

## **“Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting” – Old Texas saying**

By Barbara Brown

Carl sits on the wood deck looking out over the grassy landscape and the mountains in the distance. The morning is cool and he has on a plaid flannel shirt over his worn jeans. He is sitting on the Adirondack chair he and his wife found at a garage sale with his cowboy boots planted on the railing around the deck. Beside him on the handmade Mexican table are his black coffee, the Weekly Gazette, and a pair of binoculars. Carl is a lean middle-aged man whose body is used to hard work. He owns a small business installing water filtration systems in Granbury, Texas near Dallas-Fort Worth. He frequently works 10 hour days, six days a week. But, he is not working today. He is on vacation.

About 20 years ago Carl and his wife Sue bought 100 acres in Southwest Texas. During their vacations, they cleared an area on the land and built a small cabin with a large deck looking over the nearby Davis Mountains State Park. This part of the Trans-Pecos region is high desert. But, it is not a sandy wasteland, populated only by rattlesnakes and a few cacti. Rather, the Big Bend Country, as it is called, includes mile high mountains, steep canyons, and over a million acres of almost unspoiled wilderness. It is home to antelope, coyotes, bears, big-horned sheep, and hundreds of bird species. It is a place to refresh the spirit.

Carl refreshes his spirit by sitting quietly on their deck watching wildlife drift through the nearby grasses and foothills in search of food. This morning his eye catches a slight movement about 600 yards away and he picks up his binoculars. There, just past the mesquite trees are a white tailed deer and her fawn. The fawn is old enough to be sturdy on its legs, but still young enough to have white spots on its tan rump. The fawn is chewing quietly on the grass while the mother keeps a watchful eye out for predators. Carl smiles and realizes how privileged he is to observe this small nature vignette.

As he sips his coffee, he looks down at the front page of the Weekly Gazette. He is reminded of the town hall meeting tonight in Fort Davis. He remembers that Frank Barton, a foreman at the CF Ranch, told him about the meeting while they were chewing the fat down at the feed store. “Ya gotta come”, Frank told him. “There’s gonna be some environmental Nazi from up in Austin”. Frank is a third generation rancher and does not have much regard for outsiders. Frank said the meeting was about the border fence. “We need to keep out those wetbacks. Just last week, I had to send some boys out to repair a fence they cut through. Not to mention keeping out the raghead terrorists.”

Carl admitted to himself that he should go and at the same time he did not really want to. The drive to Fort Davis would take over an hour each way. And truth be told, he does not really care that much about the border fence. He believes that the government is going to do what it wants to do anyway, no matter what they say at the meeting. On the other hand, he knows that Frank is a honcho around the area and it might be polite to come and show support for his neighbor. So, at 6:00, he finds himself in his pickup heading east.

The meeting was in the Jeff Davis County courthouse. As Carl arrives he sees a few people chatting and drinking coffee. In front, on the small stage, a lectern and four chairs are placed. To kick off the meeting, the head of the Chamber of Commerce welcomes everyone

and introduces a ranger from Trans Pecos Parks and Wildlife, Frank Barton representing the area ranchers, and a guy in Chinos and a T-shirt – Carl did not get his name – from the Nature Conservancy. Frank speaks first and passionately. He talks about cattle being killed, fences torn down, diseases being brought in, drugs, and the loss of jobs. He reminds them of the costs for education of illegals and health care. And, he warns repeatedly about terrorists walking over the border and killing Americans. He asks the attendees to show their support by signing the petition on the back table.

The speaker for the Nature Conservancy speaks last. He tells the audience that the proposed fences are to be ten feet tall and that plans call for clearing out a path 50 to 150 feet wide alongside the fence. The Rio Grande River, the border between the US and Mexico, will be on the other side of the fence. No one has decided for sure where along the river the fence will be located, but it is likely that it will include an area around Presidio, about 75 miles south of Fort Davis. He talks about fragile ecosystems and loss of species. “We know as habitats become fragments whether by roads, fences or walls; animals become much less capable of roaming widely”. He expresses concern about cutting off a source of drinking water for animals that migrate through the desert. He paints a picture of thirsty animals standing within sight of water but unable to reach it. He, too, asks the attendees to sign a petition asking the Department of Homeland Security to consider the environmental impact of their decisions about the border fence.

When the meeting is over, Carl congratulates Frank on his presentation and talks with his neighbors for a few minutes. These are good men. Carl guesses most of them will be up before dawn to start work. Yet, they came. He is glad he came, too. As he walks toward the door to leave for home, he looks toward where Frank is holding court and sighs, and then he stops at the Nature Conservancy table and picks up a pen.