



Contemporary Ranches *of* Texas

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Chimney Creek Ranch

CHIMNEY CREEK RANCH LIES NORTHEAST OF ABILENE, FIVE miles west of the highest point in the region, at which Highways 6 and 351 join. To the northwest is Stamford, home of the famous Swenson Ranch. The land here was once the range of the buffalo and the Comanche Indian who depended on the shaggy bison for food and shelter. Since the demise of the buffalo, it has been cattle range cut into numerous ranches both large and small. Chimney Creek Ranch is mostly rolling plain, but to the east the land is broken by canyons and draws. The rocky region is not level enough for farming. Nearby Albany, which calls itself the home of Hereford cattle in Texas, has been a center for the ranching culture that settled in this area in the late 1850s. Early settlement was sparse because of the threat of raiding Indians and a scarcity of water. The major source of water for livestock and people was, and still is, tanks hollowed out in the draws to catch runoff from the infrequent rains. Some wells along creeks and draws provide adequate amounts of water for livestock, but the windmill which helped settle the High Plains is absent from this landscape.

Settlement in the area before the Civil War was aided by the establishment of Camp Cooper almost thirty miles to the north on the Clear Fork of the Brazos River. Here Col. Robert E. Lee commanded elements of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, whose mission was to monitor Indians. He later commanded the Department of Texas at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio before he resigned his commission to join Confederate

forces. When the Civil War broke out, Camp Cooper was surrendered to the Confederates. The main Confederate presence along the frontier was the Frontier Regiment, a loosely organized unit that tried, with limited success, to protect settlers over an area far too large for the small force available. When it became apparent that Indian raids were becoming more successful, settlers gathered at civilian frontier "forts," such as Fort Davis in present-day Stephens County and Fort Owl Head in Shackelford County. These forts were little more than a cluster of houses, usually of picket construction, with protection afforded by the presence of armed civilians, which proved some deterrent to raiding Indians. The settlers, some of whom farmed along the Clear Fork, continued to see after their Longhorn cattle as best they could as the animals roamed at will across the unfenced ranges. These early ranchers continued what they called "cow hunts" to brand feral cattle roaming the river bottoms and surrounding hills.

When the war ended and the army returned to the frontier, a military post was established at the point where Highway 283 now crosses the Clear Fork. Fort Griffin, as the post was named, became one of the most famous of the Texas forts, its reputation based largely on the town that grew up along the river. Troops stationed there were African American soldiers whom the Indians dubbed "Buffalo Soldiers" because of their hair, which to the Indians resembled that of the shaggy buffalo. The post was also where Col. Ranald Mackenzie mounted his expedition to the High Plains in 1874, during which he caught the Comanches and Kiowas in winter camp in Palo Duro Canyon and effectively ended their nomadic life by killing more than a thousand of their horses.

The town of Fort Griffin, or Griffin Flat as it was sometimes called, attracted a legion of frontier types that included gunmen, gamblers, prostitutes, petty thieves, and buffalo hunters along with the settlers. Names such as Pat Garrett, Doc Holliday, Wyatt

Earp, Lottie Deno, Big Nose Kate, Hurricane Minnie, John Selman, and John Larn are part of the history of this colorful era. Among the ranchers were names such as Reynolds, Matthews, Irwin, Lynch, Cauble, Howsley, and others that are still found in the area today.

The town's popularity was a result of several factors. It was a major outfitting point for the buffalo hunters, who by 1879 had decimated the great southern herd, the result of a massive slaughter and incredible waste of a natural resource mistakenly thought to be limitless. Millions of dried flint hides, named for the hardness of the untanned skin, were brought in by the wagon load by hunters passing through Fort Griffin. Also during this time herds of cattle from South Texas were being driven on the nearby Western Cattle Trail. The trail drivers brought excitement to the town, especially to the saloons and merchants. But after the Indians were forced onto reservations in Oklahoma, the sale of goods to the hunters ceased, trail driving disappeared, and the post closed so that the soldiers could be moved further west to subdue the Indians there, life in the area settled into various agricultural pursuits, of which ranching was and still is the principal one.

