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## “HOW BADLY CAN CATTLE AND LAND SALES SUFFER FROM THIS?”

### DROUGHT AND CATTLE SICKNESS ON THE JA RANCH, 1910–1918

MATTHEW M. DAY

Timothy Dwight Hobart, general manager of the JA Ranch in northwestern Texas, had a problem on his hands. Trying to sell his cattle in 1918, he had helped transport hundreds of head of cattle within the ranch. However, J. W. Kent, who was with the JA Ranch for a substantial portion of its history to date, noticed that the cattle were not feeling well. Anthrax had poisoned the cattle, and it was spreading quickly. “We are burning the carcasses,” Hobart wrote, “and not leaving a stone unturned to stamp out the disease.” What was he to do?<sup>1</sup>

In this study I discuss and analyze correspondence from the JA Ranch in a larger context, especially concerning drought and its effects on cattle and some land sales. Although many historians believe cattle sales plummeted only after

World War I, it can also be argued that even before the 1918 armistice, droughts and their related effects had a mixed effect on cattle prices. The droughts that struck the Texas Panhandle were nothing new, but they increased dependence on cottonseed cake, the prices of which significantly increased. In response, cattle consumed loco weed, the effects of which were not unlike toxic milkweed. However, some cattle sales continued uninterrupted. In the following years, the droughts had major consequences in the context of smaller-scale ranch development and of World War I. In this essay I present a short history of the JA Ranch prior to 1915 and then examine the 1915–16 and 1917 droughts and their effects on cattle sales, including the droughts’ effects on land sales. Finally, I explain this story’s connection to the larger historiographical context of the Great Plains.

*Key Words:* agriculture, ranching, Texas Panhandle, Trans-Mississippi, World War I

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#### TEXAS RANCHES

This was not T. D. Hobart’s first time to remedy problems with a Texas Panhandle ranch. In fact, some thirty years earlier, the Francklyn Land and Cattle Company and its Diamond F Ranch faced

foreclosure due to overspending. Located in Roberts, Gray, Carson, and Hutchinson Counties in northwestern Texas, the ranch had been founded in 1882 when Colonel B. B. Groom and his son, H. T. (Harry), came to the Texas Panhandle from Kentucky. B. B. Groom was the ranch's first manager, and the ranch's financiers were located at 44 Wall Street in New York City. But like many other Texas Panhandle ranches, the Diamond F struggled with the vice of extravagant spending. The ranch was almost bankrupt by 1886. But after the company's bondholders won a lawsuit against its president, Charles G. Francklyn, the company resurfaced as the White Deer Lands Company. Hobart, then thirty-one years of age, now oversaw land deals. The company would operate in some capacity until its 1957 liquidation.<sup>2</sup>

Coping with drought had always been part of the western cattle-ranching movement, which had reached the Texas Panhandle by 1915. Scholarship on this movement has been rich. Atherton's influential study, simply titled *The Cattle Kings*, eschews the role of the cowboy as a primary actor in western history, instead promoting the role of ranchers in the creation of the West. Rather than promoting the role of the South, Atherton emphasizes British and American investment as having been essential for the creation of the American West. This case study follows Atherton's approach but expands his treatment of drought beyond the well-known 1886–87 drought. Jordan stresses the role of individuals in his book *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching* and analyzes a cross-section of Texas regions, promoting the role of the American South in the establishment of Texas ranching. Relevant to the JA Ranch's story is Jordan's summary of Charles Goodnight, which follows Haley's *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*.<sup>3</sup> Mary Sandoz, in *The Cattlemen: From the Rio Grande across the Far Marias*, argues that western ranching had a "romantic" component to it. She devotes some space to the Big Die-Up of 1886–87, and she also briefly mentions the agricultural boom of the 1910s in passing.<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Athearn's book *High Country Empire: The High Plains and Rockies* examines the Eastern Seaboard's influence on western expansion, including on western ranching.<sup>5</sup> Gene

M. Gressley's work *Bankers and Cattlemen* examines the 1886–87 drought in detail but, as with several previous studies, does not pay sufficient attention to the 1910s.<sup>6</sup> J. Orin Oliphant's *On the Cattle Ranges of the Oregon Country* does not examine any drought, but it does mention the "'Texas' or Spanish fever . . . epidemic . . . [d]uring the late 1860s."<sup>7</sup> The Big Die-Up also hurt the Swan Land and Cattle Company, who operated a ranch in Wyoming through the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> It also hurt the Circle C Ranch in Montana.<sup>9</sup> Missing from this body of work is a discussion on other ranches, especially during the 1890s or 1910s.

