

Chapter 3

FRED PAINTS HIS OWN CURRENCY

Fred Darge at heart was a very thrifty and frugal individual. The fact that he was an artist made it a necessity, especially during the Great Depression that lasted from 1929 to 1939. It is to this day recorded as the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world. The memories and effects of the Depression are embedded in the word “frugality.” In the minds and memories of the millions that experienced the Depression, their memories were to last into the 1940s and some far into the 60s and 70s. If you lived the 1930s, how could you forget?

It seems ironic that Fred Darge ended his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago just in time for the Depression. His job as a commercial artist, illustrator and draftsman was like many other jobs of that nature at the time, as the Depression built-up its momentum, the jobs ended. It didn't make any difference if you were the best and the brightest, there just were not enough jobs to fill the demand. The economy slowly ground everything to a halt taking the market for decorative and fine art with it. Artists, more so than many others, were out of work with no future in sight.

One of the first economic realities of the Depression was the disappearance of money. No jobs, no money, no credit and no confidence in the future. As the desperation of the Depression gripped the nation, many who wanted to work could not find a full or even a part time job. They were reduced to offering their labor for food, meals and shelter. Thus, the barter system-the exchange, trade, bargain or swap for goods and services-became a common practice out of necessity. It was one of the economic mechanisms that people turned to in order to survive.

Fred Darge being the hardworking survivor he was, quickly began to engage in bartering labor and paintings for goods and services. His ability to gain acceptance to the ranches in the Big Bend where he wanted to paint was done so with the mutual agreement to trade art work for room and board and to help when needed. This arrangement obviously worked well for both parties because he returned year after year until he was inducted into the Army on November 11, 1942. By the time he was discharged from the Army in 1944 and his job as a draftsman and illustrator ended in September of 1945, the National Park System had taken over the Big Bend National Park. When the park opened for visitors on June 12, 1944, the ranches, the people, their homes and his friends were gone. It was like the park service wiped the slate clean and the land had been returned to its natural state. All evidence of human occupation had vanished, except for a hand full of select empty structures and a few windmills.

Resourceful Darge, never one to leave any stone unturned, especially during trying times, started to do something that worked. He signed his small paintings. When this began will

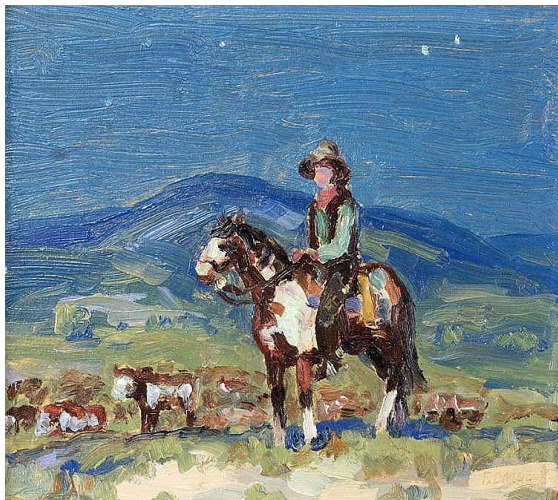
remain an unknown, but the gift of Darge's work and determination are all part of his remarkable legacy. Another unanswered question is why Darge realized those studies had value. Like many things related to Fred Darge, one can only make an educated guess. Darge, like all artists sometimes made small studies of paintings before he initiated the actual large painting. This allowed him to visualize the finished image. Many small studies by artists were never sold by the artist because for lack of a better word, they looked *crude* in comparison to the actual finished large-scale completion.



Two Riders, 4.5" x 5.5", Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts 2017

it is not a finished painting. Another of the characteristics of studies is they may not be signed at the time of completion. Many studies eventually find their way into the art market only after the demise of the artist and remain unsigned. Knowledgeable dealers and collectors who may have looked closely at the works of certain artists for many years, can quickly associate the study to the intended completed painting that may be ten times the size of the small study.

An example would be that Darge did studies that were only 4 ½" x 5 ½" with broad rough brush strokes that the observer can tell by the image that



Night Rider, 4.5" x 5.5", Oil on Board Canvas Board, Unsigned, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts 2017

At some point in time, Darge realized there was a market for very small paintings and studies that could be either sold or bartered whether they were either signed or unsigned. And thus, a new currency was created that didn't have the picture of a former U.S. president. Instead, in some instances it had a cowboy, bucking bronc, rider on horseback or longhorn. If it could be traded for goods or services, it was the same as money.

