

CHIMNEY CREEK CROSSINGS: an essay

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Special Thanks go to Special People

Watt Matthews
Robert Waller
Louie Bob Davis
Grady Smith
W. D. Thorn
John Henry Faulk
A. C. Green

CHIMNEY CREEK CROSSINGS

by Chan Driscoll

When in the beginning, God created our universe, I have always imagined His resting that seventh day in the middle of Chimney Creek Ranch. If you have ever had the opportunity to view a sunrise on the prairie, you will understand what I mean. As one looks and listens on a cool, clear, quiet morning in the grey dawn and suddenly sees the sun peek above the eastern horizon and scatter shafts of golden and crimson light, then violet and pink, rose, orange and yellow, finally blue and silver hues in the sky and upon the level plains, that is when God must have said, "It is very good." Deo volente, God willing, I shall attempt to paint a picture of this lovely land with the people and events that have shaped its history.

There were three babies born in Texas during the last decade of the 19th Century whose paths crossed on Chimney Creek ranch. In 1889 my father, Thaddeus Edgar Johnson, was born in Freestone County. In 1896 my mother, Robbie Laurine Davis, was born in Stephens County. In 1899 Watkins Reynolds Matthews was born in Shackelford County.

Dad was the middle son of six sons born to Minnie B. Johnson and T. Edgar Johnson, whose complete family history has been recorded by George Alice Randolph in her 1974 publication of the Johnson family, "Woodland Cousins." This following little essay will recall Davis history as it relates to Patty Lambert,

Hank and T. Edgar Paup in their ownership of Chimney Creek ranch. These things I remember.

Chimney Creek was inhabited as early as Texas gained her statehood on December 29, 1845, by the Comanche Indians. We know little of life here until 1858 when the Butterfield Stage Line made a stopping point at the Smith Station. Then during the Civil War, when the lower floor of the main house, today the only stone portion, was used to store arms for the Confederacy in case there was a need to fight the Yankees in West Texas, its history makes an abrupt change.

We believe that the family on Chimney Creek who built Smith Station and the rock house, now the north end of the main ranch house, must have given up after the Civil War and moved on. There are no signs of homesteading for the next twenty years. We do know that the railroad was moving west. Workmen made a tent village wherever the railroad construction stopped. The best example of this is Abilene. It began as a town in 1881 only miles from Chimney Creek. As the Iron Horse pushed west, the buffalo hunters moved along like parasites - killing, killing, killing - skinning the buffalo and leaving the carcass for the buzzards to pick the bones. The buffalo hunters and the coming of the railroad finally drove the Comanche to seek new lands. This struggle made Chimney Creek a lonely, isolated country for these twenty years.

Later the mother and father of Watt Matthews enter the picture. They were Judge and Mrs. John A. Matthews of Albany who had a beautiful daughter, Ella. On April 23, 1881 she

married Frank B. Conrad. Frank Conrad was a widower with one small child. He brought his bride, Ella Matthews, to his ranch, Chimney Creek. Ella and Frank had five children while living on the ranch. Unfortunately, Frank Conrad died when Ella was only twenty-seven years old. It was often called the Conrad Place. Watt Matthews today remembers when my grandfather bought the ranch from George Conrad. He remembers when a switch of the Texas Central Railroad, later to become the M. K. T., came on Chimney Creek where cattle were loaded to send to market. It was named for Watt's father, the Bud Matthews switch. As a child once a year I was taken to this round-up when the Davis cattle were loaded into railroad cattle cars to head for market. We carried a chuck wagon dinner from Mamaw's home in Abilene to feed all the surrounding cowboys. They helped each other at round-up time. It works the same way today, neighbor helping neighbor.

Mother had a sister, Oma Frances "Pet" Davis, and a brother, Louie George Davis. They were all three born to Hattie Collins Davis and George Robert Davis, my Mamaw and Grandan, on the Davis Ranch east of Breckenridge. G. R. Davis, one of a large family from Kaufman County, had a sister, Alice, that figures in our moving history too.

Breckenridge Walker, to become my Uncle Breck, was the first white child born in a small settlement in Stephens County. Thus it was named for him, Breckenridge, Texas. He grew up in this community while G. R. Davis and his brothers and sisters grew up in Kaufman County. Meanwhile Uncle Breck married Alice Davis,

G. R.'s sister, and brought her to Breckenridge. Shortly thereafter G. R. Davis married Hattie Collins and they set out for Breckenridge. They headed west in a covered wagon with one trunk and a rocking chair as bride and groom.

