

Big Bend: A Homesteader's Story Paperback

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OURS MUST HAVE SEEMED a strange procession as we headed south out of Alpine, Texas, that May morning. Even in 1909, when animal-drawn vehicles were the customary mode of travel, I could see curiosity in the eyes of early risers who watched us leave town.

Out in front, astride a belled gray mare, rode the lanky Mexican boy, Enrique Díaz. Behind him and following the mare, plodded eight Mexican burros, drawing an ore wagon piled high with our household goods and all the provisions I could afford to buy. On top of all this rode the squat and cheerful Juan Salas.

Chained to the ore wagon came our buckboard, with my wife Bessie and me sitting on the springseat, our eighteen-months-old daughter Lovie between us. Tex, our female collie dog, brought up the rear, padding along in the hoof-trampled dust, now and then leaving the wagon trace to sniff inquisitively at a gopher hole.

Stretching away from us on all sides were great sweeps of prairie, lushly green with tall grasses, splotted with yellow and blue and red patches of wild flowers; studded here and there with up-thrusting, creamy white blooms of flowering sotol. Cattle grazed on the prairie, and horses; and we were hardly out of town before we disturbed a band of antelope, who flared their short tails like white fans and bounded away at unbelievable speed.

To the south and west, lifting itself above the rolling foothills, rose the ragged crest of a mountain range, its sharp peaks a *misty* blue in the distance.

Somewhere beyond that range, and beyond the Chisos Mountains on the other side, one hundred and fifteen miles away, lay our destination. There, in the country where the Rio Grande made its big bend, lay a three-section homestead for us. It was a homestead we'd never seen. A homestead on which I'd gambled almost everything I had, without even looking the place over first.

This was a fantastic country, like none I'd ever seen, like no other I've seen since. And, looking back on it now, I can see that ours was a fantastic situation. A chronically ill man of thirty-one, a travelling salesman out of Mississippi, using up his last few dollars to take his wife and baby to a homestead in the wild, unknown country of the Texas Big Bend.

On the face of it, such a gamble was sheer madness. The odds were all against us. Homesteading anywhere is for the strong and vigorous man, not for one whose health is broken by years of malaria and indigestion. Then there was Bessie. A city girl, pregnant now, and with no money to bring her back to civilization when her time came. And Lovie, still a baby, and so far from a doctor.

We still had a little over two hundred dollars in the bank at Midland, but I knew it would squeeze that money to feed us for the next three years of continuous occupancy that the homestead law required.

And that wasn't taking into account the three hundred dollars more we were required to spend in improvements in those three years. That three hundred I'd have to earn yet, in some manner I couldn't foresee. And then, after that, there'd still be the annual payments on the land to meet. One serious accident, and we'd go under. Or maybe even without an accident—if I couldn't figure out some way to provide for us and earn some cash over and above our living. What if my health grew worse, so that I became a helpless invalid? What would become of Bessie and the babies out here in this lonely wilderness if I should die?