

Shoot-out at the Olive Ranch – August 1, 1876

Post-Civil War Texas attracted a steady influx of immigrants fleeing the battle destruction of the Southern states and the harsh rule of the Federal Reconstruction Act. Bell, Williamson, Milam, and Bastrop counties saw the congregation of many former Confederate soldiers, including several who rode with Quantrel's guerilla army. While many came to Texas for the cheap grazing and cropland on which to settle, others came seeking their fortunes with guns.

A stretch of rolling prairie land, crossed by the Yegura and Brushy creeks and dotted with thick, almost impenetrable cedar breaks, became the "home ground" for numerous outlaw gangs from the 1860s to the early 1890s. The area, occupying the southeast corner of Williamson County, southwest corner of Milam County, and northeast corner of Bastrop County, provided easy access to the increasing number of Central Texas railroads and the area's growing population.

Cattle-rustling along the Yegura Creek was different from that portrayed in Hollywood westerns. Instead of driving large herds of stolen cattle to Mexico or to market, rustlers often butchered and skinned individual beeves in the field and delivered their dressed hindquarters to meat markets in nearby Austin. Being caught in the act of killing and butchering cattle often resulted in the immediate death of the rustler. Killing a rustler often brought on the wrath of his confederates in the form of blood feuds, many of which often lasted for years or until all participants were dead.

Notable among Williamson County cattle ranchers who had to deal with such rustlers was James Olive. James had settled in 1843 with his wife, Julia Ann, in an area of southeastern Williamson County known as Lawrence Chapel. Together, they built a large ranch house and general store on Brushy Creek near Lawrence Chapel's Methodist Church and cemetery.

2-Minute History of Williamson County

James Olive built the family's cattle empire with the help of his four sons: Isom Prentice (Print), 1841-1886; Thomas Jefferson (Jay), 1843-1876; Robert A. (Bob), 1850-1878; and Ira, 1854-1928.

The Olive family's wealth was based on the wild, unbranded Longhorn cattle that roamed freely in the post oak thickets and cedar breaks along Brushy Creek and the San Gabriel River. Because there were no fences to indicate a rancher's property or to hold in his livestock, the Olives laid claim to all cattle in the area and quickly gained a reputation for dealing harshly with anyone they suspected of rustling.

Contemporary accounts of the Olive clan's ranching activities were consistent with post-Civil War Texas ranching operations. Most ranchers themselves were forced to deal directly with cattle and horse thieves due to the size of the county and the time required for word to reach law enforcement authorities at the county seat in Georgetown. Moreover, the methods used by the individual ranchers were tempered by their experiences during the Civil War and the boldness of the outlaws they encountered.

Following an armed confrontation between the Olives and a group of suspected rustlers in the old stone saloon building in the Bastrop County town of McDade, an attack was made early on the morning of August 1, 1876, on the Olive clan's cattle pens located near the present-day town of Thrall. Jay Olive was shot and died nineteen days later from the twenty-two "blue whistler" shotgun-pellet wounds he received in the gunfight. Jay, at the age of 33, was laid to rest in the Lawrence Chapel Cemetery, where his tombstone remains today.

According to the August 12 issue of the *Austin Daily Statesman*,

A letter received in this city Thursday from Post Oak Island says that on the night of August 1, a party of fifteen or twenty men attacked the Olive brothers on their ranch. Besides the three of them, Print, Jay and Bob, there were three other white men and two Negroes. Jay Olive was shot in the body in twenty-two places and Prentice Olive was shot in the hip; and a man named Butler several times in the leg and hip. Bill Wells, one of the Negroes, was shot twice in the head. The raiders got \$750 from the house and then forced one of the Negroes to burn it.

2-Minute History of Williamson County

The trouble is said to have grown out of the Crow and Turner tragedy, which occurred in that neighborhood some six months since. The Olives are engaged largely in the raising of stock and have suffered severely for a long time at the hands of horse and cattle thieves.

Several months ago they gave out that they would kill anyone they found skinning their cattle or riding their horses. Not long after that, old man Crow and a suspicious character named Turk Turner were killed in the woods near McDade while skinning a beef with the Olive brand. Crow had a son who served one or two terms in the penitentiary and he accused the Olives of killing his father, and threatened to revenge his death.

Since that time, it is said that he has been at the head of a band of desperadoes and toughs and this crowd is suspected of committing the horrible tragedy perpetrated on the Olive brothers and their employees on the night of August 1.

The Olive brothers are said to be upright men and they have many warm friends in the vicinity of where they live, and that further trouble and bloodshed will follow is probable.

What action the Governor and the authorities will take we cannot say, but certainly the affair calls for rigid and hearty work. Life and property is not safe in Texas, and there is no use of anyone asserting that it is.

On earlier occasions Print Olive had posted rewards at the Williamson County Courthouse in Georgetown and encouraged Sheriff John Strayhorn to investigate and arrest the rustlers who were stealing and killing Olive cattle.

Instead of waiting for Williamson County authorities to bring these killers to justice, Print and Bob Olive tracked down and killed several of the suspected rustlers. However, Bob and Print's efforts to avenge Jay's death made it difficult for them to remain in Williamson County.

As a result, Print moved to Nebraska, where he established a large cattle ranching operation. Bob also re-located to Nebraska and worked as a cowhand for his brother. Bob was shot and killed by rustlers on November 28, 1878, near Kearney, Nebraska, and his body was returned to Texas to be buried near his brother Jay in the Lawrence Chapel Cemetery.

2-Minute History of Williamson County

Over the years, the Olive brothers were branded as outlaws due to the methods they used to protect their ranching operations from rustlers. Contributing to the negative image were a number of publications including *The Ladder of Rivers*, by Harry E. Chrisman; a 1960 *True* magazine article entitled “One-man Mafia of the Prairies” by John Feak; and a scathing 1950s *Saturday Evening Post* article, “Tyrant of the Plains,” written by noted author and western historian Mari Sandoz.

An unsubstantiated story about Print Olive's murder of a suspected cattle rustler continues in print today in the book, *Wild Cow Tales*, by Southwestern storyteller J. Frank Dobie. When viewed in the context of 19th Century Texas, the violence perpetrated against them by the well-organized gangs of rustlers, and the inability of the law to stop the rustling, the Olive brothers' actions were justified.



Pictured above is the old stone saloon, now the McDade City Museum, as it appears today. The saloon was the location of the Olive brothers' confrontation with the Yegura gang which precipitated the rustlers attack on the Olive ranch.

2-Minute History of Williamson County

The stone saloon also played a role in the multiple hanging of suspected outlaws by vigilantes in what is now called the "McDade Christmas Massacre of 1883".

Note: Chrisman's long out of print book, The Ladder of Rivers, is now available in the Williamson County Historical Museum's gift shop.

[Excerpt from *The Noble John Olive*® by Jim Dillard]