

EARLY SETTLING OF THE BIG BEND

By MRS. JOEL E. WRIGHT

The war between the United States and Mexico was responsible for many of the first settlers coming to the Big Bend Country. Many of the early ranchers, surveyors, scouts, and mail carriers had been soldiers during the War of 1846-48. Earlier than this, small settlements in the Big Bend, along the Rio Grande, were in Mexico. Cabeza de Vaca, traveling through these parts in 1536 reported seeing a community of mud houses as well as maize and bean crops at Presidio del Norte (now Ojinaga, Mexico). Following the war, the earliest Americans to settle on the Texas shore, and inland, were Ben Leaton, Milton Faver, Larkin Launderaum, and John Daley.

In 1849, the gold seekers trekked through the Southwest to California, many of these keeping to the southernmost route through Texas. The great dangers that lurked in the savage wilderness between Texas and California, not only from Indian attack but from hardship and thirst, led the United States government to map a "water-route" through West Texas. This survey by government engineers marked the streams and springs, and one of them followed the Comanche Trail, on to Ojo de Leon Springs and Limpia Canyon. This route from the Texas coast to California, through Fort Davis, was later known as the Overland Trail.

The westward trend soon necessitated communication service, and the first mail route was established in 1850, between San Antonio and El Paso. The contract was awarded to a fearless Kentuckian who had distinguished himself in the Mexican war, Captain Henry Skillman. In the Davis Mountains there still exists the name of "Skillman's Grove" near El Muerte Springs. This grove of liveoaks was a rest stop for the mail stage, and is still the site of an annual cowboy religious meeting—Bloys Encampment. It was here that an incident took place, in connection with the mail run.

As was necessary in those days, all wagon trains or stage coaches were accompanied by a mounted escort of soldiers or scouts. The initial run of the Skillman mail coach was guarded by an escort of eighteen mounted Indian fighters under command of Big Foot Wallace, famed for his successes in fighting the Indians. Big Foot had charge of this mail route, and on two occasions carried the mail alone. On one of these solo trips Big Foot was sitting at El Muerte Springs under a bluff, mending his buckskin breeches, when he noticed some gravel fall from the rocks overhead into the water. He looked up and caught sight of Indians peeping over the bluff at him. Dropping his breeches, snatching his weapons in one hand and mailbags in the other, he crept along under the bluff until he reached cover of the bushes, and was soon out of sight. He made his way through the mountains to El Paso on foot with the mail, but minus his breeches.

In 1850 members of the U. S. Boundary Commission made their initial survey in the area, and Presidio and El Paso counties were created out of Bexar County and the land district. Presidio County deserves additional attention because of the magnitude of its original size. It was often referred to as Presidio Territory. It was established in 1850, and originally

it occupied more than half the area of land lying west of the Pecos River, generally known as the Trans-Pecos. That area was larger than four New England states. The original territory remained intact, but unorganized, for twenty-one years. Then in 1871 Pecos County, with Fort Stockton as the seat of government, was drawn from Presidio. Finally in 1875 Presidio County was organized with the County seat at Fort Davis. In 1885 the County seat was moved to Marfa, and Jeff Davis County was organized out of the original territory, with Fort Davis as the County seat. Brewster County, the largest county in Texas today, was carved out of Presidio County (Territory) in 1887, with Murphyville (Alpine) as its county seat. The name Murphyville was changed to Alpine in 1888.

The original designation of the seat of justice for Presidio County was Fort Leaton, five miles below the present town of Presidio. This was the place where Ben Leaton, a Kentucky veteran of the Mexican war, and one of the first Big Bend settlers, built his home—a huge place resembling a fort, with forty rooms, some of them 25x100 feet in size, overlooking the Rio Grande.

Leaton dug a canal from Presidio to his fort, utilizing the Rio Grande to irrigate the bottomlands for farming. The ruins of his old fort still stand on the banks of the river, and a canal is still used as a means of irrigating the lands below the fort.

Many of the first herds of these early ranchmen came from the numbers of wild cattle and horses found roving the plains of Texas, descendants of those brought to Mexico by the Spanish conquistadores. Herds were also purchased and brought in from Chihuahua, Mexico, especially after Fort Davis and Fort Stockton were established, and furnished a limited market for cattle traders.

