

## CHAPTER II.

*Western, or prairie region—boundaries and extent—general appearance—extent of the prairies—soil—bays—rivers—settlements—inhabitants—Red river lands—their character—the partially explored region of Northern Texas.*

THE western division, or prairie region of Texas, extends from the La Baca west to the Bravo del Norte, the western boundary of the country, a distance of nearly two hundred miles. It presents a greater diversity of surface, soil, and climate, perhaps, than either of the others, but is alike in the feature by which we have chosen to characterize it, the general want of wood.

It is not to be understood that this whole region is entirely bald. The streams have often a narrow skirting of wood, especially in the level country, and small patches, few indeed and far between, are found on the uneven lands; but the wood bears so small a proportion to the whole area, as scarcely to be worthy of being taken into the account. Some stately trees of various species are occasionally scattered through the level lands, but in the undulating country, which here approaches within forty or fifty miles of the coast, but one kind is rarely found, and that is a species of locust called the musquite. The tracts where it is found are distinguished by the name of musquite prairies. In gazing from the summits of the higher swells, over the waving ocean of prairie, the eye sometimes rests upon these poor apologies for trees, but finds little relief from so wretched an object. Its dwarfish size, ugly form, and scanty foliage serving rather to increase than diminish the sense of surrounding desolation. The nopal, which is sometimes seen where it has been building up and spreading out its alternate stem and leaf, perhaps, for a century, presents a far more agreeable object, and seen as it sometimes is at a distance of several miles, might be easily mistaken for a hermit's hut or gipsy's cot.

The barrenness here extends to nothing but wood, which nature, in the whims in which she is sometimes found to indulge, seems to have denied to this otherwise interesting and valuable country. It is almost everywhere covered with a rich coat of grass, and generally of a species very fine and nutritious, which from its being uniformly found in the neighborhood of the tree of that name, is here called musquite grass.

Besides the fruit of the nopal, or prickly pear, there are several species of ground fruits or garden vegetables, growing spontaneously here, which might sustain the life of man when lost in these almost boundless prairies, which are some of them several days' journey in extent. His faithful rifle would avail him but little here, although surrounded by whole herds of buffalo, deer, and mustangs, since there is no covert to conceal his approach; he would be only tantalized by the sight, and the sweet morsel would be for ever beyond his reach.

Upon the eastern confines of this division, along the river Guadalupe and its branches, and especially on its large eastern branch, the Saint Marks, there is perhaps a sufficient supply of wood and timber for any purpose for which it may be needed in that climate. The traveller might here be in some doubt whether he was not in the mixed, instead of having entered the prairie region, and the confines of the two might have been more properly placed here, perhaps, than upon the La Baca; yet the prairies greatly prevail here, and scarcely more than one tenth of the whole area in the Guadalupe district is in wood.

The soil is excellent, both here and on the river San Antonio, still further west, and scarcely surpassed in fertility by the lands of the middle region. West of the San Antonio, the country is oftener visited by severe droughts, to the serious injury of vegetation. Early planted crops, however, seldom fail there. The borders of the San Antonio river are favorable for very extensive irrigation from the waters of that river, and this is already practised to considerable extent; many of the farms and gardens in the neighborhood of the city of San Antonio or Bexar, are watered by numerous artificial rills supplied from the river; such rills are also conducted through many gardens within the city walls.

The whole of this division, with the exception of the valley of the Bravo del Norte, coast as well as interior, is more elevated than the middle region, less favored with rains, and with a soil in general of less depth and fertility, though abounding in various extensive tracts, perhaps equal to the former. All the productions which have been enumerated as adapted to the soil and climate of the former, may be produced here, but in less abundance.

The boundless extent of rich pasturage is even superior, and every square mile would enrich a farmer by its pasturage alone. The want of wood and timber presents a serious obstacle to the rapid settlement of this division, but means will be found to supply this want, and with the race of men now approaching and already upon its border, it may be safely predicted that this fertile region, which has lain waste during all past ages, will in that which is to succeed, be made to yield in abundance the rich and