The name of Chimney Creek Ranch, according to local historian Morris Ledbetter, derives from several stone chimneys that once stood along the creek that runs through the ranch. They were all that remained of settlers' cabins, but no one knows who constructed any of them. Noted Texas historian A. C. Greene, who has visited the site several times, has never seen even the remains of these chimneys.

Another local historian, Joan Farmer, believes that the chimney referred to in the name was part of the house built along the creek at Smith Station, a stop-over on the route of the Butterfield Overland Mail, which crossed the ranch. The success of the operation, which ran from St. Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco, California, in the late 1850s, depended upon a series of well-organized and carefully located



BOTTOM: *Robert B. Waller*

relay stations to serve its passengers. Waterman Ormsby, a journalist who rode in the first coach going west, reported that the only housing at Smith Station on that opening run was a tent for the passengers and the family of the station operator, whose name was Smith, and a partially erected brush corral for the horses. Ormsby noted that the brush wall of the corral was chinked with mud. Supper that evening was some "cake cooked in the coals," dried beef, and some "clear coffee." Little other record exists of the stop. Later, a stone house was constructed along with a stone corral to hold horses. Nothing remains today of either. Apparently, the stones were sold during the Great Depression to the contractor building nearby Highway 6 and were crushed into gravel for the roadbed. In the 1950s when mesquite brush began to encroach on the grazing land, the owners arranged for two bulldozers to pull a large chain across the land to knock down the brush. This dragging obliterated any sign of the structures. A historical marker located on ranch property along Highway 6 stands as the lone monument to this historic effort at moving mail and passengers across the vast West. The effort ended as the Civil War loomed, and service by horse- or mule-drawn coach ceased, replaced later by the iron horse, the railroad.

In the 1870s a unique house was built on the property that would become Chimney Creek Ranch, but there is no record of who lived there. The house was square and constructed of limestone quarried nearby. A bedroom and living room occupied one level, and up about five steps was another bedroom and a porch. The kitchen was in a separate structure. The most unusual feature of the house was a basement accessible from the rear, where the land slopes toward the creek. Local legend has it that the basement served as a place to hide horses from lurking Indians who frequently raided in the area, and that the house was used to cache arms for the Confederates during the Civil War. The generally acknowledged building date of the house in the 1870s, years

after the war had ended, makes either of these stories unlikely, but the legends persist.

Ownership of the land passed through several hands in early years, but by 1882 the ranch was in the hands of Frank Eben Conrad, a well-known and successful merchant in Fort Griffin. Farmer states that Conrad and Charles Rath had the sutler's store that provisioned the military post and later moved to the town along the river. Conrad also later opened a store in Albany. He had done a booming business in food, clothing, lead, gun powder, rifles, knives, and other supplies for the buffalo hunters and trail hands, and he had also bought the buffalo hunters' hides.

After the military post closed, the hunters left to pursue other work, the frontier types moved on to other lawless towns further west, and the town of Fort Griffin languished. When the Texas Central Railroad laid its tracks through the area, the line went through Albany, not Fort Griffin, and the formerly bustling town died. Conrad closed his Fort Griffin store and concentrated his efforts in Albany. Apparently, Conrad divorced his first wife, who bore him one son, Frank B. Conrad, who married Ella Matthews, a girl of sixteen. Her family was prominent in the region and across the West. Her brother, J. A. "Bud" Matthews, had married Sallie Reynolds, who later authored *Interwoven*, a classic volume on life in the area. Miss Reynolds was the sister of several brothers who pioneered ranching and trail driving in several western states, including New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, and Arizona. They were peers with the legendary Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving, who established several Texas ranches, the main one being the Long X at Kent, which is also included in this volume.

