

The Trail From Texas

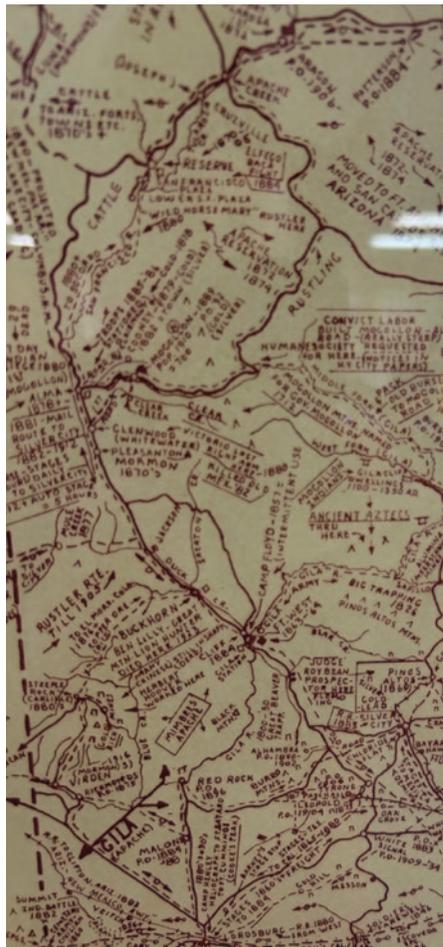
The diary of Ma Rice.
By Stephen L. Wilmeth

It is rare to discover hand-written manuscripts of first-generation pioneers. Here, Mary Belle Shelley Rice ("Ma Rice") tells of her family's journey out of Texas in 1884, starting in Bell then Edwards counties, and on to El Paso and southwestern New Mexico. This first portion of her chronicles was written in April 1941 when she was 63 years old. There is more of her life left untold here, but it's interesting to read her words as memories of a seven-year-old child.—SLW

Pa decided he would sell the farm, house and implements and furniture and come to New Mexico. Our friends and relatives gathered for days to tell us good-bye. Pa had some horses and cows, he traded some furniture and other things for cows and horses. He had a small bunch of goats he traded them off too. He sold some of the stuff for gold. He kept about half of what he had for expenses, the rest he gave to my mother and told her when they got to New Mexico she could buy some more furniture.

Ma rolled the gold in a rag so it would jingle then put it in a strong bag and sewed it inside some of her clothes, it was quite heavy. Pa was branding some horses and cows he traded for. Will and Tom were about 5 and 3 years old, and Pa had a pair of red hound pups he was going to bring his Brother-in-law, Martin Cox. The boys decided they would brand the pups. Will het a big wire in the fireplace then laid it on the hearth and went for a pup but in turning around he stepped on the wire and burned a nine on the bottom of his barefoot, he cried all night. One of Ma's sisters said good-bye Madie I don't suppose I will ever see you any more and she didn't.

We had one covered wagon to haul Ma and us four children and the pups had a rawhide stretched under the wagon to ride in. When we crossed deep water we would get the pups and put them in the wagon. A rub board, brass kettle and tub were hung on the back of the wagon. Besides a few vessels to cook on the open fire, we had tin cups, and plates, knives and forks, wash-pan, dish-pan, one gallon jug one or two buckets. We had two water kegs one fastened on each side of wagon on outside to hold water for camp use. When there was no road-side for the stock Ma would give the work team the water we washed in and the dishwater, and once in a



This old map shows where the family of Mary Belle Shelley Rice settled in southwestern New Mexico north-northwest of Cliff in the area noted as "killed old Mex. '82." RIGHT: Mary Belle's parents, Peter and Emily Jane Shelley, attempted to maintain as much normalcy as possible for their young family on the long trail from Texas.

while she would give them a little water we had for camp use although Pa told her not to. We had two cotton mattresses, quilts, and pillows enough for two beds. Ma had one large trunk for our clothes. Before we left she told us children we could not bring all our toys

and Will had his pop gun, Tom a little bell swung between two wheels and pulled with a string, Ella and I had two wax dolls we chose them.

