

## Chapter 11

# The Milton Faver / George Dawson Ranches

Shafter Vicinity in the Trans-Pecos, Presidio County, Texas

The history of the Dawson ranch dates back to the early settlement of Presidio County in the lower Rio Grande area of the Trans-Pecos. Like all historic ranches in Texas, someone has to start from nothing but bare land. Milton Faver (ca. 1822-December 23, 1889), was one of the earliest pioneer settlers and historical figures of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the area of Presidio County.<sup>1</sup>

Milton Faver is thought to have been born in Virginia and in his late teens was living in Missouri. There is no information available concerning his family or early childhood. It is generally believed Faver was involved in a duel as a young man and thinking he killed his opponent, fled Missouri for Mexico. He is thought to have arrived in Chihuahua, Mexico sometime in the late 1830s.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of different stories offered as to why and where he came from. Some of the stories are only conjecture, unproven and quite controversial. Like many prominent figures from the past, the true facts may never be known because Faver entered his grave without revealing the real stories behind the story as is often the case. It is always interesting how folklore sometimes tries to work its way into historical facts, and sometimes replaces fact with fiction. As one book publisher recently commented, "fiction sells just as well as fact."<sup>3</sup> Every effort has been made on the part of the authors to thoroughly research the known facts in order to present facts reliability without fiction.

What led Milton Faver to Mexico, like many other details, in all probability will never really be known. By 1840 Faver was living in Meoqui, Mexico, approximately 46 miles southeast of Chihuahua and 100 miles south of Ojinaga, Presidio del Norte, working in a flour mill. Not long after settling in Mexico, Faver met Francisca Ramirez who would become his lifelong partner and the two were soon married.<sup>4</sup>



Concordia Cemetery, Shafter, Texas. Courtesy of Texas Historic Commission.

The marriage eventually produced one child, Juan John Faver, born in Meoqui, Mexico around 1850. Juan married Gavina Ramirez on November 14, 1878. Their marriage produced four children. Gavina Faver died on an unknown date in 1891. Juan later married Gumercinda Zubia on an unknown date. Juan died December 2, 1913 and Gumercinda Zubia Faver died on April 28, 1961. All are interred in Concordia Cemetery in Shafter, Texas.

The date of the establishment of Faver's freighting business on the Chihuahua Trail, moving essential goods to and from Santa Fe, New Mexico has been lost in time. The Chihuahua Trail was a trade route that extended from Mexico through Texas and on into New Mexico. From 1849 to 1883 this lucrative trade route had as many as 2,000 freight wagons a year transporting goods along this popular well-traveled trail.<sup>5</sup>

At some time in the early to middle 1850s, the freighting operation had turned into a well-established profitable business that allowed Faver to leave his employees in charge and move his base of operation to Presidio del Norte. His new businesses consisted of trading, a mercantile store and a sizable farming operation. The town on the U.S. side of the border, also named Presidio del Norte, first saw Angelo settlers in 1848 and later shortened its name to just Presidio. The new location appeared from the beginning to be another astute move on the part of Mr. Faver. From all indications his businesses prospered because of his hard work and again thoughtful business insight.<sup>6</sup>



Very Early Undated Photograph of Milton Faver, Courtesy of Texas State Historical Association

Authors and historians over these many years have amply described Milton Faver as peculiar, eccentric, colorful, and contradictory no matter where he was or what he did at the time. Several descriptions that unfortunately have been omitted when describing Milton Faver are hardworking, intelligent, resourceful, industrious and purposeful. Building flourishing businesses of freighting and trading, mercantile and an agricultural empire the likes of what Milton Faver built requires a very forward thinking and astute business mind. He continuously proved this in every respect. He also did not believe in nor did he do business with banks. Back in those days putting your money in a bank far out west was a high-risk proposition. Banks were not regulated or legally structured as they are in today's world. Faver is also credited with fluently speaking four languages – French and German in addition to English and Spanish.<sup>7</sup> He was always ready to do business with

a customer no matter what language he was speaking.

