

GOODNIGHT-LOVING TRAIL IN SHACKELFORD COUNTY, 1866-1867

I. CONTEXT

Spanish colonists brought a breed of longhorn cattle to Texas in the 1700s. Anglo-Celtic colonists brought another breed of longhorns descended from English stock in the early 1800s. These two strains interbred producing a hybrid that became known as the Texas Longhorn.¹ During the Civil War, unattended herds of livestock strayed over the open range of west Texas and quickly multiplied. At war's end, Texas was the only state that had experienced a significant increase in livestock as an estimated five million longhorn roamed west Texas between the Rio Grande and the upper Panhandle.²

Southern emigrants to the state joined returning Confederate soldiers in establishing herds with the hopes of turning a lucrative profit. But because of the surplus of cattle in Texas, there was no local demand for them which caused enterprising cowmen to seek other markets. As Texas railroads were still in their infancy, the most economical way to reach those markets was by driving the herds over hundreds of miles of open land. Because northern buyers were known to pay up to ten times more than buyers at the southern ports, millions of head of cattle were driven through Indian Territory to markets in Kansas and Missouri.³ However, federal troops in New Mexico, who were charged with feeding Native Americans on reservations, and gold seekers in the Rocky Mountains provided another market for the cattle. Individuals such as Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving endeavored to meet this western demand. The trail that the pair blazed became known as the Goodnight-Loving Trail. For fourteen years, over one million head of cattle were driven on this route, further entrenching the livestock industry in Texas and providing a base for the state's post-war economy.

II. OVERVIEW

Shackelford County was an unorganized and largely unsettled land mass of 914 square miles when Oliver Loving and Charles Goodnight engaged in cattle drives through it in

1866-1867 along what would become their namesake trail. The county was carved out of Bosque County in 1858 and was named for Dr. John Shackelford, a hero of the Battle of Goliad during the Texas Revolution. Shackelford County was officially organized in 1874 with Fort Griffin designated as the county seat. This was seven years after Goodnight and Loving's last joint drive through the county. In 1875, the county seat was moved closer to the center of the county to the settlement of Albany.⁴

Portions of what would become known as the Goodnight-Loving Trail were originally blazed by others. The segment that traversed through Shackelford County followed the trace of the Butterfield Overland Mail, also known as the Southern Overland Mail, which operated between 1858-1861. This route crossed from the northeast corner of the county diagonally toward the southwest, nearly dividing it into two equal parts.⁵ Portions of the Butterfield route had been explored by the U. S. Army in the late 1840s and early 1850s as its troops followed the advancing frontier.⁶

Between the Clear Fork of the Brazos, which slices through the northeast corner of Shackelford County, and Fort Chadbourne (in present-day Coke County), the Butterfield Overland Mail included four stations. One of these was Smith's Station, located on Chimney Creek west of present day Albany, the only stop in Shackelford County. By this point, the timbered landscape was beginning to give way to the arid environment of the southern Great Plains. Fortunately, the vicinity of Smith's Station provided a dependable water supply. The next stop was twelve miles to the southwest at Fort Phantom Hill in present-day Jones County. Before reaching that stop, the route crossed Deadman Creek near the Shackelford-Jones County line before crossing Elm Creek.⁷ Cattlemen such as Oliver Loving and Charles Goodnight found that the Butterfield Overland Mail's former stations provided landmarks for navigation and the route between them offered a proven transportation corridor that lessened the likelihood of encountering inhospitable environments, both human and natural.⁸

Oliver Loving was born in Kentucky in 1812. At the age of eighteen, he married Susan Doggett Morgan and engaged in farming for ten years. The couple had nine children, four of whom were born in Texas. In 1843, Loving and members of his extended family moved to Texas where he received 639.3 acres in three patents located in Collin, Dallas, and Parker counties. By

