Quitters' Paradise

If you're ready to bail out of America, the best little ghost town in Texas is waiting for you

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They're a motley collection of loners, back-to-the-landers, artists, and eccentrics, scattered around the Texas desert, dozens of miles in every direction–as far north as the upper boundaries of the Terlingua Ranch (a 200,000-acre rough-and-tumble development south of Alpine) and as far south as Redford. What holds them together as an unstructured but otherwise meaningful community is the capital of this misfit mecca, the town of Terlingua, once the most famous ghost town in the state. Terlingua was a hotbed of quicksilver mining until carpetbagging profiteers gave up the ghost in 1942. The rubble-strewn village now stoops drowsily upon a couple of square miles just to the north of Ranch Road 170, the thoroughfare to Mexico.

Terlingua is Texas' last outpost for outcasts, for those maligned loners who fashion their own crude American dream in the anonymity of the desert. As one longtime Terlinguan, Paul Wiggins, puts it, "A lot of who and what we are can't be explained by American mores. We're just a neglected corner of America, outside of its infrastructure." David Kaczynski, brother of Unabomber suspect Ted, lived here in the early '80s, in a pink shack a little bigger than an outhouse.

Here in Terlingua country, less is more. A one-room cabin without water and electricity fits right in, in a region where census takers have discovered people living in cars, caves, and shacks made of automobile tires. The only unwelcome guest is progress, though its trespasses are becoming more noticeable.

It was ten years ago when I first got a glimpse of the leathery faces, snarled hair, and raggedy clothes of the fixtures who perched themselves on the porches of the Terlingua Trading Company and the Study Butte Store. They looked incalculable to a yuppie tourist passing through, though the very fact of their existence in the West Texas wasteland seemed ominous. As my appreciation for the desert's brutal majesty grew, my fear of its inhabitants diminished, but only so much. The questions kept coming back: Why would people choose to live here? And what would happen to them if they did?

The answers, if they can be found anywhere, lie in the weird communal fabric of Terlingua, where solitude is not solitary and the shared struggle for survival achieves the motley grace of a desert parade.

Collie Ryan sits outside her school-bus home, carefully painting a scene of the Rio Grande on the face of a hubcap. I apologize for having ignored the "No Trespassing" sign on the dirt path that leads to her refuge. With a reassuring smile, she says, "People know whether or not that sign applies to them."

To the outside world, the town is that scruffy embodiment of Lone Star bravado hailed in Jerry Jeff Walker's 1973 album `exclamdown`Viva Terlingua!. But no Terlinguan defines the community strictly by its city limits–and Collie, an indispensable element, is one of the reasons why. When she gave her last $40 to a towing service eight years ago and had her bus hauled a couple of miles from Lajitas, 13 miles west of Terlingua, the Terlingua community simply extended itself 12 to include her. (She's still closer to Lajitas, which was getting too touristy for her, but she considers herself a Terlinguan.) Asked exactly what brought her here from Marin County, in California,

Collie laughs and says, "Well, that's a long story." I get the picture. She's here now, and no one seems to remember when she wasn't.

A number of Terlinguans live in buses, and Collie seems astonished when I tell her I've never been in such a dwelling. The interior of her bus is surprisingly spacious, no more cramped than a dorm room. Why not live here? There's plenty of daylight, a kerosene lantern for night reading, a grill on the patio, fresh creek water she hauls from the nearby mule ranch. Her built-from-scratch desert sanctuary seems like a mirage–"a piece of artwork I can live in," as she puts it–but it is hard earned and precariously maintained. The riverside heat is savage, and "what dust you don't pave, you eat," she observes. The men in her life have come and gone. A friend has seen her show up in town "in a lonely blue funk, bitter about America."

But Collie has her hubcaps–or, as she prefers, "my mandalas," referring to the Hindu wheel of life. They appear on walls all over the Terlingua area, brightly colored and meticulously detailed motifs that express the circular core on which, says Collie, all life is based. "The circle is everywhere–it's the key to everything," she says.

I pay her $75 for one of the hubcaps. She accepts the money with grace. "This is the way it always happens," she says. "I really sell just by luck. It's magic. Like you coming by today."

