

Chapter 6

The Homer Wilson (Blue Creek) Ranch

Big Bend, Brewster County, Texas

Homer Marvin Wilson was born February 27th, 1892, near Moore, Frio County, Texas to T. A. and Bettie Crain Wilson who owned a family ranch north of Del Rio. He married Ogarita Maude “Bergine” Bailey Pugh born October 27th, 1902, in Sedalia, Pettis County, Missouri. ¹

Wilson graduated from Del Rio High School and then attended Rolla School of Mines in Rolla, Missouri where he graduated with a degree in Petroleum and Mining Engineering. After serving in World War I as a first lieutenant in the Army Corp of Engineers, he relocated to Cartersville, Missouri, where he was a flotation superintendent at a lead and zinc mine before returning to Texas in to begin his own ranching operation in 1922. ²



Homer Wilson Undated Photograph,
Courtesy of Iron Mountain Press

As Homer was completing his plans for acquiring land in the Chisos Mountains, an explosion at the Humble Oil Company in Beaumont killed his former roommate and closest college friend, Willard Pugh, leaving Willard’s wife Bergine, a widow at the age of twenty-six. During their marriage, Pugh always joked with his wife about his best friend: “if anything ever happens to me, you should marry Old Tex.” When Pugh died, Bergine was the enrolling clerk of the Texas Legislature, and Homer was 428 miles west of Austin building his 28,804-acre, 45 sections ranch. ³

Homer wrote Bergine on April 26th, 1929 and offered his help to her in any way needed. Bergine accepted his offer and Homer did help with concern and caring. He and Bergine corresponded and visited for the next year and a half. During this time, Bergine lost her sister and Homer lost his father and sister, Edna. These simultaneous tragedies created a deepening bond between the two correspondents that grew closer by the day. ⁴

In 1929, Homer rented a room in Marathon at the new Gage Hotel that had opened in 1927. His hotel room also served as an office for his fledgling ranching and geological business that he was in the process of establishing. He lived there and frequently drove the eighty-six miles to his ranch, often leaving Marathon at 4:30 AM to travel three or more hours over sometimes very rough caliche and dirt roads. ⁵

It was only a matter of time before Homer and Bergine would marry. They married on October 4, 1930, in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Upon their marriage, Homer the quiet and ambitious land man, and Bergine, the tall, outspoken sophisticate, moved to the ranch at Oak Creek and began the formidable task to build their ranch and raise a family.

The years of living in the Big Bend would bring joy as well as trials and tribulations. The Wilson ranch was nestled in the foothills of the western side of the mountains and contained well known landmarks such as the Window, the South Rim, Laguna and Blue Creek. The present Ross Maxwell Drive in the Big Bend National Park passes through the former Wilson ranch.⁶



Beneath the Window, Wilson Ranch, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1940, Collection of Dr. Brian Cason, Son of Patricia Wilson Clothier Cason. This painting was a gift from Fred Darge to the Wilson Family in exchange for room and board.

The Wilson's had two homes in the Big Bend. The main house at Oak Creek was one mile below the rusty red cliffs of the Window at an elevation of 4,400 feet, a natural opening framing the blue cliffs of Casa Grande.⁷ The second house, which served as the operational headquarters of the ranch, at Blue Creek, the landmark for which the ranch was named. The Wilson marriage produced three children: Patricia (August 25, 1931), Homer, Jr. (October 3, 1934) Buzzy and Thomas (May 25, 1942). Homer, Jr. acquired the name Buzzy because he

always made bee sounds as he pushed his little metal toy cars in the dirt.⁸ They eventually acquired a third home in Alpine for the convenience of educating the children.

The home at Oak Creek, like many things in the Big Bend, had its own interesting history. The house already existed when Homer Wilson started assembling the property for his ranch in 1929. Patricia Wilson indicated her mother told her “the old two-story frame house was ordered from Sears Roebuck ^{9A} and shipped by rail to Marathon, then loaded in marked pieces onto wagons and hauled to north of Study Butte for assembly. A man by the name of Rooney disassembled the whole house and moved it to Oak Creek. In 1919, he sold the land to Charlie Burnham, brother to Waddy Burnham, Jr., who lived there with his family for five years, until a man named Carter bought the place. Carter tried to raise chickens, but it was reported the varmints got to eat more chickens than the Carter family. Carter finally gave up and sold the place to Harris and Winnie Smith.”



