



Santa Elena Canyon (Glenn Burgess photo)

Big Bend
NATIONAL PARK
TEXAS

Big Bend National Park



United States Department of the Interior

Harold L. Ickes, *Secretary*

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The Big Bend National Park is a land of contrasts. Although it consists predominantly of semiarid plains characterized by gravel-covered slopes, arroyos, and washes, this general landscape is interrupted by conspicuous mountain belts and by the winding Rio Grande which has carved spectacular canyons through some of the rugged highlands. Romantic interest is added by the close proximity to the peoples of Old Mexico and by the colorful legends and stories of the country. To appreciate fully the variety of attractions offered by the park, the traveler should visit the South Rim, The Basin, Santa Elena and Boquillas Canyons, various Mexican settlements along the Rio Grande, and the quaint little village of Terlingua which is adjacent to the park on the west.

Location and Area

The park derives its name from its location in that portion of Texas where the Rio Grande, forming the boundary between the

United States and Mexico, makes a big U-shaped bend in its course. The nearest major road is U. S. Highway No. 90 which passes through Marathon and Alpine, Texas. One approach road (State Highway No. 121) leaves U. S. Highway No. 90 at Alpine, 220 miles east of El Paso and 330 miles west of San Antonio. It is 110 miles from Alpine over this route, which extends through the old mining town of Terlingua, to temporary park headquarters in The Basin in the heart of the Chisos Mountains. By another approach road from Marathon, 30 miles east of Alpine, the distance to the temporary headquarters is 80 miles. Access by rail is over the Southern Pacific Railway from either Alpine or Marathon. The gross area of the park is 707,895.45 acres, making it the sixth largest in the National Park System.

Historical Background

The history of the Big Bend National Park may be divided into five periods—Indian

Yawning canyons carved across mountain ranges show the erosive action of the Rio Grande through the ages (Grant photo)



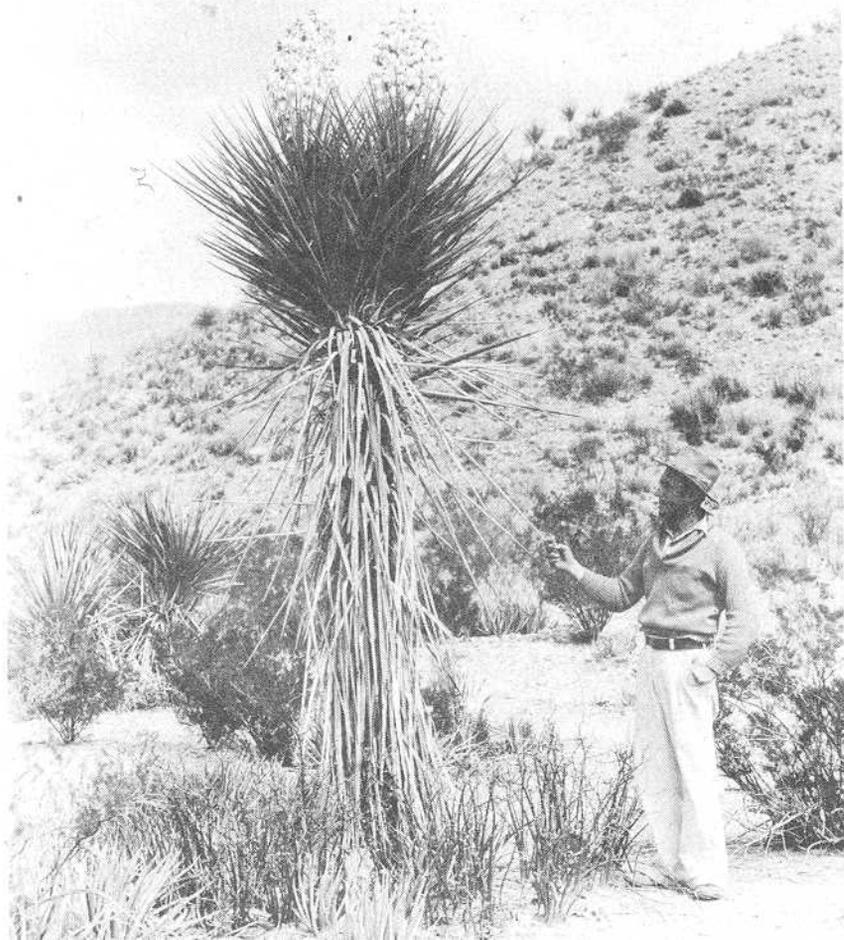
(historic and prehistoric), Spanish, Mexican, the Texas Republic, and the United States. Archeological finds indicate that the area has been inhabited by man for centuries. Perishable remains have been found in dry caves and rock shelters. Open campsites are near water and are indicated by flint-spalls, chips, rejects, cores, metates, manos, (grinding stones), burned stone, and ashy materials.

