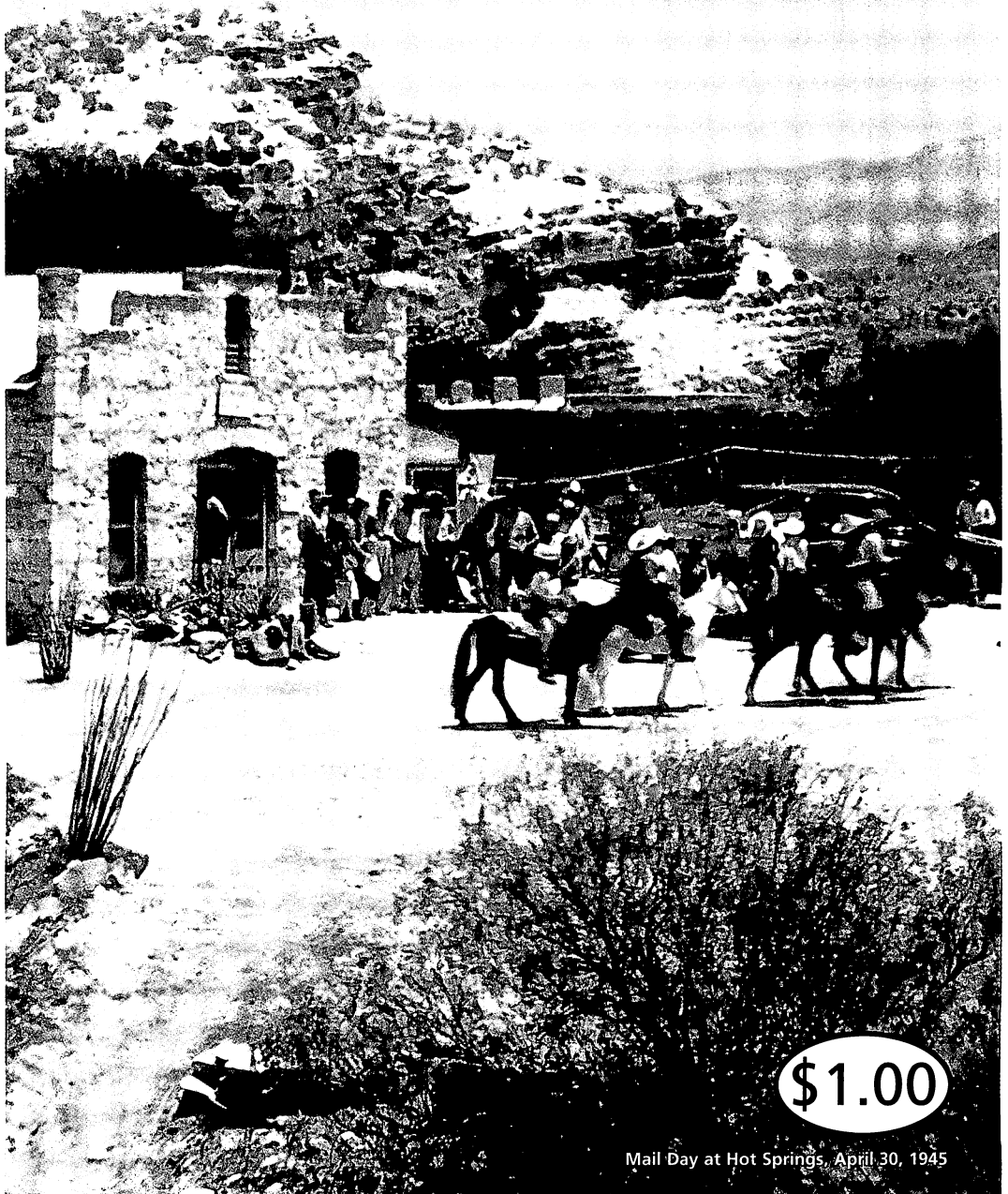


National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Bend National Park

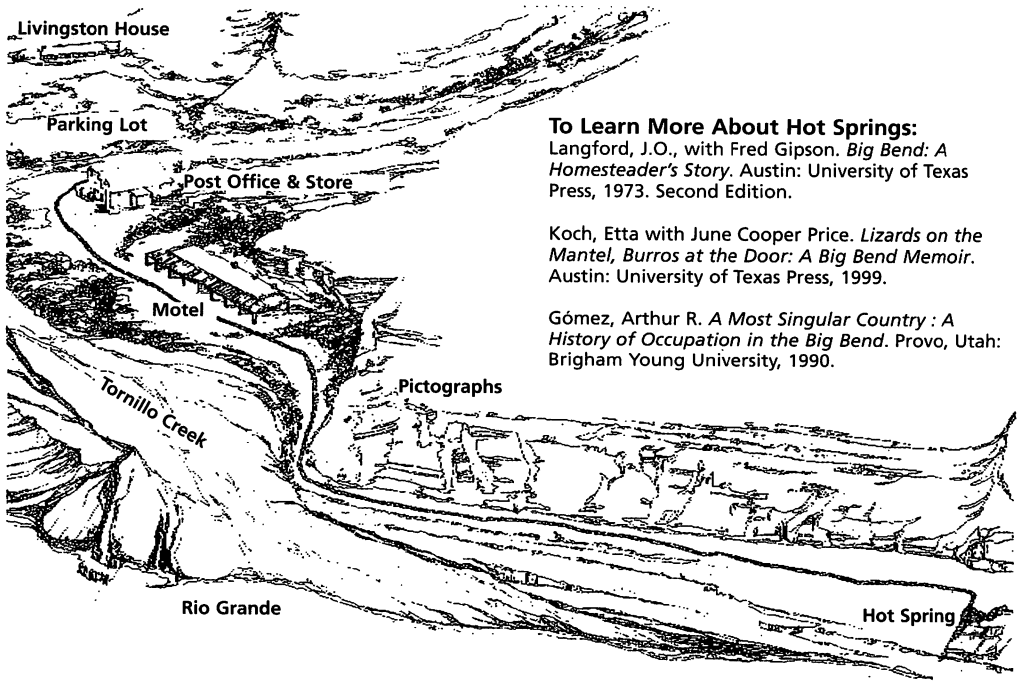


# Hot Springs Historic District



**\$1.00**

Mail Day at Hot Springs, April 30, 1945



### To Learn More About Hot Springs:

Langford, J.O., with Fred Gipson. *Big Bend: A Homesteader's Story*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973. Second Edition.

Koch, Etta with June Cooper Price. *Lizards on the Mantel, Burros at the Door: A Big Bend Memoir*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Gómez, Arthur R. *A Most Singular Country: A History of Occupation in the Big Bend*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1990.

## The Hot Springs Area

### Livingston House

Alpine, Texas, undertaker Charles Livingston built his house overlooking the banks of Tornillo Creek in the late 1920s or early 1930s. The house is of typical construction using native rock and local materials and served as a temporary residence during the early days of the park.

### Post Office/Store and Motel

Langford believed in the healing powers of the water and he returned in 1927 to continue his dream. He built the Hot Springs Store and Post Office to serve as a local gathering place and community focal point. His motor court encouraged "tourists" to sample the healing waters of the Hot Spring spa or fish for large catfish.

### Pictograph and Midden area

American Indians used the hot springs area as a homestead well before Langford. The steep rocky cliffs provided shelter and canvas for its inhabitants—native rock art pictographs and petroglyphs adorn the walls.

### Tornillo Creek

Tornillo Creek is a major drainage for the eastern portion of Big Bend. Large drainage areas provide easy travel routes with access to water and Tornillo Creek is no exception; the eastern arm of the Comanche Trail follows the drainage for 45 miles to its junction with the Rio Grande.

### Rio Grande

Wild desert rivers are a rarity; roughly 10% of the Rio Grande's 2,000 mile length is considered wild and scenic and lies within Big Bend's jurisdiction. While considered dry from El Paso to Presidio, the Rio Grande in Big Bend is replenished by Mexico's Rio Conchos.

