

Valley Beneath The Sierra Vieja:
A Texas Border Ranch History

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Located in far west Presidio County some ten miles north of the Rio Grande village of Candelaria, Texas, the land of today's Circle Dug Ranch has a long and colorful past. Bounded on the east by the Sierra Vieja Mountains, the Circle Dug is situated some five miles east of the Rio Grande River and Chihuahua. It lies in a broad and rugged desert valley bordered on the west by the vast Sierra Madre Mountain range of Mexico. Locally known as the Candelaria Rim Rock, the Sierra Vieja comprise the southernmost tip of the Southern Rocky Mountains in North America. Capote Peak, at 6,212 feet above sea level overlooks the rim rock on the southeastern edge of Sierra Vieja. The Vieja rim rock has long been a barrier separating the outside world from river valley and the Circle Dug. Although the Rio Grande the official boundary, in many ways, the Vieja rim is the true boundary and the river valley is more like Mexico than the United States. Spanish language and customs continue to prevail west of the rim and the remoteness of the area give one the experience of having gone back in time at least a hundred years.

Although the Circle Dug lies in the Chihuahuan Desert, two important watercourses cross the ranch. The spring fed Capote Creek flows continuously over the rim rock forming the highest waterfall in Texas. Capote Falls drops some 175 feet a few miles east of the Circle Dug boundary and runs until it reaches its mouth in the Rio Grande approximately two miles upriver from Candelaria. Walker Creek rises in the Sierra Vieja to the north of the Circle Dug and flows intermittently for twelve miles until it intersects Capote Creek. The name Capote is said to have come from the Spanish word *Capote* meaning a "cape" describing the clouds or fog that sometimes cloak Capote Peak. A rock formation on the mountain is also said to resemble the Spanish cape. In addition local folklore recounts that the name may be related to the Lipan Apache Chief Capote who lived in the region about 1850.

Archaeological evidence on the Circle Dug Ranch indicates a long history of human presence. When Cabeza de Vaca, the first European to explore the Big Bend in 1535, trekked up the Rio Grande a few miles east of the Circle Dug, the intrepid explorer encountered a large Native American population that later Spaniards called *Jumano* Indians. The name *Jumano* is, at best, vague and elusive but refers to the native people who lived have along the Rio Grande and in far West Texas for centuries. It is the moniker the Spanish gave these Indians and is certainly not a name that these Native Americans would have called themselves or even recognized. Although few archaeological investigations have been conducted on the Circle Dug Ranch, the extensive number of Indian sites along Walker and Capote Creeks imply human occupation from Archaic times or roughly as late as the time of Christ. In later years, the Apache lived along the Rio Grande, in the Sierra Vieja with many making camps on Circle Dug land. In 1583-84, the Spaniard Antonio de Espejo's *entrada* passed by and

probably camped near the mouth of Capote Creek. In 1850, an expedition led by U. S. Army Lieutenant William Henry Chase Whiting reached approximately the same point on Capote Creek. Lieutenant Whiting found many Apache lived in the immediate vicinity including the Lipan Apache Chief Gomez for whom Gomez Peak in northern Jeff Davis County is named.

Indian presence on the Circle Dug hindered cattle ranching until the final years of the nineteenth century. The first known individuals to attempt ranching on the Circle Dug property were Felix, Febronio and Trinidad Calanche. The Calanche family had a tragic past in the Big Bend bedeviled by what has been described as the “Calanche Curse”. The Calanche family ranched before the dawn of the twentieth century at the Viejo Ranch atop the Candelaria Rim Rock some fourteen miles outside Valentine. They built three or four houses at the Viejo Ranch, kept cattle, goats and sheep and raised vegetables in two large gardens. Cresendo Calanche and his *esposa*, Materia, lived in one of the houses. For unclear reasons, the couple got into an argument one morning and Cresendo killed his wife in a fit of rage. Following the murder, Calanche put Materia’s body on a burro and took her to the graveyard in Valentine where he buried his wife.

