

**FRANK EBEN CONRAD**  
**1842-1892**

**I. CONTEXT**

In the mid-1800s and early post-Civil War eras, military outposts were established on the Texas frontier as non-Native settlement pushed further west across the state. They were ostensibly erected to protect settlers from Native Americans threats, real or imagined. The forts also served as incubators of commerce, attracting merchants who served the needs of the military and civilians who lived nearby. When threats from Native Americans subsided after the Civil War and the military moved on, frontier merchants found new sources of trade with buffalo hunters and cattle drovers. One such merchant was Frank Eben Conrad who built a prosperous general merchandise business at Fort Griffin and Albany. His success earned him the title of “merchant prince”<sup>1</sup> and he became well known throughout West Texas.

**II. OVERVIEW**

Frank Eben Conrad was born on May 4, 1842 in Rockford, Illinois, the son of John Francis and Mary Ann (Brookbank) Conrad. Following the death of his parents in Tampa, Florida in 1854, he moved to San Antonio, Texas to live with his aunt and uncle. He worked as a clerk in his uncle’s store until the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> He then enlisted in the Confederate army, serving as quarter master sergeant for Company C, Texas 31<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Regiment.<sup>3</sup>

After the Civil War, Conrad put the skills he developed working for his uncle and his service in the Civil War to use. In July 1870, the *San Antonio Express* noted that “our young friend F. E. Conrad” had established a business under the name of F. E. Conrad & Co. at Fort McKavett, located in southwestern Menard County. The newspaper stated that Conrad was well known for his business qualifications and expressed the sentiment that he would prosper in this venture.<sup>4</sup> A notice appearing in the same newspaper in December 1873 seemed to imply that by that date, Conrad was associated with Fort Concho, across the North Concho River from present day San Angelo, Texas.<sup>5</sup>

In 1875, Conrad entered into a partnership with Charles Rath, a frontier merchant who found success through trading partnerships with Native Americans and as a teamster hauling freight along the Santa Fe Trail which ran from Western Missouri to Santa Fe. The pair opened a store and hideyard “on a hill overlooking the Flat at Fort Griffin” in Shackelford County, and operated it under the name of Conrad & Rath.<sup>6</sup> In addition to serving the fort, which was established in 1867, and nearby civilians, the store also benefitted from trade with buffalo hunters who pursued the animal for its hide until the southern herd was depleted in the late 1870s. Indeed, Conrad & Rath’s store was the largest supplier of the Sharps Sporting Rifle, the hunters’ preferred weapon and a leading contributor to the destruction of the great buffalo herds in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Having been the primary staple of the diet and culture of the Comanche and other nomadic tribes of the Great Plains, the eradication of the buffalo contributed to the removal of Native Americans to reservations in Indian Territory. As a result of the buffalo hunts, Conrad also conducted a successful business in buffalo robes.<sup>8</sup>

Conrad essentially became a frontier banker through practices such as advancing cash to the buffalo hunters, receiving their cash deposits, accepting cash orders for their skinners, and purchasing the hides they collected. He also paid cash for Shackelford County script. As the unofficial banker of Fort Griffin, Conrad kept the cash that was entrusted to him in an iron safe.<sup>9</sup>

As business with the buffalo hunters declined, Conrad & Rath engaged in a lucrative business with cattle drovers. By 1875, cattle drovers had opened the Great Western Trail from South Texas north to the Fort Griffin area and on to Kansas. For several years, Conrad and Rath's store was the only provisioning point along the trail and the pair geared their business accordingly. In 1878, they constructed a new store on the Flat at Fort Griffin.<sup>10</sup> An advertisement they placed in the *Fort Griffin Echo* in May 1879 boasted that the firm carried the largest and most complete stock west of Fort Worth, with drovers outfitting goods a specialty.<sup>11</sup>

Around 1879, Rath sold his interest in the company to Conrad. An advertisement in the October 18, 1879 issue of the *Fort Griffin Echo* listed only Conrad's name. In the ad, Conrad stated that "My stock of groceries, staple dry goods, clothing, boots and shoes, hats and gentlemen's furnishing goods, is now complete. My purchases were made before the recent advances in eastern markets. My entire stock has been purchased since First of July, 1879 . . . . Come and see my stock and rock bottom prices."<sup>12</sup> A year later, John Bradley became a partner in the business that was known as F. E. Conrad & Co.<sup>13</sup>