### Hot Spring

Hot spring water is considered old water, fossil water, ancient and irreplaceable. Heated by geothermal processes and emerging at 105° F., the water carries dissolved mineral salts reputed to have healing powers. The therapeutic value of heat has long been touted as a remedy of both body and soul.



J. O. Langford standing next to the bath house, circa 1930.

## Hot Springs Historic District

Water's invitation in an arid land is temporary and hard to refuse. It welcomes us as guests, not as permanent residents. You may see abundant water today or you may encounter a small drying trickle. Like J.O Langford's story, the Hot Springs tells a tale of hope and impermanence—follow the trail to experience both.

### Trail Basics

From the trailhead, the hot spring is a half-mile round trip. A one-mile loop trail continues from the hot spring and loops around on the bluff above the Rio Grande, returning to the trailhead area.

### Trail Tips

A three-mile (one way) trail connects the Hot Springs area to Rio Grande Village. This hike provides excellent views of the Sierra del Carmen, the Rio Grande, and Hot Springs Canyon.

### Hike Safely

- Wear hiking boots with good traction.
- Carry plenty of water; drink a gallon a day.
- Wide-brimmed hats or sunscreen are necessary precautions against the desert sun.
- It is illegal to purchase items from vendors operating on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

### Bathing/Swimming at the Hot Spring

Langford's impressive bathhouse is long gone—today the spring is contained by the foundation remains of the bathhouse, on the north bank of the Rio Grande.

- When the Rio Grande rises above three feet in depth, river water flows into the spring, often submerging it. Following flooding, the spring may be covered in mud or debris and requires some digging to form a suitable space for bathing.
- Be respectful of others—soak only and use no soaps or oils.
- Be aware that adjacent river currents can be unpredictable.
- Swimming is not recommended.
- Please help to keep the area clean by picking up trash.
- Alcoholic beverages and glass containers are prohibited.

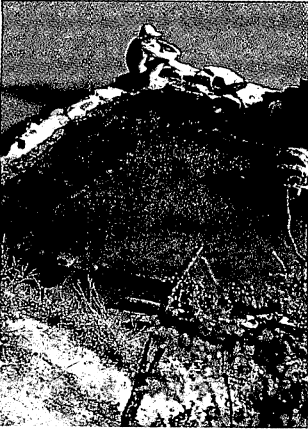
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*The Del Carmen Mountains offered an untiring view of moods that made those vistas a magic ring of enchantment. The escarpment appeared at times like a pink layer cake, and at sundown became a red-hot stove. With night closing in, it echoed the full gray ashes of a dying fire.*

- Etta Koch, describing sunset from Hot Springs.

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# All Desert Trails Lead to Water



Seen from the bluff above the hot spring, a visitor views the Rio Grande from the bath house foundation.

*Water has always been the key to survival, especially in the harsh arid climate of the Chihuahuan Desert. This well-worn path has welcomed countless visitors over countless generations seeking health, hope, or hospitality in the water-rich area known as Hot Springs.*

*This unique confluence of an intermittent fresh water stream, a major river, and hot springs has attracted man for centuries.*

Water's inherent attraction is universal and controlling; it cools, refreshes, nurtures, and soothes aching bones and tired muscles. Few places in Big Bend allow the visitor to contrast a harsh, often unfriendly landscape with the calming restful effects of running water. To your right, the thorny scrub and jagged rock are softened by Tornillo Creek, whose waters have nourished American Indians, explorers, homesteaders, and today's visitors. Just downstream Tornillo's water reluctantly enters the Rio Grande to be carried on its 812 mile journey to the Gulf of Mexico. The once mighty Rio Grande struggles to maintain its dignity after years of abuse and over-use. The river and stream juncture seem to point downriver to the source of the main attraction—the ancient, healing waters of the hot spring.