The Diamond F and the JA Ranches were part of a larger effort by Britain and the eastern United States to invest in large-scale ranching in Texas, including in the Panhandle. Northwestern Texas had only been open for Anglo settlement since the United States' victory over the Plains Indian tribes in the 1874–75 Red River War. Ranches had varying financial success. Perhaps the most successful was the Matador Ranch, located in Motley County northeast of present-day Lubbock. Henry "Hank" Campbell established the Matador in 1879 with financial backing from A. M. Britton. With operational headquarters located in Denver, then Fort Worth, the Scottish-funded ranch would operate until its cessation in 1951.<sup>10</sup> Britton also funded the Spur Ranch, another British-owned ranch located in Crosby, Dickens, Garza, and Kent Counties east of Lubbock. The Espuela Cattle Company was founded in 1882 when J. M. Hall turned his cattle over to an investment group. Much like the Matador, the Espuela ranch's operational headquarters moved to Fort Worth and was funded by British investors. Instead of Dundee, Scotland, however, these investors were in London. The ranch would operate through the 1920s agricultural depression before ceasing operations in 1930.<sup>11</sup> The storied XIT Ranch was not as successful as its founders had expected. Established in 1882 as tender for a new Texas State Capitol building in Austin, the Capitol Syndicate of Chicago operated the ranch with financial backing from London's Capitol Freehold Land and Investment Company. The ranch narrowly inverted insolvency when George

Findlay, a Scot, took control of the XIT in 1887, only two years into its operations. Although Findlay returned the ranch to better financial straits, a series of 1901 lawsuits brought by minority investors would hurt its operations. After seven years of land sales, the ranch closed in 1912.<sup>12</sup>

The Paloduro or JA Ranch, as mentioned earlier, fared better. Charles Goodnight, a Central Texas cattleman who had lost his entire fortune in the Panic of 1873, settled in the Palo Duro Canyon south of Amarillo in 1876. Goodnight wanted to try his hand at ranching once again, but he needed money to do so. John Adair, an investor from Rathdare, Ireland, agreed to finance the ranch's operations and would own two-thirds of the shares of the ranch. Goodnight, meanwhile, owned one-third of these shares and managed the ranch, which the two men founded in 1877. Over the next decade, Goodnight would expand the size of the ranch through a series of land purchases, and the JA would lie in seven different northwestern Texas counties.<sup>13</sup> But after encountering the brutal weather of 1886-87, and after John Adair's death in 1885, Goodnight sold his one-third interest to Adair's widow, a New Yorker named Cornelia Wadsworth Ritchie Adair. After Goodnight resigned his management position, several successors followed, with only Richard Walsh serving longer than five years. Walsh managed the JA Ranch from 1892 until he left the United States for South Africa in 1910. Meanwhile, Hobart, who for some years after the Diamond F foreclosure was a land agent for the New York and Texas Company, a division of the Francklyn Land and Cattle Company, resigned that post in 1915 to become the ranch's latest general manager. By the time he died in 1935, Hobart had become the ranch's longest-serving manager.<sup>14</sup>

#### DROUGHT IN NORTHWESTERN TEXAS

Even the most financially viable ranches faced the difficulty of droughts. The Big Die-Up of 1886-87, which included a blistering summer drought and then a brutally cold and wet winter, killed many of the cattle on these ranches. Texas Panhandle historians refer to the 1886-87 climactic

events as a watershed event in that region's history, primarily because it was the first such event since Anglo settlement. Of course, these events were really not that unusual. Because of the area's legendary semiarid climate and high elevations, extremes in weather happen with relative regularity. But for farmers and ranchers, these weather events can cause a great deal of frustration. For settlers taking advantage of the Land Law of 1887 and the Four Section Act of 1895, which opened the Texas rangelands to settlement, these events shocked them. Many settlers were not accustomed to such dramatic and sudden changes in weather. As we will see, the 1886-87 weather events were not the last to occur on the corporate ranches.

Droughts in northwestern Texas were nothing extraordinary. In fact, they were part of the cyclical weather patterns that have dominated the region's culture for centuries. Often, these droughts included several components. First, that was traditionally low almost disappeared with the help of dry winds from Mexico. Many days passed with humidity values from 5 to 20 percent. Second, with these low humidity values and hot winds came a lack of precipitation of any type. Weeks transpired without any rainfall or snowfall, depending on the season. Third, because of this lack of precipitation, temperatures rose above normal for the time of year. Spring and summer temperatures often exceeded one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Of course, temperatures cooled quickly after dark. Fourth, grass died, and cattle were without their regular feed. Instead, the cattle ate other plants, such as cottonseed cake and, more troubling, locoweed. Fifth, dead grass often led to range fires, not unlike the fires that burned parts of this region from 2010 to the present.

Several factors exacerbated droughts in northwestern Texas. First, the area's already short grass layered the landscape even more thinly than under high precipitation. This layering is unlike the lush grass in more humid climates such as the American South, even when droughts occurred there as well. When the first cowmen began their ranches on the Texas Plains, cattle grazed—overgrazed, even—the grass to nothing. As I will show, among

the consequences of such overgrazing are cattle diseases. Second, new settlement destroyed grazing lands that would otherwise have seemed endless for cattle. The Land Law of 1887 and the Four Section Act of 1895 hurt matters for cattle ranchers—in addition to the reasons mentioned below—on the grounds that new towns were subtracting the available grazing land from these ranches. Third, these ranches evidently knew nothing of crop rotation practices used by farmers. The JA Ranch, to say nothing of other ranches in the West, also grew alfalfa and some food commodities to supplement their revenues. Unrotated land, in addition to excessive grazing, eroded the grasses. Droughts stunted ranching, and the 1915–16 and 1917 droughts were two case studies.