The Christmas before we left Ma gave Ella and I a mug apiece and I have mine yet. As I am 63 years old and I was 6 when I got the mug it is 57 years old. I also have a card I got at school there. We had a good rain proof tent large enough to make two double beds in side by side. Ma had three irons to heat on stove and campfire, and with one old rawhide bottom chair, she sat in day in and day out to drive the team was all of the furniture we had, and for several years after we got here that was all. [This chair was the subject of a previous *RANGE* story by the author. Mary Belle's mother, Emily Jane, would sit on it to drive the team by day and then remove it to rock her children one by one each night by the fire.]

After we were here Pa got 2 horse-shoe kegs and 2 boxes and a big box for a table. One (of the family) always had to stand up.



SHELLEY FAMILY ARCHIVES

One time I was a little late and had to stand up, I began to cry, Pa got up and handed me his box, and made me sit on it and he stood up. I never made any fuss if I was late again. Well I get clear away from the tale and get the cart before the horse. On the 18th day of March 1884 we left Leakey, Edwards County Texas with about ninety head of cattle and thirty head of horses and came by way of Fort

Stockton, Fort Davis, and Eagle Springs.

I think we hardly made 10 miles a day. Ma would pull the wagon sheet back on hot days and one time she looked back and Will was up astride the top. Neighbors started with us, Millers Mr. and Mrs., Cleo, Stella, Fount, and El. Mr. and Mrs. Cornet little girl and a Son, an old Bachelor and Mr. and Mrs. Ellis making four covered wagons in all. Pa and two of the boys drove the stock all the way, rounding up before breakfast, leaving as soon [as] they had breakfast. Ma and the other Women would get up before the cows and calves did and milk a little from a lot of cows. What we



SHELLEY FAMILY ARCHIVES

ABOVE: Tom Shelley as a youngster. He was three when the family left Texas bound for New Mexico Territory. Very few images of the Shelley children exist from early years. TOP: Mary Belle Shelley and Lee Rice were married in 1897 after the Shelleys had been in New Mexico for 13 years. RIGHT: Mogollon Creek—where the family of Mary Belle Shelley Rice would call home—remains in the hands of the Shelley family to this day.

didn't drink Ma put in a jug for dinner and supper. Sometimes it was so hot the milk would sour before supper. Ma harnessed and unharnessed her own team night and morning and one of the horses was so tall that she had to stand on the wagon tongue to buckle the collar and bridle him.

Some of the wood we used was buffalo chips and mesquite roots. One day for dinner we made a fire of twisted grass. We picked a place where there was not much grass for the fire, for no one wanted to start a prairie fire then. Ella and I would cut grass and twist it and put it under the dutch ovens. We took

every thing as a matter of course. In crossing the Pecos one of our work team tried to jump every wave.

After we got across we came to a spring that was thick with some kind of bugs. The women strained it with several thickness of cloth for the Pecos water was salty. They got some good cat fish out of the Pecos. One was large enough for supper and breakfast for all. Every once in awhile when we came to good



water and wood they would camp for a few days so the women could wash all the dirty clothes and the cattle and horses could rest. Some places along the way we would gather alzaneda berries. The last we got, one man said, eat all you can for none of those berries grow in New Mexico. Sometimes when we had berries in the evening Ma would make a pie in a tin plate, bake it in the dutch oven. Never did anything taste so good. We lost all of Ma's knives on the way cutting bark from chiton trees to make chewing gum.

The other men said they would keep us in meat, but it was Pa that kept us with meat,

some of the time he killed deer and rabbits, the other men never killed a thing. One time some of the children had Tom in a wash for a fish and caught him in the face. Ma held him in her arms while the Bachelor cut it out with his pocket knife. About half way out here I took chills and fever, every other day till we got here. I worried poor Ma. Pa worried, too. Every railroad station he would try to get something to eat for me and Cleo Miller was stricken by the same thing (the symptoms could have well been tularemia or even Bubonic plague. Over time, it became known that rabbits should be handled very carefully in hot months, those months without an 'r' in the spelling, for fear of both diseases). Sometimes I thought I would shake my teeth out.

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Pa could nearly always get lemons, gee, but the lemonade Ma made was good. Many a time when I would begin to get better in the evening Ma would be sitting in that old chair silently crying. If she ever complained on that trip, I never heard her. Pa and Ma were always smiling and laughing.

