

Chapter 8

How the Big Bend Became A National Park

Have you ever wondered why 388,290 people visited the Big Bend National Park in 2016 and another 442,641 visited the Park in 2017? Those who spend time at the Park usually plan the next trip before they return from the first visit.¹

The answer to the above question is the fact there is something there to see for everyone, no matter what your age or gender. As an example, those who stop at the Chisos Basin Visitor Center are often treated to seeing a mother bear and her cubs walking around on the roof of one of the buildings. When it comes to entertainment, what more could you ask for. There is nothing like seeing a family of bears to get people's attention and they get a lot of it.

On August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the act creating the National Park Service. Forty-four years earlier on March 1, 1872, Congress had already established Yellowstone National Park in the Territories of Montana and Wyoming as a "public park." Today there are sixty sites that include "National Park" as part of their proper name in the system. The founding of Yellowstone National Park began a worldwide national park movement. Today more than 100 nations contain some 1,200 national parks or equivalent preserves.²

Big Bend National Park is the first national park in the State of Texas and the twenty-eighth park to be included in the National Park Service managed by the Department of the Interior. The southern border of the park is the 118 miles of the Rio Grande River designating the international boundary between Mexico and the United States. The area and park are appropriately named after the large bend in the river flowing southeasterly that abruptly changes direction to the northeast in the vicinity of Mariscal Canyon.³

The park is situated at the northern most edge of the Chihuahuan Desert and is composed of 1,251.8 square miles and encompasses 801,163 acres.⁴ It includes the entire Chisos Mountain Range which is the only mountain range to be fully contained within the boundary of a national park in the United States. The highest point in the Chisos Mountain range is Emory Peak at an elevation of 7,825 above sea level.⁵ The peak is named after William H. Emory, chief surveyor of the U.S. Boundary Survey team of 1852.⁶ The Park has the significance as the largest protected area of the Chihuahuan Desert in the United States that protects approximately 1,000 plus species of plants, more than 434 species of birds, 56 species of reptiles, 78 mammals, 10 amphibians and 35 fish. The peregrine falcon, currently on the endangered species list, is also found in the Big Bend.⁷

The cultural resources in the park go back 10,500 years to the Paleo-Indian period. More recently, a diverse culture of Spanish, Mexican, Angelo and Irish settlers farmed, ranched and mined in the area. There were Mexican families living in the area when English speaking settlers began following the secession of Texas from the Union during the latter half of the 19th century. Ranchers began to settle in the area about 1880, and by 1900, sheep, goat and cattle ranches occupied most of the area.⁸ The attraction was cheap affordable land, plenty of grass for grazing livestock and the lifeblood of all agriculture, water. Many parts of the area are prime examples of the perfect ranch land. Early rancher Waddy Burnham, Sr. (1844 – 1911) who came to the Big Bend in 1908, is said to have found spring water with a shovel at the base of the Chisos Mountains.⁹ As a cattle rancher in the Chihuahuan Desert, sufficient water is always of concern. Ranching or just living in the Big Bend was never all that easy, but it was home to many over the decades and centuries.

The late 19th and early 20th century brought even more settlers to the area in the form of miners with the discovery of valuable mineral deposits like silver and cinnabar from which the metal mercury is extracted. The settlers worked in the mines or supported the mines by farming or by cutting timber for the mines and associated smelters to process the metals. The communities of Boquillas (now Rio Grande Village), Study Butte and Terlingua sprang up around the mines along with the settlements like Terlingua Abajo, San Vicente, La Coyota and Castolon to support the mines in the form of farming. Their success depended upon the availability of suitable land and irrigation. The communities in reality were no more than small groups of families trying to scratch out a meager living by farming, but it was considered home.

