The Last Refuge

It's no wonder the brother of the Unabomber suspect came to the desert near Terlingua to disappear; for years renegades and recluses have found their way to this forgotten corner of Texas.

Robert Draper

June 1996

THE CABIN, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN these parts, is out in the middle of nowhere. Getting there requires so many crisscrosses on so many primitive unmapped roads that the visitor's expectations are scarcely prepared for the meager payoff. Situated on a flat expanse of cactus, greasewood, and curiously colored rocks, the two-room wood cabin resembles a slightly oversized pink outhouse. Aside from the amateurish mural of a coyote and an owl painted on the door, the dwelling is profoundly featureless. The sheer act of building it way out in the desert must have been a labor of love, which is itself odd, since its setting offers no coveted overlook and the mountains of Big Bend National Park are distant black monoliths off to the east. The nearest human neighbor is five miles away; until reporters found out about the cabin in mid-April, its likeliest visitors were coyotes, mule deer, rattlesnakes, and above all, the desert dust and the murderous West Texas heat.

The owner of the cabin, a Schenectady, New York, resident named David Kaczynski, was not the kind to appreciate the breakneck speed with which the national news media discovered his retreat on the Terlingua Ranch. David did not equip his cabin with a telephone or a television; in a sense, he had moved here in the early eighties to hide out from all that. His being here in the desert bespoke an anguished quarrel with the civilized world, which, it now appears, a Kaczynski could resolve one way or quite another. There is no crime in being the kind of loner that David Kaczynski was. He was a loner who could love. He loved nature, so much so that he slept in a hand-dug hole for a couple of years while building his cabin, that he might remain close to the desert. He loved Linda Patrik, the woman whose initials he wrote with his own in the cabin's concrete foundation—loved her so much, in fact, that in 1990 he moved to Schenectady to be her husband, thereafter returning to the desert only in the winter. And David very much loved his older brother, Ted, who also lived in a remote cabin, some 1,400 miles north of the Terlingua area, near Lincoln, Montana. So much did he love Ted that when he began to suspect that his big brother was the infamous Unabomber—suspected, that is to say, that Ted had spent the past eighteen years sending out letter bombs that had killed 3 people and injured another 23—David agonized for at least four months until his love for humanity prevailed. An intermediary contacted the FBI this past January, and two months later federal agents arrested Ted. A search of the Montana cabin yielded mounds of damning evidence but also a few oddities—among them a stack of letters written to Ted by a laborer at the Terlingua Ranch named Juan Sánchez Arreola, who comes from the border town of Ojinaga, Mexico. Intrepid reporters made haste to Ojinaga and located Sánchez, who explained that he and the suspected Unabomber had been pen pals since 1988 at the suggestion of a man who had befriended Sánchez: David Kaczynski, brother, cabin builder, hole digger, Terlingua desert rat.

David is now gone, but the Chihuahuan desert remains full of kindred spirits. I drove there recently, seeking out those who best understand the call of the wild that beckoned both brothers from the modern world. The hermits I encountered are scattered throughout the desert, dozens of miles in every direction—as far north as the upper boundaries of the Terlingua Ranch (the 200,000-acre rough-and-tumble development south of Alpine populated by some 4,900 landowners) and as far south as Redford. But what holds them together as an unstructured but otherwise meaningful community is the capital of this misfit mecca, the ghost town of Terlingua itself. Once a hotbed of quicksilver mining until carpetbagging profiteers gave up the ghost in 1942, the rubble-strewn village stoops drowsily upon a couple of square miles just to the north of Ranch Road 170, the Big Bend thoroughfare to Mexico. David Kaczynski was no stranger to the town, having spent much of the early eighties house-sitting in the vicinity. More to the point, however, the Terlingua area is where even a bitter recluse like Ted Kaczynski might have had a shot at contentment.