1855, his family had moved to what would soon be Palo Pinto County where he accumulated 1,000 acres. There they operated a country store near Keechi Creek and engaged in ranching. In 1857 his nineteen-year-old son drove a herd of cattle up the Shawnee Trail in east Texas to Illinois, profiting thirty-six dollars a head. The success of this drive encouraged the elder Loving to undertake a similar drive the following year.⁹ In 1860, Loving went in a different direction, crossing the Red River and heading northwest to the Arkansas River and then on to Pueblo, Colorado where he wintered and sold the herd for gold in the spring. The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 delayed his return to Texas.¹⁰ During the war, Loving drove cattle to Confederate forces along the Mississippi River. At the end of the war, it was reported that the Confederacy owed him between \$100,000 and \$250,000 with no means to pay, leaving him nearly bankrupt. Fortunately, with the abundant supply of cattle in Texas, he was able to assemble another herd.¹¹

Charles Goodnight was born in Illinois in 1836. His family moved to Milam County, Texas when he was eleven. He later managed the family's plantation and became a skilled rider and marksman. In the 1850s, he and a step-brother began their own ranch along the Brazos River, later moving to the Keechi Valley in Palo Pinto County. Goodnight supplemented his ranching income by hauling freight to Houston. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, he also served as a scout for local rangers and was instrumental in tracking down Comanche Chief Peta Nocona's camp which led to the recapture of Cynthia Ann Parker. During the Civil War, he served as a ranger in the Frontier Regiment, defending the Texas frontier against Indian attacks. In 1864, he returned to Palo Pinto County to rebuild his cattle business. After the end of the war, he assembled a herd in Throckmorton County but in September 1865, Comanches drove off nearly two thousand head of his cattle. Following this loss, he, like Oliver Loving, looked for a way to profitably rebuild his cattle business. Heading to western markets was the answer.¹²

Goodnight's experience as a ranger informed him that the terrain was suitable for blazing a trail in a northwest direction toward Colorado. But experience had also taught him that the territory was still held by the Kiowas and Comanches who could quite easily take his herd. Instead, Goodnight chose to take a southwesterly route along the Butterfield Overland Mail to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River. At that point he would leave the old mail route and follow the river in a northwest direction toward Fort Sumner, New Mexico and the Rockies, and

then follow the range to Colorado. This route, which cattleman George Reynolds had used in 1865,¹³ would be twice as long as the more direct northwest route but considerably safer. However, its stretches of arid terrain and alkaline water between the Middle Concho and Pecos rivers would force herds to travel eighty to one hundred miles without ready access to potable water.¹⁴

As Goodnight prepared for the arduous journey, Oliver Loving asked to join him on his drive to Fort Sumner. Goodnight readily accepted, relieved to have the help and guidance that the elder man's experience would offer.¹⁵ On June 6, 1866, Loving and Goodnight, along with eighteen well-armed men, set out for New Mexico with their combined herd of two thousand longhorns and stocker cattle. Their six hundred-mile journey started in Young County, twenty-five miles southwest of Fort Belknap.¹⁶

At Goodnight's insistence, the 54-year old Loving took charge of the drive. Goodnight scouted twelve to fifteen miles ahead, looking for water, rangeland for grazing, and suitable places to stop for the night, then doubling back to signal to the pointers which way the herd should travel.¹⁷ Hazards along the way resulted in the loss of hundreds of cattle. When the trail team reached Fort Sumner, New Mexico two months after their journey began, they sold the surviving longhorns to the army for \$12,000 in gold.¹⁸ Loving continued on to Denver with the stock cattle and Goodnight returned to Weatherford to assemble another herd for a second drive later that fall. Goodnight and Loving's success achieved legendary status and forever linked their names with a trail that became one of the most heavily used on the frontier.¹⁹