By 1903, the population of Terlingua had grown to about 3,000 inhabitants. The 2000 U.S. Census states that approximately 100 years later the population had fallen to just 58 inhabitants. There are many other mining and natural resource communities throughout the country, including oil, with the same identical story. Like all mining towns, Terlingua had its miners, workers, entrepreneurs, colorful characters and its share of rattle snakes. The cinnabar mines did not last forever, but the Texas-size stories about the community and its people will continue to live on for a long time.¹⁰ Texas Escape Online Magazine currently lists 1,046 ghost towns in Texas.¹¹ Without a doubt, there are many interesting and diverse histories associated with these former communities.

Some of the most interesting history of the Big Bend National Park is how it came into being. Many people who lived in Brewster County and loved the Big Bend country for what it was. It was in Texas that a mountain range appeared to extend beyond the sky with a vision of the far-off distances and horizon that seemed to never end. To many people this could only be found in the Chisos Mountains. It was a land of unique beauty, contrast and grandeur and they wanted to preserve it for future generations. It would take them approximately fifteen years to attain their goal, but they made it happen. Big Bend National Park advanced from a maybe to probable to inevitable to realized.

The story of the creation of Big Bend National Park and how it came into being is as interesting as the Park itself. There are three main individuals who proposed the idea of the Park and then worked tirelessly to make it come to fruition.



Langford Family, circa 1912, Photo Find-A-Grave

It is generally believed Joseph Oscar Langford (born April 6, 1875 – died May 19, 1961) traveled by covered wagon with his eighteen-month old daughter and pregnant wife Bessie from their home state of Mississippi to the high dry climate of Alpine, Texas in 1909 seeking relief from malaria.¹²

Langford, a businessman and entrepreneur, is said to have overheard two men talking about the hot springs with medicinal waters down on the Rio Grande River. Upon overhearing this discussion, Langford purchased and homesteaded a three-section claim on the property along the river sight-unseen and moved to the hot springs. “Upon arrival to their new property, they immediately found it occupied by Cleofas Natividad, his wife, and their ten children, who had been living and practicing agriculture on the land for years.” After careful thought and consideration, Langford decided with little hesitation and agreed to let the Natividad family continue to live on the property and pay rent. This decision clearly turned out to be a wise one on the part of the Langford’s, as the Natividad family would soon become their closest friends.^{12 A}



The original bathhouse built over the Hot Springs on the Rio Grande River, Photograph provided by the National Park Service.

The early Native American Indians had made use of the crystal clear constant 105°F water for centuries. The hot springs were also a favorite of the Mexican population that inhabited both sides of the river. Because of the rivers remote distance from populated areas like Alpine and Marathon, the population often had to rely on *curanderos* for health remedies when medical problems arose for individuals. Curanderos are Mexican folk healers, medicine man or woman who uses herbs or hallucinogenic plants, magic, and spiritualism to treat illness, induce visions, impart traditional wisdom and serve as midwives. They have had a long history of directing patients to use the hot springs to cure illnesses.^{12 B}

The Langfords built a home on the bluff above the river, directly above the site of the bathhouse. The two-story limestone bathhouse even included a pump for a separate tub for those more modest people who desired privacy.¹³

Langford named the location Hot Springs, Texas and named his bathhouse facility, the Langford Hot Springs. The small settlement included a general store to accommodate visitors and a U.S. Post Office to serve the new area. Lanford also became a schoolteacher, a self-taught doctor, and a postman to help supplement his income from the bathhouse. In the Alpine Avalanche newspaper, the new Langford Hot Springs was heavily promoted as a health resort.¹⁴

Peace and quiet along the Rio Grande River border separating the United State from Mexico has not always been uninterrupted. The trouble this time actually got its beginning with the instability of the government from the Mexican Revolution which began in 1910. Starting around 1913, Mexican banditos occasionally created havoc by crossing the river in lower Brewster and Presidio counties. The straw that broke the camel’s back was the invasion of forty plus Mexican banditos that attacked the nine U.S. Army troops stationed at Glenn Springs on May 5, 1916. Three soldiers and a small boy were killed by the banditos and the general store was looted.¹⁵ The Army had earlier advised people living in the area to leave for their own safety until they could regain control of the border. The Langfords moved to El Paso for their safety in early 1916, where they remained until the banditos were driven back across the border by federal troops. It wasn’t until 1927 that the Army gave people “the all clear sign” to return to their homes.¹⁶



