

Be Scarlet O'Hara for a day

Stay at Hearne's elegant Belle Oaks B&B mansion

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REPORTER

At the opulent end of Robertson County B & B's, it's hard to match Belle Oaks, a mansion in the woods a few miles south of Hearne on River Ridge Road. From its graceful "maiden"—topped fountain in the center of the circular drive to the swimming pool that seems to drop off into the deep woods behind the mansion, Belle Oaks is a unique combination of elegance and southern comfort and charm—all three floors of it.

Owners Marilyn Willie and daughter Spring Janke designed Belle Oaks themselves, incorporating every feature of a perfect weekend get-a-way they could think of and implement. And since Willie is an artist and Janke an engineer, they came up with a wonderful combination of elegance and functionality.

But designing wasn't the end of it. They painted, scored and stained concrete, created and hung a ceiling, faux painting, papered—in short, they were their own interior design team and crew. The results are breath-taking.

Marilyn and Spring built Belle Oaks in 2005 as a home for Marilyn and a part time B & B. Since both work for Texas A & M—Spring in the Engineering school and Marilyn for the former students association—they have typically



Belle Oaks offers the ultimate in southern comfort to B&B guests.

photo / Melissa Freeman

targeted Aggies as patrons. You can bet each one of the seven guest rooms with adjoining baths will be full for every home game this season. It's also a favorite spot for student organization parties.

But, says Marilyn, it's not just a place to accommodate Aggie sports fans. Some of her favorite overnight guests are the scrapebook aficionados who come to work—all day and all night. When they come into the dining room (which is typically bathed in soft light in the morning), they've worked hard enough to tackle the full breakfast Marilyn and Spring provide ("we both like to cook," said Marilyn)—eggs,

bacon and sausage, biscuits and gravy, yogurt and fruit, muffins—lots of food.

"We've also had a deposition in the library," said Marilyn, and with its book-lined walls, long table, and marble fireplace at the end, its a perfect place to take depositions.

Belle Oaks sits on over 23 acres of beautifully wooded, rolling hills. The soil is sandy—perfect for pine and magnolia trees, but not necessarily the best soil for a 8,000 square foot house. To make sure the house doesn't shift, Willie and Janke anchored it to ten-foot piers, driven into the soil. "It's not going anywhere," said Marilyn.

After guests drive through the gate, around the fountain, and into the parking area, Marilyn or Spring are likely to greet them at the top of a tall staircase leading up to a wide front porch and the foyer or "grand entrance." Inside, one sees an antique crystal chandelier hung in the center of a mural depicting cherubs flying around its base. The mural, which Marilyn painted for the grand entry's ceiling, introduces a theme carried throughout the house—the ladies of Marilyn's family, her mother (the flamboyant one) and her sisters. The upstairs rooms are also a reflection of these ladies'

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The Belle Oaks dining room has the gracious living look - it's also the place to enjoy a south breakfast - eggs, grits, biscuits, gravy, the works. photo / Melissa Freeman

Belle Oaks

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personalities, each room named for a different sister. Aunt Mary was the musician and the bathroom attached to her name-sake room is papered in sheet music.

Marilyn explains that she grew up in Milam County near Cameron, nurtured by her mom and her aunts, and she had them all in mind when she built Belle Oaks. And though she's on the other side of the river, the Robertson County acreage a realtor helped her find is exactly what she had in mind.

It may be impossible to describe Belle Oaks adequately, but here's what one ad says, "... Step into the grand entrance to be greeted by antique chandeliers, hand painted murals, and drink in the magnolia scented atmosphere, reminiscent of the old South lifestyle. . . . Mingle in the formal living and dining rooms, or linger in southern rocking chairs on the picturesque porches. Prepare meals in the state-of-the-art gourmet kitchen. With multiple outdoor activities, such as swimming, sunning and horseback riding to choose from, Belle Oaks Mansion will surely satisfy in the slow southern way."