Conrad found ways to exploit local commodities as he continued to operate his store. Although the wholesale slaughter of the buffalo had ended by the late 1870s, the bones that were left scattered in the countryside had a marketable value. Conrad took advantage of the abundant supply of bones by purchasing them for resale. He also engaged in the wholesale pecan

business.<sup>14</sup> In 1881, the same year that the army closed Fort Griffin, Conrad opened a branch store fifteen miles to the south in Albany, Texas. He moved there after the city became the terminus of the Texas Central Railroad in 1882. He first operated the store in a one story building and then moved it one block south to a two-story building. It was around this time that Conrad served as a Shackelford County Commissioner.<sup>15</sup>

Conrad also expanded his trade by engaging in the wool market. By the early 1880s, Shackelford County was a major sheep ranching center in northwest Texas and F. E. Conrad & Co. played a large role in the buying and selling of wool. The company placed an ad in the *Albany News* on May 26, 1887 in which it announced the opening of the city's wool market on June 4. The company offered approximately 700,000 pounds of wool for sale. The ad claimed that the wool was "mostly twelve months clip" and was "the choicest and most attractive of North Texas."<sup>16</sup>

An advertisement that Conrad placed in the *Albany News* in 1890 provides a good summary of his career as a frontier merchant. It read "We staid and did business here in the drought times; We came here FIRST in the early times; We were here in the Indian times; We sold goods here in the Soldier times; We did a little business here in the buffalo times; We went slow here in the hard times; We rushed things here in the cattlemen's time; We handled wool here in the sheepmens [sic] time; We boomed things here in booming times; We will remain here till better times."<sup>17</sup>

Around 1872, Frank Eben Conrad married Davidella Ella McGavock (1855-1916). They had one child, Frank Baker Conrad (1873-1955), who was born in Baltimore, Maryland. Frank

and Davidella's marriage was short-lived and ended in divorce. By 1880, his son and his sister, Louisa, were living with him in Shackelford County.<sup>18</sup>

Conrad married Rose Ella Matthews (Ella M., 1865-1945) on April 23, 1881.<sup>19</sup> They had five children; Joseph Matthews (1882-1906), George Reynolds (1884-1930), John Newland (1886-1945), Louis B. (1888-1969), and Mary (1890-1905). The couple first lived in Fort Griffin. In 1884, the family moved into a large home at the corner of Jacobs and North Third Street in Albany.<sup>20</sup>

Conrad retired from business in 1891 to devote more time to his Chimney Creek Ranch in Shackelford County, which he had purchased in 1888. On his fiftieth birthday, May 4, 1892, he had a will made in which he left all of his property and assets to his wife, Ella. He then committed suicide at 11:00 pm that evening in the house in Albany while his family was at the ranch. He was buried in Albany Cemetery. After his death, his estate was valued at \$45,357.56, an amount equal to more than \$1.5 million in 2015. His assets included 6,560 acres in Shackelford County (not including property within the town of Albany), as well as property in Throckmorton, Haskell, and Stephens counties. He had 600 head of cattle and 40 horses at his Chimney Creek Ranch.<sup>21</sup>

After Conrad's death, Ella moved to another house in Albany and later moved to Chimney Creek Ranch. The 1876 ranch house still exists. She was living in Cuthbert, Mitchell County, Texas at the time of her death on September 4, 1945. She outlived all but one of her children.<sup>22</sup>

### **III. SIGNIFICANCE**

As a legendary frontier merchant, Frank Eben Conrad played a significant role in the radical physical and cultural transformation of West Texas, especially Shackelford County, from the 1870s through the 1880s. By supplying goods to the military, area residents, buffalo hunters, and cattle drovers as well as acting as a banker and purchasing raw materials for resale, Conrad contributed to the area's economic development. This in turn created a more secure environment in which non-Native settlements transitioned from frontier enclaves to modern towns and cities.