Wilson Ranch, Goat Herd, Big Bend Country, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1940, Collection of The Daughters of the Republic of Texas Collection at Texas A&M University-San Antonio

There is no available information on the Smiths, but they sold the property to Homer Wilson in June of 1929,^{9B} a scant six months before the stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression followed by the Dust Bowl. The Wilsons were completely unaware of the challenges that were on the way to Oak Creek. It was a classic case of that old saying, “you never know until you get there.” Homer Wilson did not have an inkling of the problems headed his way,

and there were plenty of them. Raising sheep and goats in the Chisos Mountains was going to be a very different experience than ranching where he grew up.

Unlike the Burnham’s who were cattle raisers, the Wilsons assembled a herd of 8,000 Angora goats and Rambouillet sheep.¹⁰ Homer must have liked to work considering that raising goats and sheep required more work and ranch hands than cows. He also invested in the Fresno quicksilver (mercury) mining operation west of Terlingua that he co-owned with Harris Smith. Homer’s heavy work load was split between the ranch, the geology contracts and the mine. Such demands plus the mental stress of the financial issues, kept Homer very busy and unfortunately would take its toll on his health.



Goat Herder, 24" x 30", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1950's, Collection of Claude C. Albritton III

Homer Wilson grew up on a ranch outside of Del Rio, in Val Verde, County and had a good working knowledge of the business he was getting into. The Big Bend was new to him. He soon learned he had far underestimated the size and depth of some of the unforeseen problems. Goats and sheep are defenseless animals when they are challenged by panthers (mountain lions), coyotes, bears, bobcats and even eagles. They were always losing animals to predators. As an example, in one year alone, shortly after they settled at Oak Creek, predators killed over 1,500 goats and sheep from their flock of 8,000 animals. That is a loss of 18% which is not a small number. Financially it is hard to

recoup losses of that size in any given year.¹¹



Panther caught in trap
 Photograph from *Beneath the Window*, Courtesy of Iron Mount Press

In the late 1920's and early 30's the Chisos Mountains were overrun with panthers coming across the Rio Grande River from Mexico. So much so that these predators had completely wiped out the deer population. As the ranchers moved into the country, they used dogs to hunt

predators in order to slowly kill them out. The use of blind traps also helped to reduce the population. One of the main pathways used by the panthers was from the top of Mount Emory. The Wilson ranch was to the west of Emory Peak.

Homer Wilson went so far as to keep a man camped at Laguna, on the top of the mountain to keep traps continuously set for the panthers using the trail coming down from Emory Mountain. In one year alone, they caught and killed fifty-two panthers. The persistent ranchers



Shearing Season, 8" x 10", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa late 1930's, Collection of Konrad Shields

eventually won the battle against the viscous predators and when they did, the deer population in the Chisos Mountains eventually returned.¹²

Along with the constant problem of predators, there were the problems of not only building fences, but keeping them maintained after they were built. Life cannot be sustained without water. Fortunately, Oak Creek had adequate water, but not always in the places it needed to be. Pipes and pumps had to be installed for water lines. After they were installed, they too needed to be maintained. Sheds, stalls, corrals,

holding pens and shearing stations needed to be built and maintained. Jobs were never-ending and both full and part time laborers were always required.

The man power required to run a ranch the size of Blue Creek ranged from a low of seven in the slow months to a high of twenty-four during the busy months of April to August when shearing or driving animals to the railhead in Marathon required so much time.¹³ Skilled labor for a lot of jobs was just not available, especially when the mines at Terlingua paid somewhat higher wages and offered steadier employment. At the height of the mining boom, the population of Terlingua reached 2,000 inhabitants.¹⁴ In spite of the many problems, Homer Wilson worked continuously and somehow succeeded to a sustainable level.