Hattie Collins had one brother, Alex Collins, who later settled near San Angelo. He died there in 1952 while president of the San Angelo Citizens National Bank. Hattie Collins Davis was a delicate, sensitive, pretty school teacher when she married Grandan. He had gone only through the third grade in school. He was a hard working, intelligent, personable, honest rancher who soon became the village druggist as well.

The Davises saved money to buy land. First they settled east of Breckenridge. Finally they moved into town; this small ranch became a down payment for Chimney Creek twenty-five years later. But even at that time they did not sell all of the Stephens County ranch. Today many families own parts of the original ranch, each calling his "The Bob Davis Pasture." This land is next to the Breckenridge Walker ranch northeast of Breckenridge that is today owned by T. C. U. as a willed gift.

The Davises also took care of their loved ones. In 1926 Grandpaw Davis, G. R.'s father, was living in our home, died and was buried in Breckenridge. He had a long white beard and flowing white hair. At four years old I kept confusing him with Santa Claus. Mamaw's mother, by now called "Danamaw" by Robbie, Pet and Louie Davis, lived in Breckenridge with the Davis family until her death. Their home was on West Walker directly across the street from the Methodist church of which they were

active members. That church remains today in the same location in Breckenridge.

All three Davis children graduated from Breckenridge High School. Pet and Robbie attended S. M. U. and received B. A. degrees. Both girls became school teachers. Louie Davis went to Texas A&M University but became a rancher with his father, G. R. Davis, before graduation.

While World War I was going on, G. R. Davis was making his move. He bought Chimney Creek and moved his family to it from Breckenridge. They lived there until their mansion in Abilene at 718 Victoria Street was completed in 1923; the construction of this handsome house began in 1921. It took two years to complete this three story, eighteen room home with full attic, basement, garages and servants' quarters. The Chimney Creek ranch house had no inside plumbing; it had a separate house moved next to the existing rock structure to provide a kitchen. There was a springhouse to give semirefrigeration. Much later this second building was joined to the main house and is today its full kitchen and dining room.

At the end of World War I both Davis girls were teaching school. There was an oil boom going on in Breckenridge that brought new life to the community. A young lawyer, Thaddeus Edgar Johnson, just back from war duty for his country in France with a Law degree from Texas University and one from Oxford, England, came to seek his fortune in Breckenridge. There were no paved streets; he would bog down in mud knee-deep in bad, rainy weather. But T. Edgar Johnson never stayed bogged down long. Soon he met

and married the gentle, winsome middle child of the G. R. Davis family, my mother, Robbie Davis. They were married under the spreading pecan trees in the backyard by the two story rock side of the Chimney Creek ranch house. They were married on July 18, 1920 by T. Edgar Johnson's University of Texas roommate and closest friend for his entire lifetime, a Presbyterian minister, Dr. Robert Gribble.

I was born some years later at 1007 West Hulum, Breckenridge. In a few years I was joined by a baby sister, Robbie Lou. She was born with pyloric stenosis, today an easily corrected digestive obstruction. She was often very ill and hospitalized for months at a time. Thus the pattern began for me and Chimney Creek. My parents would take me to the ranch and leave me during Robbie Lou's attacks. She died as a young child, but I had developed four additional parents who continued to share Chimney Creek with me every summer of my life.

The no plumbing days at Chimney Creek are vivid in my memory, also the screened porches with swings and wicker rocking chairs and the turn-handle wall telephone called a magneto. It was a party line where one could listen to other peoples' conversation. However everyone informed me that to do this was very "bad manners." I love to think of the well out back before it went dry, the coolness of the spring house down the terraced rock steps west of the main house. The spring house was covered with a trumpet vine that had trumpetlike orange blossoms on it all summer long. I like to remember my Uncle Louie's taking an empty match box, string and two giant grasshoppers and making

me "a stage coach just like the one that stopped at Smith Station years ago south of the house." I like to remember hot summer afternoons when the cowboys in the bunk house and we in the main house lay on cots or pallets for naps to avoid the mid-day heat in our West Texas blisteringly hot, dry summers. My precious Pet, who became like my mother, read aloud innumerable books to me those many naptimes. This gave me a lifelong love of good literature. I remember making soap after hog killing time in the winter, gathering eggs down at the barn, feeding the chickens, and hiding my eyes when Mamaw wrang a chicken's neck for Sunday dinner. The cows down at the barn had to be milked every evening. Mamaw had a churn. She made butter, clabber, buttermilk and delicious thick cream. If I stood very close to my Grandan and remained ever so quiet while he was milking, he would shoot a spray of milk to me straight from the cow. I can still feel the warm milk on my face and taste it as it hit my mouth. Oh, the joys of country living and childhood dreams!