Sometime between 1855 and 1857, leaving the safety in numbers of the border, Milton Faver decided to make a bold change in his life and moved his family and a number of loyal employees 25 miles north to the vicinity of Shafter, an area controlled by hostile Apache Indians.<sup>8</sup> He would be the first to permanently settle in the interior north of the Rio Grande, and not in the vicinity of Fort Davis under the protection of the US Army. The next order of business was to lay claim to the very fertile land in the area below the Chinati Mountains on Cibolo Creek, the former site of a Cibolo Indian village. It was also thought to be the former site of the Spanish Mission, Santa María de las Caldas, the Mission to the Cibolo Indians.<sup>9</sup>

As one can well imagine, the Indians were not about to give up their long-held territory without a fierce fight. And that they did! Faver, when making his decision had calculated the risk of possible trouble and arrived with his own small army. Unfortunately, there would always be ongoing trouble and loss of life for a number of years.



Ported Gun Tower at "El Fortin del Cibolo" now Cibolo Creek Ranch, Courtesy of Texas Monthly Magazine

Upon arrival to this new area, 10.6 driving miles, or approximately 4.5 miles as the crow flies, northwest of Shafter, Faver and company soon set about constructing a fortress he named El Fortin del Cibolo or *Fort of the Buffalo*. It was a 10,000 square foot large defensive structure with thick high adobe walls, heavy wooden doors and two round ported gun towers. The fortress housed the various families and a mercantile store for local trading. This was one of three defensive centers similar in size that Faver would build to house his employees and families that were to be employed on his three ranches.<sup>10</sup>

The next fortress he built was El Fortin de la Cienega, *Fort of the Marsh*, that served as the headquarters for his ever-growing cattle operation. El Fortin de la Cienega was located 4.5 miles north and east of Shafter off of US 67 along Cienega Creek. Like Fortin del Cibolo, El Fortin de la Cienega was very similar in design and structure. The Texas Historic Commission placed historical marker #3392 in 1994 close to the turnoff toward this historical ranch.<sup>11</sup>

Faver's last and final fortified ranch structure was El Fortin de la Morita, *Fort of the Little Mulberry Tree*, which was used for his sheep and goat herds. This ranch is located 9.5 miles southeast of Shafter off of US 67. The Texas Historic Commission also placed historical marker #3001 in 1994 close to the turnoff toward this historical ranch. This marker is very close to the above-mentioned marker #3392. The markers' directions are to go east on a private road about 12 miles.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1880s, Milton Faver controlled a vast area of open range in and around Shafter. His deeded property included most of the best available water resources which were needed to support his formidable cattle, sheep and goat herds. The cattle herd at the El Fortin de la Cienega ranch was roughly estimated at 20,000 head. His three ranches comprised the largest individual landholdings and livestock herds in Presidio County by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

The Indians were not about to hand over their best land and water to newcomer Milton Faver without a fight. There is no doubt these interlopers and land grabbers expected trouble and they got exactly what they were expecting and then some. In one of the Indian raids on the El Fortin de la Morita ranch, Faver's brother in-law, Carmen Ramirez, his wife and two children were captured on July 31, 1875. Ramirez was killed and his family was never recovered.<sup>14</sup> The

Indians were out for blood and they got what they wanted. When they killed Carmen Ramirez the fight with the Indians quickly changed to all-out war on the part of Faver and company. The death of Ramirez was an extreme reversal of fortune for Faver. His brother-in-law's knowledge and skilled abilities with cattle, sheep, goats and vaqueros were indispensable to the Faver operation of the ranches. Faver rightfully owed a good deal of his accomplishment and prosperity to the management skills of his now deceased brother-in-law who had to be replaced.<sup>15</sup>

