



restored, “both looked at me like I was crazy.” He wasn’t deterred. “I said we’re going to sell crafts and all these things that people make and raise funds and send them back to Thailand principally for Asian elephant conservation.”

So that’s exactly what they did. Asian elephant conservation is the primary focus of The Elephant Story, but not the only one. The store supports indigenous crafts and textile groups in Asian elephant countries — primarily the Golden Triangle area of Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and Laos — by providing a market for their goods. The store’s website (the-elephant-story.com) shows a stellar lineup of artists and artisans, each providing background on the handmade products and who makes them. Unique and colorful scarves, jewelry, candles, gift items, clothing, purses, bags, toys, books

and more adorn the site and eventually, lucky shoppers.

Carol Cassidy (laotextiles.com), for example, “is a genius working with silk,” enthuses Ed Story. An American, she employs 50 Lao weavers and dyers in Vientiane, Laos, to create intricate brocades and tapestries; in Cambodia, more than 80 Cambodian war survivors have built homes with electricity and fresh water by working as spinners, weavers and finishers. The others are equally fascinating: Handmade stationery by The Jaab Design Company (jaabcards.com), a cottage industry in Bangkok, donates a portion of their proceeds to breast cancer research for women in Thailand; and photographer/conservationist Carol Stevenson, who is working on a five-year project documenting the vanishing Asian elephant and their singular mahout community in Northern Thailand, founded the Adopt An Elephant program designed to return elephants to their natural habitat.

Elephants are a big part of the culture of Thailand, says Story, used for long ago warfare and later in the logging industry. “When logging ceased, the elephants were left with nothing to do.” Some mahouts — the trainers and owners — would take their elephants to the bustling streets of Bangkok, selling sugar cane and bananas to the tourists to feed to the elephants, some of whom were on their feet up to ten hours a day in a highly stressful environment. “Bangkok is not a natural place for elephants to live,” says Story. “So far we have taken 30 elephants off the streets of Bangkok and moved them to a natural habitat in the Golden Triangle.”

But it’s about more than saving elephants, says Story. “It’s saving people and families. We’ve basically adopted the school in this little elephant village in northeastern Thailand, and hope to train students in ecotourism and economics, to develop ways to provide a self-sustaining framework for themselves and the elephants.”

Part of those efforts involve elephant polo. A 39-minute video on the website illustrates its history, clips from the matches, and interactions between the highly social gentle giants and the players. In Nepal and Thailand, elephant polo is played under the auspices of the World Elephant Polo Association, which enforces



TRUNK SHOW

By LEAH WILLIAMS | Photography courtesy of THE ELEPHANT STORY

Brimming with treasures, The Elephant Story is a store, a story and so much more. Opened in Comfort, Texas, in 2012, its beginnings date back to a time when owner Ed Story (yes, that’s his real name) fell in love with a certain part of the world and the wondrous elephants that inhabited it, and what followed ended up becoming the story of his life — past, present and future.

It all began during the Vietnam War era. Heavily involved in defense fuel supplies, Story spent seven years from 1968-75 assigned by what is now Exxon to work in the Far East region, falling in love with the area.

“I thought I would spend the rest of my life there,” he says. In 1974, feeling rootless, he began looking for land in Texas to coincide with a likely future move to Houston, working for Exxon and a few others before eventually forming SOCO

International oil exploration company in 1991. “I drove every day looking for ranch property,” he recalls, and stopped when he found Comfort. “I built a cabin up here. That was 40 years ago.”

Fast forward, and now Ed Story, wife Joey Story, and partner Bobby Dent found a way to combine their love for Texas, Thailand, Asian elephants, conservation, renovation, restoration and retail into an enterprise that doesn’t just look good — it does good.

That’s where the elephants come in. Not literally, as there are no elephants in Comfort. When Ed first had the idea of a not-for-profit store to be housed in the historic building — originally a pool hall — that Joey and Dent bought and



strict rules pertaining to elephant welfare and game play. The pitch (field) is about the size of a soccer field, and elephants at top speed can move up to 12 miles per hour. “I know that doesn’t seem very fast, but when you’re on top of one holding on, it’s pretty fast,” says Story, who broke his foot off six years ago, not from falling off an elephant, but by toppling from his practice truck in Texas. Players sit on a thin pad (no riding platforms are used), bamboo mallets can be up to 100 inches long depending on the height of the elephant, and the mahout sits on the head to steer using verbal commands and tapping behind the ears.

A match consists of two seven minute halves and a 15 minute intermission, “but every time the ball goes out the play is stopped, so a match takes about an hour,” says Story. Sometimes the elephants themselves playfully hit the balls with their trunks, “which they’re not supposed to do, but we think they’re trying to help out the humans.” Sometimes controversial, the sport has taken heat in other places, “but it’s never been an issue in Thailand,” says Story. “In Thailand, elephants are revered. If people have concerns, they should get familiar with [the sport] and see what happens and how the animals enjoy it.” Last year’s King’s Cup elephant polo tournament raised \$150,000 for the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation. The 2014 annual King’s Cup tournament will be in Bangkok from August 27-31 and total funds raised for elephant conservation should



surpass \$1 million since the annual tournament began.

You can’t leave The Elephant Story without trying their most exotic, unusual, and quite pricey offering — the coveted Black Ivory Coffee made from beans “processed” by the elephants’ own digestive systems and harvested from their “deposits,” resulting in a rich, smooth brew. The store is “the only place in North America to my knowledge that you can get it retail,” says Story. At \$40 per four-serving packet — \$50 if prepared and served in the store — the coffee for

home use can be bought in the store or ordered by phone. Adds Bobby Dent, “It’s especially popular for people trying to find something unique for 14th wedding anniversaries.” Turns out the gift for that year is ivory, an unethical choice these days, so Black Ivory Coffee has become a popular alternative.

As for Comfort, the little town didn’t quite know what to make of the store at first. “People saw the elephant images and thought we were part of the Republican Party,” quips Story. But they’ve increasingly embraced The Elephant Story, its mission, and the national and international attention it’s garnered. “Comfort is becoming a destination in its own right, so this adds another wrinkle to it.” ♦

For more information, the-elephant-story.com, 723 High Street, Comfort, Texas, 830.995.3133. Open Thursday-Sunday.