LAKE MINERAL WELLS STATE PARK IS THE ONLY STATE PARK IN TEXAS PRESERVING THE WESTERN CROSS TIMBERS, A WOODED RIBBON OF LAND RUNNING NORTH TO SOUTH FROM OKLAHOMA THROUGH NORTH CENTRAL TEXAS. THE PARK FEATURES STEEP HILLS, DEEP RAVINES AND OPEN PRAIRIE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE SANDSTONE FORMATIONS AND LIMESTONE OUTCROPS OF THE WESTERN CROSS TIMBERS.

LEGENDARY CATTLEMEN

Early settlers discovered these strips of forest running like rivers through the vast Texas prairies. The dense growth of black-jack and post oak trees proved hard to navigate on horseback or by wagon. The writer Washington Irving popularized the name “Cross Timbers,” one commonly used today to identify this unique geographic region bordered on the east by blackland prairie and rolling plains to the west.

The lush grasslands of the Western Cross Timbers attracted cattlemen such as Oliver Loving. In 1855 Loving settled about 10 miles north of Lake Mineral Well State Park, ranching 1,000 acres of land and running a small country store. Loving opened new markets for Texas cattle, first driving cattle north to Illinois along the Shawnee trail and later taking herds to Denver to feed hungry gold-miners. Following the Civil War, Texas was glutted with cattle. Loving teamed with neighboring rancher Charles Goodnight to herd cattle west to Fort Sumner, New Mexico where 8,000 Navajos had been relocated. This trail became famous as the Goodnight-Loving Trail. Loving died of gangrene in Fort Sumner in 1867 after being wounded during an Indian attack while on a cattle drive. His friend Charles Goodnight arranged for his body to be returned to Weatherford in 1868, inspiring a storyline used by Larry McMurtry in his novel Lonesome Dove. Loving’s son Jim carried on the family tradition as one of the founders of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association.

Today both the cowboy and the cattlemen are living links to the past. The cattle industry still plays an active role in the local economy.
THE CAST IRON FOREST

In addition to rough terrain, pioneer settlers crossing this timbered region encountered bands of Comanche and Kiowa that used the rugged area as a base for raids throughout north central Texas during the 1860s and 1870s. The impenetrable nature of the Cross Timbers allowed native Americans such as the Caddo and the Tonkawa to use the forest as a buffer as European settlers moved across Texas.

Given plentiful forage, wildlife abounded. Indians and pioneers hunted white-tailed deer and wild turkeys. Smaller animals such as raccoons, opossums, cottontail rabbits, fox squirrels and coyotes were also abundant. Even today watchful visitors may see porcupines, armadillos, bobcats and ringtail cats in the Cross Timbers habitat.

The Western Cross Timbers of Texas supports a variety of plant life. In addition to the dominant black-jack and post oaks, cottonwood, red oak, pecan and cedar elm trees are found in the ravines. Settlers used this woodland timber to build and heat log homes. Areas of open upland savannah feature mesquite trees and short grasses of high grazing quality.