Conrad committed suicide on his birthday in 1892, apparently distraught over an unfortunate situation involving his first wife. Farmer records that he had believed she was guilty of adultery, but discovered his error and realized he had wronged her. Conrad

left Ella with five children under the age of ten, all of whom had unfortunate lives. The daughter, Mary, died suddenly after playing in the snow. Joseph was killed on the ranch when his horse ran under a tree limb and crushed his skull. George committed suicide, and John died of a heart attack in 1945, the same year that Ella died at the age of eighty. Only Louis outlived his mother.

Ella continued to run the ranch after her husband's death and depended heavily on the advice of her brother, J. A. "Bud" Matthews, who owned Lamshead Ranch on the Clear Fork. It would later be the home of one of the most famous modern cattle barons, Watkins Reynolds Matthews. Mrs. Conrad granted permission for the Texas Central Railroad to lay tracks across her property and then constructed a set of cattle pens to serve as a shipping point for her own and her neighbors' cattle. She named it Bud Matthews, Texas, to honor her brother. In some years, more than 100,000 head of cattle were shipped from the site. By this time the ranch had grown to 14,000 acres.

In 1920 George Robert Davis bought the ranch from Mrs. Conrad's heirs. Davis, already established in ranching near Breckenridge in neighboring Stephens County to the east, had moved to the area from Kaufman, Texas. His sister Alice married Breckenridge Walker, the first white child born in the new settlement and for whom the town was named. Davis sold his Stephens County property to pay for the new ranch. He moved his family to the ranch, added on to the house, and later moved a small house to the site and joined the structures into one. He constructed a rock wall around the yard and built a small bunk house and a large barn. His family members still own the property, and the operation still uses the buildings he constructed.

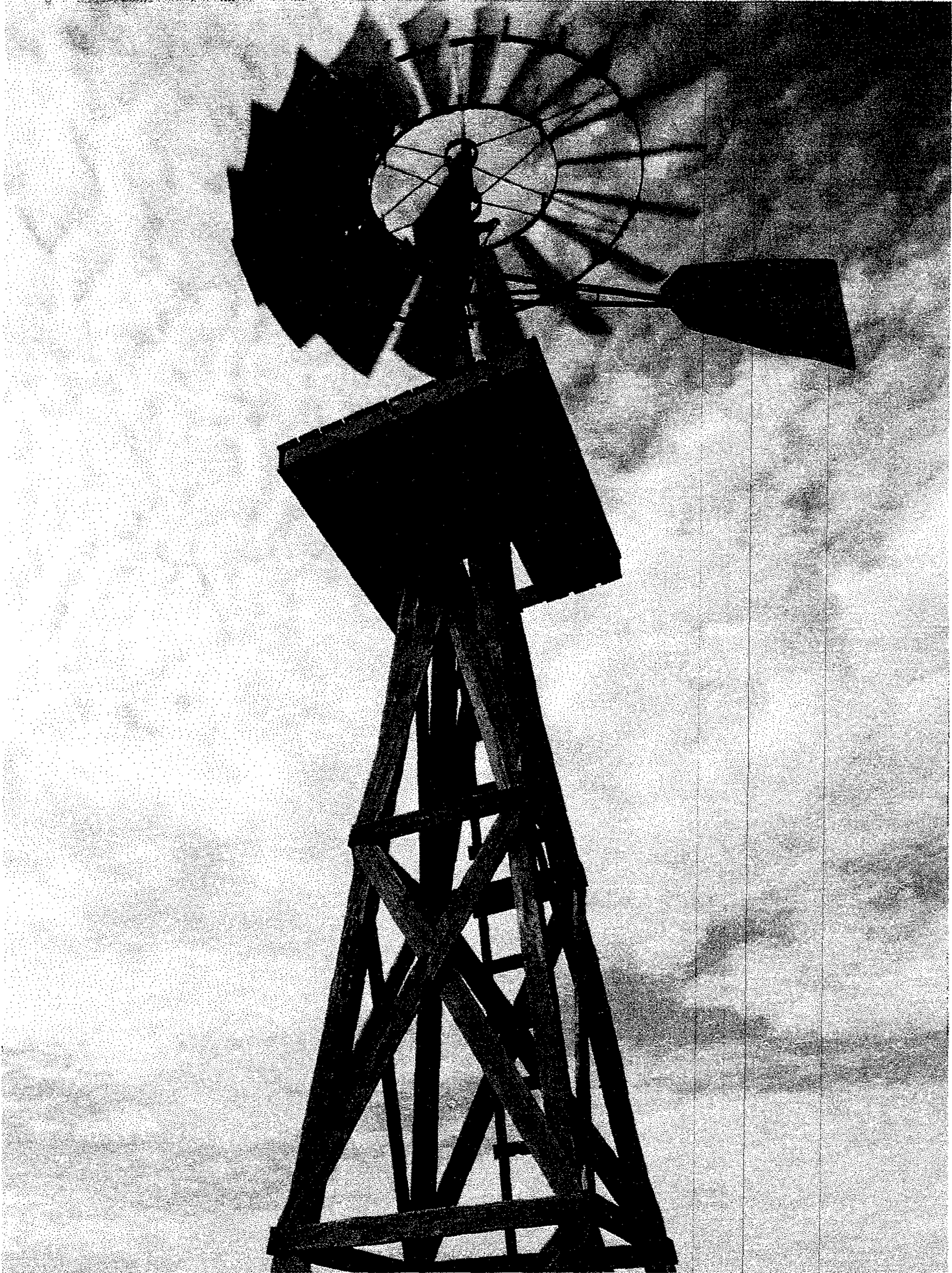
Davis moved the ranch into the modern period. He enlarged the pens at Bud Matthews Switch, as it came to be called, when the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad took over the line. He and his son

