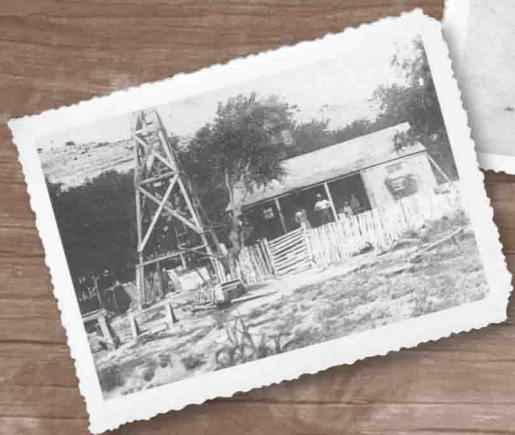


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On Independence Creek

THE STORY OF A TEXAS RANCH



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CHARLENA CHANDLER

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On Independence Creek

I appreciate the support of family members, especially my sister JoBeth, who is a part of this story, and my children Anne and Jeff, and Joe and Nan, and my nieces Jana and Joell.

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With the coming of the Civil War, the use of camels was abandoned. But the experiment leaves another image in my mind alongside that of buffalo dotting the green pastures of the ranch, that of camels watering out of the creek, a sight never again witnessed. And then these images are crowded out with another image, even more powerful, that of the land I love inhabited by a primitive people who thought the earth belonged to them.

I conclude this introduction with a quote from Leon Pope's archeological report on the area: "Your ranch is a beautiful treasure of history, especially the pre-history of the Indians. Any archeologist, as myself, sees your ranch from a view few seem to appreciate." I have something in common with Mr. Pope. Although archeologists have a scientific bent, I suspect they are also dreamers. To be able to look into the past and to envision what was, rather than what is, involves some sensitivity that pure science would exclude.



Chapter One CHARLIE

Except to paper riders, the Pecos is a lonely and bitter stream. I have that from men who rode it and who knew that country round, such as it was, such as it can never be again.

Novelist Larry McMurtry

MY GRANDDAD CHANDLER was one of those men who rode the Pecos, who settled his place a hundred years ago and “knew that country round.” But that was long before I came along. By that time, Granddad’s adventures lay behind him and he was pretty well set in his ways, a man in his sixth decade who had lived long enough to know who he was and where he belonged.

His manner was mild, manifesting no demons. He didn’t talk a lot, but when he did he had something to say. I don’t recall his ever raising his voice, but we all jumped when he spoke. It was not his size that compelled attention, as he was not quite six feet tall, but his presence. The restless energy that seemed to propel most of his offspring was foreign to his calm and untroubled personality.

In his younger days, Granddad was known to be an occasional drinker and had been quite fond of cigarettes, but those ways were gone by the time I was born, as he had suffered his first heart attack and had been advised to abstain. (He was, however, a fierce snuff dipper in his later years.) From what I gathered, he never pined for his old vices but heeded the advice of his



doctor, John Pate of Sanderson, to follow a healthy lifestyle until his death many years later.

During his seventh decade, Jim Carll of the *San Angelo Standard Times* described Grandad this way: “The pioneer ranchman still rides when occasion demands. His blue eyes are sharp, far-seeing. His voice retains the strength of youth. His sturdy figure is block-like in its strength.” Carll uses the word “strength” twice in one paragraph to describe Grandad, and, even though he was getting on in years and his health was failing, it’s the word I would use if asked to describe him today.

Grandad probably never slept through a sunrise in his life. He called it a day when the sun went down, literally going to bed with the chickens, and arose while the stars still blinked in the night sky. I don’t ever remember him sleeping in, an activity as alien to him as eating with chopsticks. Even though it would be too dark for him to go about his morning rounds, there he would be at the kitchen table, sitting in front of the wood cookstove on icy winter mornings, playing solitaire and drinking strong black coffee from a battered old tin cup, impatient to be out and about.

As the weather turned milder, he’d omit the fire, shed his undershirt, and switch from corduroy and wool to khaki. Whatever the fabric, his pants were always tucked into high-topped black boots, as they had been in his cowhand days, and the style rarely varied.

In his younger days on the range, Charlie’s attire was probably similar to that of the other cowhands, who wore a good pair of ducking pants, sturdy chaps, the ever-present hat, and high-quality leather boots. (In winter, they wore a pair of checked, woolen “California pants” or “Oregon pants” underneath, along with a ducking jacket.) Those riders were prouder of a good pair of boots and a good saddle than of anything else. And, according to Dryden range rider John Doak, if a cowboy ever showed up wearing a tie, the others would “hurrah” (harass) him.

Like his contemporaries, Grandad chose a plain, almost austere, way of life, compatible with the small white frame house he had built near the abundant springs flowing out of the hills on the north end of the ranch. Nestled in a large yard with a ditch of water from the springs flowing through it, and surrounded by pecan and sycamore trees, grapevines, and various shrubs, the house sat in the valley as neatly as a teacup in its saucer.



Charlie

There were just four or five small rooms with a porch surrounding three sides of its exterior. The first house on the ranch had been almost primitive in comparison; the new house, built in the early thirties, was a step up but still far from elaborate.

“A house don’t make no money” was a common sentiment of many of Grandad’s generation, and today there are still West Texas ranches with fine-built pens, barns, and sheds that put the living quarters to shame. There were, of course, large, ornate ranch homes built in other areas of the state, but old photos and sketches of the humble little homes built in the Trans-Pecos take us back to our roots in a hurry.

Always feeling more comfortable outdoors, Grandad slept on a metal cot covered with a tarp on the screened-in porch during the summer months and then moved into the “radio room” for the winter. This was simply a closed-in end of the porch, without an ounce of insulation, barely big enough for a double bed and a large radio. Even in cold weather, his main cover was a canvas tarp. Just as he rose early, he also went to bed early, and as soon as the radio began to blare in the dusky light of evening, we knew it was time to call it a day.

Through the years, Grandad opened his doors to all who knocked. What has become stereotypical Western hospitality was real to him and to all his neighbors. If you’d ridden or driven far, you could count on a meal and a place to sleep. His open door represented a generosity of spirit, a fellowship with other human beings, a helping hand extended in time of need. It reflected the soul of the true old West, now disappearing as a new generation unaccustomed to hardship and less dependent on their fellow human beings takes its place.

Grandad offered his home not only to anyone who showed up but also to two foster daughters, Mary Jo and Jenny. (I use the term “foster” for lack of a better one. While there was no actual legal designation, these children were taken in and cared for by Grandad through some arrangement with their families, who were not able to provide for them.) Mary Jo wrote, years later:

The Chandler Ranch is a very special place for me. Your granddaddy was very good to me. He taught me so much. He had a jersey milk cow named Tiny and he taught me how to milk and to ride. I’ve even walked behind a horse
