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by Tech. Sgt. Pat McKenna
photo by Tech. Sgt. John McDowell

You don't have to drive a pick-up truck, wear a cowboy hat or line dance the "Boot Scootin' Boogie" to enjoy a tour at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M.

But it couldn't hurt.

That's because Cannon is smack dab in the middle of cattle country, only a mile or so downwind from one of the region's many feed yards. Outlaw Billy the Kid is buried nearby, and yonder is where Comanche Indians blazed a trail across the desert.

The land here in the high plains of east-central New Mexico is covered with sagebrush, cactus and yucca, but stripped of trees and flatter than a dead rattlesnake on a four-lane highway.

Seven miles away is Clovis (population 31,484), erected in 1906 by the Sante Fe Railroad as a terminal. You can still hear the clatter of locomotives as almost 200 trains a day chug through this arid outpost.

A convoy of Dodge Rams, Chevy Silverados and Ford three-quarter-ton 'dualies' cruise down Prince Street - Clovis's main drag - like Rolls Royces on Rodeo Drive. Two features dominate the city's skyline: the derelict Hotel Clovis and the Peavey grain elevator, which vie for honors as the town's tallest structure.

By now, you've probably gathered that Clovis is what Marie Osmond might call "a little bit country." But city slickers shouldn't be scared away, nor should airmen steer clear of a Cannon assignment, because of its cowboy character. The base and region offer much, and those willing to sample the Southwest for a spell soon discover its advantages. You don't have to chew Redman, brand cattle or punch doggies, unless, of course, you have a hankerin' to.

"Part of the Air Force experience is getting a flavor of different cultures, whether you're in Japan, Korea, Germany or Clovis, New Mexico. That's what the military is all about," said Col. Michael J. Koerner, 27th Fighter Wing commander. "Every place you go in the service, you'll find something different. I suggest you get to know what's available in the Southwest. Go to a rodeo, go to a chili cookoff and

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immerse yourself in this lifestyle."

One person who took the colonel's recommendation to heart is Master Sgt. Silvio Ayars. This one-time tenderfoot grew up in south New Jersey listening to heavy metal bands like Aerosmith and Led Zeppelin. But he quickly adjusted to life in the wild West. Today he's a changed man, a country convert. You're more likely to hear him say "y'all" before "you'se guys" or shout a "howdy" before a "yo."

"During Desert Storm, a lot of the fellas were playing country music in the Khobar Towers [dormitories]," said Ayars, the services squadron first sergeant. "I never listened to it before, but I bought a couple of tapes. Now I really enjoy the music as well as the country style. I'm going to Jersey in a few weeks, and I'll be wearing my cowboy hat. My parents'll have a fit."

The "first shirt" admits new arrivals might need to scout around before they're able to exploit the area's riches, adding that many activities also demand a road trip.

"Cannon is like an oasis," Ayars said. "On my first trip here, I drove hours upon hours and saw absolutely nothing until I got to Cannon. If you've got a car or know someone with a car, you're good to go."

Airman 1st Class Avery Morgan discovered rock climbing while at Cannon. A course at the base's outdoor recreation center piqued the interest of the 22-year-old radar maintenance specialist, who is now addicted to this extreme game. He owns \$500 worth of equipment and has scaled cliffs at Sandia Peak, Sitting Bull Falls and Hueco Tanks.

Senior Airman D.J. Clay devotes her leisure time to riding and caring for her quarter horse "Ti." She and her husband, a professional rider for a local feedlot, compete almost every weekend in team roping, which involves two riders working in tandem to lasso a steer around its neck and hind legs and immobilize it as quickly as possible. The Clays own a collection of belt buckles for their equestrian efforts.

"In team roping, winners aren't given trophies, they're awarded belt buckles. I never wear mine because I don't want to seem like a hick," said D.J., whose recent re-enlistment ceremony was conducted on horseback.

Another Cannonite who horses around on the weekend is Tech. Sgt. Chris Heil. The weapons maintainer saddles his spare moments to the upkeep of 13 steeds on Hebron Ranch. But he's got a lot of help. The ranch is a refuge for at-risk children, who learn respect, responsibility and accountability through caring for horses. Heil, a 522nd Fighter Squadron member, is one of about eight base volunteers at Hebron.

