



# LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

By Mauri Elbel  
Photography by Paul Bardagiy



*Just outside of San Antonio on a 600-acre ranch in Nixon, a pure and simple white stucco house stands timelessly on its prairie-esque landscape. Although one of the first projects designed by Michael Imber, principal of Michael G. Imber Architects, it's timelessness and simplicity is still garnering notoriety 20 years later.*



“I designed it as something that made a statement on the history of German architecture in Texas,” says Imber of the home he designed in the mid-1990’s that later won a Texas AIA award. “But so many years later, it remains one of the most popular houses we’ve ever designed. It has just as much appeal today as it did the day it was built.”

Simple in form and ageless in character, the design was inspired by the German Sunday homes common in areas like Fredericksburg in the mid-1800’s when Texas was becoming a state.

“At that time Central Texas had an influx of German immigrants,” says Imber. “During the week many of them lived and worked on ranches, but some built what they called Sunday houses. These were homes in town where the family could drive in on Saturday and spend the night, and then get up early and go to church the next day.”

The pure and simple forms that defined the traditional Sunday houses resonated with Imber and aligned with the design objectives of his client, the late Milton Butcher who lived with his wife, Gayle, in San Antonio but wanted to build a weekend getaway out on their ranch to pursue his hobby of boat building.

“Milton was German and spoke German and he had a barn out on the ranch where he used to build boats — he had two, Hunky Dory and Dinky Dory,” Imber fondly recalls. “This house was designed to be his getaway. He was always very interested in boats and wanted a place he could stay out on weekends and work on them.”

During initial visits to the ranch, Imber recalls the land being covered in thick mesquite. There was one lone towering heritage oak wrapped in mustang grapevine, and Butcher said he wanted his modest and simple weekend ranch house built right beneath it.

“I spent some time out there with him on the ranch, driving around and talking about his view of recreating or restoring this mesquite land to its natural state as a prairie,” recalls Imber. “By the time it was built, Milton had cleared away most of the mesquite so it was a large prairie land dotted with large oaks.”

Butcher’s goals were simple. He wanted the home to reflect his German heritage, be a space to display







his vast art collection and include a screened porch he could sleep on. The rectangular 1,200-square-foot house also plays into Butcher's love of boats. Although the house is landlocked for miles, Imber says the white house surrounded by prairie grasses metaphorically resembles a steamship sailing through the sea.

In the spirit of a traditional Sunday house, Imber designed a rectangle with two "saddlebags" — one on the front which serves as the entry and holds part of the kitchen and the other on the back which houses a long screened-in sleeping porch spanning the length of the house. In the old days, household tasks were done on these back porches during the day to take

advantage of the shade and breeze; then, once the sun went down, it would serve as a cool place to sleep.

Butcher used his screened porch much in the same way, says Imber. A set of Mexican leather chairs and a table create a nice daytime retreat and two Murphy beds can be folded down after sunset to create a comfortable, breezy sleeping place even on hot summer nights.

"You can pull down a couple of Murphy Beds and go to sleep right there, listening to the coyotes yelp in the background," says Imber.

While Sunday houses historically were comprised of living quarters and a stable under one long roof with the barn on



one end and the living space and a bedroom loft on the other, in Imber's design, the spaces are incorporated, making it appear that the home was remodeled to turn what had been an animal space into an open-plan living room, dining room and kitchen. The architect used longleaf pine to line the ceiling, just as many of the German settlers did. But while those early Texans usually had a swept dirt floor, Imber wisely opted for a rustic sandstone flagstone from Oklahoma.

Inside, the main room features a double height space that houses Butcher's art collection. Interior walls are painted in a historic green to provide a period feel. A large fireplace sits at the end of the space, featuring the only costly finish in an

otherwise low-budget house: a mantle featuring a grapevine carving designed to replicate the one wrapping the heritage oak outside. Directly above the master bedroom and bathroom is an upstairs guest bedroom and bathroom, and from the loft area above the great room, you get a glimpse of a pair of circular iron light fixtures Imber designed. In the saddleback, a small kitchen and laundry room are tucked off to the side of the great room to intentionally appear as an addition.

Imber says the home is about proportion and composition, design qualities he credits with making it feel authentic to the landscape and sculptural at the same time — its bright white





plaster exterior and metal roof standing boldly against golden grasses and blue skies.

Sustainable by nature, the home was a green building before green building was popular. It boasts as much livability on the outside as it does on the inside with its generous screened porch and large French doors on the southeast side of the house that can be opened to take advantage of the natural breezes.

“You couldn’t build a simpler house,” says Imber. “Yet it connected on so many levels, both publicly, and privately to Milton, who ended up spending most of his days, not just weekends, at this house.” ♦

**ARCHITECT** Michael G. Imber Architects  
210-824-7703 | [www.michaelgimber.com](http://www.michaelgimber.com)

