

Charles Goodnight “Father of the Texas Panhandle”
Dawson Zarazinski
Junior Historian Writing Contest

The great state of Texas leads the nation in cattle production, as well as, the number of farms and ranches. According to the Texas Agricultural Department, there are 248,800 farms and ranches covering 130.2 million acres in Texas.¹ In Rusk County alone, the 2012 Census of Agricultural reports 1,390 farms spanning 274,327 acres.² One of every seven working Texans is in an agriculture-related job. Texas just simply would not be Texas without the cattle industry, and the cattle industry in Texas would not be what it is today without the contributions of the man considered to be the best known rancher in Texas history, Charles Goodnight.

Charles Goodnight was born on March 5, 1836 in Macoupin County, Illinois. At age five, Goodnight's father died leaving his mother a widow. His mother married Hiram Daughtery and at age nine, Charlie moved with his family to Texas.⁴ He rode a young mare by the name of Blaze all the way from Illinois to Texas! Once in Texas, he did not attend school because there was no school close by, and there was a great deal of work to be done around the farm. The farm lay on the outward edge of settlement in Central Texas so Goodnight learned to be an expert with a gun in order to protect himself and his family from Comanche Indians. As a teenager, Charlie had trouble finding a job because people felt he was too young to hire.⁵ He served in the local militia in 1856 and later joined the Texas Rangers. He served as a scout for the Texas Rangers.⁶ He is also known for the “rescue” of Cynthia Ann Parker. When his mother married for the third time, he gained a stepbrother named Wes. Three years older than Charlie, Wes proved even more adventurous. The two young men decided that cattle herding for a local rancher sounded like just the kind of adventure they wanted to pursue. They signed a contract with a man named Varner which allowed them to take as their own the calves born to the cows they managed. This was their gateway into the cattle business, the path that would eventually allow them to be

independent cattlemen.⁷

Since he was a Texas Ranger, it was only natural for Goodnight to fight for the Confederate States of America in the Civil War. While the country was in conflict, cattle rustlers took advantage of the opportunity to steal cattle due to the fact that a number of the cattlemen and their hands were off fighting. When Charlie returned from the war, he found that over two thousand head from his hard-earned herd were missing. He was deeply disappointed that he had to start over. However, Goodnight decided to make the best of the situation and was encouraged by the words of a friend, “telling him he knew too much about the Texas cattle business, Texas people, and the land itself... to quit.”⁸

Due to the fact that the South lost the war and the Southern economy was devastated, the Southern cattlemen refocused their business endeavors to sell beef to the North. Goodnight was in West Texas at the time which placed him many hundreds of miles from potential buyers so he had to blaze new trails in order to shorten the trek and reduce the hardships. Part of his planning and preparation led to the development of the chuck wagon. The chuck wagon is a “field kitchen” covered wagon that houses all of the necessities to cook for a group of cowboys. Goodnight was gathering a herd now and was farther out west than most. He wondered why he couldn't go west to mining towns and forts to sell his herd. It was settled he was to go west and attempt to sell his cattle. If he had no luck there he would start over on the plains. Goodnight said to himself, “There are a lot of things I have to do before starting the long drive west, and the very first is to build a good wagon for the cook.” He had observed the exasperation of cooks many times when supplies spilled in the wagon. He bought a strong army wagon and had many modifications made to it such as iron axles and a hinged tailgate. With the back of the wagon

hinged, it folded down into a table with a folding leg. The table provided a space to prepare and serve food. The wagon would be pulled by ten oxen.⁹

The next task would be seeking hard working cowboys to help him drive his herd. This was a fairly easy job due to the fact that he knew many Texas Rangers. Charlie ran into a man named Oliver Loving before the drive and told him his plans. Loving reminded Charlie of the many hardships that were also on this trail. After a long discussion, they ended up in a partnership. The Goodnight-Loving partnership had begun. They would drive two thousand head of cattle to western New Mexico. Loving had been driving cattle since before the Civil War, so like Goodnight he knew what he was doing.¹⁰

Goodnight and Loving drove the herd southwestward. They tried to stay close to water as much as possible so that their horses would not die or give out. They also tried to stay away from settlements and such. Due to the fact that Charlie served as a scout for the Rangers, he often scouted ahead to find water, better routes, and avoid danger. In order to insure that the cattle drive proceeded efficiently, Goodnight put rules into place for his crew. Goodnight's number one rule was no gambling. If any of the men failed to abide by this "law," there would be consequences, the most severe being immediate dismissal from the drive. One of the hardships of driving cattle was that it was necessary to keep the cattle moving which meant that often the only sleep the cowboys got were short naps sitting in the saddle. Rain, shine, sleet, or snow, the men drove cattle hundreds of miles. The long distance and the harsh conditions were detrimental to the herd as well, causing significant losses. However, once the cowboys reached their destination and sold the cattle, the money in their pockets helped ease the discomfort they had endured. Goodnight and Loving continued to orchestrate successful cattle drives in this manner

for over a year. Unfortunately, Comanche Indians continued to be one of the greater threats of their journeys. Loving was killed the second year of his and Goodnight's partnership. He suffered multiple arrow wounds to the arm. The arrows caused blood poisoning, and he only lived a few days.¹¹

