

The Chair

By Stephen L. Wilmeth

When we moved from Cliff to Silver City and started school, the surroundings of family gave way to the absence of familiarity. The outside world that existed through radio while listening to Red Ryder and Little Beaver at Boppy and Nana's on Bell Canyon gave way to totally new circumstances.

I didn't like it.

Baseball was okay and football became increasingly interesting, but the reliance on family remained disconnected until I met Bill Conner. We stood by our mothers when we were introduced. We looked each other up and down. In a reassuring way, he was dressed like me. He had boots on when most of the town boys wore shoes.

We were told we were cousins, but, more importantly, Bill's mother, Nora, told me Bill had a pony. She invited me to ride with him. That started a relationship with Bill that became fast and true. We rode Bill's pony, Billy, until he wore us out. We played on the same Little League baseball team and, later, we would play under Friday night lights on many football fields. It was Bill who helped me set the blocks in ankle deep water in a driving rainstorm at UNM stadium in the state mile medley track finals. I ran the first 220 leg to hand off to him for the second leg.

It was also Bill's great grandmother, Mrs. Martin Cox, who was a central influence in the decision by her brother, Peter Shelley, to leave Texas in 1884.

Bill and I are joined by momentous events that occurred long before our births. The history value created from cow trails, hardships, and family unity is ... our heritage.

From Texas they came

Mrs. Cox and another Shelley sibling, Stamper (who arrived in New Mexico with a new identity and the name, Absalom Davis), convinced Peter and Emily Jane Shelley that New Mexico's upper Gila River country was the place to stake their future. Both were already in what was to become Grant County, and Peter came overland in 1883 to look at the land they described in detail. Before he saddled his horse and headed back to Texas, his decision was made.

The Shelley children, Ellie Josephine, Mary Belle, John William, and Thomas Jefferson, were nine, seven, five and three, respectively.

Mary Belle and Tom later chronicled their memories of their ensuing journey. The immensity of that effort comes to life in their written words.

From Tom, the suggestion that it wasn't just the dire economic conditions that the family faced, first, in Bell County, and later Edwards County that prompted the departure from Texas. The higher humidity of Bell County contributed to health issues that didn't go away in their move to Edwards County. Mary Belle, called Madie as a child, suffered from chills and fever that worsened on the trip, but, interestingly, went away upon arrival to New Mexico.

To finance the trip, Peter sold nearly everything including farm implements, house, furniture, a herd of goats, and a portion of his stock. Most of the receipts were paid in the form of gold of which half was kept for trip expenses and half was sewn into Emily Jane's clothes for safekeeping.

For days, neighbors and family gathered to help in the process and to wish good fortune and tearful goodbyes. Madie remembered one of her aunts hugging her and telling her she probably would never see her again.

Those words revealed truth.

The boys watched their dad brand horses and cattle making ready for the trip. Mimicking him, they prepared to brand their own livestock, the hound pups, which were selected to be taken. They fashioned wire branding irons to also brand 916 and set them in a fire to heat. The pups were spared the ordeal when Will stepped on the hot 6 and branded himself. He cried all night long.

With only one covered wagon to haul the barest essentials, Emily Jane told the children they could take only one of their toys. Ella and Madie each chose wax dolls, Will took his 'pop' gun, and Tom took a device described as "a little bell strung between two wheels and pulled with a string".

The wagon was loaded with "essential grub", a trunk with clothes, two cotton mattresses with enough quilts and feather pillows for two beds, three irons, a cast iron cook kit, knives and forks, a wash pan, dish pan, tin cups, a one gallon jug, two buckets, and a wall tent. Attached to the outside of the wagon were two water kegs, a rub board, and a tub. A cowhide was hung from the underside of the wagon to carry the pups and to throw fire wood or buffalo chips for cooking meals.

On March 18, 1884, the family left 'Lakey', Texas bound for Mogollon Creek in New Mexico Territory. Peter, the boys, and accompanying men drove the stock including some 80 head of cattle and 30 head of horses belonging to Peter and came 700 miles by way of Ft Stockton, Fort Davis, Eagle Springs, Franklin (El Paso) and Deming.