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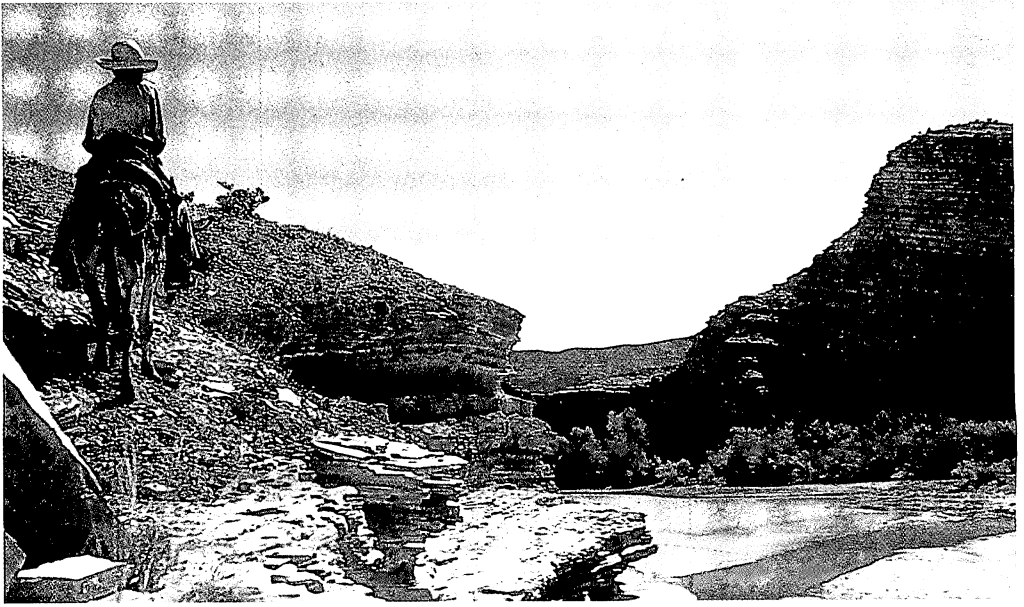
*“Nothing down there but rattlesnakes and bandits,” he said.*

*“And it's too far away from anywhere for a sick man to feel like going there to get cured. That damned country promises more and gives less than any place I ever saw.”*

-The Hot Springs area as described to J. O. Langford in 1909. Langford purchased the property, including the spring, sight unseen.

Your visit will be brief but your impact could remain long after you leave. Due to man's impact, these waters are no longer clean or pristine—trash and waste pollute, soaps and tanning oils taint. Please be respectful of the land and waterscape. While the river looks like a tempting spot to cool off in the heat of summer, swimming is discouraged and the shallow water is deceptive and often dangerous.

While J.O Langford is largely considered to be the first modern developer of the Hot Springs, the area had been a focal point for centuries prior to his arrival. The story of this early settler is well documented in *“Big Bend: A Homesteader's Story.”* You will see Langford's structures still standing today—the post office/store and the motor court built in 1927—testament to a foundation built on survival, cooperation, and faith in water.



**Above:** Rider along Tornillo Creek, looking toward Rio Grande, 1930s.

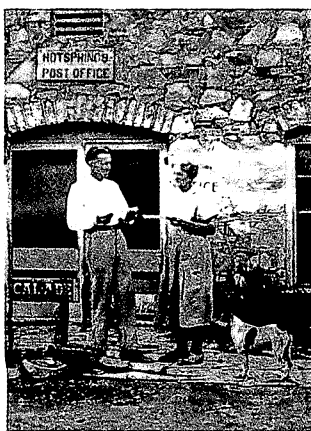
**Upper Right:** Tourists at the confluence of Tornillo Creek and the Rio Grande, 1930s. Erosion reshapes this area with every flood.

**Lower Right:** Cars in front of the motor court, 1930s.



## The People of Hot Springs

*An area is often defined by its people or by a dominant landform. While referred to as El Despoblado, the uninhabited land, by the Spanish, Big Bend hid its water in remote springs, inaccessible canyons, and under hard rocky soils, making access and life difficult.*



Above: J.O. and Bess Langford in front of the post office & store, 1929.