And that is my first but by no means last glimpse of Terlingua's screwball magic. By midafternoon the Terlingua Trading Company porch bench is occupied by the usual loiterers. Mike Letvenow, a sinewy bongo player with Ray-Ban sunglasses and sandals, is cutting a local fellow's matted hair. Betty Moore, who works at Terlingua-based Far Flung Adventures, smirks at me from underneath her gimme cap. Spider Cooper is nursing a Budweiser and bragging about the concrete gargoyle he crafted this morning. Big Al Robertson, a retired merchant seaman with a prodigious gut, a short black ponytail, and a tufted white beard, tends lovingly to the three dusty canines on the porch. When people call out "How's it goin', Big Al?" he booms convincingly, "Always great. Always great." I'm stuck with the embarrassing memory of having been afraid of Big Al, before I knew about his gentle way with animals and the miniature desert golf course he constructed out by his trailer.

Whole afternoons pass this way in Terlingua. Every couple of minutes a car sputters by; 15 years ago, I'm told, two or three hours would pass without a vehicle in sight. As recently as 1970, not a soul lived in the town. Five years later, there were six residents; by 1980, maybe 50. Today the population estimates run in the 150 to 250 neighborhood. (With all the drifters, an exact count is impossible.) Among the recent signs that the Apocalypse is upon Terlingua: A high school and a bank are being built; fiber optic telephone lines are ready for installation; and one of the gas stations in Study Butte, four miles east, now has an automated-teller machine. Elsewhere in West Texas, the natives are praying for rain, but in Terlingua I've heard people applaud the four-year drought. "It's keeping the growth at bay," one of the locals told me with a perfectly straight face.

The town suffers for a perfect villain. Rancher Rex Ivey, who bought the whole town with his son Bill in the ‘80s, drives around dispensing slabs of meat to dogs from a tray in the trunk of his car. Forty-year-old Bill pays the town’s water bill and has thus far resisted the capitalist impulse to transform his empire into a theme park. The trendmongers don’t last long here. As one Terlinguan observes dryly, “We’ve all had a good laugh at the New Agers who come here with their crystals and leave with a whopping sunburn.” Terlingua’s version of a yuppie is Mimi Webb-Miller, the late congressman John Tower’s niece and a casting director for prime-time national television commercials, whose newly built faux ruin would not look out of place in Santa Fe. Mimi spent most of the previous decade as legendary Mexican drug lord Pablo Acosta’s publicist and confidante. Her Toyota 4-Runner looks a little bit out of place among the town’s shabby buses and pickups, but she does one hell of a job plowing it across the Rio Grande into Mexico. “Mimi,” chuckles one longtime Terlinguan, “is a master of versatility.” She can stay.

“There’s gonna be more humans–it’s a reality and I’m resigned to it,” says Paul Wiggins as he sits in the workshop where he makes belts, six miles north of town. “There’s still a kind of halo around Terlingua. I was driving with my two boys the other night, and you could see all these campfires in the distance. I told my sons, ‘Take note: What you’re seeing all around you is pretty unique.’”

According to Paul, “The grace of Terlingua is that in this whole soup no one is dominant.” But particular respect is reserved for a few–among them Collie and Paul, who share a survivor’s pride that is refreshingly devoid of sanctimony. Like the hubcap artist, Paul, 48, is an American original, which cuts both ways: His place in a cookie-cutter world is not so easily found. With a sharp chin and nose, skinny legs tucked into black stretch pants, and a voice that seems never far from laughter, he could be a leprechaun exiled to the desert. He grew up in Houston and studied architecture at Rice University, where the ‘60s counterculture got him only so far. “The hippies protested against the war and did drugs, neither of which I did very effectively,” he says. “But the third thing they did, which I did find attractive, was get back to the land.”

First he worked for developers Brown and Root in the architecture and engineering department. In the ‘70s he brought his skills to the desert and found construction work wherever he could. He was back to the land, all right, and he recalls that “I wasn’t making enough money to start my car. Now with more people moving here, there’s more building to be done, more people to buy my belts. I’m not struggling anymore.”