The Spanish conquistadors and missionaries were active in the Big Bend area. From their records we learn that the Apache Indians were living in the Big Bend when the first white men arrived. Several hostile engagements took place, and one battle is believed to have been fought in the Chisos Mountains. The Comanches, famous fighting Indians of the Great Plains, traveled through the Big Bend on forays as far south as Durango in Central Mexico. The Coman-

che Trail passed through the park area, and the early Spaniards and Mexicans gave vivid descriptions of the Indian activities.

With the passing of the Spanish and Mexican regimes, the exploration, conquest, and development were continued by the United States and Texas officials. In 1853, Maj. W. H. Emory completed the boundary survey for the United States Boundary Commission. The United States Army tested the value of camel caravans in the semiarid Southwest in the early sixties by using camels for patrol duty along the Comanche Trail. Captain Neville, leading a party of Texas Rangers, defeated a band of hostile Indians near the head of Boquillas Canyon in January 1863. Dr. Robert T. Hill completed his boat trip down the Rio Grande in 1889, during the course of which he passed through three main canyons in what is now the park.

The yucca, or Spanish dagger, typical of the desert plants found in Big Bend (Grant photo)



Establishment of the Big Bend National Park, as authorized by act of Congress approved June 20, 1935, could not have been effected without the public spirited, progressive, and foresighted action of the State of Texas in appropriating \$1,500,000 for the purchase of necessary lands which were then deeded to the Federal Government for national park purposes. The park was actually established on June 12, 1944.

International Aspect

Located directly on the international boundary, the Big Bend National Park really typifies the scenery, the flora, and the fauna of Mexico more than it does that of better known parts of the United States. From almost any section of the park the view to the south is dominated by the rugged Sierra del Carmen, Fronterisa, and other equally spectacular mountain ranges in Old Mexico. These features, combined with the few quaint Mexican villages along the Rio Grande, lend an atmosphere from which the visitor gets the feeling that he is actually "south of the Border, down Mexico way."

Recognizing the fact that the Rio Grande forms only a political boundary and that natural features on both sides of the river are similar, the Mexican Government is

planning the establishment of an adjoining national park immediately south of the Rio Grande. Thus will be formed one great international park, which will typify the common interests of the two sister republics and their common desire to maintain the existing relationship of friendly neighbors necessary for the promotion of pan-American unity.