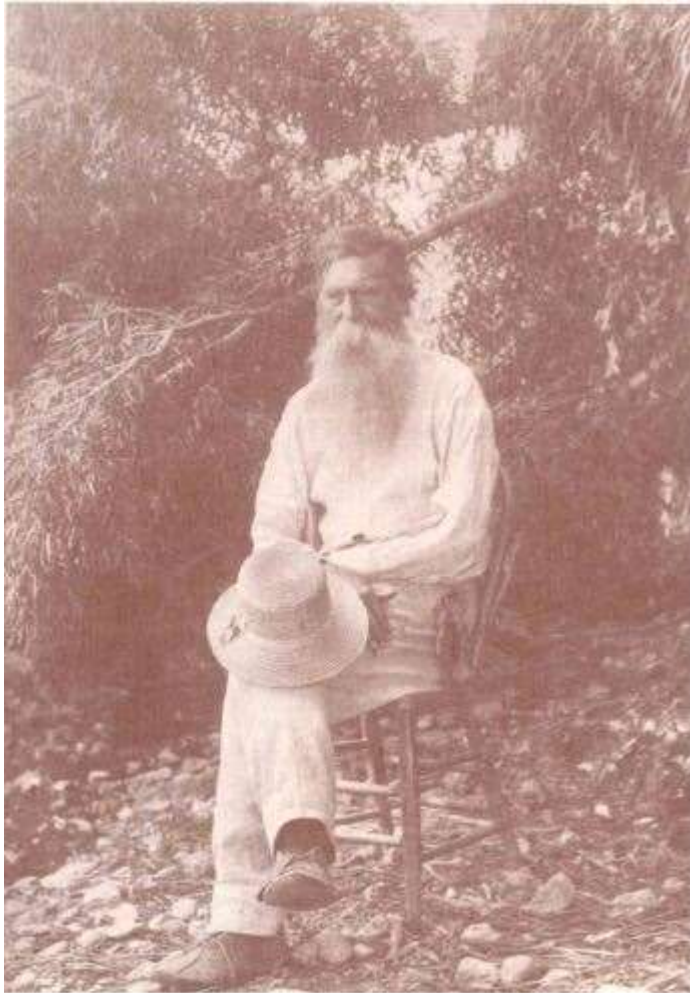
In spite of continuous attacks and repeated raids by the marauding Apaches, they steadfastly held their ground. Wherever they traveled or whatever they did, they were always alert to danger and well-armed out of self-preservation.

Fortunately, the Indian problem along the southern border of the US and Mexico finally came to an end with the death of Apache warrior Chief Victorio. On October 14, 1880 Mexican soldiers in the Tres Castillos Mountains south of El Paso killed the Chief during a battle. Victorio was considered one of the greatest Apache military strategists of all time. The reason he was feared by so many was his reputation of being blood thirsty and vicious. He and his small band of warriors took many innocent lives just for the sake of killing.<sup>16</sup> Like all antagonists, he perfectly fit the old quotation of "he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword."<sup>17</sup>

With the end of the Indian raids, Faver and company could work without fear of being attacked. It is estimated that Faver employed more than eighty people who worked at the three ranches performing various agricultural related jobs necessary to make it a sustained ongoing operation. The hundreds of cattle that were raised at El Fortin de la Cienega plus other provisions were sold to the US Army at Fort Davis some 59 miles north of Shafter.<sup>18</sup>

With the discovery of silver in Shafter in 1880/1881 the whole area soon changed. It went from being out in the middle of nowhere to being awarded the name *The Richest Acre in Texas*. From 1883 until 1942 the Presidio mine reportedly produced 32.6 million ounces of silver and employed anywhere from 300 to 400 mine workers at any one time.<sup>19</sup> The flood of miners coming to the new boom town certainly helped Faver's businesses, but the downside was a flood of new cattle ranchers moved into the area in and around Fort Davis. With the arrival of the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad to Presidio County in 1882 and later the arrival of barbed wire, significant changes occurred in the area.<sup>20</sup> The Faver ranching empire now had competition. His own success may well have attributed to his operations decline. The new ranchers moving into the area wanted to do what Milton Faver had accomplished, but fortunately he still held the deed to the best water resources in the area. The newcomers to the Shafter vicinity were now taking his cattle and the open range that he had used free of charge since the middle to late 1850s. To add insult to injury, Faver was not getting any younger

