



Couple renovates Mineral Wells dude ranch into an artists' retreat

Ranch offers a rustic recharge

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MINERAL WELLS, Texas – At first it doesn't seem sensible that anyone would elect to take on a 90-minute commute each morning, but to Jimmy Baldwin it's a no-brainer.

An art director for the Richards Group, a marketing, public relations and advertising agency located in central Dallas, he's out the door and on the road at 5:30 a.m. from his home in Mineral Wells. And at the end of each day, Mr. Baldwin heads back to the ranch.

"I realized people do this in Chicago and New York, and they don't even live in a place like this," Mr. Baldwin says.

The "this" he's referring to is his historic Dilbeck-designed dude ranch called the Double J Hacienda & Art Ranch that he and his wife, Jane, bought in 2004. They've given up the city life to live in what they call "the North Texas Hill Country." The minute a visitor steps inside the Double J's front gate and spies the Spanish tile, Brazos river views and rustic cedar posts supporting the courtyard's colonnade, Mr. Baldwin's three hours back and forth seem plausible. Built in 1939 for Elmer and Dorothee Seybold, the Double J was originally known as the Seybold Ranch, a dude ranch with guest rooms, trail rides, chuck wagons and a steak house. This is not a ranch-style house; this is a ranch-style motel.

"When I first saw the place I was like, 'Oh yeah, it's just about four times too big,' " Mrs. Baldwin remembers. But neither she nor her husband is known to shy away from a challenge.

On top of his day job, Mr. Baldwin also is a singer-songwriter. His album *Somebody's Nobody* made it to the Top 40 Americana chart last year. Mrs. Baldwin is a yoga therapist, poet and columnist for two children's magazines, including *North Texas Kids*, under the pseudonym "Jungle Jane," a name referring to her years as an anthropologist studying the Maya in Belize. But the ranch's original owners, the Seybolds, would have matched the Baldwins' quirky résumés. Mrs. Seybold was a former fashion model and the daughter of a U.S. ambassador to Mexico; Mr. Seybold was a jack-of-all-trades: blacksmith, hide-tanner and famous sharpshooter. His most famous gun trick – something

to do with a mirror, an axe and splitting bullets – landed him a guest spot on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* .

"He was like Davy Crockett," says Mr. Baldwin. "This whole place, he built. He blacksmithed all the hinges and lamps."

Lucky for the Baldwins, most of Mr. Seybold's hand-wrought fittings survived, and the furniture in the main meeting hall is original. No one had touched the place in 20 years. After a Seybold Ranch heyday, hosting guests including John Wayne, Bette Davis and Ronald Reagan, the era of the dude ranch lost favor. Around that time, Mineral Wells, once known as a luxurious resort city where "America drinks its way to health" due to the mineral water, became too expensive for families suffering through the Depression. The final blow to the area came when the glamorous 14-story, 450-room spa hotel in downtown Mineral Wells, the Baker, closed in the 1960s.

In 2003 when the Baldwins stumbled upon it, the ranch was decayed and forgotten; in fact, many locals didn't even know it existed. Mr. Baldwin happened to be in the area scouting for a location to shoot his music video when a friend pointed him toward the old Seybold place.

"What we needed was a house that was falling down. That was this place," Mr. Baldwin says. "And when we finished shooting, my friend said, 'I think this guy needs to sell this place fast.' "

And then things started clicking. Around this time, the Baldwins realized they were looking for more than a weekend get-away house, and they hatched an idea. They decided to create an "outpost where we and others can come together and rejuvenate, to be inspired and to create," Mrs. Baldwin says.

"This intention was and still is our main motivation for the move and the life we are creating here."

From that moment forward, the Baldwins say serendipity has been with them. The same week they learned they could buy the ranch, they also were told about the possibility of adopting a baby. About six months later, the same day they closed on the ranch, they officially adopted daughter Ruby, now 4.

"We got the Double J the same day she became a Baldwin," says Ruby's father.

Since then, the couple has slowly been working toward their goal. The 75,000-gallon pool was filled in; guest bathrooms updated and modernized; a labyrinth for meditation and prayer has been constructed. Mrs. Baldwin teaches yoga in a small studio above the front gate, and an art gallery with several shows a year is adjacent to the entrance. They held their first retreat almost a year ago.

In the future, the Double J also will have a small pool for Watsu (a type of water massage) and aquatic body work, a full-size yoga center and a recording studio, among other ongoing projects.

"This is a place where you can get grounded and relax," says Mrs. Baldwin.

Yet the Double J is not a bed and breakfast. The facility is rented as a retreat site only to art- or therapy-related groups, in advance.

"This is what works best for what we want to do here at the ranch," Mrs. Baldwin says via e-mail. "We found that when people rent the space out for their retreats, they prefer to rent the whole space to keep the group cohesive."

The Double J is open infrequently to the public for music and literary events. On those occasions individual rooms may be booked. For instance, Dallas novelist Will Clarke, author of *Lord Vishnu's Love Handles*, is scheduled for a reading in the spring.

The Baldwins liken their idea to the Chautauqua movement that began in upstate New York. In the late 19th century, speakers, musicians, entertainers, preachers and artists gathered to improve the local population's minds and bodies. That description suits Mrs. Baldwin just fine.

"That's what we are, a modern-day Chautauqua set in the Old West," she says.