In the vernacular of the day and now largely forgotten, the wagon had no 'spring board' or seat. In its place was a rough hewn chair with a rawhide seat. The importance of that chair can only now be fathomed. If lead is the element that soldered precious stained glass windows together in sanctuaries of worship, that simple hand made chair similarly held a family together ... against the odds and the dangers of an epic journey.



The Chair

That chair was the only furniture taken on the trip.

Emily Jane would drive the wagon five or six miles ahead of the herd each morning and set up and cook the midday meal. She would then re-harness the team and drive another five or six miles to a night camp to repeat the process. The kids would collect fuel for the cooking fire and throw it under the wagon onto the suspended hide.

When wood was not available, buffalo chips were used. When neither was available, grass was cut with a butcher knife and twisted for enough fire to cook the meal in the Dutch oven. They used the same knives to cut bark from 'chittum' trees to make chewing gum.

The trip through the eyes of those children was at once magical and terrifying.

Food was a central issue. Years later, their writings referenced when it was abundant. When they reached the Pecos, they caught catfish. One was large enough to provide supper and breakfast the following morning. They dreaded when 'algerreda' berries would no longer be present for picking. They were forewarned the berries didn't grow in New Mexico. The last of the pies Emily Jane made in a tin plate placed in the Dutch oven was a memorable event.

The stock was always central to the drama. The personality of the team was revealed. Jeff, the big brown stallion, was a pretty picture, but he had to be watched or he would kick the pulling mate, the big mare with the mule colt. The mule colt was tedious. He was mean, and, when they reached the flooding Rio Grande, he ran to the water but bogged down out of reach and couldn't be helped. An exhausted Peter concluded he wasn't worth saving anyway and left him. The little mule exhibited mule tenacity, though, and was standing at camp the next morning. He was described thereafter as 'a wise chicken'.

The children were ... children.

After an all night herd watch, the little boys along with their dad were beyond tired. To their mama they retreated to sit in her lap as she hugged them and rocked back and forth by the fire in that old chair.

It was the same when the chills and fever returned to Madie. Madie, my great grandmother who we also knew as Ma, remembered "many a time ... in the evening Ma would be sitting in that old chair silently crying." But, she never complained, and, in fact, she assumed her parents made it a pact between them to always smile, laugh and be encouraging around their children.

They knew the difficulty of the journey.

The cornerstone

Through more times of devastating loss and outright terror, the family arrived on the banks of Gila River near their eventual 916 Ranch headquarters in Mogollon Creek on September 1, 1884. Their aunt, Ellen Cox, my childhood friend and cousin Bill Conner's great grandmother, came running to them.

She welcomed them home.

In the days that followed, they lived in their tent. That was eventually replaced by a log cabin.

Their first dining furniture consisted of two horse shoe kegs and two boxes to sit on and a larger box served as a table. Of course, the chair was there, but, in the cramped space, one of the family members always had to stand or find a place on the dirt floor to eat.

Home was eventually a little frame house that Emily Jane celebrated like it was a mansion. In a broader sense, it was. It was built around an extraordinary American story. Yes, it was ranch setting, but it was also a lesson in Americana that is largely displaced today.

The chair remains. The modern day 916 legacy steward and patriarch, Terrell Shelley, gave the chair to the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum for safekeeping.

It also serves as a reminder. Those people and people like them remain important to our history, and ... they cannot be forgotten.

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. "Shame on legislators who fail to elevate historic ranches into the purpose of their legislation!"



As I read and posted Wilmeth's column today, my eyes kept being drawn to that chair, and I would just stare at it. And then I'd have visions of the lady who sat in it, of her journey, of her arrival and of the legacy she and her family left to us. And I knew that chairs or similar artifacts like this could be found across The West.

But then I had a vision of another chair - the standard, gov't issued chair used by the bureaucrats who are destroying this heritage.

Next I saw a plush chair, situated in a high-rise building and used by an enviro executive who had helped design this destruction.

Followed by a high-backed chair of the type used by members of Congress, the men and women who have enabled and continue to enable this destruction.

Finally, my eyes return to Emily's chair, and I mourn the loss of everything it represents.