Early hot springs residents belied the notion of an inhospitable region with determination, ingenuity, and toughness. A transient and nomadic life style was required to meet the demands of a harsh life. Whether driven by innate survival instincts or hope for a better future, early inhabitants were drawn to the water by following drainages, game trails, and the river edge searching for life's necessities. Their signs of occupation are apparent. These American Indians lived harmoniously and in cooperation with nature in the shadow of the adjacent limestone cliffs leaving rock art and etchings, midden areas, and bedrock mortars. These are signs of a rich life indicating the area, at times, offered all things needed for survival. As modern day hot tubs reflect a life of leisure, Indians chipped a tub at the hot springs to take advantage of the heated water. The chipped tub is gone today, like its ancient bather, leaving only a brief memory along the trail. Please respect this and all archeological sites you may encounter.

Ownership is fleeting in the desert—having title is no guarantee that survival needs will be met—being able to move from one water-rich area to another only increased man's chances for survival. While the hunter-gatherers survived by moving seasonally from one place to another, trading old hunting grounds for new, other cultures preferred to eke out a living in one spot, trading transience for a sedentary lifestyle. Mexican settlements such as San Vicente (located several miles up river) were established close to presidios. These military outposts were strategically located in areas where water and other resources were readily available. The presence of these forts and the availability of vital resources encouraged others to homestead the land along the river. These early tenants have been largely ignored historically and little is known about them. The number of Hot Springs area habitants has never been large and continuous occupation has been relatively

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*There was real amistad and understanding. When the people across the river needed help, they came. And they helped us, believe me.*

- Lovie Langford Whitaker,  
J.O. Langford's daughter,  
describing her sense of the  
cross-border community.



**Above:** Pictographs on the cliffs are reminders of the prehistoric residents of the Big Bend region.

**Bottom Left:** Resident of San Vicente making tortillas, 1930s.

**Bottom Right:** Children along the ruins of the Presidio de San Vicente, 1930s.

recent (the Mexican village of Boquillas was established in 1898). Hard work and cooperation were required for success; Langford's early enterprises would not have been possible without the help and assistance of the Cleofas Natividad family. This early example of community reliance set the standard for later residents. The feeling between people along both sides of the river was one of *amistad* (friendship) and goodwill.

Though hampered by closure of the border, the cooperative tradition continues today. As an example, Big Bend National Park's wildland fire crew is composed largely of firefighters from the villages of Boquillas, San Vicente, and Santa Elena. Los Diablos have fought fire all over the United States and participated in storm rescue and cleanup efforts.



## Where water floweth forth



**Above, Top to Bottom: Going, Going, Gone! The Hot Springs Bathhouse was totally submerged during flooding in October of 1932. Today only the foundation remains of the structure.**

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*Whether or not the springs were actually the cure-all claimed, it is a fact that a good soak in the hot water made a new man of you, or woman, as the case may be. As for drinking from the tin cup chained to the exterior wall of the bathhouse—well, if that drink with its mineral taste and liquid heat didn't accomplish some good for anyone who drank it, the illusion was there.*

- Etta Koch

*Water is the attraction. If flowing water soothes and spring water refreshes, then hot flowing spring water evokes a mystical, often alluring appeal. For some, the appeal will be the thermal and primal character of the water or perhaps the healing qualities, and for others, it is merely a curiosity.*

Langford's two-story bath house was built over the largest of several small hot springs found along this section of the Rio Grande. Today the foundation is all that remains of the main structure. The original bathhouse was built of native rock and jutted into the river channel; its thick walls were angled to cut into the water flow during heavy floods. The idea was sound but water power is overwhelming; floods continue to rearrange the remaining foundation. The spring is submerged when the river flow is above three feet.

Research indicates that the hot spring water is emerging from a pocket of "fossil water," deposited at least 20,000 years ago. Like fossil fuel, the ancient water is not being replaced and may one day become extinct. The temperature is 105° throughout the year. The flow rate in 1936 was claimed as an amazing 250,000 gallons a day! More recent measurements show a slight decrease in flow. The water is heated geothermically deep in the earth's crust. The heated water picks up minerals during its rocky journey to the surface. Calcium carbonate, calcium sulfate, sodium sulfate, and sodium chloride are all salts derived from the rocks—the ancient waters transporting ancient minerals deposited millions of years ago. Seeking the waters in times past meant soaking in mineral waters for your health—trying to find the cure for what ails you. These waters have claimed to cure everything from asthma to warts.