Darge's use of studies as currency was information shared by highly regarded retired Dallas art dealer and appraiser Murray Smither during an interview. Smithers added interesting tidbits regarding these small pieces during lunch at

Norma's Café, a fixture of the Dallas restaurant business in Oak Cliff since 1956 and famous for their home cooking and most of all their Mile-High Cream Pies™. Smither related the story behind the story of the miniature painting. Both Darge and Smithers were longtime residents of the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. Smithers explained that he, over the years, had seen numerous Darge miniature paintings hanging on the wall behind the cash register in a number of restaurants he had visited. Darge had used these pieces for currency to pay for meals. This unique story has been confirmed by others that have seen these paintings hanging on walls

behind other cash registers as far away as the Trans-Pecos Area.¹ Some of these paintings have made their way into the art market on ebay.com and art auctions and have sold for as much as \$1,000. Even at today's restaurant prices, these miniature paintings would pay for a lot of good tasty homecooked meals and slices of Mile-High Cream Pies™ at Norma's.

Smithers' next story about Darge was equally as interesting. Artists are the same as the rest of us. After all, they get sick and have illnesses too. Dallas regionalist artists Jerry Bywater, Otis Dozier and Fred Darge all shared something in common. Besides being outstanding artists, they were all patients of the same doctor, Dr. Howard Stanley Aronson, for three good reasons. First and foremost, he was a well-respected physician with an excellent reputation. Secondly, he liked the type of paintings the Dallas Regionalists painted. And last but not least, he would trade medical services for art. This made for a warm friendly relationship between doctor and patient. Fred Darge was not the only artist that painted his own currency.²



Rain God Mesa, 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Once owned by Dr. Howard Stanley Aronson, Courtesy of Heritage Auctions 2015

Dr. Aronson was a very active community volunteer who was a member of the Dallas Historical Society, Dallas Art Association, Temple Emanuel, Texas Philatelic Association and Dallas Little Theater. When Dr. Aronson wasn't working as a physician or doing volunteer-work he was also an author. He found time to author two books: *Zeb Pike, A History of the of Colorado* and *Heavenly Zoo, An Introduction to Astronomy*. Fred Darge did the seven

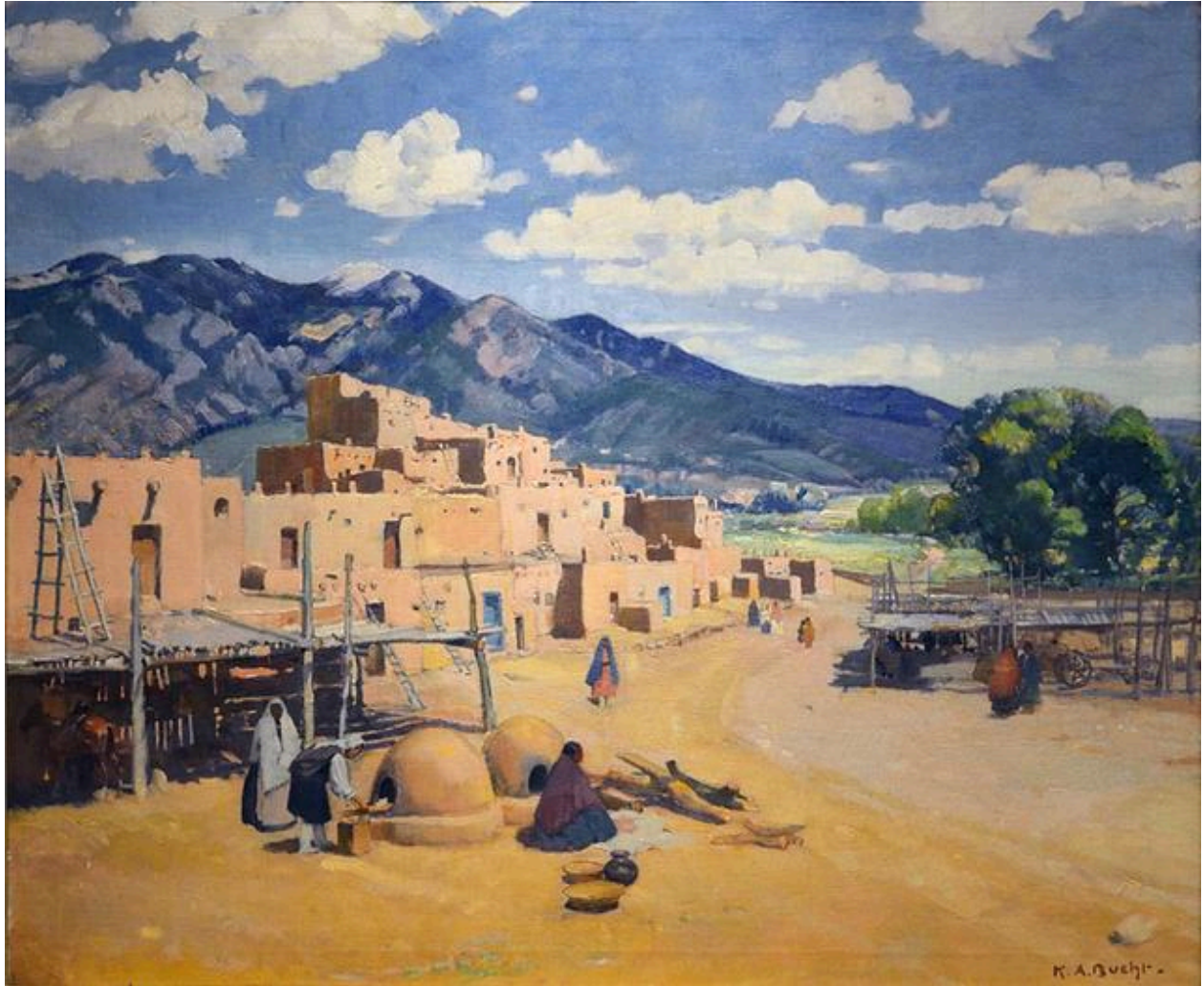
illustrations for the *Zeb Pike* book.

