

# Museum News: Dominick Hart – Big Man in a Big Land

By CW (Bill) Smith

The barren wastes of Terrell and Pecos Counties have seen the victory of some and the defeat of many. Special people are required to live in a special land. Many would-be ranchers, large and small, have failed, but a select few have had amazing success in this difficult environment. Combining business genius and hard work, the successful few made a dream come true. The rest sold out and returned to civilization and better opportunities. Dominick “D.” Hart was one of the successes.

D. Hart, as he was called, assembled a huge ranch in southeastern Pecos County in the late 1880s, in an area that was eventually to become Terrell County. Although he raised huge herds of cattle, he also dealt in sheep, horses and mules. Hart was born to Patrick and Mary Hart in Ireland in 1850 and immigrated to the US in the early 1880s. He settled at Carrizo Springs, Dimmitt County, Texas, and from 1883 until 1889 he owned about 25 sections of land there and ran a few horses, 100 head of cattle and 3200 sheep. With this small operation he began building his empire.



Moving into the Del Rio area, he partnered with Jim Brogy and added to his sheep operation. At the same time he acquired about 200 head of dairy cattle and began selling milk and butter.

In the 1880s, D. Hart married Jean Lawrie, a Scottish girl who had immigrated to the US with her parents. They had three children, two sons, Dominick, Jr. and Martin, and a daughter, Janet. Jean lived with the children in San Antonio where they received their education, but when they were grown she moved to the ranch with Dominick. Their hospitality was well known throughout the area, with the best of European customs.

In 1895 he moved farther west into Pecos County, locating north of Pumpville and greatly adding to his land and his livestock, both sheep and cattle. The Pecos Land and Cattle Company (PLCC) was liquidating its Terrell County area properties and Hart purchased 74 sections. While the consortium that owned PLCC had good times and bad times, Hart was well aware of his abilities and made a big success of his much larger ranch. With increasing success and increasing capital, he bought smaller ranches and increased his holdings. He gradually increased his number of employees, hiring 50 to 60 men for the sheep, 40 to 60 men for the cattle and 45 to 60 men for the horses. Eventually he would control all the land from Sanderson Canyon to the Pecos and from Independence Creek to the Rio Grande, encompassing a huge area.

In the meantime, he erected a drift fence from the Independence to the Rio Grande, but was sued by the state of Texas for building it on state property, rather than his own. After several years and several trials, the state won and he was fined \$48,000.

By 1907, Hart controlled over a thousand sections (square miles) of land. His business acuity was sharp, and he made money when others barely kept their heads above water. Constantly improving his properties, he erected one of the first and largest sheep shearing sheds in the area, employing 100 shearers using machines to do the shearing. At Lozier, he had over 90,000 sheep sheared in one clip.

But, besides running his ranch, Hart also worked in the market place trying to get the best prices for his wool and livestock. He traveled extensively, visiting buyers and sellers, and even went out of the country to sell his products. He was a wheeler-dealer, in the truest sense of the word.

In 1917, D. Hart sold off his properties and holdings, liquidating some 80,000 head of sheep, 1500 horses and about 1500 goats which he kept on hand to feed his employees. With advancing age and faltering health, he was ready to retire, and in 1915 moved to Fort Worth. He retained only one section of land in Terrell County out of the thousands that he owned.

Hart had no problem adjusting to life in the city, but with his health failing, he developed cancer and died in 1931. He was buried at Greenwood Memorial Park in Fort Worth. Jean lived only a few more years and passed in 1935. She also is buried at Greenwood, along with the Hart children and grandchildren.

Sometimes we are inclined to attribute success to dumb luck. But, that was not at all the case for Dominick and Jean Hart. Through hard work, stubborn will and sharp minds, they chalked up success after success in their journey through this world. To use an old phrase, they took a sow's ear and made a silk purse from it. Such people don't come through this world very often, and we are fortunate to have had the D. Harts as early pioneers in Terrell County.