The freight route in Mexico was from Chihuahua to Presidio del Norte (now Ojinaga, Mexico). The trail crossed the Rio Grande, entering Texas where Presidio is now located. It then took a direction up through Alamo to San Esteban and Ojo Berrendo, through Paisano Pass by Burgess Water Hole (now Kokernot Springs) north of Alpine, and sometimes going through Musquiz Canyon to Fort Davis or on to Fort Stockton by Leoncita.

The first cattleman in West Texas was actually Milton Faver, who was later known as the cattle king of the Big Bend. In 1857 he was well established on three ranches—one at Cibolo (buffalo, in Spanish) near what is now Shafter; one at Cienega (marshland); and one at El Morito (the mulberry).

Transportation problems became acute for the government in sending supplies to the isolated army posts of Fort Davis and Fort Stockton, and later Fort Pena Colorado near Marathon. Troopers accompanied all wagon trains to protect the freighters and their supplies from the Indians. Ox-drawn wagons were slow. On the other hand, the faster mule-drawn carts were a problem because the mules could not subsist on the scant desert forage as the oxen could. This was the problem that prompted the importation of camels to the Big Bend.

Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, had an idea that in bringing camels to this desert country, the travel handicaps over the vast arid sec-

tions of the Southwest could be remedied. With an appropriation of \$30,000 and two shiploads of camels from Asia and Africa, along with Arab drivers, a trial journey was made to California in 1857. The caravan was in charge of an Arab, Hadji-Ali (later Americanized to "hi-Jolly") who in his picturesque red fez and rainbow-hued garments created quite a stir. The Big Bend experiment was undertaken later, under command of Captain William Echols, whose purpose was to test the camels for rough mountain terrain. In spite of the fact that the beasts could travel great distances on the plains without fatigue and could thrive on what would not keep a mule alive, the soft pads of their feet could not withstand the sharp rocks of the mountain country. Besides, the Civil War had now begun, and other needs became more urgent. The camels were turned loose, and no doubt many were killed by the Indians. However, it is reported that some were seen in California as late as 1891—thirty years later.

During the first year of the Civil War, in April 1861, Confederate troops took over the administration of Fort Davis.

In August of this same year, the Indians attacked the home of Manuel Musquiz. Musquiz was one of the earliest settlers to move into the Big Bend from Mexico. He brought his family, his servants, and his livestock, and settled in a canyon about six miles southeast of Fort Davis, which canyon now bears his name. He built a substantial home there, and Mexican peons herded his livestock.

Don Manuel Musquiz had gone on one of his frequent trips to Presidio del Norte (Ojinaga), leaving his servants in charge of the ranch at Musquiz Canyon. During his absence old Chief Nicolas, with his Apache warriors, attacked the ranch, killed three servants, and drove off the cattle. The terror-stricken people sent a messenger to Fort Davis for aid. There were about twenty soldiers stationed there at the time, under command of Lieutenant Ruben E. Mays. Mays took twelve soldiers and four civilians, sending a courier on to Fort Stockton for reinforcements. The entire Mays party was ambushed and killed before the Fort Stockton detachment could reach them.

Other ranchers who had settled in the Fort Davis about this time were E. P. Webster, Sam Miller, and Diedrich Dutchover. In the 'eighties came the Crossons, the Haleys, the Pruetts, the Mulherns and others with sheep and cattle. All were subjected to attacks by the Indians, who continued to fight for their last stronghold in the Davis Mountains.

When the military abandoned Fort Davis soon after this last raid (1861), Diedrich Dutchover remained in charge of the post. Dutchover and Webster had been two guards who rode with Big Foot Wallace on the first trip of the mail coach to Fort Davis. Webster had remained at Limpia as the first stage tender, but Dutchover continued to ride as guard for two more years, during which time he also attempted to raise sheep on a small ranch in Limpia Canyon. The Indians continued to rob him of his sheep, and indeed became so constant in their attacks on the old post that Dutchover and a few civilians who had remained there finally fled to Presidio. After the fort was reactivated in 1867, Dutchover did return, and became a hauling contractor for the quartermaster there. (Incidentally, Arthur Dutchover, grandson of Diedrich Dutchover, and

who carries three-fourths Mexican blood in his veins, is a janitor at Sul Ross State College today—1963.)

With the abandonment of the post by the Confederates, Fort Davis became a hideout for murderers, thieves, and renegades of every description. The Skillman mail route that had operated as long as troops could guard the route, was discontinued during the Civil War, and Skillman became a courier in the Confederate army. He was killed when Union soldiers attacked a small Confederate group camped at Presidio, in 1864.