Dr. Aronson died December 31, 1973.³ At some later date, the estate of Dr. Aronson placed *Summer Harvest* and *Rain God Mesa* on consignment with art dealer Smithers.⁴

Over the years, many books, papers and articles have been written about the early Taos and Santa Fe artists that have captured the hearts, minds and attention of individual collectors and museums throughout the country. Several of the early "Taos Founders" such as, Victor Higgins, E. Martin Hennings and Walter Ufer, received their early art instruction at the famed school of the Art Institute of Chicago. Darge could easily have fit into either of these groups, but instead chose Texas as his place to paint. If one were to take the time to compare his work to the many artist that chose New Mexico after leaving Chicago, it would become apparent that he could keep up with the best of them with his own individual style and subject matter. *Summer Harvest* is a classic example of Taos Indians at the pueblo storing and stacking hay for the winter to feed their cattle. This exceptional and colorful painting is another example correlating Darge's mission of painting "the ranchman as he lives today," except that it was completed in Taos, New Mexico in 1946.



Summer Harvest, 20" x 24", Oil on Canvas, Painted at the Taos Pueblo 1946, Private Collection



Karl Albert Buehr, *Taos Indian Pueblo* - 1915, 26" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. McKee III

Buehr was one of seven sons of a prosperous German family that immigrated to the United States and settled in Chicago in 1869. Like Darge, he received his art education at the Art Institute of Chicago where he completed his studies in 1897 and became a figure and landscape painter. He was one of the earliest Chicago painters to adopt Impression and became known for his specialty of painting colorful “young women on porches overlooking brilliant summertime gardens.”⁵

After completing his military service in the Spanish American War in 1898, he resumed his art studies with important American artist Frank Duveneck and later moved to Europe. In 1914, he returned to the United States and took a teaching position in Chicago at the Art Institute, which he held for the remainder of his life.⁶

Taos Indian Pueblo – 1915, distinctly shows the immense size of the structure that is considered by historians to be the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America. It has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. ⁷ Little has changed since 1915 and 1946 which makes this structure so unique.

Like many of Fred Darge's paintings, *Summer Harvest* is accentuated with deep rich colors of shading, physically active figures and is a closeup of the Pueblo with almost no difference from the Buehr painting. There is one subtle difference. Notice how Darge, in his usual style used the mountains as a background for the Pueblo without rearranging the peaks.

Both paintings are well done by two highly educated, talented and accomplished artists.