Although Charlie missed Oliver dearly, it did not take long for him to find a new partner. A young man named Johnny Rumans filled the void left by Loving's death. Johnny reminded Goodnight a great deal of himself because he had a passion for cattle, never went to school, and was hard-working and dedicated. Rumans and Goodnight began to drive cattle further north to Colorado.¹² Back in Weatherford, Texas, a school teacher by the name of Mary Ann Dyer had caught Goodnight's attention. Charlie asked her to be his wife, and eventually, she said yes. They were married in Kentucky and moved to Colorado. They lived in Colorado for quite a while but Charlie's thoughts kept returning to Texas and the Palo Duro Canyon. Mary Ann was more than happy to move back to Texas.¹³ The Palo Duro offered good grassland for a grazing herd. While preparing a place to live he ran into a herd of wild buffalo. He respected the animals, but the canyon could not support both his cattle and the buffalo. He drove the buffalo out of the canyon and found a good place to build his house and ranch.¹⁴ Mary Ann, who was staying in California while Charlie was building their home, went back to Colorado. When Mary Ann decided she couldn't be away from Charlie any longer, they made plans for her to come down to Texas. Goodnight wanted to buy up more land in Palo Duro so he went into the bank to withdraw some. It was there that he met an investor known by the locals as John "Velvet Britches" Adair.

Adair was looking to invest in land so Charlie told him about Palo Duro. Adair rode

down with the Goodnights to Texas. It was one of the most extravagant wagon trains of the whole nineteenth century. The wagons had a full length mattress so you could rest along the way and they had military escort. It could not get much better than that back then. The investor liked the Palo Duro, so he was willing to invest in the land and in Goodnight himself. He and Charlie signed a contract for five years. Goodnight would run the ranch and receive a salary of two thousand five hundred dollars per year. At the end of their contract, Goodnight would own one third of the ranch. Goodnight chose twelve thousand acres which they purchased at one dollar per acre. Then Goodnight started building the first ranch in the Palo Duro. They named it the JA Ranch for the investor, John Adair.¹⁵

Word came to the ranch that officers at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, Indian Territory, were allowing the Indians to go on one final buffalo hunt. Since Indians lived in the Palo Duro once, they naturally returned there. The “Red Men”, as they were called, still thought there were buffalo living in the canyon. Goodnight met with the tribes and was able to make peace with all of them. The Comanche chief was none other than Quanah Parker whose mother, Cynthia Ann Parker, he had recaptured from the Comanche so many years ago.¹⁶

Adair died but his wife, who liked what Charlie had done with the ranch, signed another five year contract. Due to the coming of the railroad, it had become easier to transport cattle across the country. Therefore, the long cattle drives had become unnecessary. Goodnight continued to look after the cattle on the JA ranch until his late years.¹⁷ In 1926 Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight died. Charlie would not eat, see anyone, or even come out of his room for almost a year. He married one of his nurses in 1927 and was happy until he died in 1929. His name was the first to be put into the Cowboy Hall of fame in Oklahoma City.¹⁸ Texas will forever

remember the “Father of the Texas Panhandle,” Charles Goodnight.

Notes

1. Texas Department of Agriculture, *Texas Ag Stats*, 2017.
https://www.texasagriculture.gov/About/Texas_AgStats.aspx (accessed February 16, 2017).
2. U.S. Department of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistics Service. *2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile*. 2012.
3. Texas Department of Agriculture, Texas Ag Stats.
4. Texas State Historical Association, *Goodnight, Charles*, by H. Allen Anderson, 2016.
<http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgo11> (accessed February 16, 2017).
5. O'Rear, Sybil. *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*. (Austin Texas: Eakin Press 1990), 2-6.
6. Texas State Historical Association, *Goodnight, Charles*.
7. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 8-11.
8. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 13-14.
9. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 14-15.
10. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 15-16.
11. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 18-21.
12. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 23-24.
13. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 28-31.
14. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 36-38.
15. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 41-45.
16. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 47-50.
17. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 54-56.
18. O'Rear, *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*, 62-63.

Bibliography

O'Rear, Sybil. *Charles Goodnight Pioneer Cowman*. Austin Texas: Eakin Press 1990.

I had only heard the name of Charles Goodnight before I read this book. It helped me understand him like I was with him all along. Once I started learning about him and reading about him, he was my favorite subject.

Texas Department of Agriculture, *Texas Ag Stats*, 2017.

<https://www.texasagriculture.gov/About/TexasAgStats.aspx> (accessed February 16, 2017).

This website provided me the current statistics for the Texas cattle industry.

Texas State Historical Association, *Goodnight, Charles*, by H. Allen Anderson, 2016.

<http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgo11> (accessed February 16, 2017).

This source provided me with additional information about Charles Goodnight.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistics Service. *2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile*. 2012.

This website gave me the local agriculture statistics.