



The Langford Family: Pioneers of the Big Bend



“This was a fantastic country, like none I’d ever seen, like no other I’ve seen since. And, looking back on it now, I can see that ours was a fantastic situation. A chronically ill man of thirty-one, a traveling salesman out of Mississippi, using up his last few dollars to take his wife and baby to a homestead in the wild, unknown country of the Texas Big Bend.”

Note: Quotations from [Big Bend: A Homesteader’s Story](#), by J.O. Langford, 1952, University of Texas Press.

Introduction

The Big Bend region is named for the broad, sweeping turn that is made by the Rio Grande as its floodplain snakes across the Chihuahuan Desert, a desert largely stifled by suffocating heat and perpetual aridity. Historically, the Big Bend region not only remained beyond the frontier of civilization, but it also served as a fluid and fluctuating international border between the United States and Mexico. Thus, this region, inherently a land of harsh environmental and cultural extremes, has drawn only brave souls to visit and crazy souls to stay. In fact, as recently as the turn of the twentieth century, the Big Bend region remained a rough and wild wilderness loosely inhabited by a few Mexican agriculturists and even fewer American pioneers.

In 1909, the Langford family purchased and homesteaded on a three-section area of the Big Bend region located along the Rio Grande, the official international border between the United States and Mexico, in some of the most remote and undeveloped country of west Texas. The Langford family’s first years of Big Bend homesteading were tumultuous, and through an extended series of trials and errors, they learned about life in a wholly foreign land. As time passed, the Langford family successfully learned to both survive and thrive in this land of harsh extremes thanks to their willingness to adapt to the region’s environment and culture. Against all odds, the Langford family became one of the Big Bend region’s most notable and successful pioneer families.

Homesteading in the Big Bend

J.O. Langford, his wife Bessie, and their young daughter Lovie moved to west Texas from Mississippi in search of an arid climate that would suit J.O.’s chronic physical ailment, recurring malaria bouts. The Langford’s temporarily settled in Midland, TX, though they longed to homestead in a less populated area. Thus, J.O. explored south to Alpine, TX in search of land upon which to homestead. On an unchecked whim, J.O. bid on and purchased three sections of land along the Rio Grande, including a section containing a hot spring known locally for its healing powers.

In May of 1909, the Langford family set off south from Alpine, TX in a mule train carrying all of their worldly possessions. The journey to their property on the Rio Grande was an arduous one that lasted one week. Upon arrival to their 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. J.O. said of this predicament, “And that’s when it came to me what a trifling thing a deed to a piece of land was. Here I was, a stranger, with a mere piece of paper, considering whether or not I should allow a family to live on land that had probably been their home for generations.” With little hesitation, the Langford and Natividad families agreed that both families would live on the land, and that the Natividad family would pay rent to the Langford’s. The Langford’s had no way to predict that this first decision made about their new life along the Rio Grande would clearly become their wisest, as the Natividad family would shortly become their closest friends, confidants, and resources for learning about life in the Big Bend.

Life Along the Rio Grande

The Langford family first set up camp on their property, their home until J.O. could build a permanent house. J.O.’s next task was to soak in the hot springs as treatment for his malaria; he learned that the local prescription was twenty-one days of baths

in the hot springs and he immediately set upon this task. After twenty-one days of treatments and a week of rest, J.O. reported that he felt strong and nearly cured of his symptoms. He proclaimed the hot springs as a cure for him.

The Langford's learned that the hot springs were frequented by both locals and visitors alike, and that this hot springs could become a source of income for the family. J.O. devised a plan to charge a small fee for bathing in the hot springs. In turn for paying this bathing fee, hot springs users could camp freely upon the Langford land, and Bessie often cooked dinner for overnight campers. As a result, the Langford family made money on the hot springs endeavor, and they established a respectful report with both locals and visitors.

J.O. Langford also hastily began building a permanent home for his family, as Bessie was pregnant with their second child. With no experience in using the native materials of the Big Bend for home building, J.O. hired Cleofas Natividad and some other Mexican neighbors to make adobe bricks

and to build his home. Adobe brickwork is slow, intensive, backbreaking labor, and the Langford home was completed in November of 1909. J.O., Cleofas, and the other Mexican workers all profited from this project and, in the process, they all became close friends.

However, the adobe bricks and their mortar still weren't cured a few days later when Bessie went into labor, so she was forced to give birth in the Langford's canvas tent. The Langford family credits the Natividad family as being instrumental in this birth process, as Cleofas journeyed to summons a doctor and Senora Natividad served as Bessie's midwife. The birth occurred without incident as Lucille Langford was born healthily on the banks of the Rio Grande with the combined efforts of the Langford and Natividad families.

Facing Problems and Changes

Life along the Rio Grande wasn't perfect or easy by any means. The Langford family was wholly unprepared to deal with the harsh environmental conditions of the Big Bend region. The Langford's had several encounters with dangerous wildlife, including rattlesnakes inside their home and a mountain lion that followed Bessie along a path on their property. Additionally, Lucille Langford, while learning to crawl, fell over a cliff edge; the only thing that saved her from imminent death in a long fall was that her dress caught and held on a thorny bush.

Financial woes also struck the Langford family early on as J.O. toiled over being unable to make his second year land payment in 1910. Income from the hot springs did not offset costs of living in the wilds of west Texas. After much consideration, J.O. sold one section of his property to make the land payment on the rest of his land. Additionally, J.O. later took on teaching at a school about six miles away, finally acquiring a stable source of income to support his family. Financial stability in the

Big Bend region was a luxury that the Langford family gained only after several years of homesteading.

Probably the largest problem that the Langford family faced was the onslaught of the Pancho Villa raids and the Mexican Revolution, which began to affect the Big Bend region in 1912. The Langford's and their homestead survived the early raids that pummeled nearby villages in Mexico and were responsible for several deaths during each raid. Later that year, the American military, which had taken on patrol duties along the international border as a result of the nearby raids, advised that for their physical safety, the Langford family evacuate their home and the Big Bend region until the Mexican Revolution ended. The Langford's sadly but wisely packed up their belongings and moved to El Paso, TX, where they lived for fourteen years before returning to their homestead in 1927.

Conclusion

The Langford family lived and prospered at their homestead until the mid-1900's when the state of Texas and eventually the federal government began purchasing private lands in the Big Bend region for the purpose of establishing Big Bend National Park. At that time, the Langford family sold their property and vacated their homestead a final time.

Early twentieth century life in the Big Bend region was challenging by any comparable standard. The Chihuahuan Desert was a land of fierce environmental extremes. The region was only sparsely populated by Mexican farmers and American pioneers. The Big Bend region stolidly stood at the still fluid international boundary between the United States and Mexico. Life along the Rio Grande was an innately challenging but acutely rewarding one for the Langford family. The Langford's actively sought the adventures, faced the challenges, and

successfully adapted to life in this extreme environment and culture. As a result, the Langford family and homestead represent a thoroughly successful pioneering endeavor in the Big Bend region that is still recognized as such almost one hundred years later.

Today, remnants of the Langford homestead still stand along the Rio Grande in Big Bend National Park. Take a stroll along the Hot Springs trails and you may see ruins of the original homestead, a second home built years later, a bathhouse erected over the hot springs by J.O., and other associated buildings. Additionally, you may soak in the same hot springs water that initially drew the Langford family on a whim to the Big Bend region and began what would become a most successful attempt at pioneering the Big Bend.