The JA Ranch endured a blistering drought during T. D. Hobart's first year as general manager. One of Hobart's letters to Cornelia Adair from June 1916 paints a somewhat brighter picture of ranch conditions. Despite lower-than-normal rainfall in a few places, ranch conditions seemed to be fine.<sup>15</sup> But during the summer of 1916, the drought conditions continued. Hobart assured Adair that despite the oppressive heat and drought, her current cows were unaffected. However, her younger cows were not well. Hobart reminded Adair that there was no cause for panic, but there would be if the drought continued.<sup>16</sup> Later in July, Hobart and longtime JA employee J. W. Kent checked on the cattle, which seemed to be staying close to the water. Obviously, with the dry heat and lack of rainfall, this was a difficult task.<sup>17</sup> But relief was coming. Around September 1, 1916, "another good rain," as Hobart put it, fell on the JA Ranch. Perhaps the drought was easing up.<sup>18</sup> This rain followed a "general rain," albeit not enough of one to eradicate the effects of the drought. "I hope," Hobart added, "there will be sufficient [rain] to enable us to sow the alfalfa." The JA Ranch had experimented with alfalfa farming during these years.<sup>19</sup> The drought, or this leg of it, finally ended on or around September 11, 1916. That day, Hobart wrote that heavy rain, perhaps enough to cause some flooding, fell across the JA, including Palo Duro Canyon. "The outlook is now much brighter," Hobart added.<sup>20</sup> It certainly was—for the time being.

But less than one year later, the JA Ranch suffered through yet another drought. As Hobart wrote Cornelia Adair on or around June 13, 1917, "We are passing through one of the most severe droughts that has ever occurred in this country at this section of the year, so far as [Hobart had] known." The drought would kill a good number of the crops. The only good news, Hobart noted, was that "[t]he windmill men have found it extremely difficult to keep up their work using the mill team, and as we had a chance to trade for a Ford combination truck with the capacity of one ton, turning in the light pair of mules and paying \$600 difference, both Mr. Kent and myself considered it wise to do so." He continued, "This will enable the men to make at least double time in going from one mill to another, to say nothing about the usefulness of the truck in other ways." Hobart had ordered some of his employees to sell some of the animal labor on the JA Ranch to buy a new automobile. Hobart needed to complete this task before drought conditions worsened. Some hope remained that this drought would be shorter in duration and milder in intensity than previous occurrences.<sup>21</sup>

Cottonseed cake prices increased during droughts, straining ranch budgets. For the JA Ranch, the 1915–16 drought meant that cottonseed cake was needed to feed the cattle. When grass died from a lack of rainfall—the rainfall that it needed to remain hydrated—cattle often went hungry. Cattle did not have their normal means of survival, and cattle ranchers needed other methods to feed their herds. If grass died, then cottonseed cake was a viable alternative. And the Texas Panhandle–Southern Plains region was very hospitable to cottonseed production, especially around Lubbock, a modest distance away from the JA lands. During this time, the JA Ranch may have been growing this cake on its plains sections, more so than on the Palo Duro Canyon lands. These price increases presented a problem for Hobart, when he arrived at the JA Ranch in 1915 during a drought. Hobart needed to find another method of feeding these cattle—and quickly. From what we know of his correspondence with Cornelia Adair, Hobart most likely turned to cottonseed cake sometime in the second half of

1915. Although this cake was “money well spent,” prices continued to increase. As 1916 passed, these price increases, coupled with the continued drought, began to take its toll on Hobart. In a postscript to a letter, Hobart reported that “[o]il cake is simply soaring—\$45 per ton now. Fortunately we bought 100 tons at \$34.40 and 100 tons more at an advance, but not nearly what it is worth now.”<sup>22</sup> These price increases probably cut into the revenues generated from land sales under the aforementioned 1887 and 1895 laws. What was a ranch manager to do when his cattle’s main source of nourishment had dried up, especially when the *alternate* source increased in price? What could the cattle do?

#### LOCOWEED AND BLACKLEG

One troubling answer to these questions lay in locoweed. With effects not unlike that of milkweed, and similar to other types of poisonings, cattle that ate this weed suffered digestive problems. If nothing else, locoweed could kill cattle as effectively, if not more effectively, than starvation. A head of cattle with digestive problems was unattractive to potential buyers looking to feed their families. If a cow could avoid it, whether by training, by discipline, or by some other means, and if weather conditions were better, locoweed would not be an impediment to cattle ranching. But for some of the JA cows, it was. In a 1916 letter, Hobart documented one good example of this problem. Describing a host of ranch activities as he did in many of these letters, Hobart wrote that “loco” was the only real problem on the ranch, noting that “[q]uite a number of cows have taken to eating it,” and that the cows were “put on feed.”<sup>23</sup> Although Hobart does not describe exactly what digestive problems these cattle encountered, the problems were likely similar to a typical stomach virus, only with more serious, if not fatal, risks.

Then there was the blackleg virus, which infected many a head of JA cattle around this time. *Clostridium chauvoei* is a bacterium that breeds on overgrazed grass. The droughts that struck the JA Ranch during this time certainly gave these bacteria a fertile breeding ground. The unusually short

grass, even for the Texas Panhandle, was grazed to nothing. When a head of cattle became infected with blackleg, it first encountered symptoms similar to the human influenza virus—unable to eat, unable to do normal activities, respiratory problems, higher-than-normal body temperatures, and swollen joints and cavities. Often, cattle died within two days of infection.<sup>24</sup> Hobart knew he needed to come up with a quick solution to this problem. Time was running short to save his cattle. If his cattle died, the JA Ranch would lose profits. Even if the cattle survived their ailments, they were unfit for sale at market. This issue weighed heavily on Hobart in his first few years as the JA’s general manager.

