

Chapter 12

The Edward Leonard (Ed) Love Ranch

Sierra Blanca in the Trans-Pecos, Hudspeth County, Texas

Sierra Blanca, like many other small towns and communities in Texas owes its existence to the coming of the railroad. There were two competing railroads, the Southern Pacific and the Texas & Pacific, vying for a second transcontinental railroad line along a southern route to connect the east with the west. The two railroads came within 10 miles of one another at Sierra Blanca, Texas in 1881. Jay Gould, famous railroad magnate and robber baron, drove a silver spike commemorating the event on December 15th, 1881. The new town sprang up around that spot, although the population didn't reach 350 people until 1914. With the advent of the railroad, Sierra Blanca quickly became a commerce and shipping center for ranchers and soon to follow other enterprises such as minerals and agriculture.¹

Sierra Blanca is named for the Sierra Blanca Mountain, just north west of the town itself. Hudspeth County was created February 16th, 1917, and organized August 25th, 1917 when it was separated from El Paso County which at the time was the largest county in Texas.² At one time El Paso County extended from the Texas/New Mexico border all the way east to Pecos, Texas approximately 200 miles. Sierra Blanca became the county seat with the distinction of having the only adobe courthouse in Texas.³ The new county was named in honor of Texas State Senator Claude B. Hudspeth (1877-1941) who was a cowboy and holder of large ranching interests, lawyer and statesman from El Paso.⁴

The Love family were early settlers of what is now Hudspeth County dating back to the 1860s. Various members of the Love family at one time owned the majority of the land in the county.⁵ George Wesley Love, Sr. (1869-1935) married Mable Kate Smith (1882 - September, 4th, 1948).⁶ George, like many of the other members of the Love family, was an early-day rancher like his father. He was approximately thirty and Mable was eighteen at the time of their marriage. The Smith ranch was conveniently located next to the Love ranch.

The marriage of George Wesley Love, Sr. and Mabel Kate Smith produced three children, Edward Leonard (Ed) Love (born, December 28th, 1900-died, May, 15th, 1980),⁷ George Wesley Love, Jr. (1903-1949) and Mabel Beulah (born September 24th, 1907 – died August 14th, 2002), who went by the nickname of "Tiny" her entire life.

Ed Love married Florrie (Flo) Ashcroft born (December 28th, 1900-died, 1984). Their marriage produced two daughters, Louise Love Reynolds (1924-1970) and Kathryn Anne Love Neely (1930-1992).⁸ It is assumed that the Love ranch was a family inherited ranch since Ed's father was one of the early ranchers in Hudspeth County. The ranch is located 10 miles west of Sierra Blanca off Interstate Highway 10 on the south side of the highway at Skunk Canyon.

That's right, Skunk Canyon. What a name! They had no other choice to call the canyon; to this day the place is still full of them. Tom Neely, Ed Love's son-in-law, when asked about the naming of Skunk Canyon, said it was a "very appropriate name." He shared an amusing story related to the skunks. "One evening he quietly opened the front porch door to see if their cat had found its evening meal he had put out earlier. The cat was nowhere in sight, instead there were five skunks gathered around the cat dish with their tails all up in the air".⁹ Tom, to his credit without making a disturbance, quietly closed the door. Five skunks would make anyone run and hide. Think of it this way. Things could always be far worse! What would it be like to live at Rattlesnake Springs in Hudspeth County? It is a-for-real place.



Early Morning, Quitman Mountains, Ed Love Ranch, 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa Early 1950's, Collection of Joan Estes

The Love ranch encompasses 13,440 deeded acres or 21 sections. Although 21 sections are a very sizeable parcel of land, there are limits to the number of cattle it will support because of the sparse vegetation and accompanying rainfall that is associated with the characteristics of the Chihuahuan Desert. It is also believed he leased a greater number of sections from other land holders.¹⁰ The general estimate, given by the County Extension Agent and most ranchers, is that it takes a minimum of 100 acres to support one cow. Love

didn't have any trouble learning the business of ranching, it was in his blood.

Besides being a successful rancher and business man, he was also a well-liked and respected member of the community. He was elected to serve three terms as Hudspeth County Judge from January 1st, 1941 to December 31st, 1946.¹¹

Ed Love's other business interests included commercial water and managing ranches for other people who lived out of the county. Sometime after World War II he purchased the flooded mine shaft that was a water well located in Skunk Canyon about a quarter of a mile from the ranch headquarters. The Southern Pacific Railroad had owned the water source and had installed what may have been the most elaborately constructed well and pumping station in railroad history. When the railroads arrived in this area in 1881, they were of course searching for what in West Texas was and still is the most precious commodity of all: water. They set about equipping this mine to pump water for their thirsty steam engines so the trains could run on time. With the advent of the diesel locomotive and retirement of the old steam

engines, the railroads no longer needed hundreds of thousands of gallons of water to run the engines.¹²

At some unrecorded date the pump-house, pump and engine that sat above the mine shaft all fell into the 8' x 10' x 175' deep mine that was the water well. Love brought in a bulldozer to finish filling the hole, after which he hired a man by the name of Hub Virdell to drill a well and set a new casing. He was able to continue pumping the well for many years afterwards. Some of the *old timers* remember that for many years they could drive out to the roadside park close by the well and fill their containers with water that was much better tasting and better quality than the water in Sierra Blanca. The water that came from the Skunk Canyon was appreciated by many until the State of Texas, in its infinite wisdom, told Love that he would be required to install the proper equipment to bring the well water up to public water supply standards, after which he told them "to go to hell" – and closed the valve to the park. And that brings an abrupt end to this story.¹³

