

**THE STAR DAY FOUNDATION
FIRST PIONEERS AND LEADERS
OF THE STATE OF TEXAS
HALL OF HONOR**



**MARY JANE ALEXANDER
(1840-1929)**

In the Spring of 1885, Reverend C. W. Alexander drove a buggy to Sherman, Texas, to bring his family to his new posting in Mobeetie. He had been teaching at Austin College before he was called to start a new church in the Wild West town in 1884. On the way to Mobeetie, the family came to a raging river. When the horse started across, they got into some quicksand, causing the buggy to start swaying. As they got to the middle of the river, some brush, or maybe a small tree, came rushing down the river and crashed into the side of the buggy. When he (C. W. Alexander) fell into the water crossing that raging river, water and something else got into his lungs and festered. A few months later, he was caught in a rainstorm as he was riding his circuit. He was drenched and chilled. He caught pneumonia and died, leaving his widow Mary Jane with five children in a lawless town with no other family and few friends. Most widows of that time remarried as soon as was decent in order to support their families. Mary Jane did not remarry.

She homesteaded on one section of land in Hemphill County and bought the section next to it. She ordered lumber from Harrold (a small city to the south) and had a two-room half-dugout built near the creek that ran through the property. This house would become a beacon for travelers in the area.

Mary Jane did many things to bring in money for her family. For example, she serves as postmistress for the small town of Cataline that was founded near her ranch. The children would gather wild grasses growing on the prairie, bundle it up, and sell it to the soldiers in Fort Elliott. As the buffalo hunters left the area, large piles of buffalo bones remained. The children gathered these, too, and the second son, R. T., drove them in a wagon to Kansas and sold them to become fertilizer. After the bones were all gone, young R. T. continued to carry freight from Mobeetie to Kansas and back again.

Mary Jane encouraged her sons to ride around the area looking for unbranded cattle. There were a lot of wild longhorns in those days. The sons would brand them and bring them onto her sections, beginning the Alexander herd. As R. T. grew up, he learned about scientifically improving herds and began buying Hereford cattle, first to interbreed with the Longhorns, and then to replace them all together. His scientific breeding program produced one of the finest Hereford herd in the state, maybe in the country. But it was Mary Jane who began the ranch, becoming the first woman rancher in the Panhandle.

She did not set out to become a rancher. She was born Mary Jane Mathes in 1840 in Tennessee. Her family were all devout Presbyterians and had a family tradition of each eldest son becoming a minister. Mary Jane was notably religious from an early age, even in her very religious family. Her faith led her to marry C. W. Alexander, then in the process of becoming a minister. Her schooling was advanced for the time, though she was mostly self-taught, and she was an expert on the Bible and Presbyterian theology. She taught Sunday School wherever she lived and held Bible studies in her home.

Mary Jane had all of her children educated at Park College in Missouri. When her daughters Nona and Lucy attended there, she went with them to serve as house mother. Lucy earned advanced degrees and became a missionary in China. Nona became a teacher until she got married. The eldest son Hugh, became a Presbyterian minister, as was her family tradition. R. T. took over the ranch operations. Youngest son Erastus became a physician in New York. She also had two children that died in infancy.

As she neared death in 1929, word spread. People who had known her came to Canadian to visit with her one last time. Hundreds and hundreds of people, some who had stayed the night at her house, some who had worked for her, some who had gone to church with her, some who had known her at Park College, came to say goodbye.

NOTE: The photograph was provided by Kay Laird, a Director of The White Deer Land Museum in Pampa, Texas. The text was drawn from a paper authored by West Texas A&M University History Professor Jean A. Stuntz, JD, PhD entitled "Mary Jane Alexander: The Panhandle's First Woman Rancher." Mary Jane Alexander (1840-1929) was nominated to be inducted into The First PALS of Texas Hall of Honor by The Texas Bison Student Study Group sponsored by The STAR DAY Foundation. She shall be formally inducted along with others during "The Mary Ann (Molly) Goodnight Library 2016 Luncheon" conducted on September 10, 2016 in Quitaque, Texas.

THE STAR DAY FOUNDATION

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