Terlingua is the state's last outpost for outcasts, for those maligned American loners who fashion their own crude American dream in the anonymity of the desert. As one longtime Terlinguan, Paul Wiggins, puts it, "A lot of who and what we are can't be explained by American mores. We're just a neglected corner of America, outside of its infrastructure." Here in Terlingua Country, less is more: A one-room cabin lacking water and electricity fits right in, and in a region where census takers have discovered people living in cars, caves, and shacks made of hay or automobile tires, no one would think twice about a fellow who sleeps in a hole. The only unwelcome guest is progress, though its trespasses are becoming more noticeable—and when mention is made of this reality, you can hear in the angry rhetoric of the Terlinguans echoes of the resentment that ticked within the Unabomber.

But no one in Terlingua builds bombs or pens 35,000-word polemics decrying the Industrial Revolution. I would have thought differently ten years ago, when I first got a glimpse of the leathery faces, snarled hair, and raggedy clothes of the figures who perched themselves on the porches of the Terlingua Trading Company and the Study Butte Store. They looked incalculable to a yuppie tourist passing through, though the very fact of their existence in the West Texas wasteland seemed om-inous. As my appreciation for the desert's brutal majesty grew, my fear of its inhabitants diminished, but only so much. The questions kept coming back: Why would people choose to live here? And what would happen to them if they did?

These are the riddles of the brothers Kaczynski. The answers, if they can be found anywhere, lie in the weird communal fabric of Terlingua, where solitude is not solitary and the shared struggle for survival achieves the motley grace of a desert parade.

COLLIE RYAN SITS OUTSIDE HER SCHOOL bus home, carefully painting a scene of the Rio Grande on the face of a hubcap. I apologize for having ignored the No Trespassing sign on the dirt path that leads to her refuge. With a reassuring smile, she says, "People know whether or not that sign applies to them."

She is sun-scarred but blessed with sharp features and the unmistakable aura of self-possession. Her gray hair and sturdy calves beneath her denim skirt give conflicting signals about her years, but I would no sooner ask a mountain its age. The porch where Collie paints is shaded by a well-constructed overhang consisting of sotol and river cane. It leads to an elegant desert garden of cactus and flagstone, with a plot of soil reserved for cabbage and mint. Behind the rust-painted school bus, a series of paved steps leads fifty yards to a perch over the Rio Grande, where one of the locals, a Vietnam vet and concrete artist named Spider, is fishing for carp.

To the outside world, the ghost town of Terlingua is that scruffy embodiment of Lone Star bravado hailed in Jerry Jeff Walker's *¡Viva Terlingua!* and represented in the town's annual chili festivals. But no Terlinguan defines the community strictly by its city limits—and Collie Ryan, an indispensable element, is one of the reasons why. When she gave her last $40 to a towing service eight years ago and had her bus hauled a couple of miles from Lajitas, the Terlingua community simply extended itself another twelve miles to include her. When asked exactly what brought her here from Marin County, in Northern California, Collie laughs a little and says, "Well, that's a loooonnng story." I get the picture. She's here now, and no one seems to remember when she wasn't.

A number of Terlinguans live in buses, and Collie seems astonished when I tell her I've never been in such a dwelling. The interior of her bus is surprisingly spacious, no more cramped than a dorm room. Why not live here? There's plenty of daylight, a kerosene lantern for night reading, a grill on the patio, fresh creek water she hauls from the nearby mule ranch owned by David Sleeper. Collie Ryan's built-from-scratch desert sanctuary seems like a mirage—"A piece of artwork I can live in," as she puts it—but it is hard earned and precariously maintained. The riverside heat is of the most savage kind, and "what dust you don't pave, you eat," she observes. The men in her life have come and gone. A friend has seen her show up in town "in a lonely blue funk, bitter about America."

But Collie has her hubcaps—or, as she prefers, "my mandalas," referring to the Hindu meditative "wheel of life." They appear on walls all over the Terlingua area, brightly colored and meticulously detailed motifs that express the circular core on which, says Collie, all life is based. "The circle is everywhere—it's the key to everything," she says. "If you as a writer understand the mandala of your story, you'll understand the spring, summer, fall, and winter. We talk with great passion about the mounting complexities, but the facts ain't changed. If you learn the mandala, you'll know how to succeed. Someday I'll run into someone who does mandalas on computers. There is such a person," she murmurs, "somewhere between California and Arizona. But," she adds wistfully, "I lost contact with him."

