

# Rocksprings

by Jeremy Scroggins



I order the bacon cheeseburger with fries and a Dr. Pepper; I'm kind of on vacation and it's not like there's any other option. I'm in Rocksprings, Texas with my fiancée and we just walked to King Burger from the other side of town. It took us almost three minutes.

"Tomorrow's 9/11," Mel says.

"Oh wow. It is," I say. I honestly hadn't realized; Austin doesn't remind its citizens of such things.

The dry erase board to the left of the ordering counter pulled the event back into our minds. *"We will not tire. We will not falter. We will not fail."* - G. Bush 9/11.

The dining area is the size of a large living room, smells inexplicably like nothing, and is pleasantly cool. We sit at one of the four bright orange booths with light wood laminate tables among the other tables and chairs this same orange, as orange as orange



gets. The short curtains above the window catch my eye as the fan causes them to sway.

Woodland camouflage curtains. Interesting. They match nicely with the man sitting at the table next to me wearing his dark woodland camouflage ball-cap, faded camouflage t-shirt, bright camouflage shorts, and, of course, his camouflage Crocs. The perfect preseason whitetail hunter.

I look to the clock up on the wall to my right, not that I care what time it is, but it's there and it's moving and ticking. A Spurs Clock. Next to it, a Spurs 2014 champions poster, a 2006-2007 Spurs champions plaque, a plywood cutout of Texas painted grey silver with the Spurs logo, a black framed signed picture of a trophy, and a Kawhi Leonard poster. And in the middle of all of it, a large brown framed picture of a three year old girl wearing a pink princess dress and a happy birthday tiara.

"Mom loves the Spurs," Christie says. She notices my noticing. It's the kind of observation that makes her the perfect owner, server, and mom. Her son is waiting tables. Her other son plays football, number 75, a mighty Angora (I don't know what an Angora is). It is her three-year-old daughter in the brown frame; the princess photo shoot is a birthday gift that she seems to regret due to its cost.

It is her football son that she dotes on. "They come in every Friday at 12:20," she says. "They take up this whole half." She shows us with her arms. "I call that my football corner. It helps get 'em motivated." *Dedication + Motivation = Success*, one of six handmade posters explains. Paper cutouts of Angora bullhorns with each player's number are just shy of being



symmetrically lined from ceiling to table height.

Eight columns, all the same, different numbers in Sharpie.

Beyond the football corner off to the left hang randomly spaced photos of various people: of a man in Army class-A dress, a memorial portrait of a young woman, a picture of a man holding a woman tight at his side, three young girls smiling madly, a large group of folks in an informal group shot, and maybe a dozen others of the like.

Christie hands me my burger.

"This is damn good sweet tea!" Mel says.

"Hotel!" Was my first impression of Rocksprings. I called earlier this morning and that sweet, enthusiastically competent voice answered. At first I thought the singular word was used to insinuate a singular hotel in the town, but it may just be that the line clicked in after she was able to say "Historic Rocksprings..." Old and forgotten towns lose a couple seconds in translation. Debra Wolcott runs the place with her husband. They have been running the place since 2009 and this year the hotel is 100 years old.

"The town used to be the mohair capital of the world with one of the largest Angora goat populations," she tells me.

"What's mohair? What are Angora goats?"

"It's that super soft fluffy stuff. If you ever get your hands on it, it's worth a lot."

"Really? I've never heard of it, or Angora goats. What is it used for?"

"Oh, yeah! It's crazy really. It's used for lots of things. Mainly clothes. Too bad they all left here."

"How did that happen?" Mel says.

"The ranchers slowly left or sold off the goats to other more profitable places. They either left with them or left to find other work. We still have some around, but it isn't what it used to be," she says.

"Rocksprings would have gone under, but people bought up the land for small ranches. Lots of hunters now. You'll see them around. Season's coming up. We've also got The Three Sisters. Talk about that and people will be impressed."



