

# Travel



Thursday, April 10, 1986 O&E

(T-7D, Ro-10A, B, F-10, S, P, Q, C, W, G-8A)B9C

## Gilley's: still the place for fun, Texas style

PASADENA, Texas — "Ride the Bull at Your Own Risk!" proclaims a sign at the base of El Toro. Switched off, El Toro is obedient, innocuous — no more than a worn saddle bolted on a metal rack. But turned on, El Toro is ruthless — bucking, spinning, jerking, tossing.

That 600-pound hunk of mechanical bull, the one John Travolta immortalized in "Urban Cowboy," is the heart of Gilley's Club, the craziest, dancegiest, brawlgiest, biggest honky-tonk in Texas.

Gilley's is 20 miles from downtown Houston along Spencer Highway. Its massive parking lot is usually jammed with pickups, semi-trucks, motorcycles and tour buses along with Mercedes, BMWs, Cadillacs and plain cars.

The club boasts six huge bars, 25 pool tables, 120 pinball and electronic games, 500 tables, 3,000 chairs, a dance floor, bandstand, souvenir center, western store and bull arena (there are three motor-driven bulls, each surrounded by battered foam rubber pads). There's also an indoor arena that seats 13,000 for rodeo shows every Saturday night.

THE FOLKS have 17 hours to drink, dance and raise hell — 9 a.m. to 2 a.m. every day of the year. Cover charges run from \$2 to \$15, depending on entertainment. A dining area adjoins the cavernous club; an 18-ounce T-bone is \$12.55; eggs, hash browns, sausage or bacon and toast are \$3.75 from midnight to 3 a.m.

All types press through the double doors, mostly duded up in Western attire — jeans, boots, shirts, cowboy hats. Jeans mean skin-tight, and the real cowboys scuff at designer labels and decorative seams. These Marlboro men wear work Levis. And they are in the minority among Gilley's beer-swilling, heel-kicking Saturday night crowd, which often numbers 5,000.

Boots are Texan — that is, good leather — with walking rather than riding heels. The variety is staggering, from work-a-day to fancy stitched blue, beige and mauve boots. Shirts are cotton with pearl snaps. Prairie skirts, mostly jeans style, are popular with women.

BUT THE real struttin' stuff is headgear. Hats with high crowns and slight creases, with low crowns and sloped-back creases, with popped-up crowns and no creases. Wide brimmed, flat-trimmed, curved, curled, straw, leather, trimmed with a spray of feathers. In Texas, hats make the man.

Music, of course, is country-western. The Texas two-step and waltz dominate; the Cotton-Eyed Joe is also popular. From the stage, at three minutes to two, in the morning, country-western star Mickey Gilley announces, "Last call for alcohol. Motel time, y'all."

Then, running a finger over the piano, he and his Urban Cowboy Band play "Goodnight Irene." Gilley's traditional closing song. As the last



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'The craziest, dancegiest, brawlgiest, biggest honky-tonk in Texas'



The legendary Gilley's is open 17 hours a day every day of the year for such things as drinking, dancing, conversing, listening to music, riding the mechanical bulls, playing pinball and electronic games and punching the punching bags.

ma'am, we used to have a lot of fights. But the punching bags have cut the fighting way down."

Cryer says the club sees every type of individual — slick New Yorkers, wide-eyed midwesterners, high-spirited old folks, Californians, movie stars, truck drivers, lawyers, doctors, rodeo hands, Texans of any kind and, of course, the "Gilleyrats" — the regulars.

GILLEYRATS ARE urban cowboys. Most work in construction jobs or petrochemical plants. "They're the gang who knock sparks

off each other's hearts arm wrestling," Cryer explains. Hanging over it all is a brightly-

lighted sign that states: "The hottest beer and coldest waitresses in town." Beer is indeed a hot item. A bottle runs \$1.30. Lone Star is popular, as is Gilley's. Yup, Gilley's even has its own beer in 12-ounce cans and bottles, brewed by the tiny Speotzi Brewery in Shiner, Texas. According to Cryer, the club "sells the heck out of it."

Another popular Gilley's item is women's underwear with the famous Gilley's red script emblazoned across the front and back. You can also buy Gilley's belt buckles, posters, buttons, mugs, ashtrays, neon signs, blue jeans, western boots, jackets, bumper stickers and T-shirts declaring, "I rode the bull at Gilley's."

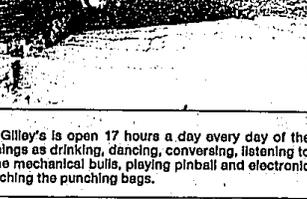
FOR THE tame of heart, there's always the non-bucking bull. The fee: \$4 per Polaroid shot. To tackle El Toro himself costs \$2. A guy sitting on a wooden chair, snuff tucked under his bottom lip and spitting into a tin bucket, operates the controls. The best El Toro riders are cowboys with rodeo experience. There are 10 speeds. As a rule, women are not thrown. A real long ride is 40 seconds.

Cryer has never even sat on El Toro, let alone ridden it. "I'm too old to mess with that critter," he says. Cryer seems untrifled by the fuss and fame "Urban Cowboy" brought to Gilley's and likes to understate his unusual nightclub.

"How would I describe Gilley's?" he asks. "It's just an interesting place where you come and do your thing — shoot pool, ride the bull, drink, chase one another, dance. It reminds me of a three-ring circus.



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