



## History and Archeology

*History is a continuous narrative of past events relating to a particular people, country, or period, etc. Archeology is the study of the remains of those past peoples, countries, etc.* We learn about the history of a people or a culture by studying the things they left behind. Things like charcoal, chipped rock debris, tools, the types of dwellings they lived in – all provide information about those who were here before us. These artifacts can be examined for evidence of technologies like food gathering and hunting, or food processing and many other facets of human activities. As citizens of this country and this world, the story of humankind is *our* story. Big Bend National Park is our library.

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### Archeological Study

There is still much to learn about the prehistory of Big Bend National Park. A complete understanding of man's past is totally dependent upon the scientific study of the sites and artifacts that have survived the ravages of time. Thousands of archeological sites throughout the park hold remnants of 12,000 years of American Indian occupation of the Big Bend. When properly studied, these sites can provide very valuable information about past ways of life. Through careful scientific study, archeologists try to recover pieces of the past that help us better understand how mankind has learned, developed and succeeded (or failed).

Sadly, many of the park's archeological and historical sites have been vandalized over the years and valuable information has been destroyed, or removed by thieves. **Casual artifact collecting by the park visitor is illegal** and has also resulted in the loss and destruction of much evidence of the past; information which could otherwise be obtained through scientific investigation.

It's important to preserve these resources because the lessons we learn from the past can help us be better stewards of our fragile planet - now and in the future. By protecting the material cultural remains here in Big Bend National Park, we help to preserve this heritage for future generations to enjoy.

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### Archeological History

Man's prehistoric occupation of the Big Bend is generally divided into five periods: Paleo-Indian, Early Archaic, Middle Archaic, Late Archaic and Late Prehistoric. Throughout the Paleo-Indian Period (10,000 – 6500 B.C.), the Indians depended primarily on large game for food, clothing, and shelter. As the climate changed at the end of the last ice age (becoming warmer and drier), large game animals like bison declined, ushering in a move toward hunting smaller game. Indians of this new era – the early to late Archaic Periods (6500 B.C. – 1000 A.D.), began relying more on plants they gathered for clothing, shelter, and food. By the end of the Late Prehistoric Period (A.D. 700 – 1535), Spanish mission priests traveling through the area reported small bands of nomadic peoples they called the Chizo living in the high mountains. This society marks the beginning

of the Historic Era (AD 1535 to Present) and it's for them that the Chisos Mountains are named. By the 1700s the Chizo Indians were either absorbed or forced out of the region all together by the Mescalero Apaches, who were then themselves displaced from Big Bend by another American Indian group—the Comanche. Even though the Comanche did not make their homes in the region, they maintained a strong presence here for nearly 100 years. Throughout the 1800s, reports were continually heard of a well-worn trail cutting across the landscape toward Mexico. The Comanche Trail, as it was known, served as a major thoroughfare back and forth between the two countries. By 1875 even the mighty Comanche could not stem the tide of American settlers moving into the region and they too were eventually forced from the Big Bend.

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## Pre-modern history

The Historic Era began around AD 1535 with the first Spanish explorations into this portion of North America. The expedition of Cabeza de Vaca passed near the Big Bend. Other expeditions followed in search of gold and silver, farm and ranch land, religious converts and Indian slaves. In an attempt to protect their northern frontier, the Spaniards established a line of “presidios,” or forts along the Rio Grande in the late 1700s. These were soon abandoned because they could not effectively stop Indian raids into Mexico.

Less study has been made of the Mexican occupation of the Big Bend after the abandonment of the presidios, but when Anglo settlers began arriving in the 1800s, they found Mexican families who had occupied the area since the late 1700s, still farming the floodplains of the Rio Grande. In 1848, with the resolution of the war between Mexico and the United States, the border between the two countries was clearly defined and American occupation of the Big Bend began in earnest.

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## The Modern Era

In the 1880s, ranchers migrated into Big Bend to raise livestock in such numbers that the land was soon overgrazed. By the late 1890’s with the discovery of mercury (also known as quicksilver), mining operations replaced ranching as the main economic force of the region. Settlers were enticed to the area by work in the mines or by work in support of the mines like farming or cutting timber for the smelters. Some communities like Terlingua developed directly around the mine sites, while other settlements like Castolon sprang up on the fertile Rio Grande floodplain.

These settlements were mainly small groups of families living and farming in the same area and they were only as successful as the land would allow. By the 1930s, however, many people began to agree that this area of contrast, beauty, and solitude was worth preserving for future generations. To that end, the State of Texas created the Texas Canyons State Park and in 1935 the federal government passed legislation to establish a national park. Subsequently, the State deeded the land to the federal government and on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1944 Big Bend National Park became a reality.

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## Protecting Archeological and Historic Resources

Archeological sites are protected by the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979. Under this act, people who disturb these cultural resources can be fined up to \$20,000 and sentenced to up to one year in prison *for their first offense*. As you explore Big Bend National Park, there is a good chance that the sites and artifacts you see have never been recorded or studied.

The park is dotted with old buildings and ruins of past settlements. Archeological sites reveal 12,000 years of Indian occupation of the Big Bend. By visiting these sites and ruins, the park visitor is able to get a glimpse of early life in what seems like an uninhabitable environment.

Many of these sites are one-of-a-kind because they occur only in the area of Big Bend National Park. What might seem like rusty, old trash to you has cultural significance and has value because it helps tell the story of Big Bend. Please help the park protect these important resources by leaving them where you find them. If you find something that you think is particularly significant, then please take a picture of it and report the location to a Park Ranger.

Remember, the taking of any cultural or natural object from their natural setting is illegal in all National Parks. So please *take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints and kill nothing but time*.

