

by *Sandra Ostgaard*

Women were certainly a part of the Western frontier, and they made very important contributions. There are some interesting stories about the introduction of women on the American Western frontier — particularly as both cattlegirls and wives of ranchers.

Most aspiring ranchers thought conditions were just too harsh and dangerous for a wife or new bride. The idea at the time was to establish oneself in the ranching industry and then to return to one's hometown to find a bride — or if an individual had a wife, to make arrangement to take her out West. This journey was the beginning of adventures for many a frontier woman.

### Mary Ann (Molly) Goodnight



Known as the Mother of the Panhandle, Mary Ann “Molly” Dyer was married to one of Texas' most famous ranchers, Charles Goodnight. Following their wedding July 26, 1870,

the couple spent a seven-year stint ranching in Pueblo, Colo., before

relocating to the Palo Duro Canyon in the Texas Panhandle.

Charles found a financial backer in John George Adair, a wealthy Irish landowner, and the two men and their wives started the JA Ranch in Palo Duro Canyon. The group moved a herd of 100 Durham bulls and four wagons stocked with provisions to the site in May 1877 and built a two-room cabin. Soon the Adairs left the management of the ranch to Charles and Molly, signing a five-year contract guaranteeing Charles one-third of the ranch's interest and a \$2,500 annual salary. Charles began what would become an 11-year career with the JA Ranch, growing the herd — which included purebred Herefords — and expanding the ranch. At its peak the ranch spanned 1,325,000 acres.

Faithfully by his side was Molly, who not only carried out the duties of homemaker but also served as his helpmate on the ranch. Charles designed a two-horned saddle to make it easier for Molly to navigate the ranch on horseback. She quickly learned the ins and outs of ranch life, including the often long and lonely periods when few visitors would cross their path and the nearest neighbors lived 75 miles away. It's said when a cowboy gave the Goodnights three chickens as a token of appreciation — intended for a Sunday supper — Molly made the chickens her personal pets to help pass the time.

Over the years, Molly earned the respect and admiration of the cattlemen for her compassion and the natural remedies she developed for wounds and fevers. She often held parties for the cowboys, mended their clothes and taught many of them to read. For this she was soon regarded as the “Mother of the Panhandle” or the “Darling of the Plains.”

Molly also extended her compassion to orphaned buffalo calves which were left to die after commercial hunters killed their mothers on the range. By rescuing the orphaned buffalo and bottle-feeding them, Molly established an impressive buffalo herd, soon known around the world as the Goodnight Herd. Many credit her efforts with helping to prevent the extinction of the Southern buffalo.

As the Panhandle became more populated, Molly donated her time to various philanthropic efforts. In 1898 she and Charles helped establish Goodnight College through the donation of 340 acres.

Molly passed away in April 1926. A fitting tribute to her life, her gravestone was inscribed: “Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight One who spent her whole life in the service of others.”

The NHW will be featuring historic women from the breed throughout the year in its newsletter and the *Hereford World* column, so stay tuned and get a look at some of the great women of America's past! **HW**



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