

## **Introduction**

### **Friedrich Ernst (Fred) Darge**

#### ***“Iconic Painted Visions of the Great Southwest”***

There is just something about Texas, West Texas to be more exact and the Big Bend in the Trans-Pecos Area that can capture one’s imagination like none other. You only have to see it once and leave and before you know it, you are already planning your next visit. To borrow the words of famous World War II five-star General Douglas MacArthur when having retreated from his station in the Philippines for Australia, famously promised “I shall return”. You can add the name of Fred Darge to this growing list of people who have used this same quotation to describe their emotional feelings about the Big Bend.

Darge was not the first person or artist to be taken in and overcome with the enormity of the vast open spaces, rich blue skies, gigantic high billowing clouds and the endless visions that await the visitors to the Big Bend. Added to that are the dramatic high peaks of the Chisos Mountains with their rock cliffs and out cropping’s and lush colors displayed during the spring and fall. There is just something about this part of West Texas and the Big Bend that once you have been there, you don’t forget. You just can’t visit this area without wanting to return soon or better yet, even stay. Fred Darge could not stay, but he managed to return as often as possible.

It is our understanding Darge first visited a portion of the Trans-Pecos Area in 1929. He must have seen things that obviously precipitated his interest and imagination that would last a lifetime. Not only did he return, he returned again and again. One has to wonder how it all happened. We credit the hospitality of the early day ranchers like the Burnhams, Nails, Wilsons and Buttrills that welcomed him as almost a family member rather than a visitor. They always had plenty of visitors, but Fred Darge was someone special. He reciprocated their generous hospitality with his quiet pleasant personality and gifts of many paintings of their beautiful ranches. Their friendships were to last a lifetime.

We decided to write a book about Fred Darge because we wanted to know more, much more about this often-admired artist, but what we felt was his under-appreciated art. There was a connection between the artist and collector that at times seemed to be partially lost. Maybe it was not knowing a story that existed related to what they were viewing. We also sensed the art community was focused on looking at the pictures and were not taking the time to think about what they were viewing or his paintings were illustrating and represented. As we began to research our projected story, we slowly began to realize there was something missing and that something was the associated stories that his paintings were illuminating. As you begin reading you will soon learn the stories of the people who are

interlinked to the paintings. Not only are they interesting, they are very special people who in many different ways became an element in the life story of Darge and his historically significant artwork.

Darge happened to become enthralled with the Big Bend and West Texas as the heyday of the big ranches of cattle, horses, sheep and goat herds were slowly marching toward their final days. The legacy we have been left with is undeniably a treasure for all of us to enjoy. Others did it with photographs and stories, but Fred Darge chose to do it with fine art. Texas will always be indebted to this talented artist who deserves accolades for his large body of work that people are just now beginning to discover, understand and appreciate for what it really is. It is an historical study of early Texas ranch life prior to World War II and the years immediately afterward.

Darge came, he saw and continued to paint the magnificent scenery, people and their stories that dutifully inspired him for thirty-five years. He had two homes, Dallas and West Texas and Beyond. His early vision of capturing life before it changed proved to be prophetic. He instinctively knew it years before the ranchers. The classic example was the cattle drives from Government Springs at the base of the Chisos Mountains to the railhead at Marathon. It took seven days, a number of drovers pushing the cattle and a chuckwagon to feed everyone. The round trip was approximately eleven days. Once the State of Texas took over the maintenance of the roads and starting in 1937, stake bed trucks abruptly ended the colorful cattle drives to Marathon that are now a relic of the past. Darge could paint plenty of horses, but just could not bring himself to paint trucks. He did a few paintings which included cars, only because horses were no longer used for on road transportation. Still to this day, there are many jobs on a ranch that can only be done with a faithful well-trained horse.

The circumstances that made this all possible were the ranchers that took Darge in like a long-lost friend. The arrangement of this quiet unassuming artist with a thick German accent giving ranchers paintings of their geographic surroundings in exchange for room and board was well received. Fred had become over the years a master at bartering as discussed in **Chapter 3, "Fred Paints His Own Currency."** There was just something about Fred Darge that people of all ages seemed to like. His sketch book, pallet and paint brushes were always busy. With this in mind there were always places for him to set up his easel and continue his work. With the advent of the Big Bend National Park and the disappearance of the surrounding ranches after WW II, he continued on west in the Trans-Pecos Area headed toward of El Paso.

Another way to describe Fred Darge's activities would be to say, "Fred sketched and completed small paintings in the West and finished his large paintings at home in Dallas during the winter months." As a professional artist he needed both places to make a living. The vast majority of all artists experience headwinds. Some are self-made and others are just happenstance. Darge's biggest headwinds were the Depression years of the 1930s and the World War II years from 1939 to 1945. The market for fine art had markedly decreased. Darge never did have an easy life, but he somehow managed to get by for two noticeable reasons: his unrelenting willingness to work and a quiet unassuming pleasant personality.

**The following is a direct quotation from Fred Darge that appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* relating to an exhibit of his artwork at the Lawrence Art Galleries. This was Darge's mission statement in his own words. This is what his art work was all about. When you look at his paintings you will make the connection as to what he was illuminating. More often than not, there is an associated story that is related to the specific painting. It is up to the owner of the art work to track down the story or to conjure up a story based on what is known about the subject of his work.**

*"I believe the simple, direct living of the pioneer people will soon come to an end. The Big Bend Country, with its abundance of beauty, is one of the few places where hardy pioneer people carry on as their forefathers. Remington and Russell left numerous dramatic canvases depicting the pioneers' struggle to conquer nature, wild beasts and the red man".*

*"I want to register the ranchman as he lives today, his daily habits, his mode of living and doing business, before this part of the country gives way to progress and the civilization of the big cities, which today, in many instances, has taken the romance out of the West, paved roads instead of trails, automobiles instead of horses".*

*"The paintings in this exhibition show life in that space of grandeur' between the Davis Mountains and the Rio Grande River, known as the "Big Bend Country" in Texas" – Fred Darge – November 1941, Lawrence Art Galleries, Dallas, TX. This Month in Dallas and Texas, November, 1941.*



**Fred Darge Self Portrait, 12" X 16", Circa 1950**

**True to his word, he established a mission and was tenacious in maintaining his focus throughout his lifetime as an artist. Fred Darge painted his way into Texas history. We are all richer for his talent and avid interest in the Western history of our beloved country.**