In 1907, Cresendo’s brother, Febronio, ranched and built a house on today’s Circle Dug near the only windmill on the ranch. Calanche called his place the Capote Ranch. In 1910, Pancho Villa, the Mexican Revolutionary took up arms in Ojinaga across the river from Presidio, Texas. Villa’s call to arms came as a result of attempts by the Terrazas and Creel *haciendados* to displace *peons* from their lands to profit from the construction of the Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railway across the Mexican state of Chihuahua. For the next decade a terrible civil war decimated Mexico, one that claimed as many as a million lives. Pancho Villa, who gained a reputation as the “Lion of Chihuahua”, fought a desperate fight. For ten years, Villa roamed Chihuahua’s Sierra Madre sometimes not far from the Circle Dug. An arms for cattle trade fueled Villa’s uprising. Between 1910 and 1920 as many as a million and a half cattle came across the Texas border. These were, in many cases, highbred Hereford cattle stolen by the various Mexican revolutionary factions from the vast *haciendas* of Chihuahua.

The revolution in Mexico brought considerable profits to Texas cattlemen. Driven by the arms for cattle trade, more than a few Big Bend ranches got their start only to have their hopes dashed by the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Mexican cattle were cheap and sold for as little as \$5.00 a head. These cattle could be exchanged for guns and ammunition at premium prices. Following an arms embargo put in place by U. S. President Woodrow Wilson, Pancho Villa paid \$1.00 for each round of any sort of ammunition. Guns brought a considerably higher price. Gunrunners sprang up all along the Big Bend border. Between 1910 and 1920 the border arms for cattle trade prospered not dissimilar to today’s arms for drugs deals. During this decade of destruction, ranching on the border became more dangerous than even in the days of the Apache. And the Calanche curse seemingly continued. In late 1914, a former Texas Ranger turned outlaw by the name of Horace L. Robinson leading some twenty bad men shot and killed Febronio Calanche and Rodrogo Barragon. Calanche and Barragon were murdered on the Texas side as they slept on the riverbank across the Rio Grande from Los Fresnos, Chihuahua. Three years later in March 1917, Cresencio Calanche’s only daughter met a similar violent death. When Villista raiders struck the Nevill ranch located six miles upriver from Porvenir, Texas they shot and killed Glen Nevill and Rosa (Clara) Calanche Castillo. Other Calanche family members met also sudden brutal demises. Not long after these murders the Calanches gave up their ranching operation at the Capote Ranch.

For a few years a man by the name of McGee ranched the Capote Ranch. Little is known about McGee. It is likely that his short time at the ranch probably came as a result of falling cattle prices after World War I and poor rainfall that led to drought like conditions. Drought has always been the ruin of Big Bend cattle ranchers. During the early 1920's, Owen Curtis Dowe and Harry Andrews purchased the Capote Ranch from McGee. Unlikely partners, O. C. Dowe was a colorful, hard drinking Texas lawman and Andrews a wealthy business man from Detroit, Michigan. Born in Cuero, Texas in 1883, O. C. Dowe left school in the eighth grade in 1904 after he got into a fight with a bully that beat up his younger brother. After the fight, O. C. tangled with his teacher and never returned to the classroom. The young Dowe then got a job as a cowboy on the Cox Ranch seven miles outside Organ, New Mexico. The job paid \$25.00 a month plus room and board with the promise to be raised to \$30.00 per month after six months if he "worked out". Rancher Cox was a hard man to work for and expected much from his men. The old rancher rang a bell in his hand's bunkhouse to roust the hands out for work at 3 a. m. every morning. The cowboys usually worked in the horse pasture until dawn before they could even eat breakfast. Evidencing his cowboy skills, O. C. Dowe got his first monthly check from Cox for 30 dollars. While at the Cox Ranch O. C. Dowe got to know Pat Garrett who made a name for himself by gunning down the infamous outlaw, Billy the Kid.

