

## Darge collection donated to Museum of the Big Bend

The Museum of the Big Bend received a generous contribution from Robert and Bonnie McKee as the couple donated their entire collection of Friedrich Ernst “Fred” Darge paintings, which will become part of the museum’s Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. McKee III Family Collection.

It will debut during the grand opening of the Emmett and Miriam McCoy Building in Alpine June 23-24.

While the McKees were aware of Fred Darge’s art, they were focused on early Taos/Santa Fe and early Texas art, following in the footsteps of Robert’s grandfather. Their daughter, Marjorie McKee Harris, was also aware of Darge due to her upbringing, explaining that while her friends and their families visited South Padre Island, her parents “dragged” her and her brother to art galleries and art auctions. A happy accident sparked their interest.

In the late 1990s, college student Marjorie worked in a Fredericksburg shop when a woman brought two paintings in from her car. The woman said her husband had bought them and she was asking \$50 each for them. Marjorie bought both on the spot even though she couldn’t afford them. She called her dad and explained they were good pieces. Robert assured her he would overnight her a check to cover it. The couple regifted them to her, but the paintings always remained in their home.

“Bucking Bronc” depicts a rider in a corral atop a horse determined to unseat him. With leather chaps flying, hat in the dirt and another horse and rider looking on, the painting captures a moment of a cowboy training a horse, a long and sometimes tedious process to keep a team available to run the ranch. The other acquisition, “Lone Rider,” is a cowboy on horseback riding in the mountains of the Big Bend. The couple began to track sales of other Darge artwork and in the meantime, they began learning more about the artist, eventually acquiring 10 of his paintings.

Few details are known about Darge’s life and the two purchases started a labor of love for the McKees. The information presented here is thanks to the McKees and their exhaustive research which led to the



publication of the free online book, *Fred Darge Paints the Big Bend and Beyond* at [freddarge.com](http://freddarge.com). The couple chose to publish online because they did not want to be limited in how many pieces of art they could include in the book.

Darge, a native of Germany, arrived in the U.S. from his home country on a merchant ship in Port Arthur, Texas, in 1923. The immigrant attended the Art Institute of Chicago and worked as a commercial artist and draftsman. He moved to San Antonio for two years where he held his first Texas exhibit at the Witte Museum, although he then moved to Dallas and lived there the rest of his life.

The Western lifestyle seemed to call after Darge, and he began his professional art career in the Big Bend, spending time on ranches throughout the area and paying for food, lodging, and hospitality with paintings of the ranches where he stayed and worked. Many times those works also depicted the family and friends. He captured the Big Bend on canvas before the state and national parks were established, when ranchers used the land to raise cattle, sheep and goats. Once the land was purchased, the fences, buildings, and barns came down, but the artist left historic painted records of what once was.

The McKees tracked some of Darge's life by locating and researching documents such as newspaper accounts of art shows and sales. For example, in the summer of 1936, his framed, miniature paintings of the Big Bend went on sale at Neiman Marcus, but no records exist of how many of the pieces sold. The Texas Centennial Exposition took place in 1936 to celebrate 100 years of Texas independence and Darge's "Open Air Gospel" was chosen to exhibit at the event in Dallas. Throughout the rest of the decade and the start of the 1940s, Darge continued to make annual trips to the Big Bend where families welcomed him back to their ranches so he could continue painting.

Darge joined the U.S. Army in 1942, completed basic training, and served in the South Pacific along with other German Americans during WWII. While it is unknown what arrangements he made for the artwork he left behind, there is documentation, including reviews, that some of it was exhibited. He was honorably discharged from active duty in March of 1944 and was employed as a technical illustrator, using his drafting skills to support the war effort until its end. Because of his service, he became a naturalized American citizen later that year with the legal name of Fred Ernest Darge. That summer, he exhibited paintings of the places he served at the Dallas Museum of Art.

After the war, wanderlust set in and Darge purchased a WWII surplus military ambulance that he retrofitted to use as a portable studio/camper combination. The sturdy vehicle allowed him to travel during the summer months and paint on location with his supplies at hand. He could cook and sleep wherever he ended up. In a Canyon, Texas, news article, he described how a gust of wind swept down the Palo Duro Canyon, upsetting his easel and scattering his paint and brushes.

He continued his western trek through New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona. He illustrated "Zeb Pike," a biography about Zebulon Pike, noted explorer for whom Pike's Peak was named, written by Dallas physician Howard Aronson. Darge spent time on the Navajo Nation, producing art of ordinary people living their traditions in daily life. He also painted Native Americans in Taos and turned his attention to some of the ornate Roman Catholic churches in northern New Mexico. He explored Arizona, lured by the red sandstone formations in the Sedona area. He also traveled east into Oklahoma, specifically to the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, to paint bison, elk and deer.

By 1948, growing recognition of his art was boosted when the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin hosted an exhibition of his work. He continued to exhibit with other artists, selected art for other exhibits as a juror, and served as a judge at shows. By the 1960s, Darge had worked as a professional artist for more than 30 years, producing untold numbers of canvases portraying a wide variety of Western themes. The artist supplemented his income by offering art lessons to small groups and individuals including former Texas State Senator and Judge Fred "Red" Harris who later exhibited in the Dallas area. Nothing is known about Darge's personal finances and whether he made a living as a professional artist, although he worked for pay at least part of the time over the years.

Darge passed away in the spring of 1978. While he never struck it rich with his art, he remained true to his vision of painting ordinary people who lived ordinary lives, but through his eyes, they became extraordinary, captured in a moment for all to enjoy.

Marjorie McKee Harris said that at first, she felt protective of her parents donating Darge's paintings to the Museum of the Big Bend, but has since decided that she had the opportunity to live with them and enjoy them, and it made sense for the paintings to find a permanent home in Alpine.

Fred Darge's legacy will enrich the lives of museum visitors and bring recognition to the artist and his work.

For more information, visit [www.museumofthebigbend.com](http://www.museumofthebigbend.com).

Image: *A Friendly Encounter*, c.1940s, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches, gifted by Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. McKee III.