Belle Oaks features a ground and first floor wrap-around porch with rocking chairs, loungers and tables with chairs for outside dining; five unique but typically more feminine bedrooms on the second floor—each with its own color scheme, antique furniture, and queen-sized bed—and two slightly more manly rooms on the ground floor. The ground floor Stewart Suite with its big screen tv, king-sized bed and sofa sleeper also features passage into the game room (pool table and swimming pool accessories) and out to the patio and pool with hot

tub. It is probably about the most luxurious and well-appointed accommodation one can get in these parts. Want to impress the socks off of someone? Rent the Stewart Suite for a weekend—preferably while its still warm enough to enjoy the pool. The pool/patio area looks like it belongs behind an Italian villa.

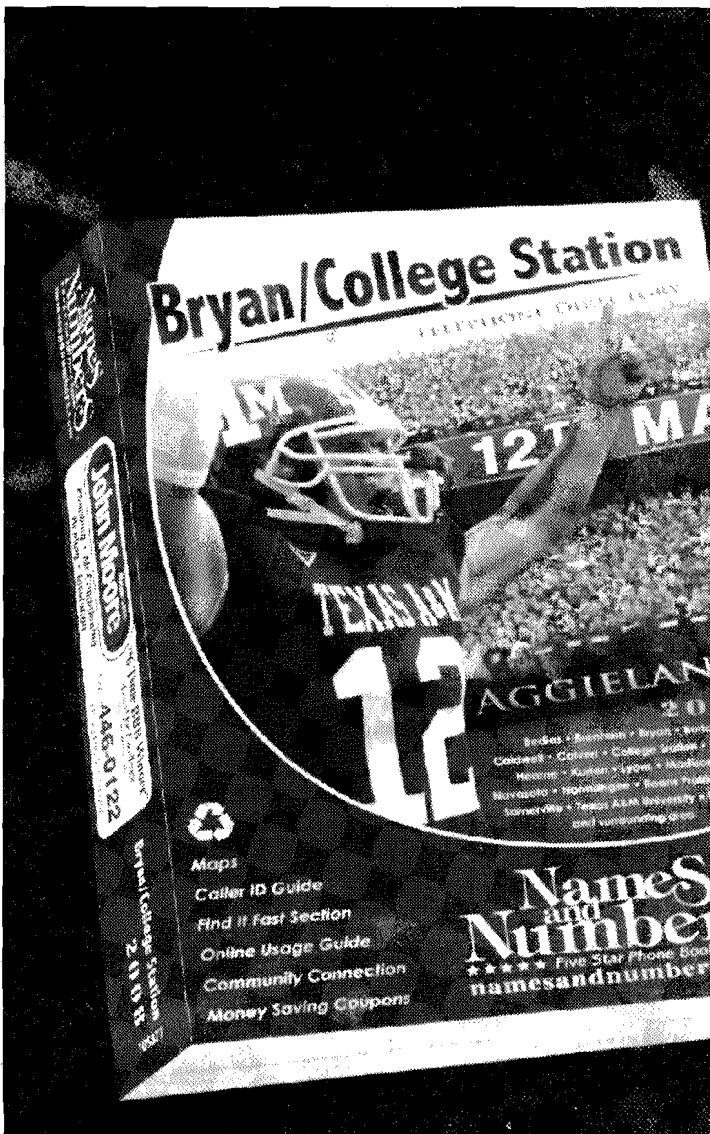
The common rooms on the first floor include a gourmet kitchen a good restaurant would die for (marble-top counters, commercial grade six burner stove), the light-filled, spacious dining (sun streams in from the screened in porch) and living rooms with the small (but also beautifully bright and gold-accented) formal dining room, and the library with its darker, reddish tones, polished wood and more subdued lighting. Fireplaces warm several rooms, including the library and living room

Marilyn and Spring also have their bedrooms on the first floor; their private living quarters can be cordoned off from the rest of the house.

Belle Oaks is handicapped accessible. It has its own elevator. The stock tank is loaded with catfish (take your fishing pole) and the butler's pantry is opened all day and all night with snacks and drinks both hot and cold (yes, it even has a warming bin). And Marilyn is a gracious hostess and good company.

It's hard to believe and a lot of frequent guests do not want to believe it, but Belle Oaks is for sale. Marilyn, who works her other full-time job, said it just got to be too much. But she is still taking reservations for now.

For more information on the house and grounds, go to Sotheby's International Realty website at www.sothebysrealty.com.



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