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THE STORY OF THE "BIG BEND"

By the Rev. Clarence Stuart McClellan, Jr., Priest in charge of St. Paul's Church, Marfa, Texas, and Episcopal Missionary of the "Big Bend" of West Texas
Number One—"The Land Itself"—"Out Where the Sun is a Little Brighter"

Extending eastward from the city of El Paso for several hundreds of miles to a meandering little stream, which still bears the Indian name of Pecos and bordering the Rio Grande on its northern bank and reaching far up to the southern boundary line of the state of New Mexico, is the little known but important territory called the "Big Bend" of West Texas.

The name was given it, we are told, from the fact that here the Rio Grande forms a great bend or curve embracing three-fourths of the entire territory. This portion of West Texas resembles a dagger with the point sticking boldly and suggestively toward the Republic of Mexico and seems to symbolize the history of this vast region and its relation with Mexico, within a stone's throw over its southern border.

Across the length of this "Big Bend" country from the Pecos High Bridge, the second highest railroad bridge in the world, near the quaint little town of Langtry, which marks about the eastern limit of this vast domain, to El Paso tucked in the very western-most corner of Texas, the Southern Pacific strikes its steel way. Since its coming in 1882 this railroad has been one of the chief factors in opening up to trade, communication and building the "Big Bend" of West Texas. Along this route of travel are most of the principal towns of the territory—Sanderson, Marathon, Alpine, Marfa, Valentine and Sierra Blanca. Two other railroads, which, like the Southern Pacific, have been instrumental in developing this region are the Texas & Pacific, which branches off at Sierra Blanca and goes to Pecos City of recent oil excitement, and the Orient Railroad, which extends from Alpine to Fort Stockton and then on to San Angelo beyond the Pecos River. To be sure, many places are far removed from these main lines of travel and can only be reached by automobile or army truck over roads or trails, the roughness and lonesomeness of which pass all description and after hard travel through mountain passes and canyons and over plains with an occasional ranch house or adobe shack to remind one that man has ventured out into these "wilds" and found a home "far, far from the maddening crowd's ignoble strife." Down by the Rio Grande are Glenn Springs, Terlingua, Santa Helena, Lajitas, Indio, Presidio, Ruidosa, Polvo, Candelaria, Hester's Ranch and not far from Valentine Holland's Ranch, where small detachments of Uncle Sam's soldier boys are guarding the "border." At Shafter between Marfa and Presidio are silver mines of no small importance and a town, which is typically Mexican, with its adobe huts, winding streets, old Roman church and creek bordered by tall cotton-

woods, which in early spring and summer add a touch of green to the brown and yellow colors of the mountains rising above Shafter and standing like sentinels overlooking the neighboring valleys.

Fort Davis, "the roof garden of Texas," one mile high, back of Marfa some twenty-two miles, is undoubtedly one of the oldest, most interesting and most picturesque towns in this whole "Big Bend" country. Today you can still see the ruins of the old fort with its "officers' row," mess halls, chapel, stores and corrals. Fort Davis was established in 1834 and named, if all accounts be true for Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War. Beautiful hills and mountains surround Fort Davis and nearby are two wonderful canyons, Limpia and Musquiz, with their stories of Indian fights and romances of the days of the Old West, when the stage coach carrying the United States mail stopped at Fort Davis and the horses were changed en route to El Paso.

Unless one has actually lived in the "Big Bend" and traveled over it, he can have no conception whatsoever of the vast extent of this great region. Many of the Eastern States can be fitted into this country alone and you will have some room left over for cattle grazing. It is fifteen times larger than Delaware, several times larger than New Jersey. The group of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island can easily be placed twice within the boundaries of the "Big Bend." South Carolina cannot boast a larger area than that of the "Big Bend" and even the Empire State of New York is but a trifle bigger than this particular section of West Texas.

So you see there is ample space for all. Someone has figured out that each person living in the "Big Bend" of West Texas has a little more than a square mile to himself and herself. We find also that to every ten square miles there is but one white male adult, who is capable and willing to uphold law.

It is strange, indeed, that a land of such grandeur has received but little mention and that so few know of this natural wonderland that lies within this West Texas country. We think of Yosemite, the Grand Canyons of the Colorado and the Yellowstone as the "show places" of the great West, yet here in the "Big Bend" there are 181 mountain peaks over 4,000 feet in altitude, 35 peaks above 8,000 feet and 3 peaks over 9,000. The highest and second highest mountains in Texas are here. Some of the most awe inspiring scenery in the United States is to be found in the Davis mountains about Fort Davis, the Chisos range near Terlingua and the "Rim Rock" hard by Valentine.

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