Hobart worked to try to solve the issue. In 1917 he received word that the Kansas State Agricultural College had developed a vaccine to combat blackleg. Hobart expressed relief as he wrote to his superior on or around March 22, 1917. Save for an unrelated “J.J.” cattle death, the vaccine seemed to be working. “Mr. Kent and I think that it would be wise to use the Kansas vaccine on all your calves another year,” Hobart wrote. “I know of a number of people who have used it with very satisfactory results.” Despite more deaths from Adair’s “main herd,” the vaccine apparently succeeded. Hobart and many other ranchers liked what they saw with this “Kansas vaccine.”<sup>25</sup> Trying to transport cattle to market was also tedious, as Hobart would describe some months later. “We are having great difficulty,” Hobart wrote, “in securing cars for the delivery of cattle. Some of the calves are dying with blackleg, and I have ordered vaccine from the Kansas Agricultural College, and am expecting it to-day.” He continued, “Mr. [H. W.] Skinner, who is to receive the calves, will pay for the vaccine, and will send his veterinary here to do the work. I am to take him to Ashtola to-morrow.”<sup>26</sup> For the remainder of 1917 and for the early months of 1918, disaster might have been averted.

But this was not so. In June 1918, as the United States helped her allies turn back the enemy forces in World War I, the blackleg crisis once again emerged on the JA Ranch. An alarmed Hobart notified Cornelia Adair of the news. “In the south end of the range,” Hobart wrote,



"a number of young fat cows have died from some unknown cause." Although locoweed was originally blamed, blackleg had killed them. This came from a consultation with "Professor Goss of the Kansas Agricultural College." Hobart then added that "we have decided to vaccinate all the dry cows in the Cherokee pasture a little later." A problem that had seemingly ended instead worsened.<sup>27</sup> And it continued to worsen during the summer of 1918. Hobart wrote Adair that "a little over one hundred head have died from this cause [blackleg] since early last fall." Hobart repeated the news from Goss. He then "propose[d] to secure a portion of the affected parts of one of the animals, and send it to Dr. Goss for analysis." He then added, "I think this will be much more satisfactory than bringing a veterinary to the ranch." Surely this problem could only get better.<sup>28</sup>

Cornelia Adair had an idea: hold a contest to see which pasture would lose the fewest cows to blackleg, locoweed, or other cause. She wrote to Hobart in October 1918 from a residence in Bath, England:

I perfectly agree with what you say about the counting of the cattle, in fact I think they ought to be tallied every second year, and I think they certainly ought to be done next year. It seems to me that the losses have been very small these last two years compared with what they used to be, don't you think so? I hoped that the small pastures would institute a sort of competition among the camps to see who could have the fewest losses. Do you think it would be a good plan to offer a prize in money for that purchase?

Even though the JA Ranch had endured blackleg and drought, it had evidently lost fewer cattle than under previous management, even under the legendary Charles Goodnight.<sup>29</sup> Although he remained silent on this issue for several months, Hobart had a different opinion. He finally revealed it. Responding in February 1919, he wrote that the contest "would not be best as conditions vary considerably in the different pastures." In other words, Adair's idea was, at best, idealistic, and, at worst, myopic.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, in November 1918, the blackleg

problem showed signs of improvement. Adair responded that because the problems with cattle disease had slowed, Hobart should "kindly write me a little memorandum and send it to me upon this outbreak of disease." Adair wanted to know what to do should these problems reappear. Adair then reminisced on a similar outbreak in 1910. Adair repudiated the notion that it was "contagious pneumonia."<sup>31</sup> As Hobart sent the memorandum, the JA Ranch would still struggle with this problem for the remainder of Adair and Hobart's leadership.

#### CATTLE AND LAND SALES

Droughts and blackleg had a mixed effect on cattle sales during Hobart's first years on the JA Ranch. In some cases, he experienced difficulty in selling cattle. When this occurred, as Adair explained her previous protocol, "losses must be counted and not so much per cent written off." She added, "That [method] was a very unsatisfactory way of doing things, but when the pastures were so enormous there was nothing else for it."<sup>32</sup> And count the losses Hobart did. Many of the JA's cattle died either from a lack of water, a bout with blackleg, or some other cause. Hobart knew that cattle sales were going to be difficult to execute. He wrote Adair on or around June 2, 1917, about his concerns for the calf crop, noting that "it is going to be rather short." Problems with getting water to the cattle had hurt the calf numbers. He added that "we are making strenuous efforts to secure at least another well right away on the plains in that pasture." In order to save their cattle, JA employees would need to drill water wells on their property.<sup>33</sup> If rain was not bound to come, cattle needed some other water source. And although many cattle died, some cattlemen were still willing to buy from the JA Ranch.

