



The United States

GEOGRAPHY

The Expanse of Texas

Giant, first published in 1952, is among the most widely read novels about Texas and one of the best-known works of writer Edna Ferber (1887–1968). In this excerpt, Texas cattleman Jordan “Bick” Benedict is returning to his West Texas home accompanied by his Yankee bride Leslie Lynnton Benedict, who has never before been in Texas.

“You can see miles,” she said. “Miles and miles and miles!” She had her flushed face at the . . . window. . . . “I can’t help it. Geography always excites me when it’s new places, and I love trains and being married to you, and seeing Texas. When your grandfather came here it was wilderness really, wasn’t it? Imagine! What courage!”

“They were great old boys. Tough.” . . .

As far as her eyes could see she beheld the American desert land which once had waved knee-high with lush grasses. She had never seen the great open plains and the prairies. It was endless, it was another world, bare vast menacing to her Eastern eyes. Later she was to know the brilliant blurred pattern of the spring flowers, she was to look for the first yellow blossoms of the retama against the sky, the wild cherry and the heavy cream white of the Spanish dagger flower like vast camellias. . . .

It was late afternoon when their train arrived at Vientecito. “Here we are!” he said and peered out through the window to scan the platform and the vehicles beyond in the swirling dust.

“What’s it mean? How do you pronounce it?”

“Vientecito? Means gentle breeze. We call it Viento for short. The wind blows all the time, nearly.” . . .

He pointed at some object. “There we are. But who’s that!” A huge Packard. In the driver’s seat was a stocky young Mexican with powerful shoulders. About twenty, Leslie thought. . . . There was no one else in the car. There was no one to meet them. . . . “Out!” barked Bick. The boy paused, turned. Bick gave him the baggage checks. In Spanish he said, “You will wait here. The pickup will be sent.” . . .

“Leslie! Get into the car, please, We’re leaving.” . . . She looked about her as she came—at the railway station so Spanish with its Romanesque towers, its slim pillars and useless grillwork. The sun burned like a stab-wound, the hot unceasing wind gave no relief. . . . No green anywhere other than the grey-green of the cactus, spiked and stark. Dust dust dust, stinging in the wind. Nothing followed the look or pattern of the life she had left behind her. . . .

With a neck-cracking jerk the car leaped away. Never a timorous [easily frightened] woman their speed now seemed to her to be maniacal He

was silent, his face set and stern. Well, she knew that when men looked like that you pretended not to notice and pretty soon they forgot all about it.

“How flat it is! And big. And the horizon is—well, there just isn’t any it’s so far away. I thought there would be lots of cows. I don’t see any.”

“Cows!” he said in a tone of utter rage.

She was, after all, still one of the tart-tongued Lynnton girls. “I don’t see why you’re so put out because that boy came instead of someone else. Or the family. After all, it’s so far from the railroad.”

“Far!” In that same furious tone. “It’s only ninety miles.”

She glanced at the speedometer. It pointed to eighty-five. Well, no wonder! At this rate they’d be home in an hour or so. Home. For an engulfing [overwhelming] moment she had a monstrous feeling of being alone with a strange man in an unknown world—a world of dust and desert and heat and glare and some indefinable thing she never before had experienced. . . .

Against the brassy sky there rose like a mirage a vast edifice [structure] all towers and domes and balconies and porticoes and iron fretwork. . . .

“What’s that! Is it—are we near the ranch, Jordan?”

“We’ve been on it the last eighty miles, practically ever since we got outside Viento. That’s Reata. That’s home.”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. From this passage, how would you describe the geography and economy of West Texas?

2. What clues does Ferber provide about Texans’ understanding of distance? How do you think the state’s size affects this perception?

Activity

The reading describes only one part of this large and geographically diverse state. Use library and other resources to identify, locate, and describe the four major geographic regions of Texas. Prepare a short report on your findings.