With the white men abandoning the Big Bend country, the Indians extended their raids, going as far south as northern Chihuahua, Mexico, depleting great herds of cattle, until there were scarcely any remaining. This created a demand for cattle in Mexico, and prices soared. Following the Civil War, cattlemen in central Texas began driving great herds over the Chihuahua Trail. Many thousands of cattle were driven through the Big Bend to this market in Mexico.

During the seventies, central Texas cattlemen turned their eyes again to the land beyond the Pecos. As early as 1866, freighting was resumed. The first two stages attempting to follow the mail route, one going east and one going west, were attacked by the Apache chief, Espejo, and his warriors. The stage route west of San Antonio to El Paso was under command of Captain T. A. Wilson, with Sam Miller as one of the guards. Both men later held public office at Fort Davis.

In July 1867, the U. S. Ninth Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wesley Merritt, reoccupied Fort Davis. Permanent quarters were now built, much of it from pink building stone quarried from the mountains around the fort, with timber from the canyons to the north, and finishing materials from sources in San Antonio. With the reestablishment of both Fort Davis and Fort Stockton, freighting on the Overland and Chihuahua trails increased rapidly, and Fort Davis became the most important town in Presidio County. The freight routes were established from Indianola, Texas, to Chihuahua, Mexico. After crossing the Pecos River, the freighters headed west and drove forty miles to Fort Stockton. Nine miles west of Fort Stockton, at Ojo de Leon, they left the El Paso road, taking a southwesterly direction to Leoncita; from there to a spring north of the present site of Alpine, Texas, which later became known as the Burgess Water Hole; through Paisano Pass to Antelope Springs; on to Tinaja San Esteban; down Alamito Creek to the Rio Grande; and across the river to Presidio del Norte (Ojinaga).

One of these freighters was John Burgess, and his name still clings to the Big Bend's history in memory of an experience he had with the Indians. Burgess had a contract to haul supplies from San Antonio to Fort Stockton and Fort Davis. From Fort Davis he would drive to his home at Presidio, where he would allow his animals to rest, make necessary repairs to his vehicles, and load up with local produce to haul back to Fort Stockton. On one of these trips, Burgess was attacked by Apaches at a spring north of present Alpine. Burgess immediately formed his freight wagons into a defense circle with his well-armed men inside the circle. He sent a courier to Presidio on his fastest race horse, which was able to outrun the pursuing Indians. However, the horse fell dead twenty miles short of his destination, and the messenger ran the distance to Pre-

sidio on foot, in four hours. The Presidio party set out immediately to rescue Burgess, arriving in time to frighten off the Indians before their own reinforcements could arrive to assist them. "Burgess Water Hole" became the name of the spring where the attack took place. Burgess married a Mexican woman, and his descendants still live in the Big Bend country. One son, Adolf Burgess, is a Ft. Stockton businessman today.

Farming along the Rio Grande increased, and settlers raised grain and forage for the soldiers and their mounts. With the increase in settlers and the development of ranches, a new act was passed in 1870 to organize Presidio County, but it was not until 1871 that there were enough people living in the county to make this possible. In March, 1875, an act was passed by the Texas Legislature perfecting organization of Presidio County. Daniel Murphy, O. M. Keesey, H. W. Tinkson, T. A. Wilson, and W. M. Ford were appointed a board of commissioners for the purpose of organizing the county in accordance with the provisions of the Act of May 12, 1871. An election was held, and Fort Davis became the county seat. In 1885 the county seat was moved to Marfa.

In 1882 the Southern Pacific Railroad was built through the region, with the Texas and Pacific built to the northward. A survey originally included a route through Marfa, Fort Davis, and on down Limpia Canyon; but the city fathers of Fort Davis did not want the railroad running through their quiet little town, and the S-P line was laid along its present route, and with it Murphyville (Alpine) and Marfa were born. Trains were running early in 1883.

With the accelerated activity in Marfa, produced by the railroad, the county seat was moved from Fort Davis to Marfa. Effecting this change had its amusing aspect. J. M. Dean had acquired land around Marfa, and in 1885 the election to change the county seat to Marfa was held. Tickets were printed to this effect. Those desiring to have the county seat remain in Fort Davis had to write in, "For remaining at Fort Davis." Few could write, so the election carried for removal to Marfa. This was the day of open ranges, and a man often took what he wanted. The man who owned the section of land whereon Marfa is now located wanted a county seat on his section, and proceeded to bring it about.