Unfortunately, little of the correspondence concerning the H. W. Skinner sale survives, but it is important for what it adds to this story. Skinner was a cattleman from Medicine Lodge, Kansas, in that state's south-central region near the border with Oklahoma. He was looking to expand his small-scale cattle ranch, and the correspondence suggests—but does not explic-

itly state—that he may have had some association with Hobart in the past. In 1917, Skinner bought about 1,900 head. According to a letter from T. D. Hobart to Cornelia Adair from May 1917, “he paid \$5 per head on 1600 to be delivered September 1st [1917].” Hobart added that about “2000 head” comprised the sale, “although with a little more time we could easily have made up the number.” Hobart hoped that “a very good price” would be placed on the cattle, “especially in view of our conditions.” The Skinner purchase seemed to progress well amid all the problems the JA had had.<sup>34</sup> In an October 1917 letter to Adair, Hobart trumpeted additional sales to Skinner. Comparable in size to the May purchase, “Old Cows” comprised slightly over half the sale. But about 150 calves were not part of the sale, with Hobart citing their condition as the reason: “too small not counted weak and very inferior.” On the other hand, close to as many calves *were* part of the sale. “The calves included in this delivery,” Hobart wrote, “include both steers and heifers following the old cows, many of the little calves thrown in were unbranded. [ . . . ] I understand Mr. Skinner lost twenty cows and four calves in shipping. We have to deliver the steer yearlings this week.” In all, Hobart sold over \$52,000 in cattle.<sup>35</sup> In spite of drought and blackleg, cattle sales did continue in some capacity.

Not surprisingly, the drought affected land sales. According to the Four Section Act of 1895, settlers could buy four sections of any combination of agricultural or pastoral lands for at least one dollar. But as Cornelia Adair wrote on July 9, 1917, executing these land sales in accordance with this act was a difficult task to accomplish. A man named Payne was trying to buy some land around modern Tulia in Swisher County, some fifty miles south of Amarillo. Fifteen dollars per acre was the price set on some of the land. Adair believed this drought might be good for the JA Ranch. “I suppose,” Adair added, “this drought will block all land sales for the present. I only hope we are in for a succession of years of drought such as they had in Western Kansas years ago.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, this wish would have undermined the Land Law of 1887 and the Four Section Act of 1895, as mentioned earlier. Set-

tlers who would have had to continue paying on their land would have been further burdened by declining land values resulting from the drought. In particular, these land values would have fallen below the minimum threshold outlined by the Four Section Act.

This letter also seemed to contradict the wish that Cornelia Adair had professed to T. D. Hobart earlier that year. As Adair aged, she suffered from neuritis. This and other health problems, as L. F. Sheffy later wrote, hindered her otherwise energetic abilities.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, she believed that her life may have been approaching its sunset. In March 1917 Adair wrote a private letter to T. D. Hobart explaining her wish to dispose of her lands. She gave Hobart three options for proceeding with the sale. “[T]ell me,” Adair wrote, “whether you think it would be best to offer the Ranch as a whole; to offer it divided into smaller ranches, say half a dozen; or to sell it in smaller tracts still, about the size of our present pastures like Sandy Pastures, Cherokee, &c.”<sup>38</sup> Adair favored either of the latter two plans.<sup>39</sup>

Cornelia Adair knew that she did not have much time left to live, and she needed to dispose of her ranch immediately. If she did not, and if death came for her, then the ranch would likely be in dire financial straits. In response, Hobart wrote that the best plan of action was “to sell it in sub-divisions to people who would make a use of it,” adding that “suitable subdivisions with [a] minimum scale of prices” would help the sale of the JA Ranch. Hobart used his years with the “White Deer Lands [Company]” as a frame of reference. He added:

In selling out the ranch the cattle will of course have to be taken in consideration, it is a bad plan as a rule to sell the she [cattle] in that country, on the other hand it would not matter so much if you were going to close out the land and cattle might in many instances be included to advantage with the various sales of land.<sup>40</sup>

Some land sales, such as E. D. Harrell’s land purchase in 1917–19, were successful both in process and in results, as compared to others such as the M. T. Howard boundary dispute. Payne’s attempt-



ed purchase probably gravitated toward the latter. From the tone of Adair's July 1917 letter, Payne might have been a land speculator, someone to whom Cornelia Adair did not want to sell her lands. So, in a way, Adair might have wanted a drought—at least for that reason. However, for other reasons, such as cattle sales, she wanted the drought to end.

Paradoxically, drought and cattle sicknesses probably had no immediate effect on the E. D. Harrell land purchase, because both Cornelia Adair and T. D. Hobart supported Harrell's efforts. A cattle rancher from Canyon, Texas, Harrell bought several sections of Palo Duro Canyon lands. Negotiations for this purchase, which included possible oil-development rights, began in 1917 and lasted for about two years. In fact, insufficient funding, problems finding a business partner, and leadership's problems with other land deals hurt Harrell's efforts to buy 50,000 to 60,000 acres in May 1917. The record does not say whether droughts and blackleg specifically affected Harrell, though they clearly affected his business partner, J. W. Puckett. An Amarillo resident who ran his own small-scale ranching operation, Puckett joined the Harrell purchase so that he could start his own small-scale ranching operation farther to the southeast. Hobart wrote in January 1919 about Puckett's progress amid winter storms. "800 choice cows," he noted, "in the Northwest part of the Panhandle [had been stranded] in thirty inches of snow. . . . [H]e was trying to move these cattle to the Railroad so as to ship them south," and he would have to pay \$10,000 to save their lives. Because the rangelands had lost large amounts of grass, he added, "it is going to take lots of money for extra feed as the winter is only fairly under way."<sup>41</sup> Although it killed many cattle, winter weather was a welcome relief in a drought because it helped grass grow back, if only for a little while. Also, the colder weather killed many of the insects, bugs, and bacteria that droughts enabled, giving the grass ample nourishment to grow. This weather often served as an antidote to blistering temperatures, not to mention the range fires that came with the drought.

#### AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION

With the end of World War I came a darker period in the JA Ranch's history. Cornelia Adair, who had suffered from a variety of health problems as well as neuritis, died in September 1921. At her passing, she owed about three-quarters of a million dollars in taxes to Washington and London, and she owed slightly more in personal debts. Moreover, cattle and land prices began to fall significantly after World War I, creating an agricultural depression separate from the Great Depression a decade later. As executor of Cornelia Adair's will, Hobart had to sell the JA Ranch. But the agriculture bust made it very difficult, if not impossible, to execute this sale. This problem, as B. Byron Price has found, lasted until Hobart's death in 1935. After that, M. H. W. "Montie" Ritchie, a grandson of Cornelia Adair, took over ranch operations and was able to save the ranch from insolvency. For fifty-eight years, Ritchie oversaw better times for the JA Ranch. Ritchie died in 1999, six years after selling the JA Ranch to his daughter, Ninia Ritchie, and her business partner, Amarillo resident Jay O'Brien. They own the ranch to this day.<sup>42</sup>

Drought and blackleg had major consequences for the JA Ranch, as well as for many ranches. First, as mentioned earlier, an already thin layer of grass became even thinner, if not nonexistent. This grass depletion left ranchlands even more barren, setting the stage for the 1930s Dust Bowl. Heat and drought similar to the conditions on the JA Ranch in the mid-1910s compounded the problems. The newer generation of conservationists, then, would say that they were right about cattle ranching. Second, although land and cattle prices remained higher during World War I, these price spikes were only temporary. A few years after World War I ended, cattle ranches, as well as the national economy as a whole, slipped into an economic depression. Although much of the nation recovered quickly after this 1920–21 depression, agriculture was slow to recover—if it ever did during the 1920s. For agriculture, the arrival of the Great Depression made little difference; hard times never seemed to have left. Third, in order for cattle ranches to survive, they needed to diver-

sify their business beyond farming and ranching. Some ranches, like the 6666 Ranch in Carson County, Texas, began attempts at producing oil around this time.<sup>43</sup> The famed King Ranch, further downstate near Texas's Gulf Coast, did so as well. They even expanded into several nations.<sup>44</sup> Only the JA and the XIT Ranches did not produce oil or gas on their rangelands. Fourth, cattle needed to be able to survive drought, blackleg, or any other malady that came their way. Cowmen bred cattle from the time of their first ranches in Texas. For example, late in his life Charles Goodnight bred cattle with buffalo.<sup>45</sup> Darwinism, in a sense, was at work: survival of the fittest applied to the cattle's survival.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps these cowmen thought that crossbred cattle would survive better than purebred cattle when it came to enduring various maladies. The correspondence says nothing about Charles Goodnight's cattalo, meaning that the crossbreeding of cattle and buffalo probably did not succeed. Unproductive lands and unhealthy cattle took their toll on ranchers. This toll further underscored the need to diversify these ranchers' business practices.

It was likely that Cornelia Adair's declining health had something to do with her wildly inconsistent views on land sales. Drought and related cattle sickness had already done their damage, and this stress resonates through some of her letters to Timothy Dwight Hobart. Those from March 1917 and the following July particularly reveal her ambivalence. Did she really want to sell the JA Ranch? Did she want to do so quickly? Also, an air of desperation in her old age seems to permeate this correspondence. Of course, censoring mail was a common practice on the British Isles during World War I, and the knowledge that her mail was being read might have affected Adair's consistency on this issue. During this time, she maintained residences in Great Britain and in Ireland. World War I had engulfed Europe. For wealthy British and Irish property owners such as Cornelia Adair, the daily fear of losing property by any method placed even more stress on daily life. Dealing with that and with business losses caused by drought thousands of miles away must have adversely affected her health.

#### THE JA RANCH IN CONTEXT

The first anti-blackleg vaccinations on the JA Ranch coincided with American intervention in World War I. American troops needed beefsteak, and these ranches were ideal producers. The Kansas State Agricultural College had developed this vaccine by 1917, just as President Woodrow Wilson had considered sending American troops to Europe. Even though the correspondence does not give the range scholar much insight into how the vaccine was developed, we know that it was developed in time to save a significant portion of the JA Ranch's cattle. More broadly, it came in time to benefit American troops beginning to fight in Europe. However, for these ranches, the vaccine came too late to heal the self-inflicted financial wounds, such as overspending.

It is unknown whether droughts and cattle sickness had a measurable effect on land and cattle sales already in progress, but they might have been behind the seemingly sudden and rapid changes in Adair's position on land sales. If not for the rains that had fallen, for instance, in September 1916, the negative consequences for ranching, including for the JA Ranch, might have been more significant. Of particular note was the averted disaster that H. W. Skinner's cattle purchase might have been. The vaccine used to combat blackleg was developed in Kansas, where Skinner resided during this time. It is possible that Skinner knew enough about the vaccine to know that the ranches using it on their cattle would be able to sell them more safely. However, there was an unforeseen variable that threatened to wreck Skinner's purchase: the winter blizzards, a perfect antidote to drought. Overall, disaster was temporarily averted for JA cattle sales.