You are welcome to "seek the waters" for health, pleasure, or curiosity. Be respectful of others—soak only and use no soaps or oils. Be aware that adjacent river currents can be unpredictable. Swimming is not recommended. Please help to keep the area clean by picking up trash. Alcoholic beverages and glass containers are prohibited. All water is precious in Big Bend—respect and enjoy.





**Above:** Flooding of the Rio Grande can submerge or cover the spring on occasion.

**Upper Right:** Fishermen and their impressive catch, 1930s. Don't expect to snare a catfish this size in modern times.

**Lower Right:** Modern visitors can still enjoy a soak in the spring.



## • Water Analysis •

(By New Mexico A. & M. College

Tot. Mineral Matter (@ 150°C)	93.28
Tot. Mineral Matter (@ 180°C)	88.70
Silica (SiO <sub>2</sub> )	2.73
Iron & Aluminum Oxides (R <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> )	.28
Calcium Carbonate (CaCO <sub>3</sub> )	22.65
Calcium Sulphate (CaSO <sub>4</sub> )	15.88
Magnesium Sulphate (MgSO <sub>4</sub> )	18.75
Sodium Sulphate (Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> )	16.32
Sodium Chloride (NaCl)	11.58

Mineral analysis of the Hot Springs water, as printed in a 1934 advertisement for the resort.



The National Park Service was established on August 25, 1916. . . *"to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife. . . and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."*

Authorized by congress in 1935, and established in June 1944, Big Bend National Park preserves the most representative example of the Chihuahuan Desert ecosystem in the United States.

As conservation educators, the park's Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services provides guided walks, talks, evening slide programs, workshops, and other educational activities as well as written materials such as this trail guide.



The Big Bend Natural History Association, established in 1956 as a private, non-profit organization, champions the mission of the National Park Service in facilitating popular interpretation of the scenic, scientific, and historic values of Big Bend and encourages research related to those values. The Association conducts seminars and publishes, prints, or otherwise provides books, maps, and interpretive materials on the Big Bend region. Proceeds fund exhibits, films, interpretive programs, seminars, museum activities, and research.

Written by Park Ranger Rob Dean  
Designed by Park Ranger Eric Leonard  
Produced by the Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services.  
September, 2010

## *The Mecca of the Health Seeker*

WHY THEY COME TO HOT SPRINGS, TEXAS, BY THE THOUSANDS—  
Because they can regain their health by drinking and bathing in this wonderful water.

Sufferers from asthma, kidney diseases, dropsy, jaundice, pellagra, eczema, rheumatism in all its forms, all kinds of stomach troubles, including ulcer, gastritis, etc., tobacco poisoning, influenza, boils, skin diseases. Some forms of disease of the genito-urinary organs, both acute and chronic—have left their troubles here and gone home rejoicing. Why not you?

Hot Springs are located 120 miles southeast of Alpine in Brewster County and 85 miles south of Marathon in the picturesque Big Bend, and is easily accessible over good roads via Marathon.

A store, postoffice and filling station are maintained for the convenience of guests. Light housekeeping rooms, furnished, except linens, blankets and pillows, rent at \$1 per day; \$6 per week; baths 25¢ each; patients with contagious diseases, 50¢ a bath; room, board and baths \$3 per day. Cafe and cold drinks, or you can, free of charge, camp outdoors under the shade of the trees, and fish in the waters of the Rio Grande. The clear, cold waters of Tornillo Creek flow through the camp grounds.

- 1933 Advertisement for the Langford Resort



**National Park Service**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**



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**Big Bend National Park**  
PO Box 129  
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<http://www.nps.gov/bibe/>

**Big Bend Natural History Association**  
PO Box 196  
Big Bend National Park, TX 79834  
<http://www.bigbendbookstore.org/>