

## **Thad J. Rees**

Farmer, Rancher, Freighter, Trail Driver and Lawman

Thad Rees' father and mother came to Texas from Virginia in covered wagons in 1855, bringing a number of slaves with them. The wagons traveled into Texas until they arrived at a site seventeen miles east of Gilmer in Upshur County. Thad's father established a plantation here on 800 acres of densely treed piney woods. With the slaves and everyone else working everyday for a year only 200 acres were cleared for cultivation. But with discipline and determination cultivation of the cleared land began in addition to continuing the clearing of the other 600 acres. Then the Civil War started and changed the plantation style of operation. Thad's father enlisted in the Confederate Army immediately and was appointed Commissary Sergeant with the supply camp located in the uncleared portion of his plantation. Supplies came mainly from Galveston plus what could be supplied from the surrounding area. This camp served the military the entire duration of the war.

The Union Forces being the victors over the Confederates Forces, the war came to an end in 1865. At the end of the American Civil War, the freedom of the Negro slaves created a difficult situation for the plantation owners. The former slaves refused to work and were also insolent to their former slave owners. At this stage the farm became a problem since there was a need to plow and plant the land plus caring for the livestock. There was also a need to clear up the supply acres which had been used by the Southern Army. It was not until Thad was big enough to help that the operation started to return to its former status.

Thad was born April 10, 1850, the oldest of three children. When he was ten years of age his father had him doing a man's work. Then the reconstruction era, also known as the "carpet bagging era", came to an end. Many of the former slaves, started to return to their former homes as they needed food and shelter to survive. The land owners had little money so they came back willing to work for enough compensation to survive.

Thad continued working on the plantation until one day a man named Bill Griffin came to see if he would come along with him to do freighting, hauling cotton and supplies. Thad quickly agreed so as to break his current boring life style. He rigged a wagon for this type of operation. He and Bill Griffin worked well together. However, he still had to help his father out on the plantation. He would plow one day, then haul a load of freight, return and plow again the following day. Soon he felt he needed to change again. He rode to Sulphur Springs where he met with George Loving, one of the big cattle owners of East Texas. Thad asked Loving for a job. He obtained employment with Loving and was assigned to gathering cattle in the local brush country. In places this brush would be so thick it was impossible to ride through, so dogs were used to run the longhorns out. In herding the animals in this environment he would have to ride on one side of his horse and then on the other side. Otherwise he would ride with his head down behind the horse's ears. This was necessary to keep from being ripped to ribbons by the thorns or knocked off the horse by low hanging limbs. Thad stayed with Loving until he quit buying animals in that area. He still had a desire to work on a trail drive so he joined the Woods

and Bushy group trail driving a herd to Caldwell Kansas. There were eight men in the outfit with John Coffey, the trail boss. Just after crossing the flooded Red River, Coffey's horse fell and injured Coffey's leg. None of the riders were willing to doctor the leg so Coffey called on Thad for help. When Thad determined that the leg was broken, he ripped off a board from the chuck wagon and whittled some splints. He obtained bandages from a gauze undershirt. He set the bones as best he could and proceeded to splint and bandaged the broken bones. For a pain reliever, he mashed some Irish potatoes and squeezed the juice into an empty can with punched holes in the bottom and let the juice drip on the splinted leg. This reduced the pain and the fever enough so that Coffee was finally able to get some sleep. Thad related that this was a home remedy he had observed his mother use. When the herd reached Caldwell, Kansas, Coffey visited a doctor and was advised the break was set a bit crooked. He wanted to break the leg bone again to reset it. Coffey resisted this advice and soon was able to ride his horse as well as ever.

After the herd had been delivered to Caldwell, Thad took in the town cowboy style. Then he returned to the Woods and Bushy Ranch with Coffey. At this time the ranch was fattening cattle not trailed with the original group because they were in too poor a condition to survive a drive. Everything was going well until the local Indians complained to Washington about this grazing being done on leased Indian land. Congress promptly ordered the herd of poorly conditioned cattle be moved out of the area. It was decided to slowly move the weakened herd to market and let them fatten on the way north. In less than a week thirty head of the cattle were killed within a mile of the leased ranch land.