Much of the success in spite of and failure stemming from drought and blackleg occurred in the context of World War I. The conflict that the pre-World War II generation termed the "Great War" had a significant impact on the U.S. economy, including agribusiness. From fuel to food, Americans went to work so that their military could win a war in Europe. Paradoxically, a number of Americans did not know much about the real causes behind the war.<sup>47</sup> Still, many Ameri-

cans supported their military, win, lose, or draw. This patriotic spirit existed on the corporate ranches. Even amid cattle disease and drought, ranchers still needed to take their cattle market—and sell it at the highest possible price. Soldiers needed food. Cowmen produced beefsteak, not to mention other crops. This supply-and-demand correlation increased cattle prices. On the other side of the coin, American civilians did not get this privilege. In fact, then-U.S. Food Department head Herbert Hoover encouraged Americans to go without meat for one day each week. While this abstinence helped ordinary Americans conserve meat and save money, even amid an increasing standard of living, it also prevented cattle and land prices from further increasing. Thus, cowmen did not have the additional benefit of even higher cattle prices. Given the agricultural depression of the 1920s, extra revenue would have helped cowmen, giving them a safety net.

Another view comes from Connie Woodhouse, who argues that precipitation trended upward between the end of the Civil War-era drought and the Dust Bowl years, despite alternating years of above-normal and below-normal precipitation.<sup>48</sup> Thus, since the JA Ranch was experiencing drought even as precipitation levels generally increased following 1865, because there were inconsistencies in rainfall by location. That is, weather patterns most conducive to significant rainfall might have skirted the JA Ranch.

While the JA Ranch grew and then shrunk in land size, much of the West saw the conservation movement, which aimed to save the West's natural resources, take shape. Although it was in the best interests of cattlemen to take care of the land, the practice of overgrazing had to have angered those concerned with the long-term impact on the environment. The 1930s drought that saw black dust clouds and hot temperatures punish the Panhandle for several years proved them right.

Finally, smaller farms and ranches eventually supplanted these corporate ranches, as mentioned earlier. The work of John Miller Morris addresses the impact of family farms on the Southern Plains. Before settlement exploded—that is, while these corporate ranches grew their business and spent their businesses into near-

bankruptcy—Morris's figure of "some thirty-five thousand . . . settlers . . . or so" seems accurate. "[R]ailroad corridor towns" and "county seat towns" held many of the settlers not on corporate ranch lands. Clarendon, Texas, one of the JA Ranch's municipal strongholds, was part of the former group. But the start of the twentieth century brought new settlers with no real knowledge of the area, putting pressure on established cowmen in addition to the 1886–87 crisis. This additional pressure from smaller-scale farmers and ranchers did not help matters.<sup>49</sup>

With improving food-preservation technologies, Americans could now buy more beef than in previous times. This increase in beef purchases helped cattle ranches across this region—but only if ranches sold healthy cattle at market. Sickened cattle could not be sold, thus temporarily increasing cattle prices according to demand. But after World War I, Americans, including the soldiers who had helped win that war, did not purchase as much beef. Cattle prices, which had been inflated because of war demand and fewer healthy cattle, dropped dramatically, and cattle ranchers could not sell even their healthiest cattle. Rainfall, or lack thereof, helped or hurt ranching operations, regardless of its scale.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have examined the effects of drought and blackleg on cattle sales and some land sales on the JA Ranch. The work has attempted to fill a gap in the historiography on western ranching by emphasizing the impact of drought other than the Big Die-Up of 1886–87. The timing of this article is perhaps serendipitous, as beginning in the second half of 2010, West Texas underwent the worst drought in at least fifty years. It was a condition that Cornelia Adair and Timothy Dwight Hobart would recognize. No doubt their handling of it would be instructive for those of us who witnessed the recent drought.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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in Canyon, Texas, for his securing of many photocopies of letters, and the Southwest Collection of Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, for securing maps for this study.

#### NOTES

1. Timothy Dwight Hobart to Cornelia Adair, October 16, 1918, envelope 72, folder C, Cornelia Adair–Timothy Dwight Hobart Correspondence, Timothy Dwight Hobart Collection, Archives of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, TX.

2. L. F. Sheffy, *The Francklyn Land and Cattle Company: A Panhandle Enterprise, 1882–1957* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), 172–233.

3. Lewis Atherton, *The Cattle Kings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), xi, 154, 155; Terry Jordan, *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 142.

4. Mari Sandoz, *The Cattlemen: From the Rio Grande Across the Far Marias* (New York: Hastings House, 1958), xiv, 463, 472.

5. Robert C. Athearn, *High Country Empire: The High Plains and Rockies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), vii, 143–9.

6. Gene M. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 243–72, for example, examines the Big Die-Up's effects on financial operations.

7. J. Orin Oliphant, *On the Cattle Ranges of the Oregon Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 235.

8. Harmon Ross Mothershead, *The Swan Land and Cattle Company, Ltd.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 60–83.

9. Walt Coburn, *Pioneer Cattlemen in Montana: The Story of the Circle C Ranch* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 15–26.

10. W. M. Pearce, *The Matador Land and Cattle Company* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 5.

11. William Curry Holden, *The Espuela Land and Cattle Company: A Study of a Foreign-Owned Ranch in Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1970), 39–43, 219.