By that, he means struggling financially. Paul is no longer married and his sons live elsewhere, but asceticism doesn’t suit him. Last year, I’m told, Paul left Terlingua to be with a woman in Houston. It is painful to contemplate the image of this gentle soul trying to hack it in the big city, but Paul wanted his heart to grow and so he gave it his best shot. It wasn’t long before he returned. One is better for trying, perhaps–though I’m reminded of the haunting words of another desert veteran: “You live in Terlingua, and you become unrehabilitatable.”

Paul needs the community. He needs the Starlight Theatre, the town's dazzling food and beverage oasis. He needs the dances and the campfire parties. But Terlingua has its genuine recluses, like Judy, also known as Suitcase Sally, a middle-aged and deeply tanned woman in sunglasses who rides with her few worldly possessions on the back of a burro and sleeps by the side of the road. She is "like art," says Paul with admiration, a desert apparition who says nothing when I greet her one day in Study Butte and nothing when I greet her two days later and 50 miles west on Ranch Road 170. Whatever churns within her, Suitcase Sally keeps utterly to herself.

But the Terlingua desert has seen its disasters, like Emil, the polite but fatally conflicted nuclear physicist who drank himself to death in his trailer. It has seen Howard, who shot at passing aircraft and claimed kinship to Colonel Kurtz of Apocalypse Now, and it still sees an individual who once served time for a sex offense and now sits by the roadside claiming he is God. Even in Terlingua, not every misfit can be made to fit.

Ambivalence seems to be the consensus on David Sleeper, the fortyish owner of a ranch less than 10 miles on the other side of Lajitas. He has been a desert presence for two decades, leading spiritual canyoneering expeditions, raising cattle on the other side of the river, and, more recently, breeding mules on his solar-powered ranch. His independent life commands a certain respect from Terlinguans, but a shared history is no guarantee of affection, and somewhere along the way, the locals found themselves withholding their embrace.

It works both ways. "I've had my hermit's license for years," David tells me with a quiet grin. He has no use for the Terlingua porch life, and though he strikes me as bright and even charming in a bashful way, it's clear that he feels most comfortable around his 20 mules. "Give them a lot of respect, and they'll give it back," he says as he caresses the neck of one of his beloved animals. "But they won't give a stupid person the time of day."

There's no contempt in his voice. He has the low-tech life he wants. Before I leave, he tells me that I'm welcome to stay over anytime. It's the fifth or sixth such invitation I've received during my weeklong stay in Terlingua, despite the prevailing sentiment that my article cannot possibly do the town any good. A cynic might regard the Terlinguans' spirit of communal generosity as a practical matter of desert survival. But they damn sure don't have to extend it to outsiders.

"We don't have much, but if you stay with us, you'll never go hungry," says Janelle Brady as she offers me a peanut butter and jelly tortilla. Her offer is particularly moving because she, her husband, Jeff, and their three children live significantly below the poverty line. Their furniture consists largely of wooden slabs set on top of buckets filled with dry food. They drink what little rainwater is left from what they caught during last September's brief downpour. Their do-it-yourself Terlingua Ranch residence, though clean and orderly, has the appearance of a wooden cave. Paul Wiggins calls them homesteaders.

Jeff dropped out of the army just after the tragic Kent State shooting in 1970 and wandered all the way to Terlingua. Back then, the town was an abandoned pile of rubble. Fourteen years later, he and Janelle became the parents of the first child born in the town since 1943. Jeff has been here longer than almost anyone and freely exercises his right to denounce what has become of the town. "The people who move here today say they're sick of the corporate world," he drawls, "but it's already in their system. They can't live back-to-nature the way we do. They come for the scene and not for the scenery. And now they're turning it into Terlingua Fe."

The skinny man with the handlebar mustache leans forward in his chair, and his words grow harsher, more sweeping. "The way this country is now, if you're not a part of yuppie culture, you're either in poverty or you're a criminal. And mark my words, this country will pay." Darkness seems to leak into the unelectrified, unmechanized home. "The Unabomber tried to make the country pay," I begin, but Jeff cuts me off, snapping, "How many of their agents have murdered innocents as business-as-usual?"