Mandalas on computers? Collie sees a wheel in everything, except, perhaps, Ted Kaczynski, a lone arrow shot in a futile violent arc. "Now I suppose they'll kill him," she says with a grimace. "They will be releasing into the astroplane a brilliant destructive astrospark that will lodge itself into the cranium of some drunken dolt. That's what happens with the death penalty."

Collie returns to the hubcap, which I pay her $75 for. She accepts the money with grace. "This is the way it always happens," she tells me. "I really sell just by luck. It's magic. Like you coming by today."

And that is my first but by no means last glimpse of Terlingua's screwball magic.

BY MIDAFTERNOON THE PORCH BENCH OF the Terlingua Trading Company is occupied by the usual loiterers. Mike, a sinewy bongo player with Ray-Bans and sandals, is cutting a local fellow's matted hair. Betty, who works at Terlingua-based Far Flung Adventures, smirks at me from underneath her gimme cap. (She dropped out of *Texas Monthly* a dozen years ago; I'm not there yet.) Spider is nursing a Budweiser and bragging about the concrete gargoyle he crafted this morning. Big Al, a prodigiously gutted retired merchant seaman with a short black ponytail and a tufted white beard, tends lovingly to the three dusty canines on the porch. When people call out, "How's it goin', Big Al?" he convincingly booms, "Always great. Always great." I'm stuck with the embarrassing memory of having once been afraid of Big Al, before I knew about his gentle way with animals and the miniature desert golf course he constructed out by his trailer.

Whole afternoons pass this way in Terlingua. Every couple of minutes a car sputters by—as opposed to fifteen years ago, I'm often told, when two or three hours would pass without the sighting of a vehicle. As recently as 1970, not a soul lived in the ghost town. Five years later, there were 6 residents; by 1980, maybe 50. Today the population estimates run in the 150 to 250 neighborhood. (With all the drifters, an exact count is impossible.) Among the recent signs that the Apocalypse is upon Terlingua: A high school and a bank are being built; fiber optic telephone lines are ready for installation; and one of the gas stations in Study Butte, four miles east of the ghost town, now has an automated-teller machine. Elsewhere in West Texas, the natives are praying for rain, but in Terlingua I've heard people applaud the four-year drought. "It's keeping the growth at bay," one of the locals told me with a perfectly straight face.

The ghost town suffers for a perfect villain. Area rancher Rex Ivey, who bought the whole town with his son Bill in the eighties, drives around the region dispensing to dogs slabs of meat from a tray in the trunk of his car. Forty-year-old Bill pays the ghost town's entire water bill and has thus far resisted the capitalist impulse to transform his empire into a theme park. The trendmongers don't last long here. As one Terlinguan dryly observes, "We've all had a good laugh at the New Agers who come here with their crystals and leave with a whopping sunburn." Terlingua's version of a yuppie is Mimi Webb-Miller, the late John Tower's niece and a casting director for prime-time national television commercials, whose newly built faux ruin in the ghost town would not look out of place in Santa Fe. Mimi spent most of the previous decade as legendary Ojinaga drug lord Pablo Acosta's publicist and confidante. Her Toyota 4-Runner looks a little bit out of place among the town's shabby buses and pickups, but she does one hell of a job plowing it across the Rio Grande into Mexico. "Mimi," chuckles one longtime Terlinguan, "is a master of versatility." She can stay.

"There's gonna be more humans—it's a reality and I'm resigned to it," says Paul Wiggins as he sits in the workshop where he makes belts, six miles north of the ghost town. "I'm sure there were Indians living peacefully in the Chisos who looked down one day and said, 'Oh, shit, here come the Comanches.' I don't like whiners. There's still a kind of halo around Terlingua. I was driving with my two boys the other night, and you could see all these campfires in the distance. I told my sons, 'Take note: What you're seeing all around you is pretty unique.'"

According to Paul, "The grace of Terlingua is that in this whole soup no one is dominant." But particular respect is reserved for a few—among them Collie and Paul, who share a survivor's pride that is refreshingly devoid of sanctimony. Like the hubcap artist, Paul is an American original, which cuts both ways: His place in a cookie-cutter world is not so easily found. With a sharp chin and nose, skinny legs tucked into black stretch pants, and a voice that seems never far from laughter, Paul Wiggins could be a leprechaun exiled to the desert. He grew up in Chicago, where the sixties counterculture got him only so far. "The hippies protested against the war and did drugs, neither of which I did very effectively," he says. "But the third thing they did, which I did find attractive, was get back to the land."