Civilian employees who had come with the Ninth Cavalry, commanded by Lt. Col. Wesley Merritt in 1867 remained to figure in public affairs of Jeff Davis County and throughout the Davis Mountains-Big Bend area. These were Whitaker Keesey, Patrick Dolan, and Sam Miller. Later came W. T. (Bill) Jones and Jesse W. Merrill.

Whitaker Keesey, head baker with the Ninth Cavalry, remained with the Army until 1873. By that time he had saved enough from his salary to open a small general store in Fort Davis. He managed the store carefully and successfully until it was the largest store in that section of the country. Government contracts for hay, wood, and hauling helped him get a start. Before Mr. Keesey opened his store southwest of the Fort, the civilian part of the town was east of the Fort. He began operating his business behind the present Union Trading Company building, and other citizens moved around the point of Crouching Lion Mountain to build their homes, which became the present town site of Fort Davis.

Patrick Dolan, the father of Mrs. O. L. Shipman, author of the book *Taming the Big Bend*, came over from Ireland in 1850. After leaving the army service, he became a Texas Ranger and later served Jeff Davis County as sheriff.

Meanwhile, in Murphyville (Alpine), a move was under way to have a portion of Presidio county cut off, with Murphyville as a county seat. T. O. Murphy, E. L. Gage, T. S. Brockenbrow, L. B. Caruthers, Ed Garnett, C. E. Way, W. W. Turney, and W. Van Sickle constituted a lobby which was on hand when the State Legislature convened in January, 1887, to create this new county. The bill creating Brewster County was signed by Governor Sullivan Ross on February 2, 1887, with Murphyville as the county seat. In March of that same year, Jeff Davis County was created from a portion of the remaining Presidio County, with Fort Davis as the county seat. The county line between Jeff Davis and Presidio counties, as originally surveyed by Jesse W. Merrill and S. A. Thompson, exists today.

Murphyville, which had originally been named Osborne, took its name from Dan Murphy, a storekeeper who owned land just east of the Fort Davis post, and also owned land just north of "Osborne." Apparently the circumstances surrounding the name of Osborne have been lost in history's shuffle. Nobody appears to know definitely the who, why, or when of it. Some of the oldtimers guessed that it might have been named for an engineer or foreman who was supervising the building of the new railroad. It is authentically stated that the name was painted neatly on each end of the boxcar railway station upon completion of the road in 1883. Jim P. Wilson said the name "Osborne" was on the station when he arrived in June 1884. Murphy conceived the idea of bargaining with the company that had just put through the new railroad, and offered the Southern Pacific a 99-year lease on the fine spring (Burgess Springs) that was on his land near the town, if they would change the town's name to "Murphyville." In 1888 the townspeople changed the name again—to Alpine.

Among those who first settled in Murphyville in the eighties, later to become prominent citizens, were the Jacksons, Hancocks, Harmons, Koker-nots, Birds, Hollands, Van Sicles, Turneys, Garnetts, Powers, Rooneys, Wilsons, and others. These residents made important contributions toward the development of the area, and also in connection with the establishment of Sul Ross State College.

J. D. Jackson, who served with the Texas Rangers and saw considerable service in West Texas, came to this area in 1885 to ranch, soon after the Southern Pacific line was in operation. By 1889 he was in partnership with Sam D. Harmon, and between them they controlled three hundred sections of land in Brewster County. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson were untiring in their efforts to secure better things for West Texas, and he became active in civic affairs and in politics, serving as a delegate to the Democratic Convention which nominated Woodrow Wilson. The First Christian Church was organized by the Jacksons, and services were held in their home. Mr. Jackson also helped organize the Alpine Chamber of Commerce. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson were strong advocates of good schools, and for several years sponsored Summer Normals for teachers, the forerunners of

Sul Ross Normal. Mr. Jackson, in fact, was known as the "father of Sul Ross State College."

W. B. Hancock, the father of Mrs. Maude Baines, an active civic leader in Alpine today, was an early stockman and trail driver. He shipped a herd of cattle from Uvalde to Murphyville in 1884. From then on he became active in the community. He owned a drugstore and livery stable in Alpine, and engaged in ranching north of the town, on what is now the H. L. Kokernot headquarters ranch. He and Mrs. Hancock were also extremely interested in education, and donated one hundred acres of land to the State of Texas, to be the site on which Sul Ross State College was built.