O. C. knew horses and while at the Cox Ranch learned how to make money buying and selling them. He found a way to purchase a small herd and drove the horses to Texas to sell in Cuero. The venture proved profitable and the following year, Dowe made a second horse drive from New Mexico to Texas. On the way home he stopped in Del Rio to visit his uncle, Luke Dowe who was Deputy Collector of the U. S. Customs Service. Luke offered his nephew a job as a customs inspector. In 1907, O. C. Dowe took the oath and was sworn into the customs service at Eagle Pass as a mounted inspector working in the Saluria Customs District. O. C. Dowe got his first assignment at the Big Bend border village of Lajitis. He recalled the day he arrived in the town and the Mexicans welcomed the startled new river rider by shooting their guns into the air. "I went outside and sat with my Winchester under a little brush arbor and waited for them to shoot close enough to me so that I could fire back, but they kept firing up in the air and there was nothing to it."

But not of Dowe's border adventures as a mounted customs inspector ended amicably. At some point during his time at Lajitas, Inspector Dowe got word that a group of smugglers intended to cross the Rio Grande with a load of illegal Mexican liquor. Dowe and some fellow federal officers responded and took up a position overlooking the river where they waited with their rifles ready. The *contrabandistas* started across the Rio Grande packing their illegal *sotol* and *mescal* on the backs of mules. When the smugglers reached the middle of the river, the lawmen opened fire without warning. Dowe recalled that he only shot to frighten them aiming to shoot over and behind the terrified smugglers. According to O. C., "It sure was a funny sight watching those Mexicans run, stumble and fall into the water trying to get back to their side." The officers managed to confiscate the booze but at least gave the frightened booze runners an opportunity to escape back to Mexico.

In 1909, O. C. married Delia Gourlery from Marathon, Texas. Delia died a short time after the marriage following the birth of a daughter. By the summer of 1914, O. C. Dowe had left the Customs Service and taken a job for a short time as a Texas Ranger. That year O. C. and some fellow Rangers were trailing a group of smugglers in Pinto

Canyon southwest of Marfa. The lawmen tracked the Mexicans from the Rio Grande but somehow the smugglers eluded them. The Rangers found a high vantage point and carefully looked over the countryside as a group of young people the officers thought to be *contrabandistas* approached. Below, unaware of the danger, several adolescents from the Wilson Ranch were enjoying an afternoon hike. Among the girls was nineteen-year-old Millie Wilson, daughter of rancher J. E. Wilson. Born in 1895 in Pass Christian, Mississippi, Millie Wilson was a very pretty young woman known on her father's ranch as being cheerful and friendly. Ranger Dowe drew a bead on Millie's head with his rifle before he realized that the group of kids below him in the desert were not outlaws but "only children playing". O. C. later recalled, "When I first saw Millie, I almost shot her."

The near tragedy gained the Rangers a chilly reception at the Wilson Ranch. The officers camped outside the Wilson Ranch but only had meager provisions. They went to a nearby ranch and bought a cow and calf. O. C. returned to the Wilson Ranch later and courted Millie. The couple married in April 1915. Dowe later bought the Wilson Ranch. Although O. C. Dowe was a lawman, he had no reservations about buying cheap Mexican cattle and bringing them into the United States, an offense he jailed more than a few other men for. Several Texas Rangers and Customs officers of the time also engaged in this questionable practice. In those days, Customs Inspectors only made \$150.00 a month and Texas Rangers even less. Yet O. C. Dowe bought two large West Texas ranches and a considerable amount of livestock.

Buying Mexican cattle also could be a very dangerous undertaking. Pancho Villa's men brought the cattle to the Texas border to sell for money or exchange for weapons and ammunition. This meant that in order to buy the cattle, someone had to be bold enough to ride across the Rio Grande and go to a *Villista* camp to make a deal. Two such individuals with the fortitude to do this were Dawkins Kilpatrick and his brother Jim. The Candelaria Kilpatrick brothers made a fair amount of money in this business. Sometimes Texas Ranger Joe Sitters took part in the deals. It is not clear if Dowe personally accompanied the Kilpatricks to Mexico to buy cattle but his correspondence reveals that he bought cattle from the Kilpatricks on several occasions at very good prices. And this was also during the time when he worked as an U. S. Customs officer.

