

## Chapter 10

# GHOST TOWNS



Terlingua, Texas Near Big Bend Nat'l. Park, Historic Mining Town, Most Visited Ghost Town in Texas, Photograph provided by ghosttowntexas.com

Just in case you have forgotten or didn't take the time to notice, Texas is the second largest state in the nation. It is composed of an area that extends 268,597 square miles and is made up of many diverse cultures and varied geographical areas with their own climate characteristics.<sup>1</sup> If all the miles were lined up in a row, the lines would extend past the moon which is 238,900 miles from earth. The eastern part of the state is blessed with thick forests, oil and abundant rainfall. The western part of the state has desert characteristics with less than needed rainfall, but plenty of oil and plenty of characters that make good stories.

The first person to declare these most often repeated words, "I wasn't born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could" is unknown. It is a phrase that offers a justification for the continuing increase in population. People are willing to locate in Texas because of the constant offering of job opportunities. It is a never ending, continuously changing process. Grab an opportunity and become a star like so many others have done.

Texas is also known for another frequently repeated saying, "everything is bigger in Texas", and rightfully so. One statistic not very well known is that there are currently an estimated 1,000 plus ghost towns in the 254 Texas counties.<sup>2</sup> That is almost four per county. Why do populated towns turn into ghost towns with just skeletal ruins of once thriving businesses and houses? The historical answer is and almost always will be, loss of economic viability. People naturally migrate to places that have jobs. Basic economic principles are not hard to understand-no jobs, no people.

All the ghost towns visited by Darge cannot be listed, but there were several prominent ghost towns in his travels throughout the Big Bend and the rest of the Trans-Pecos Area. Terlingua, a stone's throw west of Big Bend National Park, was an Old West mining town along with a colorful history. It is the most often visited ghost town in Texas.<sup>3</sup>

The once thriving mining operation in Terlingua produced cinnabar, a bright scarlet to red-brick ore. It could be crushed and used for its pigment or refined further into mercury

(quicksilver). Because cinnabar is the only important ore of mercury, the demand for mercury had driven mining activity. Mercury has many uses, but its toxicity has reduced its use in any application where reasonable substitutes can be found. Large amounts of mercury are currently used in the chemical industry in the production of chlorine and caustic soda during the electrolysis of brine. Mercury has long been used for separating gold and silver from other ores and sediments during the early days of gold mining.<sup>4</sup> It took people a long time to realize how toxic and dangerous it was to use mercury. Once its toxicity was realized, production slowly declined until Terlingua became a ghost town.

It is the tourism of the Big Bend National Park that has kept this colorful and historic mining town in the hearts of many. Park visitation records indicate that attendance in 2017 was 440,276 visitors.<sup>5</sup> You have to want to go to the Big Bend in order to get there. It is a long distance from just about anywhere, but once you go you can't wait to return.

Since Fred Darge spent so much time in the Big Bend area, he must have eventually visited Terlingua to do several paintings, if not more. Unfortunately, at this time, none of the art work has made its way to the auction galleries or dealers. He would have to have known about the mines since Homer Wilson had mining interests involving cinnabar in the area. The other interesting thing about this little town was there always seemed to be more stories than people. Readers can visit the Terlingua website at [ghosttowntexas.com](http://ghosttowntexas.com) and read more about this remarkable little town in Texas. Sixty plus years ago Terlingua was basically deserted. It is now reborn with a new life centered around tourism.

The Terlingua website points out a number of must-see attractions such as the crotchety old-timers, the three-legged dog and the supposedly semi-friendly rattlesnakes. The first two sound interesting, but most people will probably avoid the rattlesnakes. Terlingua boasts a number of very popular saloons and bars that become even more popular during the summer months when temperatures rise above 100 degrees and remain until the end of August. There are numerous ghost town attractions like the old jail, colorful cemeteries and several churches in the process of being restored.

