

Dispatches From Days Gone By

by Billie Farrington Birnie



Woulfter Mountain (left) and Gomez Peak (right, also known as Sleeping Lady). Photo by Judy Farrington Elkins.

Woulfter Ranch lies at the western edge of the Madera Valley, just below Woulfter Mountain and near Gomez Peak, some 20 miles west of Balmorhea. Like the rest of West Texas, it is beautiful but harsh, cradled between a sky that never seems to sit still and a land covered in mesquite and low brush, harboring plants that scratch and wildlife that slithers, bites and stings.

In 1941, my parents Casey and Cassie Farrington moved to Woulfter. Casey was fit, having cowboied since the age of 13. Cassie was strong of character and resilient, but as a child she had been stricken by polio, which had left her with

one weak leg and a pronounced limp that limited her mobility. The two married in 1932 and took up residence with Cassie's mother, Amy Walker, on a farm east of Balmorhea.

Some years later, my mother wrote an account of our family's time at Woulfter Ranch. What follows are excerpts from her journal.

LIVING AT WOULFTER RANCH

During the early spring of 1941, Casey was hired by Jim Duncan as foreman, to take charge of sheep and cattle that he had moved to Woulfter Ranch, which he had

recently purchased from Mr. W.D. Childress. The world was in conflict and World War II was raging, but Casey had been deferred by the draft board, so we, with our three young daughters, Jamie going on 5, Judy, not quite 3, and Billie, born the November before, loaded our few belongings and moved from the farm to the old ranch headquarters, located in the foothills of the Davis Mountains, almost in the shadow of Gomez Peak."

She describes in vivid detail the layout of the four-room house and rock-strewn yard, the gas-operated washing machine, the wood-burning cookstove, the galvanized washtub for bathing, and the meager furnishings:

There was no phone or electricity, so kerosene lamps and candles were used for light, and a flashlight was kept handy for emergencies at night. On rare occasions, a gasoline lantern was used when more light was needed. We did have a small battery-operated radio for entertainment and to keep us in touch with the latest news. Never shall I forget the feeling of horror when, on December 7, 1941, the awful news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor was broadcast. The food I was fixing to feed the girls was probably all seasoned with salt tears which could not be controlled, as I thought of all the boys that were killed and of the grief their loved ones must feel ...

During that time, it was hard to keep enough supplies, for wages were very low. We received only fifty dollars a month cash, but we were allowed to buy staples on Mr. Duncan's account at Wynn Hamilton's store in Saragosa, since Mr. Hamilton sold merchandise wholesale to ranchers in this area. Beans and flour were bought in 100-pound sacks, lard in 50-pound cans, coffee by the case, bacon by the side, and syrup by the gallon. We kept a cow that furnished us with milk and butter; a few chickens to furnish eggs and fryers, and we had a good garden spot that furnished fresh vegetables. There were a few bearing fruit trees that Mr. and Mrs. Childress had planted. The garden and trees were in a flat place a good way below the house, and a pipe had been laid from a spring-fed pond on the hillside to the fenced-in area to carry water for irrigating. The only trees near the house were two shade trees, a large tree in the north end of the wire-fenced front yard and a smaller one on the north side of the back yard.

FRESH PORK

"Mr. Childress had released a number of domestic hogs when he was on the ranch, and they were allowed to run wild and multiply in the mountains. One fall day



Cassie and Casey Farrington. Photographer unknown.

Casey returned to the ranch house and said he had killed a large hog and needed help bringing it in. Mother was staying with us by that time and could look after the children so I could go help. Casey gave me the horse he was riding, and he rode a half-broken horse that Mr. Childress had left in the corral until he could come back. Jack, the small mule that was in the hay barn, was taken to carry the hog. We rode back several miles into the mountains where the hog had been killed. It had been on a ridge when shot but had rolled down into a deep ravine, then into a washed-out pothole in the narrow bottom.

We had to dismount to scramble down the steep sides of the ravine; then we had trouble finding a firm footing for the animals in the narrow bottom. As soon as the bronc smelled the fresh blood, he began rearing and trying to break loose, and Casey had to take him back out on top and tie him. When Casey came back, he positioned the mule near the pothole and, after both of us heaving and

tugging, he succeeded in getting the rope under the hog. Then, with the help of the horse, we pulled the hog out of the pothole and across the little mule's back. When the rope was almost securely tied, the mule flipped and landed on top of the hog back in the pothole, with all four feet up in the air. It was no easy task to avoid those thrashing hooves and get the mule untied from the hog and upright again.

Casey decided that the hog was too heavy for Jack to carry, so he unsaddled the horse and put the saddle on the mule. Then with his help, he again got the hog out of the pothole and loaded onto the horse. The ravine was so steep that Casey had to use all his strength to help support the hog while the horse climbed out, and, by hanging onto the mule, I was able to scramble out.

It was impossible to lead the packed horse with the bronc, for he wouldn't get near that hog, and the gentle horse wasn't very docile with that dead hog on his back. So Casey helped me onto the bronc and he led the pack horse. I managed to keep the bronc under control until we got back to the corral but I expected every step of the way for him to start pitching with me, and I knew I couldn't ride him.

The meat was surely gotten the hard way, but after we had scalded, scraped, cut up and had the hams and bacon smoked and cured and sausage made, it was delicious eating, for the hog had fattened on acorns, pinon nuts, and wild berries, and the meat was well flavored. However, that was the only time Casey ever killed one of those hogs.

My family left Woulfter Ranch for Balmorhea in 1942 so that Jamie, who turned six that summer, could attend school. And the ranch changed, too, with ownership going to W.L. Kingston, then to Ad and Jess Neal, and from them to their descendants, the Lethcos, who own it today. ■