

A Cowboy's Daughter:

Life on the J A Ranch, 1916 – 1924



*A historical atlas by Kim Nettles
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I was born in Swisher County Texas on November 10, 1915 about two miles from the town of Vigo Park. Soon after I was born, my Dad went to work for the J. A. Ranch as a single man. I was about one year old when the Camel (Campbell) Creek Camp became available to us. My Dad's brother lived at the Pleasanton Camp.



*Iva Belle Moore
early 1920's.*

Iva Belle Moore was born November 10, 1915 in west Texas, the eldest of seven children of May V. Melton and Jesse L. Moore. She spent her childhood on west Texas ranches and farms, including the famed JA Ranch where several members of her family worked as cowboys and cooks. Iva never described her life as easy, but she had a strong sense of the life on the ranch as a unique and important moment in the nation's history. Wanting the people and places to be remembered, she devoted considerable energy to identifying photographs, collecting family memories and ephemera, and recording her own stories in a strong, feminine script. Despite her very limited formal education, her papers are well written and reflect an eye for detail.

In combination with other personal memoirs and objective data to support or refute these memories, her collection presents an opportunity understand the lives of low-income farm and ranch workers at the end of the Progressive Era.

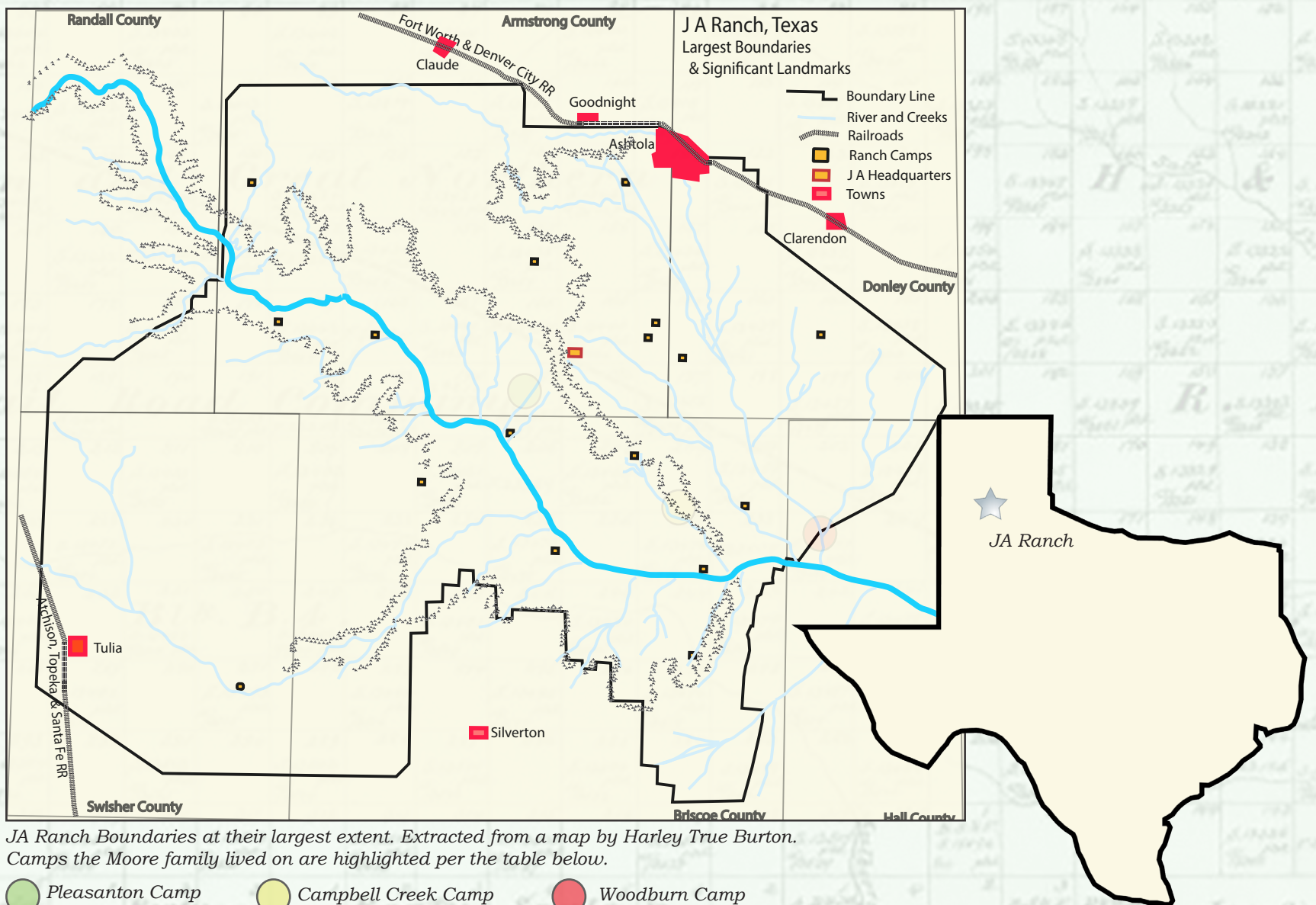
Iva's father, Jesse, was born in 1890 in McKinney, Texas (near Dallas). He was the twelfth of fifteen children born to Columbus and Paralee (Jordan) Moore, emigrants to Texas from post-Civil War Tennessee. By 1910, the Moore family was living in Hall County, Texas, east of the JA Ranch. Although the date of his marriage to May Melton is not yet known, the birth of their first child, Iva, in November, 1915 suggests that they likely married no later than that same year. Soon after Iva's birth, he went to work for the JA Ranch and remained there until 1924.

