
Gladewater Economic Development

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Love Antiques? Gladewater is Your Town!

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Along Gladewater's Main Street, the vendors trade in memories.

But that wasn't always the case. Once a booming oil town, this mini-metropolis near Longview felt the slump of the 1980s with a vengeance.

With the finality of a townwide going-out-of-business sale, Main Street dried up, buildings were boarded up, and once-flush inhabitants found their economic prospects on the grim side of fair to middling.

"We needed to reinvent ourselves," said Margaret Larkin, one of the founding vendors of a movement that helped Gladewater rise from the ashes.

Led by the late Beth Bishop, a number of antique dealers banded together to rebrand Gladewater as a commercial antiques capital.

They started with the Gladewater Mall, now owned by Larkin, that was then (as now) filled with myriad individually owned booths selling vintage items. Over time, more antique arcades and malls opened, as did a number of freestanding antique stores.

At last, not only was the entire Main Street a treasure trove of collectibles, but so, too, were two connecting streets, Pacific and Commerce avenues. Before long, vintage lovers got wind of the prizes to be found, and in 1995 the Texas Legislature officially designated now-flourishing Gladewater as "The Antique Capital of East Texas."

These days the town is chock-a-block with antiques stores. Walkable and quaint, Gladewater is now both a National Main Street and a Texas Main Street town — all charmingly restored down to its shiny streetlights and evocative storefronts.

More than 30 shops or halls embrace a multitude of independent sellers — think close to 200, though the figure's a moving target — all within walking distance from one another.

And not every old item to be sold has been sourced in Texas. A popular stop for Europhiles, Decorate Ornate (202 S. Main St.), for example, offers up architectural marvels, art and design items uncovered by the owner on trips to Italy. Shop for ancient monastery doors, bits of castle balustrades and regal bedposts, just for starters.

Icons from the past still welcome shoppers along Main Street. Daniel's Ladies Wear (107 E. Pacific Ave.) boasts

owners from the same family that opened the store back in the 1930s.

Throughout the antiques district, innovative contemporary stores have a presence as well. At the Screen Door (120 S. Main St.), owner Lola May peddles exotic, hand-blended loose-leaf teas (more than 20 types) — not to mention vintage teapots, china cups and brewing accoutrements.

Her store also includes various vendors carrying all sorts of beautiful items, including full sets of china. (May is adamant that sets should be kept together as they pass from owner to owner.)

All in all, Gladewater is serendipitous for shoppers. But it's not all about spending money or getting good deals (of which Gladewater has plenty). People visit for a nostalgia that feeds the soul.

"When people come here they take a trip down memory lane," said Diane Turner, owner of the 4,500-square-foot Antiques II (112 S. Main St.), a mall awash with 22 dealers. "I love to be back here in the office and hear that whoop and a holler that tells me somebody found something they were searching for."

Antiques II is filled with Texana of every type. Busy booths reflect the personalities of those in charge of them.

"We have a bit of everything," said Turner, who notes that her establishment is a good bet for those with a penchant for vintage kitchen supplies. Here, search for that missing piece of Grandma's flatware or find a replacement for that broken china cup. While stock forever evolves, the booths are packed with such things as

McCoy pottery, cookie jars, vintage linens, primitives and defunct telephones.

At Larkin's Gladewater Antique Mall (100 E. Commerce Ave.), shoppers will find items to fit any budget. Carrying lots of furniture, Larkin's vendors sell everything from primitives to Victorian to mid-century modern.

Glassware, oil paintings, books, pottery and quilts are also popular. One booth even specializes in early tools, carrying some that date back to the 1500s.

"If you think about it, antique dealers are the original recyclers," said Larkin, who also runs a furniture repair shop called Good Old Stuff. "Many of these items were built to last for several lifetimes, but sometimes they need a little help."

At St. Clair Antique Emporium (104 W. Pacific Ave), one of the only malls open seven days a week, manager Melinda Hill shares a secret: It's OK to barter. In fact, people who spend more than \$10 can expect a 10 percent to 50 percent discount. You just have to ask.

At St. Clair, where more than 40 dealers have booths, shoppers can find collectibles such as vintage Coca-Cola and Barbie paraphernalia, jewelry, glassware and furniture. Spacious and airy, the booths at St. Clair seem particularly well organized.

"One thing we're proud of here is that our aisles are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and large

crowds," Hill said.

Talk to Gladewater's affable shop owners, and you'll notice how they support and promote one another. "Well," Larkin said, "it takes a village."

Gladewater renewed itself via a collaborative community effort, and though countless vendors compete with what might seem like similar stock, they seem to believe in carrying on the tradition of commercial solidarity.

"We like to help each other out," Larkin said.

And though the town clearly makes a living from the antiques trade, something about all these talkative shop owners will convince you they're in this business for more than the money. All speak of the joys of sharing memories with customers who can't help but exclaim when they see something that reminds them of a loved one. "There was one of these in my grandmother's kitchen," they'll say. Or, "My dad used to have one of these."

May of the Screen Door relates that some folks like to come into her shop simply to touch an antique hoosier cabinet she has in stock, if just for a minute. "They connect with their past here," she said. "And, sometimes they share their memories. And when they do, I feel like I've made new friends — maybe even family."

The busiest shopping day of the year

In Gladewater, that's the second Saturday in November, which this year falls on Nov. 12. From 5 to 9 p.m., the entire town celebrates the season with a free open house. Lights and carolers set a holiday mood while shoppers stroll from shop to shop.

Everybody serves food and drink, so store owners say the event is more like a progressive supper than a shopping spree. Some lucky shoppers will win prizes such as a \$200 shopping spree.

For more information, visit www.gladewaterchamber.com.

Shop owners recommend...

Restaurants

Linda's Place. Sandwiches, homemade bread and salads. 104 S. Main St.

The Fork. American fare, hamburgers to steak. 111 N. Main St.

La Taqueria Don Omar. Interior Mexican. 101 E. Commerce Ave.

Alba's Kitchen. Italian. 125 S. Main St.

Guadalupe's Mexican Restaurant. A Tex-Mex kitchen that's a town tradition. 101 E. Pacific Ave.

Lodging

The Walker Manor. This centrally located bed-and-breakfast occupies a gorgeous Victorian house with lovely gardens. 214 E. Commerce Ave. www.walkermanortx.com/bandb.html.

Entertainment

If you tire of shopping, step into the Whisenhunt Center, a restored church turned art gallery and concert venue. 201 E. Quitman Ave. www.whisenhuntcenter.com.

For a complete list of shops and more information, visit www.gladewaterchamber.com. Most stores are closed on Mondays.

How to get there

Gladewater is at U.S. 80 and U.S. 271 (which is Main Street). It is about 105 miles east of Dallas and about 13 miles west of Longview.