By 1886, the remarkable days of the Faver ranching empire had passed. Milton Faver no longer wanted to be a cattle baron because of his slowly failing health. He worked out a usage and management agreement with D.G. Knight, another Presidio County rancher and County



Late Undated Photograph of Milton Faver, Courtesy of Texas State Historical Association

Inspector of Hides and Animals, who he felt was knowledgeable and trustworthy to use his land, cattle, horses and equipment for three years and they would basically split the profits per their working agreement. Due to the conditions of the cattle raised and low prices, the operating agreement signed by Mr. Knight unfortunately proved to be unprofitable for both parties. The poor results could very well be attributed to the onset of the drought of 1885-1887. At the expiration of the agreement in 1889, Faver sold his remaining cattle to another rancher, Joe Humphreys.<sup>21</sup> Faver was now a former cattle baron and officially retired from what would be considered a remarkable career. All this was done with only 2,880 deeded acres and the surrounding open range.<sup>22</sup> Like all successful ranchers, the acreage he controlled held the best access to natural and permanent, abundant spring water. It was this precious water that made Faver and company self-sustaining.

Milton Faver, known locally as “Don Melitòn” for three decades, died peacefully at El Fortin del Cibolo ranch two days before Christmas on Monday, December 23, 1889. In September of 1889 Faver had turned over operation of La Morita (El Fortin de la Morita) to George Dawson, Sr., the husband of Juliana Ramirez Dawson, Francisca Faver’s niece. Three months later, just days before his death, Milton and Francisca Faver deeded the entire property to Juliana Dawson.<sup>23</sup>

George Smith Dawson, Sr., (born September 6, 1861 - died March 24, 1942) was born in County Dublin, Ireland and is thought to have come to the United States sometime after 1885. Extensive research has been unable to produce definitive biographical information relating to Mr. Dawson. One unverified version is that he left Ireland (date unknown) and moved to Paris, France. From there he went to England and then to Hoboken, New Jersey.<sup>24</sup> The bigger and more interesting question is, why did he decide to move to Shafter, Texas? Could it have been the silver mines? In all probability the answer is yes, but like everything else it has been left to history. Bonnie



The next big event in the life of George Dawson was the meeting and eventual marriage to Juliana Ramirez (born February 4, 1866 – died January 3, 1948) who was born in Mexico and was the sister of Carmen Ramirez, brother in-law to Milton Faver. There is no marriage date available for the couple. Their marriage produced one son, George Smith Dawson, Jr., (born November 24, 1889 - died May 27, 1986). Presidio County records show George S. Dawson, Sr. as a Justice of the Peace, Precinct #7 Shafter in 1887. The biography of George Dawson, Jr. provided information that George, Sr. “grew all sorts of fruits and vegetables behind his home. When the produce was ripened, he would put everything in an old wagon and go around Shafter selling his home grown produce door to door.”<sup>25</sup>

In September of 1889, 3 months before his death, Milton Faver had made much the same agreement with George Dawson, Sr. as he did with D. G. Knight. According to the agreement, Dawson was to take over the entire herd of sheep and goats in his possession at El Fortin de la Morita and devote his entire attention for their care. Dawson was to furnish all the needed herders and take care of the shearing and marking of the flocks. In return Faver gave Dawson one-half the increase of the flock of approximately 5,000 sheep and 1,600 goats and one-half of all the wool clipped for the next four years.<sup>26</sup> As always, Milton Faver was detailed and meticulous. When it came to agreements and contracts, he always knew exactly what he wanted and how he wanted it to work along with the exact wording. With the death of “Don Melitòn” the vicinity of Shafter was about to change.