After leaving the JA, Jesse purchased a Model T truck and delivered cotton and feed from farms to area towns. In 1926, the family moved to a 200-acre farm and raised cotton. The 1927 crop failed for lack of rain, and the family was forced to sell everything, including household goods, and to go as far as Colorado in search of work. Iva's narrative of 1927-1935 is about a constant search for work, often to hoe or pick cotton, a labor that included the children and precluded a consistent education for them. The family of nine was often homeless, staying with various relatives in the region or, for a brief period, in a half-room dugout.

At some point, Jesse returned to the JA Ranch. In his later years, he drove the chuckwagon and was the camp cook.



Jesse Lee Moore, undated



JA Ranch Boundaries at their largest extent. Extracted from a map by Harley True Burton. Camps the Moore family lived on are highlighted per the table below.

The only accessible way to these camps [Campbell Creek and Pleasanton] was by horseback or teams. During the summer, we moved to the Woodburn Camp which was closer to the Headquarters of the ranch and about 30 miles west of Clarendon... You could get to this camp by auto if you had one. Also the Ranch truck would deliver groceries and other home supplies and we had a telephone. The house had a large kitchen and 2 bedrooms and screened porch downstairs and a fireplace and two bedrooms upstairs.

As the birth of each child approached, May and the children moved in with relatives or to a rented house in Clarendon, presumably to be closer to a midwife or medical assistance if it was needed.

In the summer of 1923, we moved to the Graham Camp because it was near the school. This camp was near the road that went from Clarendon to Headquarters. This house had five rooms and a porch all the way across the front. When school started in September the teacher boarded with us and the Wiley children (from another camp 10 miles away) in a buggy and me and the teacher road with them on to the school, which was about 2 miles away.



Camp house on the JA Ranch. Likely Campbell Creek, based on the apparent age of Iva (pictured far right).



JA Ranch Cowboys Racing to Dinner, 1904.

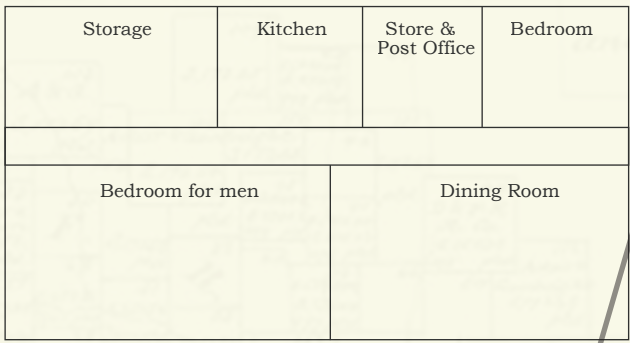
In 1926, the Ranch was managed from a Headquarters with 16 “camp” locations. Several, if not all, of these camps included homes for the families of ranch workers, a water supply, and small farms to grow crops to feed livestock and residents. They served as important logistics points to support ranch hands assigned to remote parts of the JA.

Although housing was a benefit for married hands, their wives were expected to provide compensated meals, housing, and other services for the men working in the area. A chuckwagon provided meals further afield on the range, possibly re-supplying from the camps. Charles Goodnight’s famed code of conduct for JA Ranch hands may have had a dual purpose in enforcing “civilized” behavior around these families living in isolated and vulnerable positions.

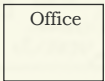
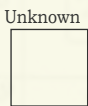
The Headquarters compound included a large and ornate home for the Adairs (constructed around the original log cabin), additional housing for employees and horses, business offices, and supply sheds. A dirt road led to Clarendon, the nearest town and shipping point.

Map extracted from hand-drawn sketch by Iva Moore Tucker.

