

Chapter 15

PALO DURO CANYON

Palo Duro Canyon is a canyon system of the Caprock Escarpment located in the Texas Panhandle approximately 15 miles southeast of the city of Amarillo. There are also branch canyons that feed into the main Palo Duro Canyon that are much closer to Amarillo. The Panhandle city of Canyon is 12 miles west of the beginning of the Palo Duro Canyon.

Escarpment is a geographical term used to describe a long, steep slope, especially one at the edge of a plateau or separating areas of land at different heights. Unbeknown to most people, Palo Duro is the second-largest canyon in the United States. It is approximately 120 miles long and stretches directionally from west to southeast. The average width is 6 miles, but with the crevices it reaches a width of 50 miles at several places. Its depth averages approximately 820 feet, but in some locations, it increases to 1,000. The elevation ranges from 3,500 feet above sea level on the prairie rim of the canyon to 2,380 feet on the floor below. ¹



Lighthouse Rock, Palo Duro Canyon, Courtesy of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

Palo Duro is derived from the Spanish meaning “hard wood” or, more exactly, “hard stick.” It has been named the *Grand Canyon of Texas*, both for its size and for the dramatic geological features, including the multicolored layers of rock and steep mesa walls similar to those of the Grand Canyon. From the floor looking upward, the rock formations reveal the geological history throughout millions of years. ²

The canyon was formed by the *Prairie Dog Town Fork Red River*, which initially winds along the level surface of the Llano Estacado of West Texas, then suddenly and dramatically runs off the Caprock Escarpment. Water erosion over the millennia has shaped the canyons geological formations. Notable canyon formations include caves and hoodoos (a column or pinnacle of weathered rock). One of the best-known and the major signature hoodoo feature of the canyon is the “Lighthouse Rock.” ³

The first evidence of human habitation of the canyon dates back about 10,000-15,000 years, and it is believed to have been continuously inhabited to the present day. Native Americans were attracted to the canyon because of the consistent water of the Prairie Dog Town Fork Red River, as well as the abundance of ample wild game, edible plants and protection from the weather the canyon provided. It was a natural habitat for both man and animals. ⁴

The first European explorers to discover the canyon were members of the Coronado Expedition, who visited the canyon in 1541. Fray Juan De Padillo conducted a "Feast of

Thanksgiving" which was the first Thanksgiving conducted in America, 79 years before the coming of the Pilgrims.⁵ After many miles of traveling across the staked plains, Coronado realized the significance of this newly discovered canyon, albeit out in the middle of nowhere at that time. Apache Indians lived in Palo Duro, but they were later displaced by Comanche and Kiowa tribes, who had the advantage of owning horses brought over by the Spanish.⁶

A United States military team under Captain Randolph B. Marcy mapped the canyon in 1852 during their search for the headwaters of the Red River. The land remained under Native American Indian control until a military expedition led by Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie was sent in 1874 to remove the Indians to reservations in Oklahoma. The Mackenzie expedition captured about 1,200 of the Indians' horses and slaughtered them in nearby Tule Canyon during the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon. The Comanche and Kiowa conceded and left the area.⁷



JA brand
est. 1877

In 1876, Charles Goodnight became the first cattleman to bring herds onto the Llano Estacado, land that encompasses parts of eastern New Mexico and northwestern Texas. He drove 1,600 head of Longhorns from Pueblo, Colorado to the Palo Duro Canyon to establish the "Old Home Ranch" near the Prairie Dog Town Fork Red River in southwestern Armstrong County. Goodnight next outfitted his men and cattle for the winter and returned to Colorado to bring back his wife, Molly, John and Cornelia Adair and four cowboys along with bulls for breeding and plenty of provisions.⁸