The Three Sisters is a premier motorcycle route. "People come from all over the world to ride through here. I get people staying here all the time really. Either for the riding or the goats, or the bats, or who knows. Once two gentlemen from Europe stayed here. They were in the sitting room one afternoon taking their toddies." She gestures out to one of the many sitting rooms. I assume she means the one with the dry bar fixings and tea arrangements. An old wax butler holds a tray out with a few stout glasses by the bar. Seven teapots are lined up on the

buffet across the room. Not the English kind. The oriental kind, I think. Like the kind you need to pour hot tea on to keep in good condition. Squat, beautiful little things.

"I was doing my books out here when I heard a *clap clap clap* outside." She gestures with her other hand out the front window. "A white horse was trotting down the middle of the road."

"Did it have a rider?" I ask.

"No. And I thought, now this would be something for these men to see."

She took great pleasure in hosting and facilitating travelers. She enjoyed learning about us and about others, but she really enjoyed letting the Rocksprings norm hit us foreigners like the uncanny.

Debra and her husband moved here from Houston. They wanted to get away from the city and run a bed and breakfast in the hill country. They searched the area for a decent place to live that wasn't overrun by tourists and didn't cost a fortune, but was nice enough. Rocksprings hit the mark. They first moved to the area on a ranch outside of town. Debra then acquired a small lot that used to be a restaurant that used to be a bank. They stripped away the restaurant; the boards high on the walls, opening up the old windows; and the acoustic tiles, revealing four more feet of vertical space and heavily aged tin ceiling tiles. It had more promise, but more work than they knew. She checked into the building across the street to fix up the place, the hotel.

"Yeah. I booked myself here, and stayed here until I finished the renovations. It saved a lot of time from me going back and forth from the ranch," she says.

Not too long after, the Wolcotts bought the hotel from Mildred Fleischer Williams and made it their own. New wood floors, new paint. New furniture, full of decorations. She walks us through each common room.

"This is the dining room." A long wooden table, eight ornate wooden chairs with blue upholstered seats, an empty buffet, and large framed portraits that would have been gaudy in any other room. The floor creaks as we move on to the next room through the old solid wood door with the small brass knob, the kind that feels like the past.

The small room was plucked out of the 19th century's fascination with orientalism. A large couch dominates the room with its claw-like legs, intricate wooden framing and upholstery that pulls me into a



Brontë novel. Oriental tapestries, dancing with thickly painted strokes of nature, hang on either side of the only window in the room, leaving limited white space on the wall. Two matching chairs sit opposing one another with each their own small tables, with each their own ceramic lamps, with each their own scene of old East Asia. A few pictures sit here and there, mostly black and white, and all, I presume, somehow related to the Wolcotts. We tour more rooms: another dining room, a storeroom, a pantry, a commercial kitchen, a confounding little library, and the big sitting room, the one for toddies. Each full of little intricacies, of little fascinations. Debra forgot to mention the place may be haunted.

"Good luck," the girl at the register says. A quick stop at The Lowes Market for some wine to enjoy later in the sitting room. Debra warned us that places don't stay open around here long. We passed a few dozen deer feeders and hunting stands walking in. Pallets of corn feed sat

stacked up where the special sale items would be in most grocers. The girl also works at the hotel as a housekeeper. "I've never stayed there. Heard it's haunted. But, you guys'll be fine."

"They're friendly ghosts," Larry says, our guide for the Devil's Sinkhole to see the millions of bats fly out. "They won't bother you." We watch the bats swirl up and into the night and hear the



whooshing of their combined mass flapping and pushing the wind as they rise out of their huge hole. It's a rushing water of living, flying rodents. We watch the bats dart and eat the bugs around. We watch the Great Horned owls swoop and eat the bats over and over. Swoop. Land. Eat.

All I can think when I lay down that night is the time when the hotel was used as a hospital for the seriously ill during a flu epidemic in 1918, and the time when the town was hit by a massive tornado in 1927 killing a whole third of the town, and that I'm too old to even consider ghosts. *They won't bother us. We're guests.*