Before doing so, he worked for Brown and Root—"Which was this great masculine company," Paul says—in the architecture and engineering department. In the seventies he brought his skills to the desert and found construction work wherever he could. He was back to the land, all right, and, he recalls, "I wasn't making enough money to start my car. Now with more people moving here, there's more building to be done, more people to buy my belts. I'm not struggling anymore."

By that, he means struggling financially. Paul is no longer married, but asceticism doesn't suit him. As he talks about loneliness, he finds himself suddenly talking about the Unabomber suspect. "The whole thing with Ted Kaczynski," Paul says, "has reminded me that human hearts have a hard time growing when we're alone." Last year, I'm told, Paul left Terlingua to be with a woman in Houston. It is painful to contemplate the image of this gentle soul trying to hack it in the big city, but Paul wanted his heart to grow and so he gave it his best shot. It wasn't long before he returned. One is better for trying, perhaps—though I'm reminded of the haunting words of another desert veteran: "You live in Terlingua and you become unrehabilitatable."

PAUL WIGGINS NEEDS THE COMMUNITY. he needs the Starlight Theatre, the ghost town's dazzling food and beverage oasis; he needs the dances and the campfire parties. But the Terlingua area has its genuine recluses, like Judy, also known as Suitcase Sally, the middle-aged and deeply tanned woman in sunglasses who rides with her few worldly possessions on the back of a burro and sleeps at night on the side of the road. She is "like art," says Paul with admiration, a desert apparition who says nothing when I greet her in Study Butte and nothing when I greet her two days later and fifty miles west on RR 170, in Redford. Whatever churns within her, Suitcase Sally keeps utterly to herself.

But the Terlingua desert has seen its sad disasters, like Emil, the polite but fatally conflicted nuclear physicist who drank himself to death in his trailer. It has seen Howard, who shot at passing aircraft and claimed a kinship to Colonel Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now,* and it still sees an individual who once served time for a sex offense and now sits by the roadside claiming he is God. Even in Terlingua, not every misfit can be made to fit. All the same, says Paul Wiggins, "It amused me to hear a reporter on the

BBC shortwave making such a point about the Unabomber living without electricity or running water and connecting that to his eccentric, violent nature. I can't speak for Ted Kaczynski's neck of the woods. But my experience is that the desert eats violent people."

Between the sad cases and the romanticized Suitcase Sallys, there are the unclassifiables, anomalous desert species like the Rabbit Lady, who lived in a car and herded her rabbits with a stick before relocating, incredibly, to comparatively yuppified Alpine. No one knew what to make of the Rabbit Lady, and in a different way, ambivalence seems to be the consensus appraisal of David Sleeper, the fortyish owner of a ranch less than ten miles west of Lajitas. He has been a desert presence for two decades, leading spiritual canyoneering expeditions, raising cattle on the other side of the river, and more recently, breeding mules on his solar-powered ranch. His independent life commands a certain respect from Terlinguans, but a shared history is no guarantee of affection, and somewhere along the way, the locals found themselves withholding their embrace of David Sleeper.

It works both ways. "I've had my hermit's license for years," he tells me with a quiet grin. David has no use for the Terlingua porch life; only on occasion does he make the trek into the ghost town. Though he strikes me as bright and even charming in a bashful way, it is clear that he feels most comfortable around his twenty beasts. "Give them a lot of respect, and they'll give it back," he says as his fingers caress the neck of one of his mules. "But they won't give a stupid person the time of day."

There's no contempt in David Sleeper's voice. He has the low-tech life he wants. Before I leave, David tells me that I'm welcome to stay over anytime I like. It's the fifth or sixth such invitation I've received during my weeklong stay in Terlingua, despite the prevailing sentiment that my article cannot possibly do the town any good. A cynic might regard Terlingua's spirit of communal generosity as a practical matter of desert survival. But they damn sure don't have to extend it to outsiders.