George Dawson Jr. and Juanita (Juana) Manriques (born November 24, 1894 – died May 27, 1986) both attended grade school in Shafter. The 1930 Census recorded they each received four years of schooling. George Jr. was credited as very intelligent and studious person that liked to read books when he had the time. He was also gifted with a good sense of humor and always had many witty ideas and comments.<sup>27</sup>

As a young man it was his job, like many other boys his age, to gather and bring home firewood every morning for the stove and fireplace. The other important chore for the day was to go down to Cibolo Creek and pump water from the creek into a barrel and bring it home for the day’s use.<sup>28</sup>

As George grew older, he and his friends began capturing wild horses from the open range. When they found horses, they would corral them by herding them into a box canyon with no escape. The first order of business was to decide which horses to keep and which ones were too old and needed to be returned to freedom. The boys would then break them enough so they could be ridden and then divide up their new hard-earned riches. Some of the horses were sold and some were kept. Like all bronc busters one can be assured they received their share of bumps and bruises that came with the job.<sup>29</sup>

George, Jr. 28 and Juana Manriques 23, were married in Shafter on November 17, 1917. They moved to El Paso in 1918 where they lived for only 90 days before returning to La Morita to rejoin with his father and work on the ranch. George Dawson Sr. had shortened the name of

the ranch from La Morita to La Mora. What brought about the name change is unknown. Within several months of returning to the ranch, George Jr. was drafted into the U.S. Army to serve in World War I (1914-1918). After 90 days of basic training, he was shipped to France where he remained until war's end. <sup>30</sup>

While her husband was serving in France, Juana stayed at La Mora with her new in-laws. One of the attractions that may have brought George and Juana together could very well have been horses. Juana was known as an experienced horseback rider. Whenever there was a roundup, she was always there to help and assist the Vacqueros'. <sup>31</sup>

At wars end, George Jr. returned to La Mora where he and Juana lived for the next seven years. The end came when George Jr. got into an argument with his father concerning Juana. George Sr. told his son that he no longer wanted his wife as his daughter-in-law. George, Jr. and Juana left La Mora and moved to "El Rancho Del Pajorito." The background of this ranch and who the owner was is unavailable. Juana Dawson is quoted in her interview "the ranch was in ruins when they arrived and they quickly set about repairing and rebuilding." El Rancho Del Pajorito would be their home and livelihood for the next twelve years. <sup>32</sup>

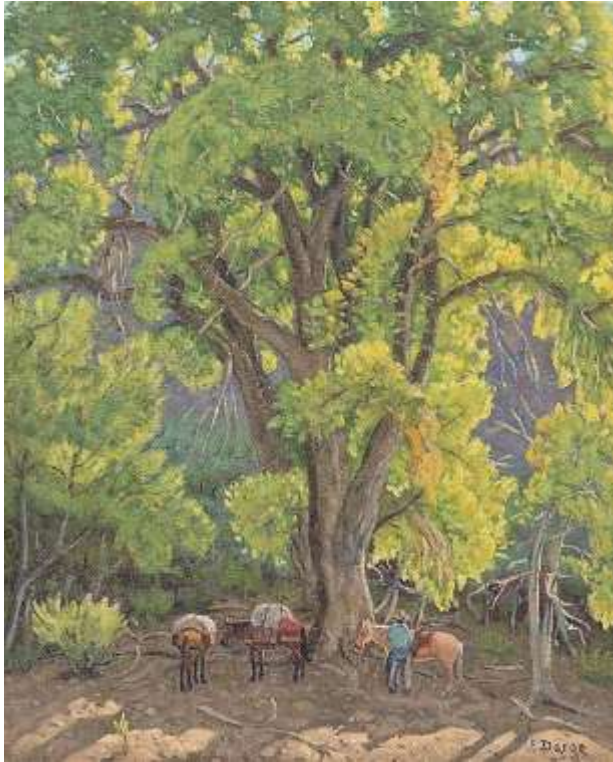
Although the date is not known, it was likely that in 1942 the Dawsons left the ranch and returned to Shafter where they built a house and used part of it for a small convenience store selling limited groceries, food and gasoline. The venture turned out to be only marginally profitable. The store had only been in operation a few months when George Dawson Sr. died on March 24, 1942. <sup>33</sup> This event set in motion the closing of the store in Shafter and George Jr. and Juana moving back to La Mora where they had two ranches to manage.