Store and Post Office at Hot Spring, Texas, Circa 1930's, Photo Courtesy of National Park Service

After an eleven-year absence, Langford returned to the river to find his bathhouse in ruins and almost gone except for the foundation. He set about rebuilding a smaller version of the bathhouse on the original foundation, but not quite as refined as the original. This time he built a new store with a post office. Next to the store was a small motel. The expanded Langford Hot Springs became a popular attraction and prospered throughout the 1930s and early 1940s.¹⁷

As one of the very early proponents of the Park, on May 27, 1942, Langford conveyed his property to the State of Texas for \$10, stipulating that it be used “*for park purposes only.*”¹⁸ Two years later, the Big Bend Park officially opened for visitors on July 1, 1944.

It would be almost impossible not to have a national park when you team up the next two men that were noted for their unrelenting hard work, dogged determination and ability to motivate other people to join the effort to make things happen.

Everett Ewing Townsend, born in Colorado County, Texas on October 20, 1871 was raised by another family struggling to make a living raising cattle, of which there were untold thousands. In the early days of rural west Texas, prior to the building of the railroads, making a living anywhere involving agriculture was a bonified tough undertaking. Just like it is today, it involves well suited land at an affordable price and the requisite amount of sunshine and rain at the appropriate timetable.¹⁹

The Townsend family made a number of moves before settling in Eagle Pass located on the Rio Grande River southwest of San Antonio where young Everette attended school until the age of thirteen. Because of his father's poor health, Everette quit school to become the sole bread winner to support the family. In 1891, at the age of twenty, Everette fibbed about his age in order to join Company E, Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers. Two years later he resigned from the Rangers and became a Deputy U.S. Marshal. After only a year in the Marshal's service, he took another job as a mounted inspector for the U.S. Customs Service in Presidio County.²⁰

On August 31, 1894, Townsend was high in the Chisos Mountains tracking down stolen mules that belonged to a Mexican citizen. As many others before and after, Townsend was struck by the very memorable panoramic view from the south rim looking westward to the Sierra Del Carmen Mountain range on the other side of the river in Mexico. Decades later he recalled that the sight made him "see God as he had never seen Him before and so overpoweringly impressed him that he made note of its awesomeness."²¹ He vowed to preserve this region in some fashion for future generations.

It is believed that from 1900 to 1918, Townsend was employed as manager of the 264,555, acre O2 Ranch, started by Edward L. and Alfred Gage who had sold it to William W. Turney in 1891.²² The ranch was located in the Green Valley area of western Brewster County and extended into eastern Presidio County. At the zenith of its success, the ranch is said to have had approximately 12,000 +/- head of cattle. It was Alfred Gage who built the historic Gage Hotel in Marathon in 1927, only to die one year later in San Antonio following surgery for appendicitis.²³ Brother, Edward L. Gage took his own life in the washroom of a Chicago railroad station on April 21, 1892 when he was unable to sell stock to investors to ease his financial liquidity problems of the ranch.²⁴

Turney, a native of Marshall, Texas attended Sam Houston Normal Institute in Huntsville and began his working career as a teacher in Hallsville until 1886 and then moved to Fort Davis. In 1887 Turney was admitted to the Texas Bar Association and began practicing law in nearby Alpine. This same year he was elected county attorney for Brewster County and served as a county commissioner. Turney was to become a man of achievement. His next move was to El Paso where he joined a large law firm as a partner in 1892. It wasn't long before he was selected as general counsel to represent a number of important businesses. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad being more noteworthy along with a number of others. From 1918 to 1925



Big Bend, by E. L. Boone, 16" x 20", Oil on Canvas, Circa early 1930's, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. McKee III. Painted prior to 1937 when the CCC started building the road by hand up to the basin of the Chisos Mountains.