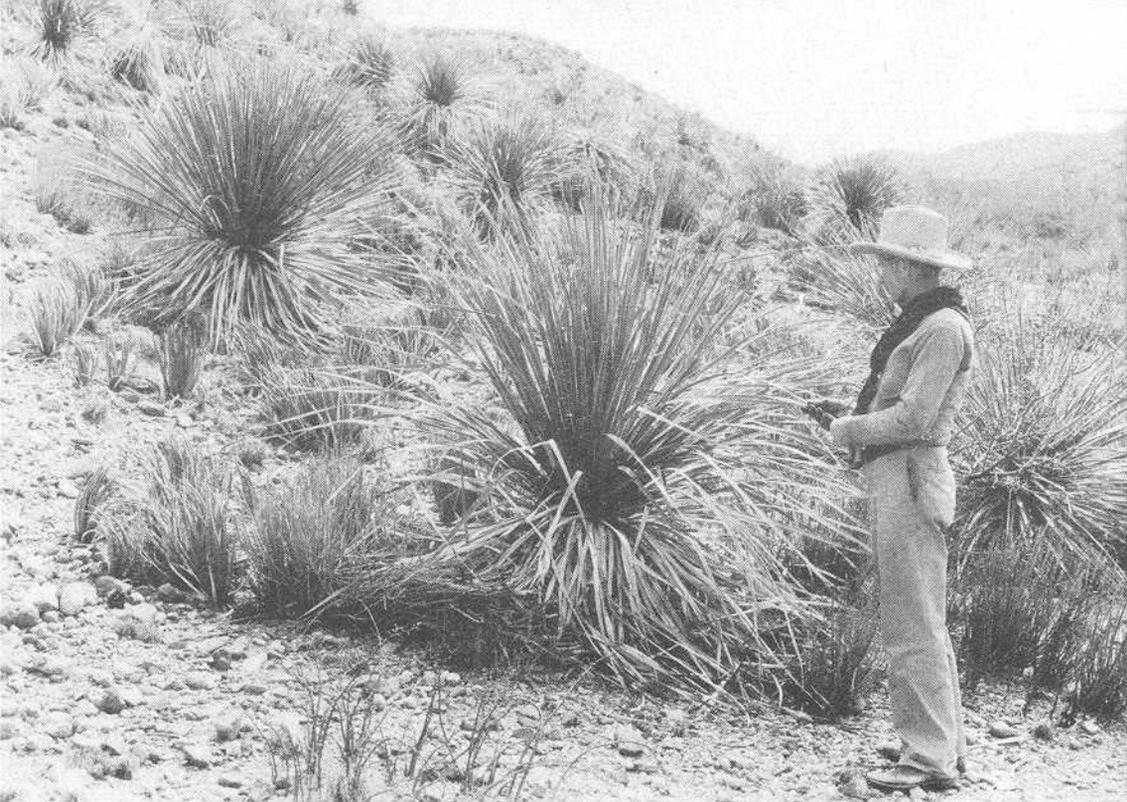
Plant Life

Vegetation of the Big Bend may be grouped into four general types of plant communities or associations. The desert scrub, consisting of creosotebush, yucca, and various species of cacti, is characteristic of the lowlands. The piñon-juniper woodland communities are found in the lower mountain slopes and foothills. The ponderosa pine-Douglas-fir-Arizona cypress forests are in the canyons of the higher mountains. Aquatic communities or moisture-loving groups, the fourth type, are found along the Rio Grande and in a few localities in the Chisos Mountains.

The types of plant life have influenced the activities of the people. Early settlers were interested in ranching, and numerous herds became established on the lowlands. As the

Casa Grande, overlooking The Basin in the Chisos Mountains (Grant photo)





The soto, another typical desert plant found in the park (Grant photo)

forage was depleted the herds kept moving farther from water and into higher and more rugged terrain.

Native Mexicans brew alcoholic beverages from the soto (*sō'tole*) and maguey (*mah-gay'*), or centuryplant, and roast the tender cabbage-like center for food. Blossoms from the yucca (*yuh-kuh*) or Spanish dagger, are used for food and taste similar to cabbage. Fibers taken from the leaves substitute for twine, and frequently the broad leaves are used in making sandals and baskets. The sharp points on the ends of the leaves are utilized for awls. In some instances they have been driven into the flesh following a rattlesnake bite, the natives believing that the poison in the Spanish dagger neutralizes the venom from the snake.

Mesquite (*mes-kēt'*) is an important source of food for both man and beast. The trees frequently bloom twice a year, and occasionally there is a succession of blooms and beans. The green bean pods can be chewed raw, but the general practice is to grind the dry beans, making flour. Dough is made when water is added. Although hard when dried, the dough is very nutritious and is a staple food for the Mexicans. Live-

stock thrive on the beans. The wood also is important as one of the chief sources of fuel.