"We don't have much, but if you ever stay with us, you'll never go hungry," says Janelle as she offers me a peanut butter and jelly tortilla. Her offer is particularly moving because she, her husband, Jeff, and their three children live significantly below the poverty line. Their furniture consists largely of wooden slabs set on top of buckets filled with dry food. They drink what little caught rainwater is left from last September's brief downpour. Their do-it-yourself Terlingua Ranch residence, though clean and orderly, has the appearance of a wooden cave. Paul Wiggins calls them homesteaders.

Jeff dropped out of the Army just after the tragic Kent State shooting in 1970 and wandered all the way to Terlingua. Back then, the ghost town was an abandoned pile of rubble. Fourteen years later, he and Janelle became the parents of the first child born in the ghost town since 1943. Jeff has been here longer than almost anyone and freely exercises his right to de nounce what has become of the town. "The people who move here today say they're sick of the corporate world," he drawls, "but it's already in their system. They can't live back-to-nature the way we do. They come for the scene and not for the scenery. And now they're turning it into Terlingua Fe."

Then his words grow harsher, more sweeping. The skinny man with the handlebar mustache leans forward in his chair and says emphatically, “The way this country is now, if you’re not a part of yuppie culture, you’re either in poverty or you’re a criminal. And mark my words, this country will pay.” A darkness seems to leak into the unelectrified, unmechanized home. “The Unabomber tried to make the country pay,” I begin, but Jeff cuts me off, snapping, “How many of their agents have murdered innocents as business-as-usual?”

Janelle, who still carries the figure of the ballerina she once was but whose dark and wind-creased face personifies the desert life, chimes in, “I teach our children that *they,* the government, are the dangerous ones. *They* bred the Unabomber. He’s like the counter-CIA. What he fought against is still the governing force. And everyone who came to Terlingua is at least subconsciously trying to escape that beast.”

That applied to David Kaczynski, who was content with escape, rather than retaliation; it applied, at least until 1978, to his brother. How much bitterness and despair did it take to turn an escapist into a Unabomber? Jeff and Janelle have each other, and they have the Terlingua community, but something else diffuses their hostility toward the outside world, and Jeff volunteers what it is: “I still have hope,” he says calmly. “I still have faith that we’ll work things out on this planet. Otherwise I wouldn’t have brought three kids into the world.”

The youngest of the three is asleep on the family bed. The other two are in school. The eldest son, says Janelle, wants to study rocket aviation. Eventually he’ll be leaving the desert, going off to a university. The homesteaders tell me they’re okay with that. I notice the mandala on their wall. The little home is buttressed with hope.

PROPRIETOR ANGIE DEAN OPENS THE doors to the Starlight at five every afternoon, and one by one the Terlinguans shuffle in. Ken Barnes, the town’s venerated self-taught paleontologist, strides up to the bar in his straw hat and holds out the day’s find of dinosaur bones, which are passed around the bar to grunts of admiration. Laurie arrives fresh from the Chihuahuan town of Creel, her truck loaded with Mexican craftwork that she will sell to the trading company. One of the evening’s musicians begins tuning his mandolin. By ten after five, every barstool is taken.

One of the occupants is Spider, who must have just gotten paid, since Angie doesn’t give him a line of credit—unlike the trading company, where Spider owes $36, and the Study Butte Store, where he is $125 in arrears. “The way I see it,” he tells me, “I’ve got to get paid two or three hundred dollars every week, because I like to drink a lot of beer and dip a lot of snuff.”

When I carefully ask him if he thinks he’s an alcoholic, Spider doesn’t miss a beat. “I know I am! Hell. Four DWIs, disorderly conduct. I don’t deny it.”

He laughs and returns to his Budweiser. The talkative, compact-looking man in the gimme cap and sunglasses is Terlingua’s latest project. Spider has been here five years, and it is fair to say that he did not arrive brimming with communal spirit. After being tossed out of the Army in 1970 for brawling with his fellow soldiers—“I was a loner, and when the others picked on me, I’d go crazy on ’em,” he says—the Vietnam vet spent the next twenty years roaming in South Texas and south of the border, never spending more than a couple of months in one place. He acquired the spider tattoos on his arms and neck from an artist in Ciudad Acuña, but the nickname came first, given to him around the time he got into a brawl in Del Rio. When a former brother-in-law purchased a few acres just behind the ghost town in 1991, Spider got in on the deal and settled down in an old camper parked in the rubble of Terlingua.