Julius Caesar Bird came to Murphyville with Nevill's Rangers, and upon leaving the Ranger service, took up land on Ash and Calamity Creeks south of town. In 1888 he entered into the cattle business. He helped build and organize the First Baptist Church, and was one of the organizers of Paisano Encampment in the Marfa area. Mrs. Bird's widow, whose given name was America, died in Alpine in 1956.

H. L. Kokernot, Sr., was a grandson of the Texas pioneer, David L. Kokernot, who fought under General Sam Houston in the Texas battle for independence. In 1883, H. L. Kokernot joined his uncle, John W. Kokernot, in buying extensive ranching interests in this area. H. L. Kokernot, Sr., was one of the first organizers of the First National Bank, and served as its president for many years. His son, H. L. Kokernot, Jr., continues to operate the original 06 Ranch and is chairman of the Board of the First National Bank of Alpine.

Albert M. Turney came to Alpine from Marshall, Texas, as a young lawyer, about 1892, as a partner in the law firm of Turney and Stanton. In 1894, he went to the 02 Ranch, later taking over the management of the ranching interests for his brother. Later, in 1903, he was appointed County Judge, and in 1909 was representative of this district to the State Legislature.

About 1882 silver was discovered in the Chinati Range, not very far from Milton Faver's Cibolo Ranch headquarters. John W. Spencer discovered the silver. The original mine owners with Spencer were General W. R. Shafter and Lieutenant John L. Bullis, both of whom had held commands at Fort Davis during the military occupation. Shafter, also known as "Pecos Bill," was in command in 1871, but the exact period of his service there is not known. The silver deposit proved to be extensive, and the Presidio Mining Company furnished most of the silver output for the State of Texas. The town that grew up around this new industry was named Shafter. Today, Shafter, Texas, is a typical ghost mining town.

In the middle eighties, prospectors discovered cinnabar in the Terlingua area, eighty-five miles south of Alpine. A half dozen quicksilver mines sprang into operation, chief of these being the Chisos Mining Company, owned and ruthlessly operated by Howard E. Perry, of Cleveland, Ohio. The mines were active from the late eighties until the close of World War II. At one time, Terlingua (now a ghost town) had a population of some 2000 persons.

Many Anglos drifted into Terlingua to work at the mines, but for the

most part the operators depended on Mexican labor. The drifters often married native women, some taking on the Mexican customs and others persuading their wives to adopt Anglo ways. One such person was a soldier from the North, who was in some sort of trouble, and sought to lose his identity in the Big Bend. Because he was a "white" man among Mexicans, he became known as John White, and lived out his life among the Mexican people at Terlingua. Some descendants still bear his name. A son, Joe, worked as a faithful employee of the Chisos Mining Company for many years, and has many descendants in the Alpine area.

Rich farms were developing along the Rio Grande, in the Brewster County area. Ed Lindsey, a customs officer who settled what was later known as Johnson's Farm, also married a Mexican woman, and they had four beautiful daughters who married Anglos.

At Fort Pena, near Marathon, lived a soldier named Peake, who, after his discharge from the army, became a freighter for the mining company, and established a claim of his own at Mariposa when it bore the name of Terlingua Post Office. Folks recall that Mrs. Peake had a piano in her home, and people came for miles around to see and hear this instrument, which she proudly displayed in her comfortable home with the peeled-cane ceilings. Peake died while working his own mine, and was buried near the place where his body was found. His sons, like many others in this area, have spent years hunting for the site of his grave and the mining claim, but without success. This is due partly to lack of records, but also because changes in place names occurred through usage, with little thought to the effect these changes would have on posterity.

Many legends have developed about lost mines and rich mineral veins in the Big Bend country, and there are many true adventures still unwritten that should be recorded before the memories of the older citizens have faded, and these living pioneers of the Big Bend have passed away. As the old adage goes, "truth is stranger than fiction" and the true stories about the quicksilver mines in the Terlingua area and the silver mines in Shafter contain as many thrills as any legends of lost mines.

The Davis Mountains and the Big Bend Country had as turbulent and bloody a historical beginning as can be expected of any savage-held hostile land. Add to that the fact that Texas had been wrested from Mexico, with consequent resentment among the Mexicans living along the Border, and you have a double image of the dangers that harassed the first settlers. "The first hundred years are the hardest," could certainly apply to the development of this last frontier; but these first hundred years have also furnished as fascinating a history as that of any American frontier area that saw the opening of the West.

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