At one ranch Pa got a hen. It must have come out of the ark for Ma and Mrs. Miller kept it boiling all night and it did not get tender, but the

soup and dumplings were fit for a king. This old hen was the only chicken on that ranch.

After we had been on the road some time Pa told Ma that they would have to throw away some of the load or the horses would never make it. One thing she threw away was the cotton out of a mattress, but she kept the tick. One team Ma drove was a mare with a mule colt and was that mule colt mean! It would get in front of the team and kick first one then the other. If Ma hadn't of jerked Jeff he would have bit that mule. The mare's name was Fan. The mule was afterwards named Kate. Jeff was a big brown stallion,

pretty as a picture. When he would throw up his head and squeal I think he could have been heard a long way. When we got here pa mortgaged him to Mrs. Cora Holland's stepfather for one hundred dollars and that was what we lived on the first winter. The rest of the stuff was poor. The next spring Pa asked Mr. Miller if he wanted to buy him and he said no, just did it to help you. Pa then sold him to Mr. Siggins on Dry Creek for one hundred and twenty (five) dollars paid Mr. Miller the hundred dollars and we had twenty five. Seems like we always had good people to live by.

Sometimes water was little far between, a rain saved us once. Just before we reached the Rio Grande at El Paso Pa and those two little boys drove the cattle all night. When we got there cattle and horses were bogged down. Pa was sure red. The river was from hill to hill. That mule colt ran out and bogged down too. Pa was tired, sleepy, and hungry and said the thing ain't worth pulling out, but that colt was a wise chicken. It just lay down on its side and wiggled out to dry ground on its side. Pa said too bad the other stock hasn't the sense that mule has.

But back on the way, we came down such a steep hill that they cut trees and tied them behind the wagons to serve as brakes. Pa and Ma's money was all gone and not much to eat. There was a man by the name of Prather that was going to ship his cattle to Deming and as Pa wanted to come on so bad he borrowed money from that man and shipped his stuff to Deming, too. The crowd we came with went on to Peñasco in Lincoln County, New Mexico. [The trestle at El Paso and the rail on to Deming had been completed in 1882. That allowed crossing the Rio Grande in flood stage as well as eliminating over 85 miles of much harder travel on the Butterfield Trail to a point just north of Deming from where the family had unloaded.]

I was one scared child in El Paso. The trains made so much noise. The stock were put on stock cars. The wagons put on flat cars

like they were. I stuck to Ma like a leach. We all rode in the caboose and that was my first ride on a train.

While we were in Deming a train ran over a pup and cut him half into head and front legs on one side tail and hind legs on the other. Pa sat down he was so tired and sleepy and went to sleep. Someone saw him just as the train started backing up. Pa was leaning against a wheel and the man jerked him away and said, don't ever do that again or you will be killed like the pup. [The Deming stockyards were where the Union depot is now.]

We were stopped on the Mimbres River by the stockmen [already settled in the area] and one day when Pa was out to see the sheriff a bunch of armed men came to our camp. One man in our crowd, reported to be a killer, stood with his hand on his pistol. Ma watched

this man all the time and her gun was in reach of her hand. Old Israel King was one of the bunch that stopped us. Ma said he jerked his pistol and said there would be bloodshed before these cattle would go though if he had the cattle he once had.

Ma told Ella to get us children together and go under the hill. Old Dick Hudson was in the bunch of stockmen and he went under the hill with us. Maybe he was a coward but I sure remember him as a kind man and he must have liked children for Tom wanted

to go back to Ma and Mr. Hudson got down on his all fours and got Tom to ride his back. Us kids did as Ma told us instantly during those early troublous times.

We were moved (in the workout overseen by the sheriff) to the Burro Mountains and quarantined for a month for they said our cattle were dying of Texas fever. We only had one die and it was a little calf too little to travel. Pa put it under the wagon with the pup that was left and some way it fell out, and as it was tied we choked and drug it to death. ■

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico and a great-grandson of Lee and Mary Belle Rice.



SHELLEY FAMILY ARCHIVES

The modern family's ranch remains vulnerable to those things that threaten all western ranches. Here, a fire has broken out on the family's namesake, Shelley Peak.