Janelle, who still carries the figure of the ballerina she once was but whose dark and wind-creased face personifies the desert life, chimes in, "I teach our children that they, the government, are the dangerous ones. They bred the Unabomber. He's like the counter-CIA. What he fought against is still the governing force. And everyone who came to Terlingua is at least subconsciously trying to escape that beast."

That applied to David Kaczynski, who was content with escape, rather than retaliation; it applied, at least until the first letter bombs in 1978, to the Unabomber. How much bitterness and despair did it take to turn an escapist into a killer? Jeff and Janelle have each other, and they have the Terlingua community, but something else diffuses their hostility toward the outside world, and Jeff volunteers what it is: "I still have hope," he says calmly. "I still have faith that we'll work things out on this planet. Otherwise I wouldn't have brought these kids into the world."

The youngest of the three is asleep on the family bed. The other two are in school. The eldest son, says Janelle, wants to study rocket aviation. Eventually he'll be leaving the desert, going off to a university. She and her husband are okay with that. I notice a Collie Ryan mandala on their wall. The little home is buttressed with hope.

Proprietor Angie Dean opens the doors of the Starlight at five every afternoon, and one by one the Terlinguans shuffle in. Ken Barnes, the town's venerated self-taught paleontologist, strides up to the bar in his straw hat and holds out the day's find of dinosaur bones, which are passed around the bar to grunts of admiration. Laurie arrives fresh from the Chihuahuan town of Creel, her truck loaded with Mexican craftwork that she will sell to the trading company. One of the evening's musicians begins tuning his mandolin. By ten after five, every bar stool is taken.

One of the occupants is Spider, who must have just gotten paid, since Angie doesn't give him credit–unlike the trading company, where Spider owes $30, and the Study Butte Store, where he is $125 in arrears. "The way I see it," he tells me, "I've got to get paid two or three hundred dollars every week, because I like to drink a lot of beer and dip a lot of snuff."

When I carefully ask him if he thinks he's an alcoholic, Spider doesn't miss a beat. "I know I am! Hell. Four DWIs, disorderly conduct. I don't deny it."

He laughs and returns to his Budweiser. The talkative, compact-looking man in the gimme cap and sunglasses is Terlingua's latest project. Spider has been here five years, and it is fair to say that he did not arrive brimming with communal spirit. After being tossed out of the army in 1970 for brawling with his fellow soldiers–"I was a loner, and when the others picked on me, I'd go crazy on 'em," he says–the Vietnam vet spent the next 20 years roaming South Texas and Mexico. He acquired the spider tattoos on his arms and neck from an artist in Ciudad Acuña, but the nickname came first, given to him around the time he got into a brawl in Del Rio. When a former brother-in-law purchased a few acres near Terlingua in 1991, Spider got in on the deal and settled down in an old camper parked in the rubble. But, as one of the locals puts it, "It took him two years to arrive here mentally." Spider agrees: "I was still angry when I got here. My first year, I punched out one guy and threatened to kill another." Terlinguans were aghast: A loner-monster was in their midst. Then Angie stepped in. Observing Spider's skill as a concrete pourer, the Starlight owner asked him if he would design a sign for her establishment's rest rooms. Spider did so, using metal spikes for the lettering, and a concrete artist was born.

Nowadays he makes dinosaurs for Big Al's miniature golf course and busts of the Virgin Mary to sell across the border. The savage beast is soothed. "I got the monkey off my back," he says proudly, though, he confesses, "Three weeks ago I nearly beat up a guy. He showed up from out of state, and immediately he starts hassling me. I told him to stay away, but he wouldn't."

Spider takes a gulp of his Budweiser, then says, "But I held back. And eventually somebody else beat him up pretty good, and he split. See, because I waited, now it ain't on my conscience. I feel at peace."

The cackle that follows suggests "Stay tuned." But no one is worried about Spider anymore. He has his first home, his first mailbox in 20 years, and though all those years of marginal living trigger the occasional compulsion to withdraw (he sometimes sleeps in the cave on his property), Spider is usually among the first to claim a spot on the trading company porch every afternoon. In Terlingua, he has at last found a place where he belongs.

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