John G. (Jack) Adair, a wealthy Irish financier living in New York, had been in Colorado looking for potential investments. The Goodnights and Adairs met while they were in Colorado and Goodnight described the Palo Duro Canyon in Texas to them. He further explained the unique properties for a cattle ranch where cattle could roam as buffalo did and thrive, grazing on the surroundings plains in the summer and wintering in the shelter of the canyon. When the Goodnights returned to Texas accompanied by the Adairs, finding the Palo Duro Canyon exactly as Goodnight had described and represented it, Adair decided he had found his investment. It was with cattleman Charles Goodnight.⁹

The Old Home Ranch that Goodnight founded in 1876 was the beginning of what would become the JA Ranch in Palo Duro Canyon. Adair and Goodnight signed a formal partnership agreement on June 18, 1877. The two formed a five-year partnership with Goodnight providing management and ranching knowledge and Adair providing the financing to purchase suitable land. John Adair's initials, at the suggestion of Goodnight, became the name of the ranch and the brand.¹⁰

The agreement called for Adair to receive two-thirds of the property and profits and Goodnight to receive the latter third. Goodnight was able to borrow his third of the investment from Adair at 10% interest and received a salary of \$2,500 per year paid out of the profits of the ranch. Their original agreement was for the ranch operation to begin with modest 1,500 head of cattle and 2,500 acres.¹¹

After Adair made the money available, Goodnight's first land purchase was 12,000 acres for seventy-five cents per acre from surveyors Jot Gunter and William Munson, Sr. He also bought an unknown number of cattle. Over the next two years he proceeded to buy pieces of land in a peculiar quilted and non-contiguous fashion and assembled another 12,000 acres in and around a 75 mile stretch of Palo Duro Canyon. He carefully selected areas that met his standards of suitable grazing land and all the water that was available. Goodnight knew better than anyone what it took to raise sturdy and healthy cattle for the mid-west markets. The subsequent acreage was purchased for twenty-five and thirty-five cents per acre. In a short five years the partnership had acquired 93,000 acres for approximately \$28,000 and they were still planning additional acreage. ¹²

With the expiration of the first five-year partnership contract in 1882, to Adair's satisfaction and probable surprise, the cattle and land enterprise had realized a profit of \$512,000, a very large sum of money at that time. Goodnight had made a remarkable achievement. At this point one would suspect the partnership to be close to or almost self-funding for more land purchases. In all probability it didn't take Adair long to renew the partnership for another five years. ¹³

There are no accurate historical dates available, but in the next five years the land purchases were immense. Goodnight purchased the 140,000-acre Lazy F ranch at Quitaque, Briscoe County for Cornelia Adair and added the Tule Ranch in Swisher County to the partnership. He acquired additional land holdings from Gunter and Munson, the surveyors from whom he had acquired the initial 12,000 acres. He bought land from the railroads that were building across the Panhandle and from the State of Texas. The partnership had assembled land in six Texas counties: Armstrong, Briscoe, Donley, Hall, Randall and Swisher Counties. In all, the JA Ranch became a goliath operation that encompassed 1,325,000 deeded acres, 100,000 head of cattle and an unknown number of ranch hands that were needed to manage the livestock and build and keep the fences in repair. ¹⁴ It was a mammoth operation skillfully managed by a very astute cattleman who hired the most adept people and retained them for years.



Charles Goodnight and Cornelia Adair
Circa 1920, Courtesy of ranches.org

John George Adair died May 4, 1885 at 62 years of age in St. Louis, Missouri following his third visit to his JA Ranch. Cornelia Adair continued the partnership with Goodnight until the expiration of the contract in 1887. ¹⁵ With the coming of the railroads, falling cattle prices, the influx of settlers and attempts by politicians to curb large-scale ranch activities, Goodnight was ready to slow down and limit his ranching and business activities. Upon mutual agreement, the partnership was terminated with the expiration of the contract and the partners divided the land. Goodnight helped manage the ranch until 1890. ¹⁶ The JA Ranch of approximately 335,000-acres is still owned and operated today by Adair descendants.