The onset of the Great Depression started with the stock market crash on October 24th, 1929, referred to as "Black Thursday". By 1933, nearly half of America's banks had failed, and unemployment was approaching 15 million people, or 30 per cent of the working population. The economic problems caused the Dow Jones Industrial Average to lose 89.19% of its value by July 8, 1932. People would soon learn the financial markets were not the only problem. To add insult to injury, there was the horrific problem of the Dust Bowl. It intensified the crushing economic impacts of the Great Depression and drove many families on a desperate migration in search of work, water and better living conditions.¹⁵

The expression, "when it rains, it pours" was never truer for so many during these years of struggle for most Americans. There were plenty of financial problems, and there was no rain in the Midwest and Southern Plains. This added even more stress for those trying to take care of their families. It was like being on a roller coaster that only went one direction – down. The combination of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl was a crushing defeat for a nation that was on the move and wanted to grow.

The Dust Bowl refers to the drought-stricken area of the middle of the country from Texas to Nebraska. The entire region was engulfed at times with high winds and choking dust that killed

both people and livestock. Entire crops and vegetation across the whole region were totally destroyed. The dust driven by the high winds turned many days into long nights. People in many areas had no choice but to leave for the sake of safety. The drought lasted for approximately ten years, but the economic devastation lasted much longer. Regular rainfall finally returned to the region by the end of 1939, bringing the Dust Bowl years to a close. ¹⁶

Even the Big Bend was affected by the Dust Bowl. Terrible dust storms hit Marathon and the northern Big Bend in the spring of 1930. Bergine Wilson described, “dark clouds of debris blew so thick that people in Marathon could not see to walk or drive. Dirt sifted through cracks around doors and windows causing a thin layer of dust to settle inside homes and buildings. These storms continued intermittently through 1934 when most of the land in Big Bend received some rain. We were lucky in the Chisos as the mountains and foothills drew more rainfall than the surrounding lowlands.” ¹⁷

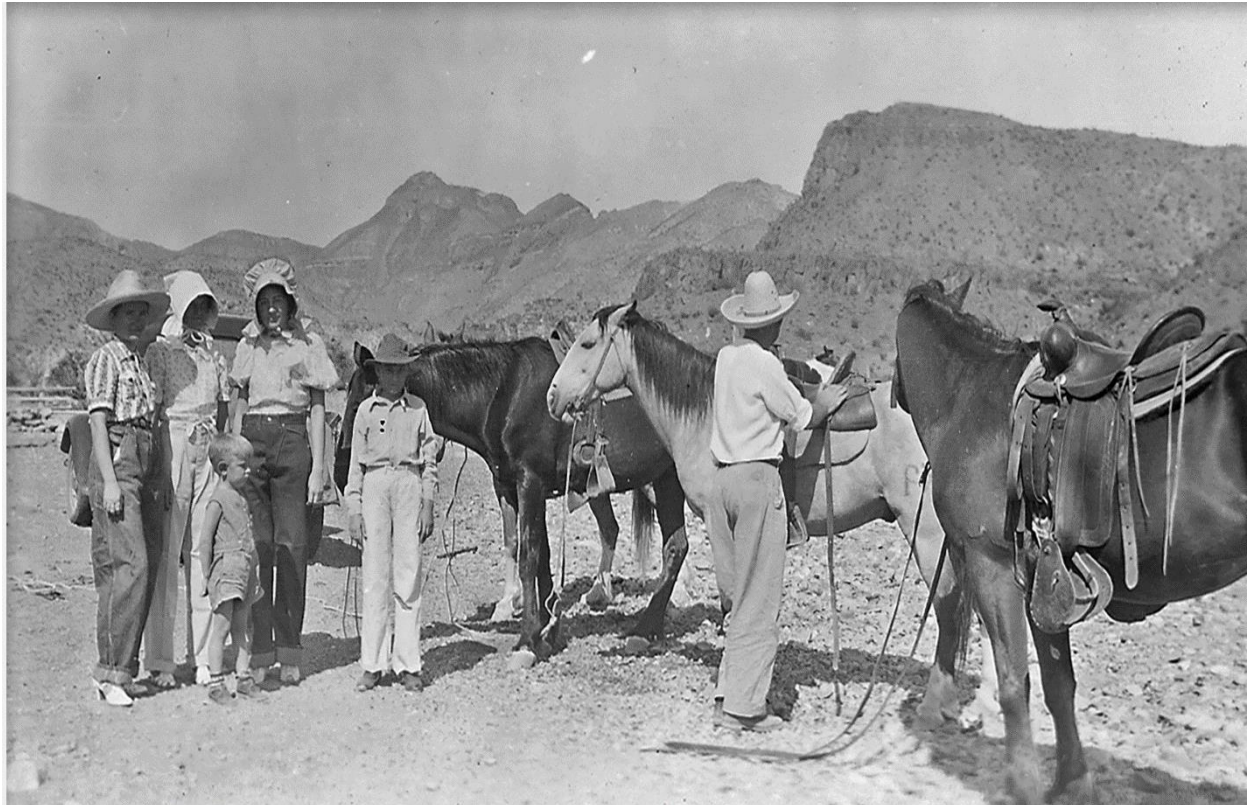
For all practical purposes, history shows that Homer Wilson could not have picked a worse time to get into the ranching business, no matter what he intended to raise. He like so many others, had no forecast for either problem – the duration and recovery from the depression or the drought. The onset of the Great Depression brought lower prices for cows, goats, sheep, mohair and wool. Everyone who farmed and ranched was affected, some more than others.

