

## A RIDGE TOO FAR

*In which Brittlebush Valley is located on the map of imagination, as a destiny rarely reached or if arrived at, seldom settled.*

BRITTLEBUSH VALLEY sits within the Sierra Blanca Mountains, which rise over a crumpled landscape of plateaus more than 7,000 feet high. The mountains are volcanic, their peaks and lava flows sprawling like a great shaggy bear rug thrown over the countryside. The name was commonly shortened to Blancas, and then Anglicized into Blanks. Behind the bear's skull, Mount Cabeza, there is a great hole in the rug, as though eaten by lithic moths or conifer-browsing mice. The hole is grassy and splashes outward like the splayed fingers of a stepped-on hand. That cavity is Brittlebush Valley.

Only recently have humans tried to live here year round. The winters are cold, the snows deep. The Indians, lastly Apaches, came and went with the seasons, passing through to scalp a few elk and mule deer and then flee. The first whites, headed by Ebenezer Eager, looked lustingly at the waving bunch grass and the flowery glades under the oak and pine. One of his vaqueros mumbled, "Las pasturas del cielo!" Ebenezer thought that if these were the pastures of heaven, he might wander over to purgatory, as he struggled to wrestle the muhley and fescue into wheat, and then fed them into rangy Texas cattle. "You couldn't grow a damned brittlebush in this valley," growled Ebenezer, thereby naming the locale. After they left, the Mormons moved in, following the Little Verde that irrigated their flatland fields to its mountain headwaters, nestled in soggy meadows on the west flank of the Valley. It would have been the end of road, if there had been a road, which there wasn't. The great Mormon scout, Jared Hopkins, died on a mission to the Valley and one of his half dozen wives buried him there, the first of those who stayed. The Mormons persevered, building a chapel on a small knoll on the north side of the Valley, patenting homesteads in the Valley, content to be pioneers of Zion, even if Zion meant 300 inches of snow and if there were as many grizzlies as gentiles and the nearest temple lay 800 miles distant. Within a few years the land around Brittlebush Valley proper was reserved as the Big Scrub National Forest. A small ranger station appeared. A gravel road from the south punched over the rough lava ridge and into the Valley. The place became accessible to tourists. The cool summers beckoned, along with streams, lakes, eagles and elk, in short, Nature. Some of the tourists wished to stay longer than a weekend and to live in something more than a canvas-duck tent. Land titles shuffled from farm and pasture to recreational subdivision. The population doubled, one an inrush of expectant exurbanites, the other a sullen rural residue. They mixed weakly and warily. But neither could exist without the other. Brittlebush Valley was too remote - too high, at 8,047 feet, to hold wealthy geezers with lung and heart problems; too far from metropolitan city-states to attract breezy weekenders; too hard-scrabble to draw trendy art colonists. It was a ridge too far. The old residents couldn't get ahead, the newcomers couldn't get properly planted, and nature did its best to ignore them both.

At the junction between Highway 137, which headed east to nowhere in particular, and Highway 281, which headed nowhere particular south, there stood an Airstream trailer converted into a saloon, a Forest Service ranger station, and the Brittlebush Valley blacksmith shop. Over the years the saloon evolved into the Snag Tavern, complete with worm races and happy hours. The ranger station remodeled itself to better greet seasonal visitors, since fishing and birdwatching had become more vital than logging and herding. But the blacksmith shop underwent an acute metamorphosis. Its proprietor was Horace Henry, a local. He hated his name and whenever someone spoke it, Horace, a church-going man, would mutter, "Oh, heck." Before long he became known as "Heck" Henry. Heck succeeded as a blacksmith, which had been his father's trade, because horses had always been the favored mode of travel in Brittlebush Valley. But when packers began raising llamas and the Forest Service converted to ATVs, Heck

was left with making handles for 55-gallon-drum barbecues and water wrenches for residents. He saw what was coming. "Oh, heck," he mumbled. He added snack food and a touch of hardware to the store - Doritos and 10-penny nails and a few postcards. He couldn't compete with the Big Bite Serve-Yourself Gas and Tackle Emporium or the True West Hardware and Fudge Shoppe, where you could buy 30-06 shotgun ammo, No-Fail Power Bait, and candy in the shape of elk antlers. So the forge went to the rear, and the front became an office for Christian Counseling. That folded, and spiritual comfort gave way to a resident chiropractor (what the locals called the "lumbar mill"). Then he, too, left when his lease expired, complaining that the unhelpful residents, inclined to patronize the Sierra Blanca Clinic and Rest Home 23 miles over Cabeza Pass in the town of Chokecherry, were a "pain in the neck." Yet Heck knew one of the great truths of American life: Location, location, location. He had the best in Brittlebush Valley. So he sold out to that final limbo of all American longings, real estate. In less than seven years, a working blacksmith shop had morphed into Dream Catchers Realty, "Lots Bought and Sold."

THERE WAS, in truth, lots to sell, and lots of people to sell to. The place was a hive of people searching, people hiding, people mired in the past, people inspired by a future, people just milling like bored bison. Even a superficial survey could turn up a menagerie of misfits, aspirants, and the just plain muddled. The place was a field guide to the modern West. Some people were a bit of all. Probably E. Paine Kieffer was one such. He wasn't sure, not at first. After his fall, he wasn't sure of much.

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