



# **Big Bend Country: Land of the Unexpected (Centennial Series of the Association of Former Students, Texas A&M University)**

*Kenneth Baxter Ragsdale*

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Having first visited the Big Bend in 1928, Kenneth B. Ragsdale has been digging around in and writing about the region for the last forty years. In *Big Bend Country: Land of the Unexpected*, he takes a nostalgic retrospective journey through the times and places of this increasingly popular corner of West Texas to say goodbye to those who made the history, created the myths, and lived the legends.

Building his stories around themes of compassion, conflict, and compromise, he profiles both famous and relatively unknown figures. He tells stories of *curanderas* (healers), charity workers, a woman who practiced medicine without a license, and another who started a private lending library in her store to encourage rural, poor children to read. In contrast to these stories, he chronicles blood feuds, shootouts, and the violence bred in wild, relatively lawless spaces.

In a fascinating play on levels of meaning, Ragsdale traces the legacy of J. Frank Dobie and his stories of buried treasure—treasure that turned out to be that of the imagination if not of gold. Finally, he turns his attention to the cinematic portrayal of life in the Big Bend. He looks at the filming of *Giant* both as a subtext of its own--how the coming of celebrity and celebrities affected local lifestyles and self-perceptions--and as a cultural commentary on the popular perception of the West.

Ragsdale's stories cover a half-century, roughly 1900 to 1955, from wagon trains to the filming of an epic movie, a time in which the face of the Big Bend changed: the quicksilver mines closed, a national park was established, isolation and cattle gave way to vacation ranchettes and tourists.

Big Bend enthusiasts will want to join the author in his farewell tribute as he recaptures the spirit of the times through the eyes and words of the people who made the region the folklore attraction it is.

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