JA Ranch Headquarters Layout According To Iva Moore Tucker



← To Clarendon



Southwestern view of Adair house, JA Ranch Headquarters. 2001.

On the Headquarters grounds there was a nice large home where the Adairs stayed when they came to visit which I think was about once a year. They brought a cook, housekeeper and personal maid with them. The house was vacant during their absence.

There was another house for the Manager... There was also a house for the bookkeeper. And there was the Bunkhouse where the single men slept. I believe they had a handyman to take care of the buildings.

There was also corrals and barns for horses and other animals. There was another large building at the Headquarters that had living quarters for a family plus an extra large kitchen and dining room. This building also had a room known as “the store” and the Ranch Post Office. They sold tobacco, candies and other miscellaneous items. This building also had an extra room that was used for various gatherings

Most single men stayed at Headquarters in the Winter months but some were sent to camps to help the family men feed cattle, take care of windmills, etc. That meant that the wives at the camps had to cook for them, provide a bedroom and I suppose do their laundry on a rub board. I believed the wives were paid a monthly salary of \$30 for this job.

The Ranch was founded as a partnership between Charles Goodnight, an experienced cattleman, and John Adair, who fronted the capital for land, livestock, and expenses. Cattle were initially moved in large herds to markets in Colorado and Wyoming.

Advancing railroad lines gradually lowered the cost and time involved in shipping cattle, as well as obtaining supplies; JA business accounts were opened in each city as each new terminal was built. In 1887, the Fort Worth & Denver Railroad extended to Clarendon (near JA Ranch boundaries) and the Santa Fe Railroad extended to Panhandle, Texas (about 30 miles from the ranch.), making them shipping points for JA cattle that obviated the need for cattle drives – and likely reduced the number of hands needed to operate the ranch.

As settlers moved into the former frontier, open rangeland was increasingly constricted and disputes often turned violent. Coupled with the drought of 1895 and crashing beef prices after the end of the Spanish American War, the future was dire.

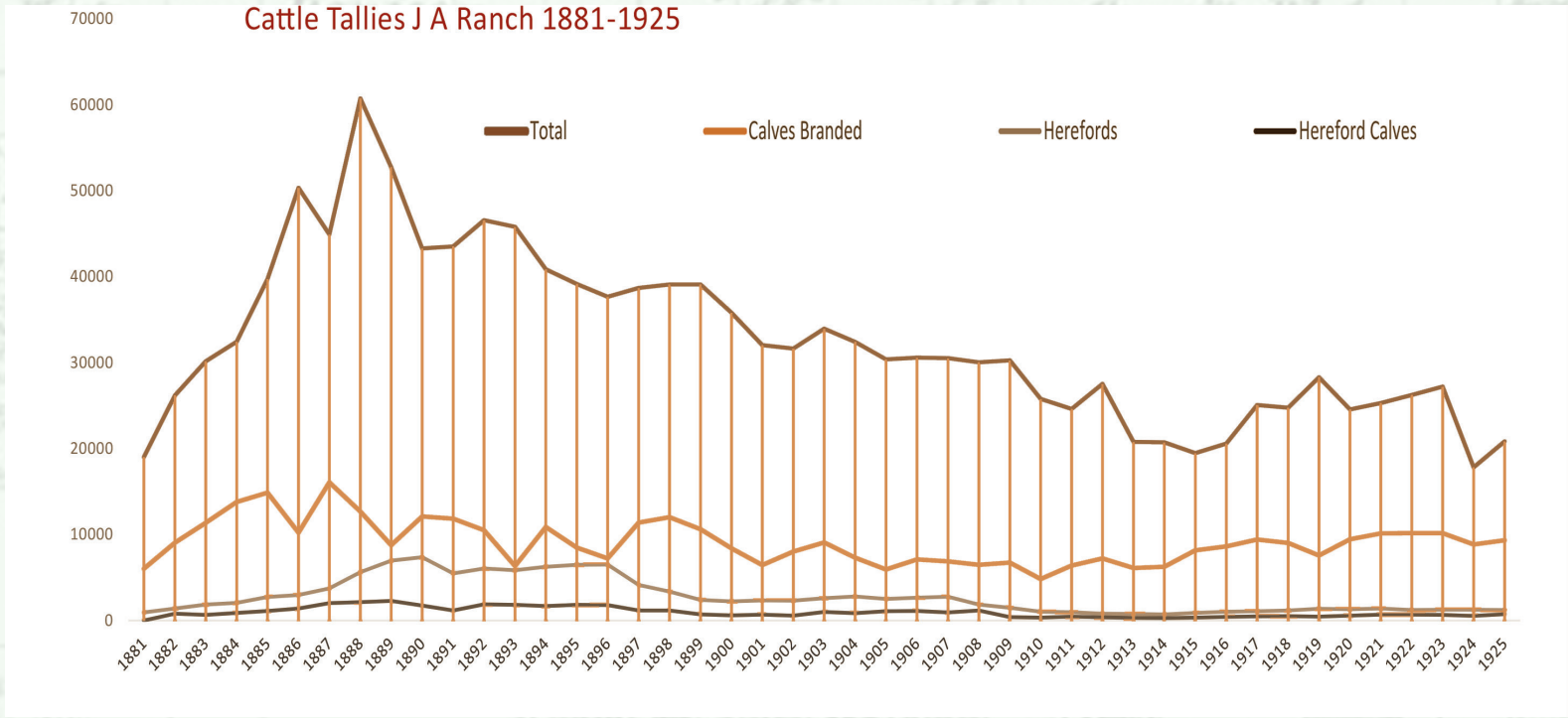
The 1901 election of Theodore Roosevelt, considered a friend to the West, raised hopes for federal policies that would ease some of the pressure. Instead, Roosevelt vetoed the Lease Bill that would have given ranchers long-term access to federal land, and ordered fences on government land to come down, making it impossible to enclose existing ranges. In the great “Roosevelt Roundup”, dozens of ranchers were prosecuted for illegal fencing and land fraud.