Honey bees gather nectar from blossoms of the catclaw, whitebrush, and mesquite. Tender joints of the prickly pear are used for salads, and the juice is used in candy and jellies. The *petaya* (*pit-ah'-yah*), the fruit of the strawberry cactus, is edible raw, and when served with sugar and cream, or made into jam, is similar in taste and appearance to strawberries. The *peyote* (*pay-oh'-tay*), mescal button or devil's root, is used by certain Indian cults for its narcotic and delirium-producing qualities. Canes, napkin rings, lamp stands, and various ornaments are made from the stocks of the *cholla* (*cho'-ya*) cactus.

Animal Life

Animal life varies in type and habitat. The Texas peccary (*javalina*), which ranges the foothills and slopes surrounding the Chisos Mountains, is one of the most unusual animals. Other large animals which are present, but not frequently seen, are the Mexican black bear and mountain lion



The Window from The Basin of the Chisos Mountains (Grant photo)

in the Chisos Mountains and beaver along the Rio Grande. Deer are abundant, especially the white-tailed, or flagtail, and mule deer are often seen by visitors in the more isolated sections. Many other species have been reported.

In addition to large numbers of more common varieties of birds, such rare species as the Colima warbler and aplomado falcon are found. Orioles, tanagers, cardinals, hummingbirds, and other brilliant-plumaged songsters brighten the thickets and groves of cottonwoods along the Rio Grande and the wooded canyons of the Chisos Mountains.

Geology

The geological story is told by the rocks themselves. In certain localities the strata (rock layers) are highly folded, tilted, and shattered. Some strata are standing on end, most are lopsided, and a few of the mountains have been turned upside down and piled where it seems they should not be.

Yawning canyons carved across mountain ranges show the erosive action of the Rio Grande through the ages.

Many of the rock strata exposed in the area were deposited bit by bit on the floors of ancient seas. These sediments, originally sand, mud, and limy mud have been consolidated into rock. In certain places the sea water was teeming with various types of life, and their fossilized forms are now preserved in the rocks. Forces within the earth's interior caused the elevation of the newly-formed rocks with an accompanying withdrawal of the sea water. Mountain ranges were formed along the lines of greatest strain. Rapid erosion of the new mountains and corresponding deposition in the lowlands produced the extensive slope and valley deposits. Locally, there were swamps in and around which developed a dense growth of ancient vegetation. It was in this environment that the dinosaurs lived, fought, and died; that giant trees were petrified; and that coal deposits were formed. Later, uplift accompanied by volcanic activity added further complexities. Some of

the larger volcanic masses pushed slowly toward the surface, cooled, and were later uncovered by erosion. Others burst forth with explosive violence and spread ash and lava over the surrounding terrain.

Erosion is the most recent chapter in the geological story. Its forces have excavated the canyons, formed the cliffs, columns, spires, and buttresses, and left exposed strata with a wide variety of color tones. These topographic features, augmented in grandeur by the ever-changing play of light and shadows, further enhance the scenic and recreational attractions of the park.

Accommodations

The Big Bend is a new undeveloped national park, but one which will be thoroughly appreciated by those who enjoy roughing it. Although there are a limited number of housekeeping cabins in the temporary park headquarters area, lodge accommodations are not as yet available. Those who visit the park during the early development stages should be prepared to camp, bringing their own food, bedding, and tents. Information regarding campgrounds may be

obtained at park headquarters. Hotel, restaurant, and auto court accommodations are available in Alpine and Marathon. Groceries and gasoline may be purchased in either of those towns, or, to a limited extent, at Terlingua, Castolon, and at an occasional roadside station.

Roads

Main roads are gravel surfaced and well maintained. Dips are frequent, and motorists are cautioned regarding washouts and running water during and immediately following a storm.

Administration

The Big Bend National Park is open throughout the year and is administered by the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. Hunting or the disturbance of any natural feature of the park is prohibited. Camping is permitted only in designated areas. Inquiries and communications should be addressed to the Superintendent, Big Bend National Park, Marathon, Texas.

*The entrance to Boquillas Canyon, showing the village of Boquillas, Mexico
(Grant photo)*