He admits he needed coaxing before he'd even approach a horse. "I'm from Cleveland," he explained. "My wife is the animal lover. When I first learned our neighbor owned all these horses, I tried to keep it quiet. But she found out and was down there the next day. I was recruited the following month. For the past year, I've spent every weekend there."

Staff Sgt. David Boring also is fervent about horses ... well, horsepower, that is. Last summer, he and another driver captured first place in a "Grand Prix" go-cart championship race through the streets of Clovis. The sheet-metal mechanic also is a car-detailing hobbyist, but he's had little time to enjoy it while at Cannon. During his five-year tour, Boring said he's been deployed for more than 800 days.

"This has been the toughest assignment as far as work goes," said Boring, who is assigned to the 429th

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Electronic Combat Squadron, which flies the EF-111 Raven. "I've been TDY constantly, and it's been tough on the family. Luckily, my commander and the rest of the squadron are real supportive. We care for each other - mowing the grass or taking care of each other's cars when the sponsor is away. It makes a difference when your biggest problem is that little Johnny broke his finger playing outside "

Nicknamed "America's Go-To Wing," the 27th Fighter Wing recently retired 74 F-111E and F-111F Aardvarks while gaining 60 F-16C and F-16D Falcons. The 27th also flies the only EF-111 radar-jamming Ravens in the Air Force, which puts them in high demand. The Ravens have been deployed recently to Saudi Arabia, northern Italy and Turkey.

"Overall, I believe our ops tempo is in line with every other wing in the Air Force," Koerner said. "Our EF-111 people are a little busier than most, because they're unique and support multiple operations simultaneously. But time away from station is shrinking as we get additional manpower."

The commander said his biggest challenge is improving the quality of life on Cannon. Base housing, dormitories and providing more recreational activities for young people rank high on his priority list.

During base newcomer briefings, Koerner often asks for a show of hands from people who volunteered for a Cannon assignment. He said only about 10 percent of the audience admits choosing the base.

"It might be because we don't have the oceans, the mountains or major cities," the colonel said. "I can't move mountains, but I can make the stay here more enjoyable and encourage people to get involved. I want to give our airmen activities so they don't feel like they're in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do."

Koerner said the dormitory area is laid out in a campus concept with most facilities within close walking distance. Cannon has the usual amenities you'd expect on an Air Force base. It boasts a 16-lane bowling center, 18-hole golf course with new club house, two swimming pools, a co-located club, rock climbing wall, theater, skeet and trap range and a trendy community center.

For bluesuiters with families, Cannon is endowed with contemporary and plentiful base housing. It has 761 housing units within its gates with an additional 611 quarters across the highway from the base. The wing also leases 350 units in Clovis and Portales. With abundant military housing and a short waiting time, about 70 percent of families reside in military quarters.

"It's the best housing I've seen in my 14-year career," said Ayars. "I live in leased housing in Portales and have a two-story, three-bedroom house with a fenced-in backyard. It's unbelievable. The neighborhood looks like a subdivision instead of base housing."

Some live off base in the local area, where they find housing affordable and a community that's close-knit and neighborly.

"I haven't found communities more supportive of the military than Clovis and Portales," Koerner said. "They welcome our people into their churches, their businesses and into their homes and hearts. We also don't have the same level of problems you see in big cities - gangs, crime, drugs and alcohol. It's safe here. It's a place you can raise a family."

Master Sgt. Jennifer Linton hasn't let the serenity of the Southwest slow the pace of her lifestyle. The sergeant, who was raised in Montego Bay, Jamaica, teaches aerobics, takes college courses and has been promoted twice in her six years at Cannon.

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"Clovis might not be the garden spot of America, but you can get your degree," said Linton, superintendent of nutritional medicine. "Don't sit around and complain about what Clovis doesn't have to offer. You can get promoted here [because] there aren't as many distractions. You can accomplish a lot at Cannon if you put your mind to it."

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