Louie established the ranch as a producer of fine Hereford cattle and well-trained ranch horses. Among the cowboys who helped him were Clarence Holt, Lewis Burfiend, and Duncan Leech.

Successful ranchers often built homes in a nearby town or city so their families could enjoy the comforts of city life. Davis was no exception and erected his "prairie mansion" in Abilene, about thirty miles away. It was a three-floor structure with servants' quarters in the rear. He left the running of the ranch to Grady Smith (no relation to the operator of the Butterfield station on the ranch). Smith kept a busy schedule typical of cowboy work in that day, working seven days a week. The threat of screwworms kept him and other cowboys "prowling" through pastures on a regular basis, especially in warm months when infestation was at its worst. Smith's daughter Florene recalls that her father spent five days a week in the saddle looking after the cattle and worked weekends building and repairing fences or doing the other chores necessary to keep the ranch going.

By the 1930s the pens at the Bud Matthews Switch had fallen into disrepair, so Smith undertook the rebuilding, despite the effects of the Great Depression. He traded hogs raised on the ranch to Parker Sears, who ran the lumber yard in Albany, to help pay for the pine lumber used to rebuild the fences. He hauled the posts from Palo Pinto County to the east, where cedar growth has long supplied one of the favorite natural wood posts for such purposes. Bud Matthews Switch had a new lease on life and served neighboring Bluff Creek Ranch, Cook Ranch, Dawson Conway Ranch, and McComas Ranch.

One of the most interesting incidents or "wrecks" (a cowboy term for disaster) involved the shipment of a small herd of buffalo. Buffalo are very difficult to manage, but the cowboys finally succeeded in capturing them in the pens. Once the rail cars had been moved into place, the men began loading the animals into the car. The buffalo, distressed at being confined, began using their strong heads and horns



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to break boards off the sides of the cars. The conductor, who had some ranch experience himself, encouraged the men to finish loading the animals before they tore up the rail cars. After the cowboys finished their work and the train pulled out, the buffalo settled down and arrived at their destination.

