg. Luckenbach began with a post office and general store in 1854, expanding to a dance hall, blacksmith's shop, bar, and cotton gin by the late 1800s. The festive site—made famous by the 1977 Waylon Jennings song "Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)"—continues to host musical acts most days. Visitors

can experience afternoon and evening performances in the open-sided hall and oak-shaded outbuildings.

**African Americans** in Texas also have a history of gathering at local halls for community meetings and dances. One of the best preserved is Wright's Park in Schulenburg. Olton and Josephine Wright founded the hall in 1948, and their family has run the place for generations. When Olton's daughter, Ora Mae Wright, began managing the hall in 1960, she continued the musical traditions started by her father and booked blues acts such as Albert Collins. Ora's son, Robert Moore, has managed the hall for the past 17 years, keeping alive its community efforts, such as the Easter egg hunt started by his grandfather, and organizing cemetery cleanups. An annual Wright's Park highlight is the Juneteenth celebration, an event that extends outside the hall with entertainment and a parade to kick off the day's events.

**In South Texas** and the Rio Grande Valley, you'll find a range of dance halls and ballrooms, many of which opened in the aftermath of World War II to cater to young veterans with music and dancing. Regional dance halls helped foster the development of conjunto music, a blend of German accordion-based polka with Mexican-American folk music. The style originated in the late 1800s, grew popular in dance halls, and over time spread beyond them.

In Corpus Christi, the Galvan Ballroom opened in 1949 and hosted jazz and swing acts like the Ralph Galvan Orchestra and Beto Villa and Balde González, as well as conjunto acts such as Paulino Bernal and Tony de la Rosa. Businessman Rafael Galvan Sr. opened the hall and rented it to various social clubs, promoting diverse acts and musical styles. Today, the youngest of Galvan Sr.'s nine children, Bobby, works at the music store below the ballroom. The dance hall upstairs features a

raised bandstand tucked in a pink alcove with a shiny brass background featuring the silhouettes of big-band musicians. Red light bulbs adorn the ceiling, and a mirrored disco ball adds even more flair to the large wooden dance floor.

Back at Club Westerner in Victoria, the 3,000-square-foot dance floor has hosted both musical performances and political gatherings. John Manuel Villafranca, a local postal service employee, started Sunday dances at the Westerner in 1956. The afternoon dances became so popular that Villafranca added "Club" to the name and expanded to night acts including pop bands on Fridays, conjunto on Saturdays, and big bands on Sundays. Villafranca purchased the hall in 1965 and continued to run it until he passed away in 2007. These days, the Villafranca family leases Club Westerner for private events and puts on occasional public shows featuring local and regional performers, such as