

Travel



Thursday, March 15, 1984 O&E

(T, S, F, R, G, B, * 7C, R, SC, W, G, B) * 15C

For gettin' away from it all, West Texas is the place

National Geographic News Service

"We pioneered this place in 1935," said Sammie Bramblett, standing in the dusty backyard of her blufftop ranch, looking across the broad Rio Grande valley toward Mexico.

"At age 74 she lives alone at the end of the longest dead-end road in all Texas," writes Griffin Smith Jr., who stood in her backyard and observed, "There was no other human habitation as far as the eye could see."

To reach the nearest grocery store, Bramblett must drive 86 miles round-trip, and her ranch still has no telephone. A two-way radio is rigged so that incoming calls make the car horn blow.

Smith asked her if she was ever afraid. "I've got a pistol, and I know how to use it," she replied.

IN TEXAS, west of the Pecos River, lots of people have pistols, and they know how to use them. Smith spent several weeks last fall exploring the huge area, and found it to be "among the last truly idiosyncratic parts of the United States, and its people . . . a tough, old-fashioned breed, secure in their convictions and self-sufficient in their ways, delighted to be left alone."

In order to seek out dozens of "people for whom solitude is the basic fact of life," he maneuvered his four-wheel-drive vehicle through canyons, mountains, and desert flats.

"Spanish explorers called it the despoblado — the unpopulated place," Smith writes. "Texans who speak today of the Trans-Pecos or, more loosely, the Big Bend country, mean this same rugged quarter. Though it embraces nine counties and part of a tenth, together the size of South Carolina, it is

home to just 55,000 inhabitants, excluding El Paso."

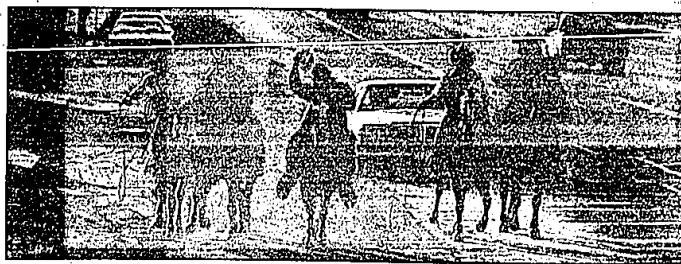
Drawing on his experiences in the region, Smith observes: "Redford and nearby Presidio are farther from a commercial airport than anywhere else in the lower 48 states."

"Candelaria . . . is so small that the church celebrates Mass only every other week."

"The search for water is the one abiding constant of life . . . When torrents come, water runs off with wasteful havoc. The proud Pecos highway bridge near Langtry was 50 feet above the river, but a 20-inch downpour one night in 1954 obliterated it beneath an 86-foot-high wall of water. In the Trans-Pecos, fortune smiles with bared teeth."

"Fort Davis . . . is the highest town in Texas at 4,900 feet, conservative, chilly, a bit strait-laced. The courthouse has turnstiles to prevent stray cattle from wandering off the street and into the halls of justice."

"IN 1859 John Butterfield's stage traveled from the Pecos River to El Paso in 55 hours. Now sleek buses



DAN DRY/National Geographic

Cowboy visitors to Van Horn whoop it up as they ride the main street. The town is the only way

station of consequence for 175 miles along Interstate 10.

cover the same distance in less than six. But travelers still stop for fuel and refreshment at Van Horn, the only town of consequence for 175 miles on Interstate 10."

"Mexican-American influence is on the rise. Six counties now have Hispanic majorities. But the ethnic transformation is less a matter of numbers than of participation social, political, and economic by people who once stayed on the periphery."

The ghost town of Terlingua, Smith wrote in the February issue of National Geographic, has been described as "the farthest you can go without getting anywhere." Smith drove that distance

to visit the annual Wick Fowler Memorial World Championship Chili Cook-off.

For two days each November, a "portable village" sprouts in the desert. At what he calls the "mardi gras of the country and western set," Smith joined 8,000 other spectators:

"There were people dressed as chili peppers, as monks, as locomotives. There were bouncy women dressed as Dallas Cowboys and bearded men in brassieres as their cheerleaders. There was the Best Little Chili House in Texas. And from many of the sizzling cauldrons the smells were, well, disturbing. Was it chili, or was it herbicide?"

Smith drove away from Terlingua, eastward into the wild country of Big Bend National Park, the scenic heart of its vast silences, the uproar of the chili cook-off receded like a thunderstorm.

"This was landscape reduced to its essentials, surface and horizon sky. A love of such land, with its solitude and its spare, sudden beauty, and no less a love of personal independence the chance for a man to do as he pleases, unwatched and unbossed, make the people of the Trans-Pecos what they are."

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