With two ranches to operate, George Jr. soon hired addition ranch hands and set about the daily routine of raising cows and goats. With more help and better livestock markets he was soon credited with making the ranches bigger and better than they had been prior to his move back to Shafter. <sup>34</sup>

George Jr. and Juana were always well liked and popular people in and around the Shafter area. They enjoyed having picnics and inviting their many friends to La Mora for social events. The picnics were well attended and included music and dancing. It was a classic case of "the more the merrier." <sup>35</sup> Their kindness and popularity would eventually be found by a Dallas artist named Fred Darge.

All three of the original Milton Faver ranch properties - El Fortin del Cibolo, El Fortin de la Cienega and El Fortin de la Morita - were purchased by Houston industrialist John B. Poindexter starting in 1990. The ranches have now been rehabilitated to follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. The Project Architect was Ford, Powell & Carson Architects & Planners, Inc. with assistance from Killis Almond, FAIA, Preservation Architect, both from San Antonio, Texas. The properties are now luxury guest ranches featuring deluxe accommodations. <sup>36</sup>

**Don Melitòn and Francisca would be impressed and very grateful for the restoration of their former home at El Fortin del Cibolo.**



**Making Camp (Dawson Ranch, Presidio County, Shafter, Texas), 16" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1946/1947, Collection of Dr. and Mrs. J. Sloan Leonard**

**There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Fred Darge would fit right in with the Dawsons. World War II had ended, the National Park Service had taken over the Big Bend and true to form, Darge naturally moved west to the next county, Presidio, and found the little town known as the Richest Acre in Texas. The town of Shafter was established in 1886, ten years after the first mineral survey of the nearby Chinati Mountains noted the presence of lead, silver and copper. It is estimated Darge first came to Shafter in the time frame of 1946/1947. With this historical mining town and the big ranches along Cibolo Creek waiting to be painted, it was made to order for this artist. As usual, upon arrival, Darge couldn't wait to get right to work and start applying the pallet of many-colored paints to the canvas.**

**As has been pointed out in previous chapters, Darge almost had the nose of a bloodhound when it came to finding interesting and sometimes historical people and places to paint. Milton Faver and the Dawson families that followed, along with Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church in Shafter are examples of his interest in painting the "working ranchman" and ordinary individuals living an everyday life. He always gives us a glimpse of time standing still as it was that day and hour.**





**Watering at the Spring, Dawson Ranch, Presidio County, Texas, 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy Heritage Auction Galleries**

This painting as well as the previous, *Making Camp* depicts two of the more important aspects of La Mora ranch, the abundance of natural flowing springs and many tall trees along Cibolo Creek. The three horses could very well be wild range mustangs or tamed ranch horses let loose to wander around and find something to graze on. This work illustrates plentiful water but no grass for grazing.



**Back Home, Dawson Ranch, Presidio County, Texas, 8.5" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa middle to late 1940s, Collection of Jim and Sherry Carey**

The figure in this painting could very possibly be George Dawson Jr. because of the fact Darge liked to give paintings to the ranch owners for room and board. It always seemed to make him a welcome guest. If you were a ranch owner you would not spend the money to buy a painting like this. But if Fred Darge were to give you this painting of you mounted on your favorite horse it becomes a family keepsake and valuable possession. The landscape in the painting appears to reflect that it has been heavily over grazed by the livestock.