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Not Far by West Texas Standards: Resources for Big Bend history at the University of Texas at El Paso

Claudia A. Rivers

University of Texas at El Paso Library, crivers@utep.edu

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Not far by West Texas standards...

Resources for Big Bend history at the University of Texas at El Paso

A presentation prepared for the Annual Conference of the Center for Big Bend Studies, Nov. 11-12, 2011

Residents of the Alpine and Big Bend area know some of the advantages and some of the disadvantages of being isolated, and experiences that are also familiar in El Paso, located as it is on the edge of Texas. We are closer to the capitals of three other states than we are to Austin. In comparison, Alpine and other places in the Big Bend seem relatively close.

The Library at the University of Texas at El Paso tries to collect regional materials for its users, especially from the El Paso/Juarez area. However, we have found that some of the collections also include primary sources about the Big Bend region and other parts of West Texas. Of course, the Archives of the Big Bend, the Marfa Public Library, and the county courthouses have some wonderful resources, but this presentation tries to let people know about some of the materials at the University of Texas at El Paso Library in hopes that more visitors will visit us to consult them.

For instance, the UTEP Library operates as a sort of branch of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission as a Regional Historical Resources Depository or RHRD. As such we hold records that have historical value from local governmental agencies. Of particular interest to the Big Bend may be the El Paso County records. As many of you know, the boundaries of El Paso County were much more extensive in earlier periods before West Texas was divided into several counties. The El Paso County records include some civil and criminal court records dating from the 1870s, and the early deed records record transactions from what are now Hudspeth and Culbertson counties. Here, for instance, are references to some transactions relating to the Leaton family of Fort Leaton fame.

Other RHRD collections include a very small collection of Marathon school censuses, a large collection from the Texas Eighth Court of Appeals, and the records of the El Paso office of the Rio Grande Compact Commission.

Not surprisingly, since UTEP began as the Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy, our collections include a number of resources relating to mining and geology. Most important is the collection of John G. Barry, the first president of what became the Texas College of Mines. His tenure at the then-college was brief, although he left a legacy of hiring some of the first liberal arts faculty, but he had a long career as a consulting mining engineer. He traveled widely, especially in the American Southwest and Mexico, and his files on economic geology contain information about many sites in the Big Bend and in adjacent states in Mexico, particularly Chihuahua and Coahuila. A volunteer who has a background in mineral resources has created a detailed guide to the collection so that it can be searched for locations, names, and even minerals.

Another UTEP geology professor who also worked as a consultant was Henry Ehrlinger. He also left files with information about mineral resources in the Big Bend region. Another collection that is interesting in both mining and social aspects is the Ginther family papers. The Gintners, from the Alsace-Lorraine region, included at least two brothers who were mining engineers. The collection includes personal correspondence, maps and plans, photographs, and even a “sack-o’-rocks,” something we try to avoid accepting in the archives.

Other mining-related collections include two that have records from the Chisos Mining Company. These small collections—with different provenance—include correspondence, account books, pay books, and other materials from this Terlingua enterprise.

Another resource that I would like for you to be aware of is the Oral History Institute records. The Special Collections Department has been adding digital copies of oral history interviews to the Digital Commons at UTEP. If you search the site, you can put in search terms that could appear

anywhere in the interviews. As you see, I did a search for “Big Bend” and retrieved 12 interviews. Here is an excerpt, as it appears on the web, from an interview with Mrs. George Benson where she is talking about Alpine.

Some of the business records we have also contain information about the Big Bend. For instance, we have two boxes of records from the Valentine Grocery. How they ended up in El Paso, I don't know, but they do show the links between businesses in El Paso and the towns down highway 90.

The *El Paso Herald-Post* used to be the afternoon paper in El Paso. When it closed, its newspaper morgue came to the UTEP Library. The collection was huge, so we kept only materials relating to El Paso and nearby regions. The files contain quite a bit of information about the Big Bend, including coverage of the early efforts to create a Big Bend park. These pictures, from a Presidio folder, show some aspects of farming along the Rio Grande.

Railroads linked a lot of West Texas with the rest of the world and lessened some of the isolation suffered by its residents. The UTEP Library has several railroad collections, but the one that most directly relates to the Big Bend is the Hugh Wilson railroad collection. He compiled a lot of information about the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio line of the Southern Pacific Company for a history he was writing. The El Paso Division includes a lot of West Texas. Here you see a crane used to right derailed cars (a Frank Duncan photograph) and a shot of a freight train traveling through the Big Bend.

Personal papers hold information about a number of topics. For instance, Leon Metz, who was the first archivist at UTEP but is better known as an author of many books of popular history, has donated his papers. He also wrote *A Roadside History of Texas*, and his personal papers include research files on many topics. The Mose E. Kelley papers are a fairly recent acquisition that tell about Kelley and some other family members. Kelley was a customs agent and businessman in Presidio and Ojinaga; his

journals and day books have a lot of research potential, but are sometimes difficult to read.

Photographic collections are some of the most popular materials in the UTEP Library's Special Collections. The staff is working to make many of them more accessible, and the department has received a grant from the National Park Service as part of their Save America's Treasures program to help us preserve them. We have two databases that may be searched at the same site as the oral history interviews: [DigitalCommons@UTEP](#). Here you see a picture from the Leigh Osborn collection of Shafter, Texas with refugees after the Battle of Ojinaga. The larger database is from the Casasola Photo Studio. Although the studio was located in downtown El Paso, there are a few pictures with links to other parts of West Texas, like this portrait of Father Lourdes Costa, the parish priest of Smelertown and the moving force behind the erection of the statue on Mount Cristo Rey outside El Paso. Before coming to Smelertown, he was a circuit-riding priest in Presidio who went to several smaller communities in a horse-drawn wagon.

The UTEP Photo Database includes the Leigh Osborn photographs and other pictures that can be searched by key word. Other collections are copies of collections that you may know well: The Southern Pacific Railroad photographs are pictures of the Sunset Line by a photographer named Turrell; the original negatives are in Austin at the Center for American History. The original of the Francis King Duncan photographs, of course, are at the Marfa Public Library. We also have a few others that show West Texas, like this of the Toyah roundhouse crew, possibly separated from the Hugh Wilson collection.

The UTEP Library holds other collections that have a few incidental items about the Big Bend. For instance, the Otto Thorman architectural records contain project files for several buildings in Alpine and Marfa.

We have several other collections from which I did not get sample pictures that contain information about the Big Bend, including the papers of Joseph

Friedkin, the long-time head of the US section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, other water-related collections, and the Millard McKinney papers that include some materials about early aviation and military topics in the Big Bend region.

I hope that this presentation has whetted your appetite for research, and that I will see you in El Paso, and that you will find that we “measure up” to some of the other research facilities that you are familiar with.

Thanks to those who helped me put this presentation together.

Claudia Rivers
Head, Special Collections Department
University of Texas at El Paso Library