

Situated within the vast and rugged Chihuahuan desert, Fresno Canyon's plentiful water supports a diversity of habitats and an abundance of wildlife. People have lived in Fresno Canyon for thousands of years and it has been an important crossroads for travelers throughout the ages. Now it's your turn.

HOW TO *explore* FRESNO CANYON

Fresno Canyon and the Crawford-Smith Ranch site are in a rugged part of Big Bend Ranch State Park. From Saucedo Ranch, you can drive a four-wheel drive vehicle to the Crawford-Smith Ranch where the road dead ends. From other points within the park, you can hike, bike or ride your horse to the site. In places, the trail through the canyon follows the old Marfa to Terlingua road, which runs along terraces of Fresno Creek.

LEAVE *no trace*

Fresno Canyon shelters a rich variety of plants and animals and has an impressive archaeological and historical legacy. Please protect Texas' heritage by leaving this special place exactly as you found it.

water FOR LIFE

As you tour Fresno Creek, you can see how water has created ribbons of green in the desert. Strands of large cottonwood, desert ash and willow provide important habitat for diverse bird species, including the diminutive elf owl. The Texas horned lizard is abundant on the sandy terraces. And, the reticulated gecko, which is found only in this part of the world, thrives in the rocky habitats of Fresno Canyon.

(front cover) The families who lived at the Crawford-Smith Ranch also benefited from local springs. In this photo, the Crawford family poses near an irrigation feature.



E. Dan Klepper

Texas Horned Lizard

The Crawford-Smith Ranch of FRESNO CANYON



Hallie Crawford Stillwell

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STATE PARK

THE FRESNO *ranch*

As you hike through Fresno Canyon you will come upon the remains of the Crawford-Smith Ranch, also called the Fresno Ranch. Most people come to Fresno Canyon to experience the silence and solitude of this special place. But, Fresno Canyon once echoed with the sounds of a large and busy ranch. Between 1915 and 1946, the Crawford family, and later, the Smith family used this complex as the nexus for their livelihood.



The Crawford-Smith Ranch today

THE *lifeline* OF A COMMUNITY

While today the Fresno Ranch might seem remote and isolated, it was located along the Marfa to Terlingua road. Established in the late 1890s, this road was the first to connect the local cinnabar mines to the rail lines in Marfa, providing a crucial route for freight and supplies. A passenger stage line also ran a couple of times a week.

With both year-round water and an active road, this was a perfect site for a ranch. The ranch was not a stage stop in the formal, business sense. But, we can assume that the families living at the ranch got local news from the travelers who probably stopped for water and a break in the shade. The road was largely abandoned in the 1930s.



William Austin

The people who grew up in Fresno Canyon fondly recalled a childhood spent working and playing on their family ranch. Swimming in the small reservoir which supplied the ranch complex was a favorite activity. ▲



ella Anne Hill

The Chihuahuan desert is not "cattle friendly." The families of Fresno Canyon raised Angora goats, whose wool was in demand during the years of WWI. ▲



CRAWFORD'S RANCH IN FRESNO CANYON - BY MARFA - LAJITA - TEXAS

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The Crawford family built this wax processing plant. The wax of the candelilla plant was in high demand for waterproofing military supplies during World War I. ▲



Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center
The University of Texas at Austin

These workers are delivering loads of desert grasses to the ranch for livestock feed. The grasslands of the Big Bend were depleted during the early 20th century and have not yet fully recovered. ▲

These structures were the first ranch buildings occupied by the Crawford family. Later, other adobe buildings were added to the complex and replaced some of the original wooden structures. ▼

AN *oasis* IN THE DESERT

In 1915, James L. Crawford and his son-in-law, J.J. Allen, purchased the Fresno Ranch. They brought their families here because they knew the area's natural springs would provide a reliable source of water. But, they were not the first to see the site's potential. For thousands of years, native peoples had used this area as a camp.

The Crawford and Smith families harnessed the nearby springs to create an oasis in the desert. The families and the ranch's hired hands were hard-working people and the Fresno Ranch grew to be a very large and prosperous operation—at least part of the time. The Crawford family planted citrus groves, grapes and fig trees. Both they and the Smiths planted large fruit and vegetable gardens.

MAKING A *living*

The Crawford and Smith families raised Angora goats. During years of good rain and while the demand for wool was high, goat ranching was profitable. Always resourceful, the families also turned to other local industries, making wax from the candelilla plant and mining cinnabar for mercury production, to make a living.

THE END OF AN *era*

Ranching in the Big Bend was possible through hard work and ingenuity, but it was not sustainable. Droughts, the Great Depression and the declining health of the landscape caused an end to most family ranches in the area by the middle of the 20th century.