

# PIONEERS WHO BROKE THE TEXAS SOD

*Nothing was easy for the cowboys in Hardeman County.*

*By Marge Bennett*

**T**exas is known by some as a God-forsaken place, and by others as heaven on earth. Hardeman County, on the plains of Texas only a short gallop from the Oklahoma border, is the setting for the stories of some of the early settlers, including my grandfather, John Ellington Easley.

Ellington, as he was called, was born in Talladega, Ala., in 1837, but he and his brothers migrated to East Texas, searching for new frontiers and a better way of life. When the Civil War started, he made his way back to Alabama and enlisted in the Army of the Confederacy. After the war, he returned home

they finally reached Hardeman County, two more girls were born. The Easleys settled in Big Valley, where they were able to get all the land they wanted and it was cheap. The land was virgin scrub brush, windswept and sun-baked. When they decided to make their home base there, it took a lot of work and more courage than they had ever expected to break the land and make a home. The small town of Chillicothe was just getting started, its business offices in dugouts. Even the post office and small grocery store were housed in the makeshift dugouts.

My father told me the story of his papa Ellington, who with oxen and walking plows

the settlers became cattle barons. The Easleys were not among the wealthy. They raised most of their living, with their own corn and wheat and some cotton. Their cows and hogs furnished milk and meat for the family. They would have to wait for the weather to get cold enough to chill the meat. After butchering a hog, they would trim it and pack it in wooden boxes between layers of salt. They couldn't cure beef that way, and with no refrigeration, beef would have to be used immediately. Beef clubs were the answer, with different cuts rotating among the members: steaks this time, a not-so-desirable cut the next, so that everyone had a chance at the choice cuts. They went to market only twice a year for tobacco, sugar, coffee, seeds and medicine.

After a few years, conditions improved and the Easleys built a schoolhouse on one corner of their property. The building was also used as a church and meeting hall, for dinner on the ground, singings or a dance. The schoolteacher needed a place to stay so he bedded down with the seven Easley boys

*LEFT: John Ellington Easley and his bride, Sarah Jane Cliett, true pioneers of Texas before the turn of the 20th century. BELOW: Wedding photo of George and Della Whitton Easley, the writer's parents. Marge is the seventh child born of this union.*



PHOTOS COURTESY MARGE BENNETT

and married his childhood sweetheart, Sarah Jane Cliett, in 1865. Sick of war, they longed for a new life. They soon joined the ranks of restless citizens traveling west, and since Ellington had spent some time in Texas, he took his new bride and joined a group of friends and relatives moving by oxen-hauled wagons. Their first stop was in Cass County in eastern Texas.

Twenty years later, Ellington and his family moved to Hill County and then to Tarrant County—where they stood on their front porch and waved when the first train came into Fort Worth. Along the way, one girl and eight boys were added to the family. When

would spend months breaking the sod, making it ready for planting wheat. He wore heavy brogans and the soles were attached with little wooden pegs. Those pegs would work up through the soles and make his feet bleed as he walked and walked behind the plow. At night, Grandma would fix a pan of warm water and add a shovel full of ashes to bathe his feet in, so that he could walk the next day.

The boys, some of whom were almost grown, helped on the farm and soon Ellington had breeding stock for fine horses, and a good start on raising longhorn cattle. The open range was perfect for cattle, and some of



in the upstairs of the Easley home. The first school year had a severe winter. This was before horse-and-buggy days, so horse-drawn wagons were used for travel, with hay in the bed of the wagon and quilts to keep the young'uns warm. The wagons would go from farm to farm, picking up children and adding other quilts. My daddy was a trapper and he would check his traps, then walk to school.



*The Easley family in 1892, including widowed sister Annie Harper with her two babies. The sons are all wearing suits, handmade by their mother, Sarah Jane. Left to right, back row: George (the writer's father), Oscar, John Ellington, Elbert, Fayette, Walter and Henry. Front row: Emily, John Ellington Sr., Janie Easley, Sarah Jane, and Annie, with son Bennie and daughter Sammie. BELOW: Grandmother Sarah Jane with her horse Old White Man and granddaughter Marie.*

The Texas plains were loaded with buffalo bones bleached white by many years in the sun. Hunters had come through in waves, shooting the buffalo, skinning them for their hides, then leaving the carcasses to rot. This gave the children a chance to make a little extra money by gathering the bones until they had a wagonload. Then they took them to the railroad and shipped them to where they would be made into fertilizer.

Some years, the farms would do well, but there were lots of years that would bring heartbreak to the county. Farmers would work all year to get their crops ready for market, only to have a hailstorm or tornado destroy their grain. One year, the Easleys paid their taxes with money received for bounty on jackrabbit ears. By 1900, the Easleys had fruit trees and garden produce to help with expenses. They churned butter in a

20-gallon churn, then sold and delivered it twice a week to the residents of the nearby town of Quanah. They sold the butter for 15 cents a pound; corn for 25 cents a bushel; oats, 15 cents; wheat, 25 cents; and eggs, 10 cents a dozen.

My grandfather Ellington worked very hard, but so did my grandmother, who was an amazing woman. She bore 11 children, buried two too soon, and never saw her mother again after leaving Alabama. She carded the wool, wove the material, and handmade the suits for her big family of boys. The girls learned very early on that they had responsibilities too, and that everyone working together could do great things. In spite of all the hardships,



they flourished, and if their Texas wasn't exactly heaven on earth, it was far from God-forsaken. ■

*Marge Bennett is proud to be one of the many descendants of Ellington and Sarah Jane. She is 91 years old and lives and writes in Reno, Nev.*