Homer survived, but it was always nip and tuck. It was a tremendous financial strain which was perpetuated by 116 loans on land that he owed to individuals and to the State of Texas that had interest rates from three to eight percent. By 1934, he had consolidated his loans with the Federal Land Bank of Houston at a rate of three percent, cutting his interest cost to less than half. That gave the Wilson family \$90.00 per month to live on. The rest went to the bank for mortgage payments and ranch maintenance. ^{ibid}

While people living in cities and towns were out of work; had little or no money to buy food, farmers and ranchers in certain places such as the Big Bend had an upside. They raised cows, goats and sheep along with many gardens and orchards. If they had seeds, they could sustain themselves along with their neighbors because they all generously shared with each other during these tough economic times. They survived by sticking together. The neighbors in the Big Bend were always close because of necessity. The depression and associated drought brought them even closer.

Homer Wilson and Waddy Burnham, Jr. were very good friends. Bill Burnham stated their relationship as, “They were very good friends. In fact, Homer Wilson, I would say was probably at our ranch to drink coffee in the morning, ah, on an average of three to four times a week.” Although Waddy raised cows and Homer raised sheep and goats, they both were always busy fighting the same predators. ¹⁹

Fred Darge was what might be called a different sort of person to these determined hard-working ranchers of the Big Bend, but he obviously had attributes that enabled him to become an always welcomed visitor to these ranchers and their families. He brought with him artistic capabilities that were not common vocations in a practical country. They were grateful for Darge replicating scenes of their ranches in colorful paintings that decorated their homes. These paintings added an element of style and quickly became family heirlooms. Darge was known to be shy but his self-portraits and photographs demonstrate that he knew how to smile. He was always well received by everyone.



Evelyn and Dorothy Burnham, Julia Nail, Homer Wilson Jr., Patricia Wilson and Fred Darge. Circa late 1930's. From picture section of *"Beneath the Window,"* Courtesy of Iron Mountain Press

Bergine Wilson summarized Darge as a "character and an eccentric".²⁰ Daughter Patricia saw him as "a quiet man who didn't talk about himself, who was average size, and something of a loner. He never mentioned his past or a family – if he had one – and spoke in an abrupt, gruff manner when asked questions."²¹ It is interesting that she says this – as it isn't what others said; maybe his German accent sounded that way to a child.