After the Indian camps vanished and the bison had disappeared, after the Butterfield stage coach had its short life in 1858, after the Civil War days of stored munitions in the rock house, and after the Conrad's ownership of Chimney Creek for around forty years concluded, then came the G. R. Davis purchase of this splendid ranch in 1919. G. R. Davis and his son, Louie, ran the ranch operation alone in the beginning. When they moved into Abilene in 1923 however, a foreman was hired to live in the Chimney Creek house. This happy association lasted with Grady

and Bertha Smith until 1939. Today Grady at eighty years old says, "I drew a pay check from the Davises for fifty years. They were the best, well, the only, employers I ever had." Grady and Bertha had two of their four children born at Chimney Creek. Their first child, Florine, and I played together as kiddos and love to remember "the olden days" as we visit today. Water was piped into the ranch house. Then came Rural Electrification that brought electricity to it. The telephone was added and later butane gas was obtained. Acquiescence was not the rancher's view of progress. He embraced progress. After the Smiths moved to another ranch house Pet lived on Chimney Creek until her death in 1941. Again this area became the Davis ranch headquarters. By now the Davis ranch operation was an expanding one. Chimney Creek remained their headquarters until G. R. Davis's death December 31, 1955 when my mother, Robbie Davis Johnson, inherited Chimney Creek.

Mother chose to lease the land. She had not been trained as an agronomist so she leased Chimney Creek to Charlie Waller of Breckenridge in 1957. Mr. Waller ran his Waller Cattle Co. from this land and put his son's family, Ruby and Robert Waller and son, Bobby, in the Chimney Creek ranch house. Charlie Waller died in December of 1973, but Robert Waller picked up the lease and has lived there until this day, aided by the Bobby Waller family who lives in Albany.

Chimney Creek Crossings have been few but enduring. The land is much like it was over a hundred years ago. Today it has more prickly pear and mesquite and broomweed, more oil and gas

that has been drilled out of the earth to supply industry and transportation of America. But the changes are almost imperceptible. The watch for and the killing of the rattle snake is still a grave task. The fear of fire on any of the land is a constant danger. The lack of water and the dread of drought has been and will remain our number one problem. These three facts have always existed and will always exist.

The wild life and vegetation on Chimney Creek must be very much like it was in the days the plains Indians roamed the West. The buffalo, correctly named the bison, herds are gone, but the other changes are minimal. The land never provided much food for the red man. Today there are a few wild plum trees, but most fragile plants have been eradicated. Sitting outside under the stars at night one can hear the howl of coyotes on the distant prairie. The small deer is scarce, the Bob cat and wild turkey exist but not in abundance. The Jack rabbit and prairie dog are ever present. There are seasonal birds to hunt. However we have never allowed hunters on this ranch. Chimney Creek is cattle country. First the long-horned cattle survived here, then the Hereford did well. Today the Wallers do cattle breeding with the Angus, the Brahma and other breeds that makes a strong, meaty range animal. The Waller Cattle Co. supplies our markets with good beef for American tables.

Horses on Chimney Creek are for work purposes. The cowboys are the riders. My fondest memory of my horsemanship was riding on a little pillow in front of Grandan. I held on to the saddle

horn for dear life. We often had hay rides in a horse drawn wagon for Abilene friends. Urban friends today enjoy a visit to Chimney Creek to view a genuine working ranch of the 20th Century. In the north tank by the barn as a child, I went fishing, even found some Indian arrow-heads there sometime. If I ever caught a fish Mamaw made me throw it back since they were too small to cook. Wild life remains on Chimney Creek much as it has always been, in modest array.

As I sit on the south porch of the newly constructed Little House, one of the Chimney Creek compound, I feel as if I am looking into the past. First is the Carriage Shed, then our Little House and garage where once the chicken house and smoke house were located; the main house comes next with its many additions, then the bunk house, now a work shop, and finally the barn and corrals. This picturesque setting is in a valley along water where the breezes blow in a gentle pattern. It is a working cattle ranch with fences, cattle guards, pastures, water tanks and wind mills. It is heaven on earth to a little girl who was born to parents married on it and who has children who will inherit it. We are not a capricious clan. We are pioneer stock. We are loyal to the land. It is our past, present and future in the American West. It represents our heritage and our peace. By the grace of God, Chimney Creek Crossings will never end.