Over the next half century, the canyon remained in private hands, but was an increasingly a popular recreation area for local residents. In 1931, Fred S. Emory, a major landowner in the area, signed a two-year contract with the local chamber of commerce to allow public access to the canyon. The upper section of the canyon was later purchased by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1933 and turned into the 29,182-acre Palo Duro Canyon State Park that opened for visitors in 1934.¹⁷

Like all parks, Palo Duro Canyon has its own set of notable scenic sites and attractions. Visitors can see and enjoy sites that were home to mammoths and bison and early humans 15,000 years ago. Like the Big Bend, it is also a place of more recent history made by people who experienced extraordinary lives in a land that tested their endurance.

Many prominent Texas artists such as Frank Reaugh, Dawson Dawson-Watson, Georgia O’Keeffe, Franz Strahalm, Reveau Bassett, Olin Travis, John Eliot Jenkins, Harold Bugbee and yes, Fred Darge, have been captivated by the Palo Duro Canyon. They have painted the scenes that best illustrate their artistic skills in capturing the scenic wonders created by mother nature.

As an artist one of Darge’s strong assets was his sensitivity to color and shading. He became recognized by his peers and collectors as an expert colorist. Palo Duro was the perfect place for him to use his expertise with color as well as his highly developed techniques of brush shading. The red canyon walls were alive with shades of color in multiple levels of intensity and value that were enhanced by constantly changing light and shadows.

Documentation of Darge’s visits to Palo Duro Canyon first came to notice in a newsworthy article titled: *Dallas Artist is Working in the Palo Duro*, that appeared in the *Canyon (Texas) News, Thursday, August 11, 1949*:

Fred Darge is here from his studio in Dallas making sketches in the Palo Duro State Park. He will take these sketches back to Dallas in order to paint larger canvasses of beautiful scenes which he is finding in the Palo Duro.

Dave Darge, his son, who is an art student in California, is here this week assisting his father with the sketches. Dave was introduced Sunday to the crowd which was at the Park for the drawing and expressed amazement at the beauties of the Palo Duro.

Fred Darge stated that many Southwestern artists had told him of the beauties of the Palo Duro. He believed that this would soon become the art mecca of the Southwest.

An exhibit of the sketches which Mr. Darge has made will be on exhibition at the El Coronado Lodge next Sunday. Citizens of the Panhandle are invited to view them.¹⁸

Several important things were learned from this article. Father and son are traveling and working together which was interesting as no records of their relationship from 1933 to this point in time have been found. Darge normally traveled from May thru October. They could have been in West Texas, the Panhandle or maybe even New Mexico before Palo Duro. This will never be known because it is usually almost impossible to connect locations without dates. When Darge was traveling to the Big Bend in the late 1930s, he was a guest at the ranches.

After the war the ranches were gone. In 1949, automobiles were better and more reliable so Darge could go back and forth to Dallas more often. Perhaps Darge's travel schedule had changed while he was making connections with new ranches. Additionally, it appears he was preparing a large number of paintings for an upcoming exhibit in Dallas.

A week later another very newsy article about Darge reported on what it is was like to be working outdoors as a plein air artist:

Fred Darge, artist from Dallas, completed his work in the Palo Duro State Park Saturday, and left for his studio on Monday.

Mr. Darge has spent two weeks in the Palo Duro making sketches which he will enlarge on canvasses which will be offered for sale.

Darge exhibited a number of his sketches at the Lodge Sunday afternoon. Many interested citizens inspected his work.

One of the unforgettable incidents of his sketching in the Palo Duro came last week near the Capitol Dome on which he was working. A sudden gust of wind swept down the canyon upsetting his easel and spreading brushes and paints in all directions. Mr. Darge usually had his canvasses securely fastened, but not this time.

He stated that while sketching in the Big Bend that it was necessary to fasten down canvas, brushes and paints because of so many little whirl winds which were a menace to artists.