By 1910, the days of open range were over. The JA’s herd size dropped from a peak of 60, 759 head to less than 20, 834 head in 1925. Many ranches did not survive the transition from free grass: the story of how the JA’s managers navigated this upheaval is likely an important research topic of its own.

The plunge in cattle numbers in 1924 coincides with the Moore family’s departure from the ranch, and Jesse’s turn to work driving a delivery truck instead of transferring to another ranch. Iva’s record is silent regarding the employment situation on the ranch, but it is reasonable to infer that the number of hands required to manage the herd varied with herd size, and that other Panhandle ranches may have been experiencing similar reductions..



Jesse’s brother, Bill Moore (right) and unidentified cowboy on the JA Ranch. Undated



The inhabitants of the JA Ranch were the embodiment of frontier culture, celebrated in 1893 by Frederick Jackson Turner as a people with

“a passionate belief that a democracy was possible which should leave the individual a part to play in free society and not make him a cog in a machine operated from above; which trusted in the common man, in his tolerance, his ability to adjust differences with good humor, and to work out an American type from the contributions of all nations--a type for which he would fight against those who challenged it in arms, and for which in time of war he would make sacrifices, even the temporary sacrifice of individual freedom and his life, lest that freedom be lost forever.

“This ain’t work, this is living”

-- Bill Moore, to his nephew, Chris Nettles, high atop a windmill, 1983.



Jesse’s son, Bill Moore, circa 1960’s.

Turner’s thesis catapulted frontier culture into the national imagination and turned the cowboy into an icon. Yet, this lionization of a culture created a caricature that does a disservice to the people who inhabited the geography of the last frontiers. Turner’s thesis dominated western history until the 1980’s, when “new western” historians began to look more closely at the influence of race, class, and gender, but still with a focus on the 19th century. By 2004, however, western historians agreed that the subject of western required a more complex approach that

“...help us to avoid the too-positive triumphal approach of many early twentieth century historians.... (and)... beyond several late-twentieth century scholars placing too much emphasis on negative conflicts

in the West. This larger view sees the American West as an arena in which different cultures met, sometimes conflicted, but also compromised and intermingled.”¹

The collected memories of Iva Moore Tucker, and people like her, are an important contribution to this work, which is as yet not fully realized.

¹ Embry, Jessie L. Oral History, Community, and Work in the American West. University of Arizona Press, 2013.

Illustration Credits

Unless otherwise noted, all images are from the author’s personal collection.

- 1. JA Ranch Map. Created by the author, 2015. Extracted from Harley True Burton’s thesis, “History of the JA Ranch” published in The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, January, 1928.*
- 2. JA Ranch Cowboys Racing to Dinner, 1904. Library of Congress.*
- 3. Southwestern View of the Adair House, 2001. Architectural rendering of image from the Library of Congress.*
- 4. Cattle Tallies, JA ranch 1881-1925. Graph created by the author, using data extracted from Harley True Burton’s thesis, “History of the JA Ranch” published in The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, January, 1928.*

About the Author

Kim Nettles is a graduate student in George Mason University’s history program. After retiring from the Coast Guard in 2006, she raised goats with her husband on a small farm in western Illinois for eight years. Her research interests include JA Ranch history and application of social network and digital analysis tools to history studies.

JA Ranch family descendants who wish to learn more, or participate in her research should visit her site at www.rumennation.com.