Closely following the herd were Indians all dressed in their warpath gear. They did not attack but it appeared they were attempting a showdown. Any attack or shooting by the trail drivers in this area was strictly forbidden by the government. Finally this activity became too uncomfortable to the trail drivers and one of them shot a following Indian. The Indians then retreated but it was believed they would soon return to capture the individual who did the shooting. Not long after this the whole Indian village returned on horseback demanding the man who had killed their chief. Prior to their arrival the guilty cowboy was advised to ride north as fast as possible in an attempt to escape. The Indians wanted this person but were told he had ridden off to the south. After searching the area and not finding him, the Indians began cursing everyone very loudly in their Indian language hoping to cause the trail riders to initiate a conflict. Being unsuccessful, the Indians rode off and the trail drivers moved the herd off to Dodge City. Before arriving at Dodge City the cattle, still in poor condition for market, were turned out to graze again before being driven to market. It was necessary to have soldiers to stay alongside the herd to prevent the Indians from stealing them. The soldiers continued guarding the herd with Coffey and his trail riders until they crossed the Cimarron. Here, Mr. Coffey turned the herd over to his trail drivers and appointed Thad Rees as trail boss to continue the drive to Dodge City.

The rest of the trail drive to Dodge City from the Cimarron River Crossing was uneventful but on this drive the boys in the outfit nicknamed Thad "Texas", "Mr. Texas" or sometimes the new name was changed to "Texas Kid". After two days in Dodge City Thad learned that it was a place

where they would kill you first and then relate the reason for your death afterwards. The law enforcement in the town didn't waste any time getting rid of individuals they thought cluttered up the landscape in a dance hall or saloon. Learning this, he decided it was time to return to Texas. On returning back to the camp at the Woods and Bushy Ranch he was asked to take charge of another herd of cattle located on their W. C. Bar Ranch on the Arkansas River. He readily accepted but once he arrived at the ranch he was sorry he had taken the position. The ranch was at a lonesome, forsaken place. However, at this time it was the only job available to him. He needed work and decided to stay.

The coming winter was brutal and according to "Mr. Texas" the weather he encountered made a Texas norther' feel like a spring breeze. In one large storm snow began falling at a rate so thick you could barely see a yard ahead of you and the cattle began to stampede heading south. Thad raced ahead and after crossing the river, he was able to turn the herd back toward camp but not until they had traveled some six miles. Going into the wind visibility was almost zero and being wet from crossing the river his feet were frozen to the stirrups and he had the reins wrapped around his wrists as his fingers were so numb. He was able to guide his horse only by moving his frozen arms. He was almost frozen to death until he encountered a dugout one of his trail hands had established to care for the remuda of their horses about four miles from their camp. Smoke was coming from its chimney stack which was sticking through the snow. Thad hollered for help for someone to pull him off his horse. Inside the dugout hot coffee was available and after removing his frozen clothing he thawed out. By morning the wind and snow had stopped. The trail foreman thought that Thad had probably frozen to death. He gathered all the riders in camp to search for Thad. On reaching the dugout and finding Thad alive, everyone rejoiced, hollered and cried. By three o'clock in the afternoon everyone had made it back to camp. They had traveled some fourteen miles in the snow and ice.

When the herd and remuda were fattened enough to trail north, Woods and Bushy sold cattle and the W. C. Bar Ranch together as a package deal and at a good price. When everything was closed out, Woods tried to persuade Thad to go to one of their other Texas ranches. After a bit of negotiation, Thad agreed to go to the Turkey Trot Ranch. It was fine country to work in and with a good group of cowboys who had things well in hand. It was much better than the conditions at the W.C. Bar Ranch. One of his unusual duties at the ranch was to deliver to Colonel Goodnight, originator of the Goodnight Trail, two buffalo calves. Colonel Goodnight wanted to experiment by crossing them with cattle. The experiment was successful but not practical. The new cross he named "cattlo" but it was not continued because of the difficulty in handling the animals.