As the federal demand for beef increased, Loving and Goodnight started a third drive in the spring of 1867. Days into the journey, it was decided that Loving should travel on ahead to New Mexico and Colorado so that he could bid on contracts for the herd they were driving. Fearing reprisals from Indians, Goodnight advised Loving and his escort, "One Armed" Bill Wilson, to travel only at night. This they did for two nights until Loving became impatient and the pair continued their journey during daylight. Later that first day, they came under attack by Comanches and the pair took refuge along the banks of the Pecos River. Loving sustained a broken arm and severe gunshot wound in his side. Fearing that he would die, Loving sent Wilson back to the herd to inform the others of his fate.²⁰ Wilson reached Goodnight after three torturous

days of travel. With a party of fourteen men, Goodnight set out for the place where Wilson had left Loving but when he arrived, Loving was not there. Goodnight assumed the Comanches had killed him. However, the day after Wilson had left him, Loving made his own escape and five days later encountered Mexican traders whom he hired to take him to Fort Sumner. When Goodnight and Wilson learned that Loving had survived and was taken to the fort, they set out to find him. By the time they arrived, gangrene had overtaken his arm. Loving died on September 25, 1867, but not before Goodnight had promised to return his body to Weatherford.²¹ Loving was temporarily buried at Fort Sumner and Goodnight continued on to Colorado, in part, to sell the cattle and give Loving's share of the proceeds to his family. Loving's body was later exhumed, taken to Weatherford, and buried on March 4, 1868.²²

After Loving's death, the northern portion of the trail was extended from Denver to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Further revisions shortened the distances between points. Until the expansion of the western railroads in the 1880s and the fencing of the open range, the Goodnight-Loving Trail, or portions of it, was used by cattlemen from Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado. Most of the drives originated from Fort Concho or points further south.²³

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Charles Goodnight's and Oliver Loving's lucrative success with driving cattle to New Mexico and Colorado inspired many cattlemen to drive herds along their namesake trail. The trail ranked third in the volume of cattle driven to market annually between 1866 and 1875. It is estimated that four million cattle were driven from Texas to Kansas during the years of the long cattle drives.²⁴ From that number, it can be inferred that more than one million cattle reached markets via the Goodnight-Loving Trail. The trail differed from those that ran to the northern railheads in that it traversed over deserts and through mountain passes. Its open ranges subjected the herds and their cowboys to the potential of raids from Comanches and Apaches whereas the northern routes passed through a terrain that was easier to navigate and afforded better access to supplies. The northern routes led to railheads whereas the Goodnight-Loving Trail delivered the animals directly to the consumer.²⁵ However, both markets contributed to the state's post-Civil

War economic recovery and the dominance of the livestock industry, particularly in south and west Texas.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Donald Frazier, “Cowboys Riding the Trails,” *Heritage* (Spring 2003): 9.

² Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., Fifth edition, 1982), p. 612.

³ Robert F. Pace and Donald S. Frazier, *Frontier Texas: History of a Borderland to 1880* (Abilene, Texas: State House Press, McMurry University, 2004), pp. 185-86.

⁴ Carl Coke Rister, *Fort Griffin on the Texas Frontier* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 207. It should be noted that the article on Shackelford County in the *Handbook of Texas Online* states that the county was carved from Throckmorton County in 1874. See *Handbook of Texas Online*, Frank Beesley, “Shackelford County,” accessed August 25, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hcs08>. Similarly, Beesley’s entry states that the county is comprised of 887 square miles whereas Shackelford County’s website states that it has 914 square miles and also relates that the county was drawn from Bosque County in 1858. See Shirley W. Caldwell, “About Shackelford County,” accessed September 22, 2016, <http://shackelfordcounty.org/about-shackelford-county/>.

⁵ A historic map of the Butterfield Overland Mail through Texas in 1858-59 has been reproduced in Glen Sample Ely’s *The Texas Frontier and the Butterfield Overland Mail, 1858-1861* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), p. 4.

⁶ J. Evetts Haley, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936), p. 127-28.

⁷ Ely, *The Texas Frontier and the Butterfield Overland Mail, 1858-1861*, pp. 136-38. It was twenty-six miles from the Clear Fork of the Brazos to Smith Station.

⁸ Sources such as Haley’s *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*, p. 129, make references to these former stations as being along the Goodnight-Loving Trail.

