

Museum News: The First Cattle Ranches in Terrell County

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Up until 1881, not many folks moved into the Trans Pecos area, our home. Our desert landscape made it difficult for anyone or anything to survive, but there were other problems that brought this about.

The first problem preventing mass immigration by Anglos and Hispanics into the area was the "Indian Problem." It wasn't a deserted area, even though that is the way most US immigrants looked at it. Paleo-Indians had moved into the area as early as 9200 BC, according to archeologists, back when mammoths, saber-toothed tigers and giant bison still wandered the area. Through the eons the Paleo-Indians lived and survived, subsisting on an environment that was very similar to what we see today, generally with a wetter climate but gradually drying out to desert conditions.



Photo: Roy Harrell Collection, TC Museum

In the 18th Century modern Native Americans, the Comanches, Apaches and others, began to drift into the area following the game trails, and soon had pushed out the old people, absorbed them into their tribes or completely eliminated them. By the time the US came into being and Anglo immigrants began to move into Texas, the old people...the Jumanos, the Basketmakers and the Unnamed...were long gone and their replacements were extremely hostile to Anglo and Hispanic immigrants. These Naive Americans were very warlike and proud and adept at defending their homeland. It was only through the strong arm of Texas Rangers, the US Army and local militias that the Native Americans were defeated and removed from the area, a long and bloody period that put fear in the hearts of immigrants.

The second problem was the lack of roads into the area. Except for a primitive military road which skirted the Big Bend to the north in a connection from San Antonio to El Paso, the area through the heart of the Trans Pecos was trackless. Parties sent out by the US government to scout new trails found the area extremely rough and the lack of water sources on any planned route stymied creation of new trails. The Mexicans called it "El Desplablado" - the uninhabited place - for good reason. Not only were there no people, there was little in the way of resources for people to survive.

The third problem, and a big one, was the lack of surface water in the Trans Pecos. The Pecos River in the east and the Rio Grande to the south are the major water sources in the area. Very few springs of water are found in between, even fewer today than in the 1800s as the climate continues to get drier. You can survive without food, or find alternatives, but you and your animals cannot survive very long without water.

But, humans are problem solvers. The "Indian Problem" was taken care of by physical force, roads and trails were finally hacked from the wilderness, and human ingenuity invented windmills to draw water from a huge subterranean cache of water lying throughout the area. One invention, the creation of railroads, brought about the first major inroad into the Big Bend. Creation of the GH&SA Railroad by its parent company, the Southern Pacific, through the heart of the Trans Pecos, opened the door for immigration in the early 1880s. Sheep and cattle ranchers saw the lush valleys of grass and open range as ideal for their livestock, and it was all free for the taking. Railroad workers followed the work and needed services provided to sustain their lives and businessmen began to move in to supply the local needs. Towns were created and modern life began, replacing the native inhabitants.

The first ranch in Terrell County was begun by Charles Downie in 1881, hardly before the rails had reached the area. He developed a huge ranch with thousands of sheep, a whole story in itself.

In eastern Terrell County, an area of open range, the first large cattle ranches in the area were the Pecos Land and Cattle Company and the King Spring Cattle Company, established in 1884 near Meyer Spring and King Spring. In that same year, the Pecos Land and Cattle Company (PLCC,) owned by a consortium of men from the east, bought the King Spring Cattle Company, combined the herds and put Mr. W. W. Simonds in charge as general manager. They also purchased the brand and cattle of several other smaller cattlemen and leased land around Meyer and Cedar Springs from General John Bullis, who had obtained rights to much of the area. A huge ranch of 106 sections, or, 67,840 acres, was established. Headquarters was built about seven miles east of present-day Dryden, Texas, which at the time was just a small water stop on the railroad, and Daniel Franks was hired as foreman of the outfit.

In 1886, Simonds took up one section of school land, the present site of Dryden, and headquarters was moved to this location. A two-storey building was built as sleeping quarters, a post office and a company store. Two additional buildings were built as a home for Franks and his family, and for storage.

Water for the cattle was provided from the Rio Grande, Meyer, King and Cedar Springs, and seasonal waterholes which soon dried up after monsoonal weather in the summer had finished. To become a large and lucrative operation for its owners, the water problem had to be solved. A water well contractor was hired and six wells drilled, but all were dry holes. The owners would not accept that there was no water in the area, so they bought their own well rig and drilled much deeper, bringing in successful wells near Dryden. Soon, wells and windmills were erected across their land to provide water.

At this time there were no fences erected, and the cattle roamed on open range. This meant that cattle from other ranches often drifted onto PLCC lands. Round ups were held twice a year, in the spring and the fall, beginning at the mouth of the Pecos River and going west to Dryden. Round up was a communal affair, with representative cowboys from each ranch taking part to gather cattle, then separating them by brands and deciding who owned the unbranded calves born during the year. Men from the H. C. Tardy, the John R. Billings, the T5 outfit, the Muleshoe outfit from Sheffield, the NA outfit, the S outfit, and the TX outfit, all located to the north of Dryden, the Joe Kincaid, the George Miller, the Bob and Ross Neighbors from Haymond in the West; and men from the Gage Ranch at Marathon, gathered cattle, branded calves and drove them back to the home ranch or up the trail to market. It was a congenial affair, usually held without incident, although some outfits squabbled over ownership of some of the cattle when brands weren't clear.

In 1892 Mr. Simonds retired and D. R. Barret was hired as general manager. In 1895 the Pecos Land and Cattle Company began to liquidate and the days of the PLCC were over. The remaining cattle were bought by a Mr. Hines of San Angelo, 32 sections sold to N. G. King and 74 sections were sold to Dominick Hart, who was amassing his own huge ranch. Mr. John Doak bought the horses and the remaining cattle.

In 1884 the land was purchased for \$1.00 per acre at \$67,840; in 1895 it sold for \$19,687, less than a third of the original price. In good times the PLCC consortium made great profit, but in droughty times they lost money. In the end the company ended in the red, but the new buyers were more skilled at running cattle ranches and they succeeded. Such is the story of ranching in Terrell County.