Patricia liked to sit on a rock and watch him paint the Window. "He saw and captured the glory of the mountains and towering cloudbanks. He painted in early morning light or the late afternoon sun, dabbing and brushing the rich sienna's, umbers, and cerulean blues as he captured the magic scenery like jewels on display."²² It is ironic that Patricia later became an art teacher. Darge, unknowingly, may very well have influenced her vocation.

Apparently, all of the art community and Darge collectors assumed he had a good working knowledge of a cowboy's real life. Although there were several comments from some ranch hands that Darge had no qualms about helping with chores and working cattle when called upon, the reality is Darge quickly learned from observation and likely participated on very few occasions. He was there to paint. According to various descendants of the families who had



Courtesy of Iron Mountain Press

welcomed Darge to their ranches, including Patricia Wilson Clothier and Julia Nail Moss,²³ he frequently gifted them with his art work as payment for room and board. During the depression, bartering became a necessity and a favored way of life especially for rural citizens. Both ranchers and Darge were low on cash and bartering worked well for everyone.

The Wilsons, like the rest of their neighbors, had been hearing talk of the possibility their land and that of their neighbors would be taken over by the Department of the Interior for the National Park Service. It appeared that 1940 started out to be a better year with new hope on the horizon now that the Great Depression was winding down along with the drought. The optimism didn't last long – the State of Texas backed by the federal government, appeared just as agricultural commodities were starting to rise in price. Serious discussions regarding the land being incorporated into a new state or national park were initiated with ranchers in and around the Chisos Mountains. This new plan for purchasing their land and homes was not well received by most ranchers. They felt they could never catch a break!

December 6th, 1941, started out just like any other day at Blue Creek Ranch, but this one ended differently. While inspecting a deer that his close friend, Dr. W. D. Lockhart of Alpine, had shot earlier in the day, Homer Wilson suffered a debilitating heart attack that would leave him greatly incapacitated the rest of his life. The fact that Dr. Lockhart was close at hand kept him alive.²⁴ The many years of continuous hard work and high levels of stress and debt had finally taken its toll on a man determined to make things happen, but didn't have the heart to support his energetic body.

Homer's health issues left Bergine, two months pregnant, with the enormous burden of taking care of two children and an incapacitated husband unable to work. The family quickly moved to their Alpine to be close to Dr. Lockhart. Bergine was now wife, mother, homemaker, nurse and secretary to Homer while she also assisted Lott Felts, the indispensable ranch foreman at Blue Creek, as he would keep the ranch operating during Homers absence.²⁵

The Wilsons, due to their current circumstances, decided it would be in the best interest of the family to accept the offer from the State of Texas and sell their beloved Blue Creek Ranch. The contract with the Texas State Park Board was signed by Homer on May 25th, 1942. The abstracts to surveys of the land came to a total of 1,222 pages.²⁶ The Wilsons received

\$137,376.06.²⁷ They were able to recover their cost, including the many improvements that were made over the years.

May 25th was a memorable date for the Wilsons. The bitter sweet signing of the contract to sell the ranch was followed by the joy of the birth of their third child. Bergine did not tell Homer she was labor; instead, in the middle of the night she had driven over to Dr. Lockhart's office and given birth to Thomas L. Wilson.²⁹

The following month, in June, they returned to the ranch at Oak Creek. Once back at Oak Creek, Homer insisted that he could resume working and off he went. With shearing season on the horizon, he was intent on overseeing the intense job of shearing the flock. He had very specific instructions on their shearing, handling the bagging of the fleece and wool and caring of the goats and sheep after shearing. His instructions were always to be carefully followed.

On July 11, 1943, he had his driver, John Lash, chauffeur him from Oak Creek to Presidio on an errand concerning bonded men who worked on the ranch. At that time, there was no River Road (FM 170) that went from Terlingua through Lajitas to Presidio like there is today. The driver instead had to drive to Marathon, through Alpine and Marfa, then turn south to the port of entry at Presidio where they stayed overnight. They spent the next day with immigration authorities before returning to Oak Creek the following day.