⁹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, Julia Cauble Smith, “Loving, Oliver,” accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/flo38>. In Charles Goodnight’s accounting of Oliver Loving’s death, he asserts that it was the elder Loving who drove the cattle to Illinois. In fact, Goodnight stated that Loving “is undoubtedly the first man who ever trailed cattle from Texas” citing the 1858 trek as Loving’s first. Of course, Goodnight’s recording of the events occurred more than fifty years after the fact. See Charles Goodnight, “The Killing of Oliver Loving,” in *The Trail Drivers of Texas: Interesting Sketches of Early Cowboys and their Experiences on the Range and on the Trail during the Days that Tried Men’s Souls—True Narratives Related by Real Cow-Punchers and Men who Fathered the Cattle Industry in Texas*, Volume II, compiled and edited by J. Marvin Hunter, The Old Trail Drivers Association, 1920-1923, p. 344.

¹⁰ Goodnight, “The Killing of Oliver Loving,” p. 344. Goodnight states that the trip to Pueblo was his second drive and that it occurred in 1859.

¹¹ Smith, “Loving, Oliver.”

¹² Pace and Frazier, *Frontier Texas: History of a Borderland to 1880*, pp. 185-86; *Handbook of Texas Online*, H. Allen Anderson, “Goodnight, Charles,” accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgo11>.

¹³ A portion of this route, also substantially derived from the Butterfield trail, was used by another cattleman a year prior to Reynolds’ trek. In 1864, W. A. Peril of Harper, Gillispie County, Texas drove a herd from Fort McKavett (located in southwest Menard County) up the Concho to Horsehead Crossing. Some sources refer to this segment as the Horsehead Route. See T. U. Taylor, *The Chisholm Trail and Other Routes* (San Antonio, Texas, 1936), pp. 77-78 and W. A. Peril, “From Texas to the Oregon Line,” in *The Trail Drivers of Texas*, Volume 1, 1920-1923, p. 372.

¹⁴ Haley, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*, pp. 126-27, and 130; Pace and Frazier, *Frontier Texas: History of a Borderland to 1880*, p. 187.

¹⁵ Haley, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*, p. 127; *Handbook of Texas Online*, T. C. Richardson, “Goodnight-Loving Trail,” accessed August 25, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ayg02>.

¹⁶ Haley, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*, p. 127.

¹⁷ Haley, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*, pp. 127-28.

¹⁸ J. Frank Dobie, *Up the Trail from Texas* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 147; Pace and Frazier, *Frontier Texas: History of a Borderland to 1880*, p. 191. Sources vary as to the actual payment. The amount of \$40,000 in gold is cited by Donald Bubar in the chapter titled "The Goodnight-Loving Trail" in *Along the Early Trails of the Southwest* (Austin, Texas: The Pemberton Press, 1969), p. 148.

¹⁹ Richardson, "Goodnight-Loving Trail."

²⁰ Goodnight, "The Killing of Oliver Loving," pp. 347-48.

²¹ "W. J. Wilson's Narrative," in *The Trail Drivers of Texas*, Volume II, pp. 348-53.

²² Smith, "Loving, Oliver."

²³ Richardson, "Goodnight-Loving Trail." In his book on the range cattle industry, historian Edward Everett Dale does not even mention that the trail had its origins in Young County, and instead states that cattle were gathered near Fort Concho. Dale also refers to the trail as the "Goodnight Trail." See Edward Everett Dale, *The Range Cattle Industry: Ranching on the Great Plains from 1865 to 1925* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1930 [new addition, 1960], p. 51.

²⁴ Billington, *Westward Expansion*, p. 614.

²⁵ Bubar, "Goodnight-Loving Trail," p. 150.

Additional Sources

Goodnight, Charles C. "Managing a Trail Herd," *Heritage* (Spring 2003): 26-29.

Ridings, Sam P. *The Chisholm Trail: A History of the World's Greatest Cattle Trail*. Guthrie, Oklahoma: Cooperative Printing Company, 1936.