

“... *a sentimental journey*”

## PROLOGUE

It began as a sentimental journey to revisit once-familiar sites and recollect those still-graphic images of the past. But this was not to be; man and time had wrought their changes. The people, the voices, the friendships—all the things that enrich and magnify the experiences of youth—had long since disappeared. Only the land, the river, and the memories remained.

And as most such journeys end, so did this, with a feeling of remorse for old friends once known and good times almost forgotten. But to attempt to recapture and relive the past one first has to search for those times and experiences that decades have thoughtlessly sealed off from the present. And thus the past, sometimes seeming so near, is relegated forever to wishes, to dreams, and to history.

And so it was when Wilfred Dudley Smithers, photographer, journalist, and historian, asked his old friend and colleague, J. O. Casparis, bush pilot and aerial eagle hunter, to fly him from Alpine to the Big Bend country that morning in 1962. Smithers had first witnessed the raw, rugged beauty of that region in 1916 as a United States cavalryman. He chose to remain; that harsh, unyielding environment placed an indelible stamp on his subsequent work. Readers were intrigued with his accounts of primitive life along the Rio Grande, and his photographic renderings of the people, places, and events captured a disappearing way of life on one of America's last frontiers. This was his country and he wanted to see it again. The past still seemed so near.

As Casparis climbed his 1941 Aeronca Chief monoplane to the cruising altitude, the two old friends watched familiar landmarks slip slowly by—Cathedral Mountain, Santiago Peak, and Nine Mile Mesa. Following a southward course toward Mariscal Canyon, the point where the Rio Grande carves its deepest penetration into Mexico, the old

eagle hunter guided his vintage aircraft around the eastern perimeter of the Chisos Mountains. As they passed over Dugout Wells, Smithers began looking for his first photographic checkpoint, the abandoned ruins at Glenn Springs, site of the tragic 1916 Mexican bandit raid.

The village site came into view, then slowly disappeared as they circled south of the Chisos range and began following the Rio Grande on a northwestward course toward Santa Elena Canyon. Approaching the point where Smoky Creek intersects the great river, Smithers pointed ahead and Casparis gently banked the Aeronca to the left, affording him an unobstructed view of the panorama below. Smithers raised his camera, snapped the shutter, and captured on film the fading site of his early Big Bend adventures—crumbling ruins of the Elmo Johnson ranch house and trading post, the dim depression that was once his dugout darkroom, and, stretching beyond, the abandoned airfield, one of the most remote and unique installations in the annals of the United States Army Air Corps.

This is where it had all begun over three decades before. Squadrons of the Air Corps' most advanced combat airplanes once lined the dim earthen runways, now overgrown with mesquite, greasewood, and wild tobacco plants. And to the west, on a high bluff overlooking the Rio Grande, stood the crumbling remains of the radio station. From this remote transmitter the United States Army intelligence once received daily dispatches on conditions along the Mexican border.

As Casparis circled the ruins, Smithers gazed down on the grim remains, reminders of a rich lifestyle he had once known with Elmo and Ada Johnson. Smithers had lived with these modern pioneer ranchers, traders, and humanitarians who played host to both the famous and infamous. Impoverished goat herders from across the Rio Grande, as well as people of wealth and eminence enjoyed the Johnson's hospitality. Bandits and lawmen, authors and scholars, scientists and government officials, cavalry soldiers and Air Corps pilots—all had been visitors at the Johnson ranch. Three great pillars of melting adobe, still visible on the west side of the dwelling site, marked the location of the broad patio that overlooked the Rio Grande. In this romantic setting famous generals disregarded rank and relaxed casually with lieutenants, sergeants, corporals, and privates. And all stayed for dinner to enjoy Ada Johnson's good home cooking. "Mrs. Johnson fed generals and privates at the same table," Smithers later recalled (interview, August 27, 1975).

Between the main house and the river below spread the dry barren floodplain where Johnson and his Mexican neighbors cultivated irrigated fields of fruits and vegetables. Smithers had known them all.

Johnson was his friend, as were the Mexicans who worked the fields. Smithers spoke their language, knew their names, and shared their folk secrets as did few outside their native culture.

After circling the area a few minutes, Smithers was ready to return to Alpine. The journey was nearly complete; scenes of three decades past had been revisited. And while the tangible evidence of an earlier lifestyle was fast disappearing, the memories lingered—exciting years when the Big Bend area was still a remote frontier, when political upheaval in Mexico spread fear among the Rio Grande settlements, and when military aviation, still in its teenage years, joined the United States Cavalry to give the region its first permanent security. But memories, like the fading panorama Smithers watched from his aerial vantage point, were becoming distant blurs. The past Smithers remembered bore scant resemblance to the present. There was no need to remain; the mission was complete. His two-sentence summation is revealing in its brevity: “We flew to Johnson’s but did not land. I saw all I wanted from the air.”