Another exciting experience during his time at the Turkey Trot Ranch occurred in 1887. During a roundup at the present site of Amarillo, while gathering a herd to trail to Canadian, a new railroad town, a group of wild mustangs tried to mix with the gathered cattle. Such a mixture of cattle and mustangs would cause the cattle to start running wild. To prevent such an event the herd was monitored 24 hours a day except one very dark night a terrific rain storm occurred causing the mustangs and cattle to mix and create a stampede. It was an inky dark night and with Thad in the lead the herd was directed toward the brush but it was almost daylight before

the herd sort of quieted down. By morning the herd was under control but the trail drivers were soaking wet and cold. After reaching camp, drinking a lot of hot coffee and changing to dry clothing, the herd was gathered together to continue its drive to Canadian.

In 1889 Thad left the ranch of Woods and Bushy and relocated to Floresville. Here he purchased 168 acres of land six miles east of Floresville in the Marcelina Community. The property had a small house on it and he lived there alone for about six months. Then in 1892 he married Miss Kate Sample. To this marriage three children were born, two girls and a boy. His son, the youngest child, was four months and 20 days old when his mother died. Thad raised his family on his own for the next fifteen years until he married Miss Annie Williamson. No children were born to this union. However, they did adopt a son, Manuel Rees. He was a very devoted child and continued to live with his adopted parents in their declining years. He and his parents developed a lasting relationship creating a joyous bond in their passing years.

Thad Rees was a charter member of the Old Trail Drivers Association and became known as one of the best members of the organization. He was a familiar figure at all its meetings and activities. In 1928, in a simulation of the earlier pony express rides, Thad helped promote the annual convention of the Old Trail Drivers Association. Thad rode his horses named "Jim Hogg" and "Reno Joe" non stop continuously from Dallas by way of Fort Worth to San Antonio in sixty-two hours. He insisted he could have shortened this time by at least four hours if all the "gas buggies" had given him the right of way along the road. He was 66 years old when he made this ride and arrived in San Antonio a stiff man but not feeling a day older or less fit. This reenactment attracted state wide attention as he was racing in competition with his friend Hiram Craig. Craig was running a similar route but from Galveston to San Antonio. Craig also rode his route non-stop but came in second. This pony express ride reenactment was a gala affair and the men were met in towns they were passing through by cheering crowds and in many places by the local school bands. Some of the communities even held local functions in their honor.

Thad also served fourteen years as a Wilson County Deputy Sheriff under Sheriff Will L. Wright. Later, Will L. Wright became a well known Texas Ranger Captain and is in the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame. Thad next served two years as a deputy under Sheriff A. B. Carnes. He was a very proficient officer, being entirely fearless, honest and loyal. During this time period in Wilson County, it took a man of strong courage to handle the law enforcement conditions.

All of the time he spent in Wilson County he continued to develop his ranch and farm property. His pleasant and agreeable attitude earned him the respect of his neighbors. Mr. Rees took great pride in improving the breeding of his cattle herd, the raising of registered Poland China hogs and farming peanuts.

He was a very devout member of the Marcelina Baptist Church. Thad Rees died at the age of 79 years of pneumonia. He was widely known throughout Southwest Texas and an honored citizen of Wilson County. His Funeral services brought out a great number of friends filling the church to overflowing. Thad and both of his wives are buried in the Marcelina Cemetery.

His life's legacy as he spoke of it many times was, "I have done everything on a ranch or farm that anybody else has ever did and with all my bronco-busting and cowboy adventures I had but one bone broken. Never did I get so smashed that I could not keep going, though I have struck through some pretty hard jolts. One thing I am glad to say about the old-time cowboys is they never turned down a friend or a needy person and they never insulted a lady".

Thad Rees was an open range cowboy of the 1870s known by longhorn cattlemen from the breaks of East Texas, west to the Palo Duro Canyon and north to the open plains. He was a colorful character and always willing to talk about his many thrilling experiences.

Compiled by Gene Maeckel from the files of the Wilson County Historical Commission Archives. P. O. Box 101, Floresville, Texas 78114. Web site: [www.wilsoncountyhistory.org](http://www.wilsoncountyhistory.org). 2/2011