Certainly O. C. Dowe could not afford such large financial transactions with a lawman's paycheck. Dowe's letters, however, make clear that he had several very wealthy financial backers from Detroit, Michigan. These included Joseph E. Boyer, Harry Andrews and James (Jim) S. Smithwick. The president of the Burrows Adding Machine Company, Joseph Boyer, got in on the ground floor of an early twentieth century technology boom. In 1885, William Seward Burrows invented and patented the first workable adding machine. Burrows died in 1898 and Joseph Boyer became president of Burrows' enterprise, the American Arithmometer Company in 1902. In 1904, the American Arithmometer Company moved its headquarters to Detroit where they built a 70,000 square foot manufacturing facility. In 1905, the company was renamed the Burrows Adding Machine Company and 1,200 employees produced 7,804 adding machines. The company marketed their machines to banks and businesses that previously had to calculate account balances manually with pencil and paper. The following year, the Ford Motor Company produced a business car equipped with a special large rack large enough to carry a Burrows Adding Machine. They called the new Ford the "Burrows Special". By 1907, Burrows had produced 50,000 adding machines. In 1911, as a bloody civil war raged in Mexico, the Burrows Company offered for sale the first subtracting-adding machine much in demand by banks wishing to automate their

check posting operation. By 1920 Burrows sold 800,000 machines and had twelve thousand employees. Four years later, the prosperous company issued stock and became listed on the New York Stock Exchange. In 1925, Burrows machines were being sold in sixty countries and the company sold their one-millionth calculating machine.

It is not clear how O. C. Dowe came to know his wealthy partners. Perhaps it took place when Dowe and eight other Texas lawmen journeyed to Michigan in May 1919. An article in the *Detroit News* headlined "Lounge Lizzards Pop-Eyed When Cowboys Stroll In" presents an intriguing clue. According to the *Detroit News*, the Texans had been summoned to Detroit to testify about border conditions in "Henry Ford's Libel Suite against the Chicago Tribune". Dowe and his fellows packed their pistols to Detroit and made quite an impression on several city dwellers. The article recounted an observation by a hotel bellboy who saw the Texans. According to the bellhop "them gents are 100% sure enough [cow] punchers. They got guns as big as cannons strewed all over the bed and the dresser and everywhere else. And believe me, they is loaded. The guns I mean."

Following Dowe's trip north, his correspondence documents his personal and business relationship with Boyer, Andrews and Smithwick. On several occasions Dowe hosted hunting trips in the Big Bend and in Mexico for his partners. They hunted deer and bear on these expeditions. Dowe kept his eye out for ranch investment opportunities that on three occasions resulted in the purchase large ranches. In addition, O. C. took Joseph Boyer's son under his wing in an attempt to help the troubled young man. Myron Boyer drank excessively and stayed in trouble most of his life. As president of the Burrows Adding Machine Company Joseph had little time to spend with his son and finally turned to Dowe for assistance. Joseph set up a trust fund for his son and Myron Boyer stood to inherit a considerable fortune from his father. Spoiled and rebellious, Myron had been kicked out of several private schools by the time he turned eighteen. His father thought it might be a good idea to send the boy to Texas in an attempt to dry him out or at least get him out of the elder Boyer's hair. In a 1925 letter Dowe wrote, "I have Myron Boyer of Detroit here and have been running around with him. His father is head of the Burrows Adding Machine Company of Detroit, and is paying me big wages to try and do something with this boy. He has been drinking very hard for several years and I am trying to get him on his feet. I get \$600.00 per month and want to try to get this boy straightened out if I can." Considering O. C. Dowe only made \$150 per month with the Customs Service at the time, the money he was paid for his help with Myron Boyer must have been a considerable sum.

At first Dowe tried to keep Myron on the ranch and teach the young man how to be a cowboy. Certainly O. C. could not have been much of a role model for Myron since Dowe himself had a reputation for heavy drinking. Myron hated the ranch and ran away several times. Dowe corresponded with James Boyer about Myron's progress saying at one point in 1926 he thought Myron had not taken a drink in three weeks and seemed to be doing better. Then Myron ran off again and demanded his father buy him a new Lincoln automobile. Dowe wrote the elder Boyer about the demand and received the following reply. "I note what you say about Myron's wanting a Lincoln, which is very characteristic of him. He would want a Rolls Royce if he happened to think of it. A Lincoln would not be nearly as satisfactory a car for that place as the Buick, Dodge or Nash. I have done a great many things to give Myron a start. For instance, I bought him a small farm at Flint one time and he lived there only a short time when he became tired of it because there was no running water. I have frequently bought him cars. The last one, I think, cost \$2,500 or more. It seems to me he sold it for about \$500 after making use of

it for less than a year. I want him to be in Texas for a longer time before there is anything of that kind done." A month later Joseph bought Myron another new car.