In the early 1940s, Smith was injured in a riding accident. As he was attempting to mount his horse, his foot slipped in the stirrup, and he pulled the horse over on himself. Smith left the ranch in 1945 because he had not fully recovered. He purchased a store in nearby Hamby that he operated until he retired in 1976. Because the store was on the highway between Abilene and the ranch, members of the Davis family often stopped by to visit. Smith died in 1986.

When G. R. Davis died, he left behind three children: Louie, Robbie, and Oma Frances. Today, Chimney Creek and other ranches that Davis purchased over the years—one in Throckmorton County and another near Midland—have been divided among the surviving heirs. Part is owned by Louie Bob Davis and the rest, including Chimney Creek, by Mary Frances "Chan" Driscoll. She lives in Midland and leases the ranch property to Waller Cattle Company. This absentee management began in 1957 when Driscoll's mother, Robbie, inherited the property and realized that she would be unable to operate it. She leased it to C. B., Robert, and Ruby Waller, doing business as Waller Cattle Company. Robert, the son of C. B., took over the ranch in 1973 after his father died and then took as a partner his son Robert, a graduate of Texas Tech University with a background in agriculture.

The Wallers have sought to improve the ranch by cross-fencing the pastures. The largest pasture was eleven sections, or 7,000 acres, when the Wallers took over the ranch. Another pasture that contained four sections has been subdivided into four pastures of 640 acres each. These are small compared to some ranches, but the Wallers feel that they have better

control of their range and rotation grazing with this method, one that is growing in acceptance in contemporary ranching.

The Wallers do not raise horses but instead buy the Quarter Horse geldings they need for the work, usually keeping about six for the remuda of using horses. The cattle herd includes about 500 cows, 150 replacement heifers, and 40 bulls, about the optimum number for this ranch. The Wallers originally favored breeding Black Angus bulls to Hereford cows, and then phased out the Herefords. They then started crossbreeding the Angus-Hereford offspring, usually called Black Baldies, with Chianina and Maine Anjou bulls. The latter are black with some white, sometimes white stockings on the legs. The Wallers have also used some Charolais and Limousin bulls.

Since Chimney Creek Ranch is largely on a rolling plain, it lacks the draws necessary to provide enough tanks to water the stock. Although subsurface water is rare in this area, a well along the creek near the headquarters provides water for the family's personal use and is pumped to twenty-two troughs strategically placed in the different pastures so that cattle do not have to walk far to find water. The Wallers must check these regularly to ensure adequate water for the stock. This pipe network is essential to the ranch's operation.

The large open areas found on Chimney Creek and two more ranches to the east convinced area game conservationists, led by Lamshead's Watt Matthews, that antelope might find it suitable habitat. The mature antelope that were brought in and released did indeed thrive, but the young proved easy prey for coyotes. Since an antelope reacts to danger by fleeing rather than fighting, the females would abandon the young who were too weak to keep up. The surviving antelope have since died, and the experiment was deemed a failure.

Railroad service in the area was discontinued in 1967, and the rails were torn up in the early 1970s.

But the Bud Matthews Switch continues to be the shipping point for Chimney Creek Ranch. Mrs. Driscoll restored the pens in 1992 and placed a restored cattle car at the site to honor those who established the facility. She also secured a historical marker from the State of Texas for the site and had the Butterfield Overland Mail historical marker relocated to the site along Highway 6, where it is plainly visible to travelers.

Mrs. Driscoll has the ranch in a trust with a bank

in Fort Worth and has built a small house in which she stays from time to time when she visits the ranch. She says, "This is my heaven on earth. Chimney Creek Ranch is a peaceful spot." Because she spent time there with her grandparents as a child, she reveres the ranch and its history, which, with its ties to Fort Griffin, the Butterfield Overland Mail, the Reynolds-Matthews family, and the progeny of G. R. Davis, is indeed a valuable part of the heritage that is Texas ranching.