Turney served as a member of the El Paso branch of the Federal Reserve Bank board of directors and later became chairman. If that wasn't enough, Turney was also elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1892 and was reelected in 1894. Two years later he was elected to the Texas Senate where he served until 1902. To say that Turney was on the "go" would be a gross understatement. Having a large ranch just about required being a member of the Texas and Southwest Cattle Raisers Association. He not only was a member, but served two terms as president beginning in 1901-1903 and again in 1915-1916. ²⁵

William W. Turney and Townsend were acquainted. As his employer, Turney was in all probability a mentor to Townsend who looked to him as a guide and teacher. Turney knew and understood politics. Not only did Townsend want to elevate his station in life, he appeared to be very willing to work hard to achieve his goals.

Beginning in 1918, Townsend ran for Brewster County sheriff and was successfully elected. His background as a former Texas Ranger, deputy U.S. Marshall and U.S. Customs agent was a background that voters liked. In 1932, Townsend was elected to the state House of Representatives. In order to turn the Big Bend area and the Chisos Mountains into a national park, it was essential that promoters needed to be in Austin at the State Capitol. ²⁶

In the spring of 1933, Townsend was approached by Representative Robert Wagstaff of Abilene, who had read of the stunning beauty of the Big Bend, and was interested in establishing a park there. Townsend confirmed the description of the area, but demurred when Wagstaff attempted to list him as the author of the bill establishing a state park there. Townsend felt that a bill sponsored by a frontier representative would get lost. When the bill establishing Texas Canyons State Park in the Big Bend was passed in March 1933, Townsend was indeed credited as the co-author. Later that year he assisted in expanding the scope of the new park and renamed it Big Bend State Park. ²⁷

Townsend was instrumental in the establishment of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the Chisos Mountains. Following the establishment of the state park, the next step was to bring in a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp to develop the new park; this proved a difficult task. The US Army, responsible for overseeing operation of the CCC camps, repeatedly objected to potential camp locations in the Big Bend due to lack of roads and sufficient water. In April of 1934, Townsend led a locally financed expedition of six men into the Chisos Mountains to locate water. All other desirable locations had not had sufficient water. Expressing his concern

over the matter, Townsend told his group “Boys, we've got to have water and quick.” When a sufficient water supply was found, it was named “Agua Pronto [quick water],” in commemoration of the need. One month and two days later, a CCC camp was established in the



Closing the deal to purchase the Johnson's Ranch property. Everett Townsend is second from left. Photograph provided by the National Park Service, Big Bend National Park

Chisos Basin, to begin the work of developing the new park. ²⁸

Establishing the state park was only the beginning. Writing about the region to a U.S. Army officer, Townsend went on to provide a detailed physical description of the area he wanted to be preserved. ²⁹

Townsend's tenacity in support of the national park idea seemed nearly limitless. He tirelessly promoted both the idea of a national park and international park status for the region, writing National Park Service officials and politicians of two countries. In 1942, \$1.5 million was appropriated by the Texas State Legislature to purchase approximately 600,000 acres of land from private owners. Everett Townsend's local expertise was utilized to appraise the land values and arrange for the purchase of much of the private land needed to establish the park. In a ceremony handing the land deeds to the Department of the Interior in 1943, Townsend was the one individual singled out in recognition of his efforts to see his decades-old dream realized. ³⁰

Big Bend National Park was officially opened for visitors on July 1, 1944. In its first year, Big Bend Park recorded 1,409 visitors.³¹ This sounds small by today's standards, but as it turned out, this was only the beginning.



Everett Townsend with Bianca, a Mexican child in Boquillas Mexico 1936. Photograph provided by the National Park Service, Historic Photograph Collection.

