

## **‘A freeing place to live’ Coast Monthly**

by SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER on JUNE 25, 2016



**BEN AND JUDY SVOBODA’S HOUSE ON DICKINSON BAYOU IS SURROUNDED BY LIVE OAKS AND WATER OAKS DRIPPING WITH SPANISH MOSS, AND PALM TREES. PHOTO BY KIM CHRISTENSEN**

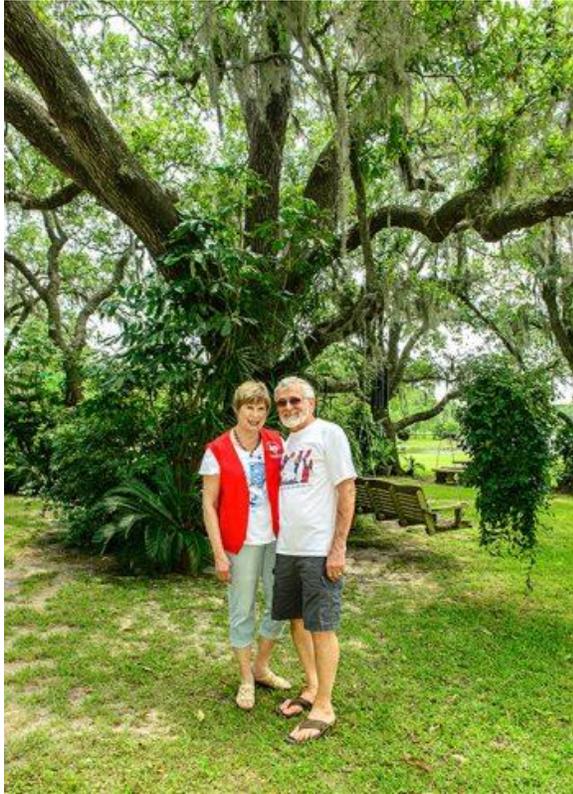
### **Homeowners care for plants, wildlife, and history on bayou**

Ben and Judy Svoboda aren’t just homeowners — they’re keepers of history who enjoy looking through an album of black and white photographs documenting the lives of the people who lived on the Dickinson property before them.

One photograph is of a snow-covered lawn during the winter of 1929. Another is of a group of women in flowered hats enjoying afternoon tea. And another is of a beaming bride and her mother standing on the front porch in 1942. Birthdays, weddings, holiday gatherings, guests enjoying parties — the photos are testaments to the joy of bygone days.

In 1974, Ben Svoboda, a young veterinarian, was looking for a place in the country he could afford to rent. He didn’t really need a two-story, five-bedroom house built in 1927, but it just

happened to be surrounded by eight acres of land along picturesque Dickinson Bayou. Plus, the Spanish moss-laden oak trees and surrounding forest spoke to him. So did the price — \$50 a month.



BEN AND JUDY SVOBODA WERE MARRIED UNDER A LARGE OAK TREE IN THE FRONT YARD OF THEIR HOME ON DICKINSON BAYOU. IT WAS THE SECOND MARRIAGE ON THE PROPERTY, THE FIRST BEING THE ORIGINAL OWNER DR. FRED AVES' DAUGHTER, FLORENCE. *PHOTO BY KIM CHRISTENSEN*

Called “Bayou Bend” by original owner Dr. Fred Aves, the name is fitting because the bayou bends gently to the left of the property.

Ben and Judy Svoboda met in 1980 and were eventually married under a large oak tree in the front yard, the second marriage to take place on the property — the first being that of Aves’ daughter, Florence, as shown in the photo album.

“The old interurban railroad used to run through here, and Dr. Aves rode the train from Galveston, where he practiced, to his house,” Ben Svoboda said.



In 1989, the Svobodas bought six acres of the land and a few years later bought the remaining two acres.

A long driveway, lined with camphor trees, leads to the house, where live oaks, water oaks and palm trees dominate the yard, and cypress trees hug the bayou. Defined flower beds and untamed areas dot the acreage, which is full of roses, tropicals, ferns and tall, impressive scheffleras, many in their original pots — one almost 20 feet tall and more than 40 years old. “I move them into our greenhouse every winter to protect them,” Ben Svoboda said. Because the scheffleras are so heavy, it’s a chore to get them in and out of the greenhouse, he said.



A PICNIC TABLE OVERLOOKS DICKINSON BAYOU FROM THE SHADE OF OLD OAK TREES ON BEN AND JUDY SVOBODA’S PROPERTY. *PHOTO BY KIM CHRISTENSEN*

Judy Svoboda, a retired florist, is most proud of her roses — especially the Mutabilis, a rose whose petals undergo mutations in color, blooming pale yellow, then changing to pink and finally crimson.



A sizable vegetable garden in the back of the property always has something ready for picking. It’s next to an area where the Svobodas had raised peacocks. The Svobodas are particularly fond of wildlife.

“We love the birds,” Judy Svoboda said. “We see owls, cardinals, osprey, rosy spoonbills, woodpeckers and a yellow-crowned night heron we call Ernie.”

Several noteworthy items add to the personality of Bayou Bend, namely a rusty antique stalk cutter that belonged to Ben's grandfather, who farmed in La Grange, Texas. And there's "Ben's Hideout," a smaller structure, originally a quail house built in the 1930s, which is about 100 yards from the main house. Ben Svoboda keeps a barbecue nearby, ready for gatherings.



A SMALLER STRUCTURE ON BEN AND JUDY SVOBODA'S PROPERTY WAS ORIGINALLY A QUAIL HOUSE BUILT IN THE 1930S, BUT NOW IT IS "BEN'S HIDEOUT," WITH A BARBECUE AND SPACE FOR HIS TRACTORS. *PHOTO BY KIM CHRISTENSEN*

"The hideout is actually my inherited man cave," he said.

Watching life go by on the bayou is an experience in itself, Judy Svoboda said.

"There is a completely different world going on up and down this bayou," she said. "Before jet skies and boogie boards, we had a lot of water skiers who would come by. We'd sit out here in the Adirondack chairs and be thoroughly entertained."

Ben Svoboda, who is of Czech descent, likes to point out that his last name means "freedom" in Czech.

"This is a very freeing place to live," he said.