12. J. Evetts Haley, *The XIT Ranch of Texas and the Early Days of the Llano Estacado* (1929; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 49–58, 84–104, 214–26.

13. These counties are Armstrong, Briscoe, Donley, Floyd, Hall, Randall, and Swisher.

14. J. Evetts Haley, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936, rpt. 1949): 195–233; L. F. Sheffy, *The Life and Times of Timothy Dwight Hobart, 1855–1935* (Canyon, TX: Panhandle-Plains Historical Society, 1950), 202ff., 196.

15. Hobart to Adair, June 26, 1916, envelope 71, folder C, Adair–Hobart Correspondence, Hobart Collection.

16. Hobart to Adair, July 20, 1916, envelope 71, folder C.

17. Hobart to Adair, July 31, 1916, envelope 71, folder C.

18. Hobart to Adair, September 2, 1916, envelope 71, folder D.

19. Hobart to Adair, August 31, 1916, envelope 71, folder C.

20. Hobart to Adair, September 11, 1916, envelope 71, folder D.

21. Hobart to Adair, June 13, 1917, envelope 71, folder I.

22. Hobart to Adair, January 4, 1916, envelope 71, folder C; Hobart to Adair, November 20, 1915, envelope 71, folder B; Hobart to Adair, October 25, 1916, envelope 71, folder G.

23. Hobart to Adair, January 25, 1916, envelope 71, folder C.

24. “Blackleg,” Cattle Diseases, *Cattle Today Online*, <http://cattletoday.info/blackleg.htm> (accessed July 16, 2011).

25. Hobart to Adair, March 22, 1917, envelope 71, folder H. Kansas State Agricultural College is now Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS.

26. Hobart to Adair, November 12, 1917, envelope 71, folder J.

27. Hobart to Adair, June 11, 1918, envelope 72, folder B.

28. Hobart to Adair, August 2, 1918, envelope 71, folder C.

29. Adair to Hobart, October 14, 1918, envelope 72, folder C.

30. Hobart to Adair, February 1, 1919, envelope 72, folder E.

31. Adair to Hobart, December 5, 1918, envelope 72, folder D. “I have your letter of Nov. 12th, and also your cable of Nov. 26th which was not delivered to me till Dec. 1st. I was glad to see in it that there has been no more trouble among the cattle. When you have time will you kindly write me a little memorandum and send it to me upon this outbreak of disease, so that it may be kept to be referred to. I daresay you have heard that about eight years ago twenty-five of the fin-

est JJ cows were found dead, dying of some mysterious disease, all within a few days of one another. The veterinary who examined them said it was contagious pneumonia, but I never was quite satisfied that it was thoroughly investigated. Mr. Ligertwood was then accountant and telegraphed to me about it when I was at Aiken. Mr. Kent would remember all about it. This seems to be quite a different thing, and I am quite alarmed about it still."

32. Adair to Hobart, December 7, 1916, envelope 71, folder D.

33. Hobart to Adair, June 2, 1917, envelope 72, folder F.

34. Hobart to Adair, May 7, 1917, envelope 71, folder F.

35. Hobart to Adair, October 16, 1917, envelope 71, folder K.

36. Adair to Hobart, July 9, 1917, envelope 71, folder I.

37. Sheffy, *Timothy Dwight Hobart*, 214.

38. Sandy Pasture was located in northwestern Donley County, Cherokee Pasture in Briscoe County. *Sandy Creek Pasture Map #1*, undated, JA box #2, map #260; *Cherokee Pasture Map*, undated, JA box #2, map #248. Both maps from JA Collection, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

39. Adair to Hobart, March 13, 1917, envelope 71, folder H. Adair referred to a boundary dispute between the JA Ranch and a private rancher named M. T. Howard. See, for example, Hobart to Adair, September 11, 1916; Hobart to Adair, June 7, 1917, envelope 71, folder I.

40. Hobart to Adair, April 2, 1917, envelope 71, folder H.

41. Hobart to Adair, January 4, 1919, envelope 72, folder E.

42. Sheffy, *Timothy Dwight Hobart*, 214; B. Byron Price, "Surviving Drought and Depression: The JA Ranch in the 1930s," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 75 (2002): 1-12.

43. J. W. Williams, *The Big Ranch Country*, with an introduction by Lawrence Clayton (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1999), 229.

44. Don Graham, *Kings of Texas: The 150-Year Saga of an American Ranching Empire* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2004), 212-19.

45. Haley, *Charles Goodnight*, 437-38.

46. In the interest of full disclosure, I do not subscribe to Darwinism or its derivatives. However, I include references to Darwinism to more closely match the thinking of these ranch owners and managers.

47. Even historians of Europe could not agree on who started the war. See, for example, John D. Treadway, *The Falcon and the Eagle: Montenegro and Austria-Hungary, 1908-1914* (1983; repr., West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1998).

48. Connie Woodhouse, "Droughts of the Past, Implications for the Future?" in *The Future of the Southern Plains*, ed. Sherry L. Smith (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 104, table. Although the table shows data for only the modern Oklahoma Panhandle, that region shares climate similarities with the northwestern Texas plains.

49. John Miller Morris, "When Corporations Rule the Llano Estacado: The Glorious Past and Uncertain Future of the Southern High Plains Family Farm," in Smith, *Future of the Southern Plains*, 44-94. See also previous citations on the settlement boom.