#### IV. DOCUMENTATION

<sup>1</sup> Carl Coke Rister uses this term in his book *Fort Griffin on the Texas Frontier* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 149, as does J. R. Webb in his biography of Conrad in the *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fco44>), accessed September 2, 2015. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>2</sup> Webb, "Conrad, Frank Eben." The names of Conrad's aunt and uncle have not been confirmed. The 1860 U. S. Census indicates that a Frank and Laiza Conrad were living with G. P. Port, a 50-year-old merchant living in San Antonio with other members of the Port family ranging in age from 17 to 7. Frank Conrad was 17 and born in Canada and Laiza Conrad was 19 and born in Missouri. Frank's occupation was listed as a merchant. We know from the 1880 U. S. Census that Frank had a sister named Louisa (who was born in Canada) but she was nine years older than Frank according to that census [see endnote 18]. U. S. Census 1860, San Antonio, Ward 4, Bexar County, Texas: Roll M653\_1288; Page 424; Image: 376; Family History Library Film (www. Ancestry.com), retrieved October 9, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Historical Data Systems, comp. *U. S. Civil War Records and Profiles, 1861-1865* [([http://search.ancestry.com/search/collections/civilwar\\_histdatasys/37756881](http://search.ancestry.com/search/collections/civilwar_histdatasys/37756881). . . (accessed September 2, 2015)], Provo, UT, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2009 and *Texas Confederate Soldiers, 1861-1865*, Name Roster, Volume 1 (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1997), 106. Webb's biography of Conrad in the *Handbook of Texas Online* and Rister's *Fort Griffin on the Texas Frontier* (p.150) state that Conrad served in Hood's Texas Brigade.

<sup>4</sup> *San Antonio Express*, July 12, 1870.

<sup>5</sup> *San Antonio Express*, December 18, 1873. Fort Concho was established in 1868.

<sup>6</sup> H. Allen Anderson, "Rath, Charles," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fra43>) accessed September 2, 2015. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>7</sup> Vernon Lynch, "Fort Griffin," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uef04>) accessed September 8, 2015. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Modified February 5, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association; W. S. Peace, "Sharps Buffalo Rifle," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/Ins02>) accessed September 2, 2015. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association; Robert E. McNellis, Jr., "Frank Conrad and the Fort Griffin Sharps," *Arms Gazette* (December 1975): 34-37.

<sup>8</sup> Webb, "Conrad, Frank Eben."

<sup>9</sup> Webb, "Conrad, Frank Eben." Conrad placed an ad in the October 9, 1880 issue of the *Fort Griffin Echo* stating that his firm (at that time known as F. E. Conrad & Co.) would pay cash for Shackelford County script.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, "Rath, Charles."

<sup>11</sup> *Fort Griffin Echo*, May 3, 1879.

<sup>12</sup> *Fort Griffin Echo*, October 18, 1879.

<sup>13</sup> *Fort Griffin Echo*, October 9, 1880.

<sup>14</sup> Conrad placed a want ad for 500 tons of bones in the November 26, 1881 issue of the *Fort Griffin Echo*; Webb, "Conrad, Frank Eben."

<sup>15</sup> Joan Halford Farmer, "Remember When," *Albany News*, December 24, 1998; Don H. Biggers, *Shackelford County Sketches* (Albany, Texas: Albany News Office, 1908, reprint, ed. Joan Farmer, Albany and Fort Griffin: Clear Fork Press, 1974), 2.

<sup>16</sup> The text of the ad appears in Biggers, *Shackelford County Sketches* (reprint, 1974), 109.

<sup>17</sup> *Albany News*, February 7, 1890.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Census, 1880, Precinct 4, Shackelford, Texas; Roll: 1326; Family History Film: 1255326; Page 468D; Enumeration District, 179 ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)), accessed September 2, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> After her marriage, it appears as if Frank's wife used the name Ella M. Conrad as found in the documents pertaining to Frank's will and her death certificate.

<sup>20</sup> Farmer, "Remember When."

<sup>21</sup> Index to Probate Minutes, 1875-1880: Probate Records, 1880-1937 and Wills, 1881-1927, Shackelford County, Texas; Author: Texas Probate Court (Shackelford County); Probate Place: Shackelford County, Texas (Ancestry.com Texas, Wills and Probate Records, 1800-2000 [<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=FSProbate&h=332376>, accessed September 2, 2015]. Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc. 2015). The 2015 value of Conrad's estate was established using an inflation calculator at [http://halfhill.com/inflation\\_js.html](http://halfhill.com/inflation_js.html) on September 21, 2015. It was speculated that Conrad committed suicide after learning that his first wife had not committed adultery. This untruth was the reason that marriage ended in divorce. See Farmer, "Remember When."

<sup>22</sup> Farmer, "Remember When"; Texas, Death Certificates 1903-1982 for Ella Matthews Conrad, Ancestry.com. Texas, Death Certificates 1903-1982 [<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=txdeathcerts&h=24050830>, accessed September 7, 2015], Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc. 2013. Original data: Texas Department of State Health Services, Texas Death Certificates, 1903-1982.