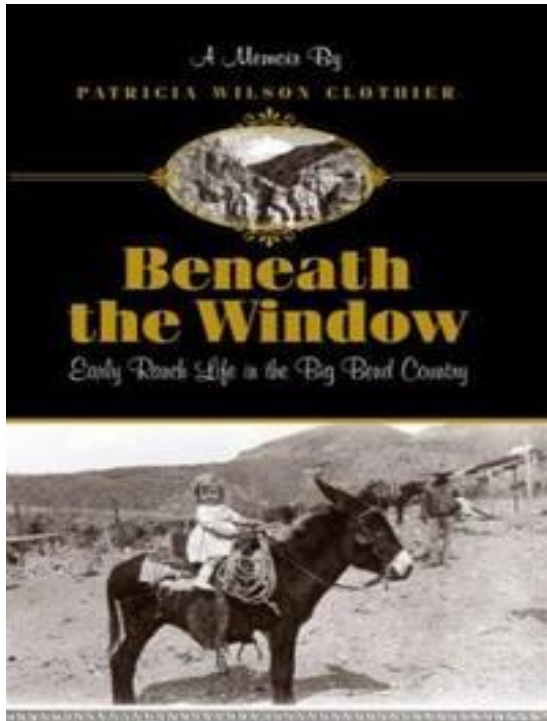
Homer Marvin Wilson, just 51 years of age, died quietly in his sleep on July 14th, 1943.²⁹ His heart never recovered from its debilitating attack and was too weak to support a man who was always on the go and felt compelled to work all the time. Una May Wedin, whose father hauled wool and livestock for the Wilson ranch said her father was devastated by the death of Homer Wilson and remembers him saying "Yes, he was a prince of a man."³⁰ This comment was universally echoed by the many who knew the founder of the Blue Creek Ranch.

Once the Texas State Park Board secured all the contracts for land for the new park, in September of 1943 landowners in turn deeded their ranches to the Department of the Interior for the National Park Service. Bergine, by special exemption, was able to remain on the ranch for some time after the December 31, 1944, take over date by the Park.³¹ She left the ranch and moved to Alpine on an unknown date in 1945, but did not stay permanently.

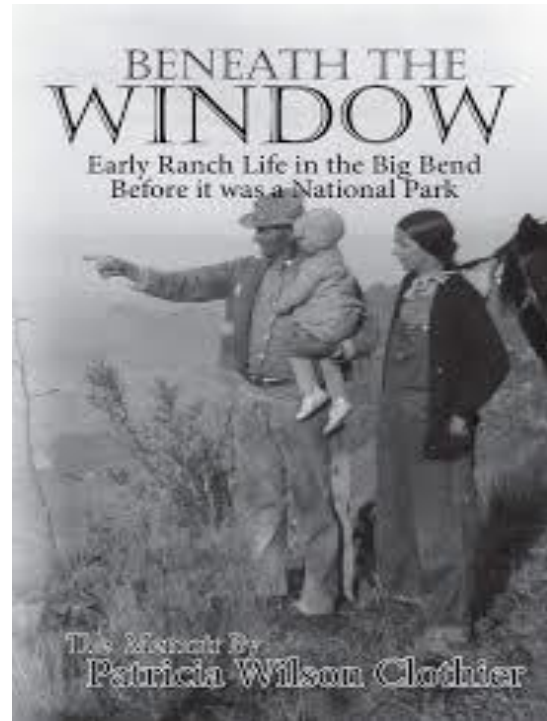
At some point in time, Bergine moved to Kansas City, Missouri and married Mr. H.E. Gatlin. She died on November 4th, 1991 and is buried next to Homer in the Wilson family plot at Masonic Cemetery in Del Rio, Val Verde County, Texas.

The Blue Creek area of the Wilson ranch was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 14, 1975.

For more detailed information concerning the Wilson family and Blue Creek Ranch, Patricia Wilson Clothier has written a passionate memoir titled, *Beneath the Window* of her early years of ranch life in the Big Bend. Of all the books written about the Big Bend, this book is a great is a great reference for what life was like in the Big Bend area prior to the formation of the Big Bend National Park in 1944.



Courtesy of Iron Mountain Press



Courtesy of Iron Mountain Press