He related that on one occasion he was sketching animals when a big fat inquisitive hog upset his easel and scattered his material to the four winds. There are many griefs connected with this art business, so we soon ascertained from Darge.¹⁹

The reporter for the *Canyon News* reported something in his article that doesn't happen very often. Darge recalled an incident that happened in the Big Bend when he was out painting and a wild pig, most likely a javelina, came running by and knocked down his easel. There are at times a downside to being an artist. Just like every other profession, one can experience good days and bad days. Plein air painters must contend with rain and many weather conditions. What do you do when it rains that day? Whatever an artist is working on day after day soon becomes one judgement and decision after another. The mind is working every second; there are many decisions to make. An incorrect decision, even a minor one, could be a negative for a painting and it may not sell. It is always a big worry for an artist. Like all retail businesses, their survival is based on sales.

The Palo Duro Canyon is one of the great physical landmarks of Texas with a story as long as the canyon itself. Darge's visit to Palo Duro Canyon in 1949 and again in 1950 were likely two of an unknown number of times that he painted the colorful and unique canyonlands. Considering the vastness of the canyon and all there is for an artist to paint, it is understandable that he would return again and again. Art in the Palo Duro is like art in the Big Bend, an artist's work is never completed, just repeatedly delayed and postponed for another day.

True to Darge's custom of painting local scenery, content, stories and sometimes even folklore, he produced a selection of scenes that reflect his understanding and experiences of

Palo Duro's long and interesting history. Darge's interest in local history is embedded in most of his paintings regardless of where he painted. More often than not he leaves no explanation and it is up to the viewer to discover their own interpretation of the story he had illustrated on canvas.

As one browses through the paintings of the Palo Duro, white horses usually stand out. These are not normal cow ponies. There has been a great deal of folklore, stories and myths written about the white mustangs. Some of the mythical story writing goes on even today and never seems to end. The real truth and common sense, is perhaps best expressed in J. Frank Dobie's lively and thoughtfully written book, *The Mustangs*. "A white mustang was never a rarity like a white buffalo. As late as 1882 a band of thirteen white mustangs ran between the Palo Duro Canyon and the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle – so alert that nobody ever saw them standing."²⁰ The white horses are a carryover from the early settlement of the canyon. One Darge painting of the Big Bend and only one he did in the Trans-Pecos have white horses. The white Mustangs are peculiar to the Palo Duro Canyon and Darge deserves thanks for integrating this unique thread of history into these colorful paintings only he would have thought to do.

Dallas Morning News columnist, Wayne Gard, wrote a news-filled article concerning the Palo Duron Canyon relating to both the White Mustangs and Fred Darge. The following is paraphrased from the excerpted original article:

The Borger, Texas Rotary Club has donated a young white stallion which will be turned loose in the canyon with white mares that are already there.

Another Texas artist who has spent the summer at Palo Duro is Fred Darge of Dallas. Recent visitors noted his old Army ambulance on the canyon's rim, as isolated as a sheepherder's wagon. Darge slept on a cot in the ambulance, by day, set his easel in the shade.²¹



On Top the Rim, Palo Duro Canyon, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board,
Courtesy of Heritage Auctions



The Remuda Round-Up, Palo Duro Canyon, 18" x 24", Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy of Heritage Auctions



Joining the Posse, Palo Duro Canyon, 16" x 20", Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy of Heritage Auction



Painting Out the Trail-Palo Duro Canyon, Texas, 32" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Courtesy David Dike Fine Arts 2005

One thing is for certain, many artists have visited the Palo Duro Canyon but leave it to Fred Darge to paint the working ranchman going about his daily job of raising cattle as amply depicted in this dynamic unusually large painting. The Palo Duro is cattle country just as Charles Goodnight explained to John Adair as they inked their partnership agreement in 1877 that laid the foundation for one of the largest ranches in the history of the Panhandle, Texas and the United States.