Because of his unending devotion and hard work, Everett Ewing Townsend (1871-1948), has rightfully been called the “father of the Big Bend National Park.” The second highest peak in the Chisos Mountains rises 7,580’ and is named Townsend Point in honor of Mr. Townsend and his pursuit of preserving this place in Texas for all America to enjoy the beauty and grandeur of the Big Bend. In 1954, on the tenth anniversary of the park’s establishment, then current Superintendent Lon Garrison, presented the Townsend family with a posthumous honorary park ranger commission for the man that will always be remembered for his dedicated efforts to preserve the Big Bend for the future.³²

The third and final person to officially having been given credit for proposing the Big Bend National Park, was Amon G. Carter (December 11, 1879 - June 23, 1955). There are of course many words that could be used to describe Amon Carter, but the first word to come to mind is, “dynamo,” because in reality that is what he was. First and foremost, he was the creator and publisher of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, a skilled

political activist and advisor, prodigious civic leader and generous philanthropist. Fort Worth, Texas will never have another civic leader and booster quite like Amon Carter, simply because there just aren’t that many people with the relentless dogged determination of “Mr. West Texas,” as he was fondly called. Whether it was a mountain or a mole hill, he could move it to wherever he thought it belonged.

Carter began life in a one room log cabin in Crafton, Wise County, Texas on a cold winter day in December of 1879. He was the son of William Henry and Josephine (Josie) Carter. William was a farmer who sometimes retreated to blacksmithing when his farming efforts did not turn out very well. His mother died in 1892 soon after giving birth to her daughter Adie. At age thirteen, Carter left home and moved 47 miles north to go live with his grandmother in Nocona, Texas.³³

He later moved back south to Bowie and supported himself at various jobs. His first job was working for Mrs. Mollie Jarrot, owner/operator of the eleven room Jarrot Hotel as a general handyman at \$1.50 per week, plus room and board. As a very young man out on his own struggling to sustain himself, Carter developed a strict determination to succeed. It was from

the experiences of his numerous jobs that he learned salesmanship. With his dauntless ambition and self-taught ability as a salesperson, it wasn't long before he was on the road working as a traveling salesman. He later worked in Oklahoma and traveled as far west to San Francisco, California.³⁴

By 1905 Carter had moved back to Texas and put his salesmanship skills to work as an advertising space salesman. It wasn't too many months later that he and other investors would start a fledgling new newspaper, named the *Fort Worth Star*. The new venture published their first paper on February 1, 1906, with Carter charged with the very important job as advertising manager. Unfortunately, the *Fort Worth Star* was not the financial success anticipated. Carter and his partners decided the way to solve the problem was to get bigger rather than downsize. They went about raising additional capital and with the help of Col. Paul Waples who invested \$25,000, they bought out their competitor, the *Fort Worth Telegram* in 1908. With his deep-seated ambition and never satisfied with the status quo, the backing of Col. Waples put the newspaper on firmer financial footing ready for growth. The newly merged newspapers were renamed the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* on January 1, 1909. It was now a newspaper that was on its way to a big circulation and history.³⁵

By 1910, "Cowtown" as Fort Worth was fondly and generally called, was on its way to becoming more than a railroad and stockyards center. With a population of 73,312, Carter was also on his way to giving his fellow citizens living at the most eastern edge of the vast boundaries of West Texas more than they ever dreamed possible.³⁶ This thirty-year old newspaper man was just getting started. He never delivered the actual newspapers, but he certainly would deliver a lot of the headline-making news that was in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. The byname of *Cowtown* is proudly utilized today to describe this ever-growing town that celebrates and promotes their western legacy while stepping in the present and their future.

The foundation had now been put in place for the newspaper to become the largest circulation of any newspaper in the south from 1923 until after World War II. The *Star Telegram* served not only the Fort Worth area but also West Texas, New Mexico and western Oklahoma. The circulation covered an area of 375,000 square miles. Carter became publisher and president of the paper in 1923 at the age of forty-four and bought out the last rival newspaper paper, the *Record*, from William Randolph Hearst in 1925. The newspaper created radio station WBAP in 1922 and twenty-six years later received the license for the first television station in Texas, WBAP-TV, in 1948.³⁷

When one conjures the plausible thoughts of Amon Carter's vision, it is surprising that he had the patience to wait that long for television to be invented. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* was his to use in working his wonders of shaping Fort Worth from a prominent West Texas cattle town to a city that was also ready for industrial manufacturing, banking, natural resources (oil) and aviation. He not only wanted a commercial airline based in Fort Worth, but also a military airfield to make its presence in Fort Worth. True to his style, he eventually got what he wanted.