But, as one of the locals puts it, "It took him two years to arrive here mentally." Spider agrees: "I was still angry when I got here. My first year, I punched out one guy and threatened to kill another." Terlinguans were aghast; a loner-monster was in their midst. Then Angie Dean stepped in. Observing Spider's skill as a concrete pourer, the Starlight owner asked him one day if he would design a sign for her establishment's restrooms. Spider did so, using metal spikes for the lettering, and a concrete artist was born.

Nowadays he makes dinosaurs for Big Al's miniature golf course and busts of the Virgin Mary to sell across the border. The savage beast is soothed. "I got the monkey off my back," he says proudly, though, he confesses, "Three weeks ago I nearly beat up a guy. He showed up from out of state, and immediately he starts hassling me. I told him to stay away, but he wouldn't."

Spider takes a gulp of his Budweiser, then says, "But I held back. And eventually somebody else beat him up pretty good, and he split. See, because I waited, now it ain't on my conscience. I feel at peace."

The cackle that follows suggests, "Stay tuned." But no one is worried about Spider anymore. He has his first home, his first mailbox, in twenty years, and though all those years of marginal living trigger the occasional compulsion to withdraw (at which time he typically sleeps in the cave on his property), Spider is usually among the first to claim a spot on the trading company porch every afternoon. In Terlingua, he has at last found a place where he belongs.

When I asked people how far Terlingua's communal boundaries extended, they directed me a dozen miles past the ghost town, past Collie Ryan's school bus, across the Rio Grande, and into the Mexican village of Paso de Lajitas. Somewhere beyond the village lived Feather. Repeatedly her name had been invoked during my stay: Feather was Terlingua at its purest, a committed recluse, her energies focused exclusively on survival and painting and the four daughters she raised on Mexican soil. Her house, like so many others I had seen, was a dubious jumble of wood, plaster, and sotol but tidy and not without a primitive artistic flair. On the bed by the front door rested a naked infant, along with a Mexican woman in her nineties whose brother, I would later be told, once rode with Pancho Villa.

Feather herself was an understated presence, weathered but otherwise of indiscernible age, slight of build with short dark hair and equally dark eyes that greeted her uninvited guest with quiet wariness. She poured me a cup of red herbal tea, and we sat next to the tiny kitchen—where, it did not surprise me to discover, one of Collie Ryan's mandalas hung on a wall. In a measured, oddly accented voice, Feather told me that she was born in Ireland but spent most of her childhood in India. As to how she got to where we now sat, Feather replied with a soft laugh and shook her head. “I’ve been all over,” she then murmured.

Once she warmed to me, Feather showed off her well-kept garden, her chickens and horses, her well, and the little studio where she had spent the morning painting a portrait commissioned by a government official in Ojinaga. By the time we returned to the house, her daughter Talgar was in the kitchen peeling avocados and the elderly woman was kneading tortilla dough.

When Feather asked why I was writing about Terlingua, I mentioned the Unabomber. She cocked her head slightly. “I don’t know who that is,” she said, adding, “I don’t read the papers.”

I began to describe the saga of Ted Kaczynski: the primitive cabin in the middle of nowhere, his aggressive rejection of all things technological, his scornful manifesto. Feather’s deep eyes were alight; she was smiling, nodding, on the brink of exuberance—until I came to the ugly punch line, whereupon her peasantlike face clouded over.

Terlingua’s matron saint considered it all for only a moment. Then she grinned. “The guy had a few screws loose,” she said. I nodded and got up to leave, but Feather wouldn’t hear of it—not until I accepted a burrito fresh from her little kitchen, something to fortify me for the journey home.

The Ted K Archive

Robert Draper
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Texas Monthly; Austin Vol. 24, Iss. 6, (Jun 1996): 88.
<texasmonthly.com/being-texan/the-last-refuge>

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