## Shafter, Texas



Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, Shafter, Presidio County, Texas

On State Highway 67 some 20 miles north of Presidio and 40 miles south of Marfa, is a sign that reads "Shafter Ghost Town." The town of Shafter was born with the discovery of silver in 1880. When the Presidio mine was in operation and producing, was known as the "richest acre in Texas."<sup>6</sup>

The little town, a stone's throw east of the former headquarters ranch of Milton Faver at Cibolo Creek, was named in honor of General William R. Shafter, who at one time commanded the nearby Fort Davis,



Early Morning, Shafter, Texas, 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy of Heritage Auctions 2007

calvary Fort D.A. Russell and the Marfa Army Air Field. When the posts were closed at the end of World War II, the population plummeted to 20. By the year 2000 the national census reports the population reduced to 11. The silver mine has now reopened and is back in operation, but the population has not returned.<sup>9</sup>



Siesta, Shafter, Texas, 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Heritage Auctions 2013.

61 miles north. He was given the nickname "Pecos Bill" because he, "drank heartily, gambled earnestly, ate plentifully and cursed incessantly."<sup>7</sup> He sounds like an interesting fellow.

With the discovery of silver, Shafter was the biggest town between Del Rio and El Paso.<sup>8</sup> Like all mining towns, nothing lasts forever and by 1900, the population had dwindled to 110 inhabitants. The town and its economy have always been directly correlated to the price of silver and the cost of labor to operate the mine. The Presidio mine has an up and down history. It was closed and reopened several times throughout the 20s and 30s. By 1943 Shafter's population had grown to 1,500 with the economy buoyed by nearby

It was not surprising to find these paintings by Fred Darge. They seem to fit his well-established technique, approach and methodology of choosing where and what to paint. His fascination of the subject matter in the Big Bend area and Brewster and Presidio counties shouldn't be underestimated and underappreciated. Once again, he has left us with an unforgettable legacy of what used to be, just as he intended.



Sagrado Corazon de Jesus (Sacred Heart) Catholic Mission Church, Shafter, Texas, 12"x 16", circa 1950, Oil on Canvas Board, Collection of Ken and Elsie Duperry

The paintings of Shafter will remain in people's mind for years to come. The Shafter Historic Mining District is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Isn't it odd that Fred Darge somehow knew this before others? The NRHP is the United States federal government's official list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects deemed worthy of preservation for their historical significance. Darge was there first.

With the discovery of silver in 1880, and the influx of the populous looking for jobs and families looking for a future, Shafter would need a church. Sagrado Corazon de Jesus was built in 1890 as a Mission church of the Presidio Diocese.<sup>10</sup> The adobe and timber structures are all hand built by the Hispanic and Anglo miners who paid for the church out of weekly and monthly stipends they generously gave to the church along with their labor.<sup>11</sup>

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Interior of Sagrado Corazon de Jesus (Sacred Heart) Catholic Mission Church, Shafter, Texas. Photo Courtesy of [trekkermom.wordpress.com](http://trekkermom.wordpress.com)

Shafter may be somewhat of a forgotten place, except that the many stories and this historic church is a testament to the ongoing faith of mankind. To this day it is still maintained by a small group of volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

Many people would say the riches of Shafter lie in the vein of silver deep underground running along Cibolo Creek, but the real treasure is, and always will be, Sagrado Corazon de Jesus (Sacred Heart) Catholic Mission Church located on church road that Fred Darge so exquisitely painted. Over the years, the Presidio mine has opened and closed. This wonderful church, almost 130 years

old, with its traditional Catholic alter is open every Sunday.

Thankfully, Darge liked to paint churches. Ken Duperry said, “There were many in the collection when we purchased it in the 1970s.” It seems odd that there were a significant number of church paintings that remained unsold when Darge stopped painting in the early 1970s. One couple was said to have bought at least ten of Darge’s paintings of churches owned by Duperry. <sup>13</sup>



This was the last public Traditional Latin Mass offered by Fr. Rodriguez at Sacred Heart Catholic Church Mission in Shafter, Texas. Photo courtesy of you tube.com