In the mind of Amon Carter, there were no limits to the growth he always thought possible for Cowtown. He didn't just go to work every day, he just never stopped working. He was proud of his accomplishments, but always thought he could do more.



President Roosevelt and Amon Carter in the oval office, June 6, 1944. Photograph provided by the National Park Service, Big Bend Park.

How Amon Carter came to play such an important role in getting Big Bend National Park into the National Park Service and the first national park in the State of Texas, in retrospect is pretty easy to understand - politics. The United States was still at war in both Europe and Asia and did not have the money to add another national park. The State of Texas bought and paid for all the land. J. O. Langford in Brewster County, and Everett Townsend, a State Representative, combined their efforts with Amon Carter working in Fort Worth and Washington, D.C. Mr. Carter was a nationally recognized publisher and majority owner of a very influential newspaper in a big state called Texas. He was also a nationally recognized Democrat who strongly supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt and was considered a personal friend of the President. As a result of these three Texans, the Big Bend National Park was officially established on June 12, 1944.³⁸

People have forever wondered how Amon Carter was able to obtain so much help from political figures. It has been repeatedly stated that "he pestered them until they finally gave in just to make him go away." There is in all probability a lot of truth to this statement. This is how super salesmen operate. The salesman keeps up the sales pitch until the customer finally says "yes."^{38 A}



Amon G. Carter, Undated Photograph, Courtesy of Amon Carter Museum of American Art

any other light.³⁹

In the forward of the wonderfully written book, *Amon: The Texan Who Played Cowboy for America*, by Jerry Flemmons; Amon G. Carter is best described as, "Within Texas, he was a power, a force of politics, of civic boosterism and industrial development. Amon's underlying philosophy was to sell, promote, and build the city and region, and the paper will grow and become the best in Texas. Carter became the ruling body of Fort Worth, yet he never once held public office. He made it a point to form the bonds of friendship with men of industry and politics. Perhaps his most lasting contribution should be as "the champion of the people of West Texas." It would be hard to describe Mr. Carter in

The residents of both Dallas and Fort Worth well remember the light-hearted friendly feud Carter carried on about the neighboring city to the east of Fort Worth. Well at least most people wanted to think it was friendly. His disdain for the city of Dallas was legendary throughout

Texas and the southwest. Everyone's favorite story was the one that he would always take a sack lunch in a brown paper bag whenever he traveled to Dallas so he wouldn't have to spend any money. Another often quoted saying of which there were many, "Fort Worth is where the West begins and Dallas is where the East peters out."⁴⁰ The Dallas business community always took Carter's colorful comments as humorous, that is until he started recruiting businesses to move to Fort Worth. The humor generated by Mr. Carter soon faded. There was even talk at one time of banning him from entering the city limits of Dallas.

Amon Carter suffered a number of heart attacks beginning in 1953 and the final attack, two years later on June 23, 1955 ended the life of a young man from Crafton, Texas born in a log cabin who forevermore will be remembered in Texas history as a man bigger than life.⁴¹ In 1957, two years after his death, the Big Bend National Park appropriately named a 5,688' high peak, Carter Peak in honor of his contributions to the establishment of the Park.⁴²

This unique man of time and place earned his rightful position in Texas history. He did not die at the Alamo, like some of the others, rather his famous battle was to make Fort Worth bigger and better. He died in his beloved "Cowtown" as his final resting place. If his hope was for his legacy to live on forever, his prayers will forever be answered!

The Big Bend National Park was only the beginning for the Lone Star State. Today there are a total of eleven national parks in the state of Texas that encompass 268,597 square miles. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department reports they oversee ninety-six state parks and natural areas in their care and jurisdiction.⁴³