Many large ranching families end up acquiring interesting stories. Love's sister, Mabel Beulah ("Tiny"), is one of those stories. Not so much for what she did, but for whom she married. There is no law enforcement agency more revered in the State of Texas than the Texas Rangers. She chose as her husband, Emanuel Avent (E.A. "Dogie") Wright, born April 25th, 1901 and died December 19th, 1989. Dogie and Tiny were married about 1929 and their marriage produced two daughters, Ellen Frances Wright and Zora Belle Wright.¹⁴

Over the years, there would be many chapters written about this remarkable Ranger who became a well-known Trans-Pecos area figure in the history of the Old West. Dogie Wright became a Texas Ranger at the young age of 17, then served many years in the U. S. Border Patrol and finally served several terms as sheriff of Hudspeth County. He was first sworn in as sheriff on January 1st, 1953 and served well into the 1960s. Sheriff Wright, like several other sheriffs at that time, also served as Tax-Accessor Collector.¹⁵

Earlier in his career he served as a deputy U. S. Marshal. Born in Laredo, Texas in 1901, Wright entered law enforcement in the footsteps of his father, who also served with the Texas Rangers and was sheriff of Wilson County, near San Antonio.¹⁶

Dell City, located in the northern most part of Hudspeth County some four miles south of the New Mexico border near Guadalupe National Park, was a newly developed farming area that seemed to have an unlimited amount of groundwater. So much so that in 2016, the El Paso Public Service Board purchased the 26,470-acre CL Ranch that surrounds Dell City just to obtain the water rights. The selling price was approximately \$50 million.¹⁷

At that time the community had no paved roads, electricity or telephones and few permanent buildings up until the 1950s. As is typical of a boom town, several saloons quickly sprang up in Dell City on the arrival of hundreds of migrant farm workers. Some of the saloons employed ladies of the night, who were brought to Dell City from El Paso each Friday night and then returned home the following Monday morning. The question asked of Sheriff Wright upon his

election was not who he was going to appoint as deputy for this new frontier in Dell City, but how many deputies he was going to have to appoint. ¹⁸

Sheriff Wright knew he was going to need an experienced deputy for this boom town area, and he heard about just the type of man from Gully Cousert, a captain in the Texas Rangers. Captain Cousert, in a recommendation to Sheriff Wright, told him of a man named Hearst Laws, a former deputy sheriff who served in Crockett and Sonora counties. After considering Laws' experience and qualifications, Dogie hired Laws on the spot and later described him as being a big, powerful man with a lot of nerve who wore the biggest hat he had ever seen. Deputy Laws was a dead shot, but he was never overbearing to anyone or abusive regarding individual rights. He came well equipped for his job as deputy sheriff in Dell City. He drove a Dodge pickup with a cage mounted in the bed which he used as a jail for his prisoners. On Saturday nights Deputy Laws would start at one end of town, and by the time he had reached the other end, his truck would be full of prisoners. ¹⁹

There are no Fred Darge paintings with Dodge pickup trucks with this kind of a cage in the bed but he did paint a lot of fascinating scenes depicted on ranches, including that of Ed Love. What was the connection between Ed Love and Fred Darge? Darge had traded paintings for room and board in the bunk houses of the Big Bend ranches and continued this practice after WW II when he traveled to the Sierra Blanca area. Tom Neely, Ed Love's son-in-law who was married to Anne Love (1930-1992), currently resides at the ranch, which is now held in a trust, told us that his mother-in-law, Flo was an "amateur artist". ²⁰ This would strongly suggest that Darge also traded art lessons for room and board. Flo Love and her lady friends could not have had a better teacher. The large number of Love ranch paintings suggests that Darge and Ed Love enjoyed a good, friendly relationship.

In addition to the Ed Love ranch, Darge painted as a visitor at the Jack Frost ranch in Hudspeth County. The Frost ranch was a working ranch, but Mr. Frost was an oilman that lived in Dallas. He had his own private airplane and pilot that he used to commute to his ranch when needed. ²¹ The Frost ranch was located 17 miles northwest of Sierra Blanca off of Interstate Highway 10 at Finlay, Texas which is now a ghost town. The town is named after J. R. Finlay, who also loaned his name for the nearby mountain range. ²²

It is reported that Mr. Frost was not exactly a teetotaler and was observed one morning arriving at his ranch still in his pajamas. Darge apparently made a connection to the Jack Frost ranch through Ed Love who managed the ranch for Mr. Frost. ²³

And then there is the Smith ranch. There are several Darge paintings with notations indicating on the verso of the canvas board at the top left-hand corner that the pieces were painted at the Smith ranch somewhere in Hudspeth County. The Love ranch were neighbors to the Smith ranch. Just as in the Big Bend, it seems no matter where Fred Darge visited, he always was well received and made new friends.



Approaching Storm, is an example of a line shack on the Ed Love Ranch in the Quitman Mountains. Even as late as the 1950s, the country was rough and the distances between places ranches made it necessary to have a place to live and be close to work. The mode of transportation on a cattle ranch is the old reliable horse that was used daily to check fences and do head counts.

Approaching Storm, Ed Love Ranch, Sierra Blanca, Texas. 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1950's, Courtesy of Dallas Fine Arts Auction 2011



Line Shack, Ed Love Ranch, Sierra Blanca, Texas. 9" X 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Collection Larry and Stephanie Boettigheimer



Looking at the faint background of the mountains in the far distance, one can see that checking and maintaining the fencing is a never-ending job. There are many never ending miles as far as the eyes can see.

Fixing the Fence, Ed Love Ranch, Sierra Blanca, Texas. 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1950's, Courtesy of Heritage Auction Galleries 2009



Horses, Thought to be the Ed Love Ranch, 11" x 15", Oil on Canvas Board, Collection of Joan Estes