After he got the car, Myron threatened to run off to Mexico but instead went to Marfa where he got drunk and caroused for several days with some soldiers from the army camp. Venting his frustration Dowe again wrote Joseph Boyer asking the monthly allowance be increased so that Myron could take a hotel room in Marfa. O. C. got the following reply from Myron's father in May 1925. "I realize that it is not an easy job to handle Myron, but I also know that there has always been more trouble with him whenever I increased or raised his allowance. It seems as though the more money he has, the worse off he is. I bought a car for him and supposed that everything was arranged for him to have a pleasant time, but he cannot have that any other way than by spending a large amount of money I think you had better turn him loose and let him shift for himself. If he comes up here and does the same kind of business that he did before I will have him confined in some institution where he will not have any liberty." Joseph Boyer went on to say that he had already made arrangements with a Detroit judge to have Myron confined, "in an institution" if he returned to Michigan. Myron Boyer died five years later at the age of twenty-six.

In 1922, O. C. Dowe and his Detroit friends entered into a partnership agreement that led to the purchase of the Wilson Ranch, the Capote Ranch, a farm at Ruidosa and a *candelilla* wax factory. They named their new business venture the Pinto Canyon Cattle Company. The Wilson Ranch consisted of six sections of land, a ranch house, 220 cattle, 25 saddle horses, 240 head of sheep and goats, and a Dodge automobile. The Capote Ranch apparently, at the time, contained as many as twenty sections of land or possibly more with the only structure on the property being the Calanche house. The Dowe letters indicate the value of the Wilson holdings to be some \$21,000 in 1922. No figure has been found as to the 1922 value of the Capote Ranch. But the Dowe correspondence reveals that O. C. knew Presidio County land prices quite well at the time had discovered the existence of a buyers market for the partnership. Also, during this time, Dowe wrote that he had "gotten on the water-wagon" and not taken a drink of booze for at least a month. In addition to the Wilson and Capote ranches being for sale several other upper Big Bend ranches were offered for sale to the Pinto Canyon Cattle Company including the Wood Ranch, the Shannon Ranch and the Mitchell Ranch. Mr. Wood had offered to sell 5,120 acres for \$6.00 per acre but O. C. Dowe declined the offer writing his partners "he is so high that we could never pay it out".

In addition to his duties as ranch manager and attempts to "dry out" Myron Boyer, Dowe continued his work as a mounted inspector of customs well into the 1920's. In January 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution went into effect making the importation; sale, transportation and manufacture of intoxicating liquor illegal by the U. S. The Constitutional Amendment signaled the beginning of the Roaring Twenties in which crime in the United States skyrocketed. Although it had been illegal to smuggle liquor from Mexico previous to this time, illegal booze came to be in great demand simply because it had been prohibited. Smuggling greatly increased on the Mexican border and the U. S. Customs was charged with the duty of preventing it. O. C. Dowe soon earned a reputation as a booze buster but he approached the job in much the same way he had with cattle smuggling. He worked both sides of the law for his personal profit. Some of his adventures were published in newspapers of the day and others live on in local folklore.

Dowe even wrote about some of his seizures and other accounts appear in Big Bend newspapers. One evening during the twenties O. C. rode his horse in Pinto Canyon and came upon a Model T Ford stalled on the big hill coming out of the canyon on the road to Marfa. Although Inspector Dowe was off duty at the time, he stopped to help the driver of the Ford. He tied a rope to the front bumper of the automobile and pulled the car up the hill. Dowe could not help but notice that the driver seemed nervous and by the time they got to the top of the hill, O. C. smelled booze. According to the *Marfa New Era* newspaper, Inspector Dowe searched the Ford and discovered 110 bottles of Mexican liquor. O. C. arrested the smuggler and sent the man to El Paso for trial. In January 1922, Dowe wrote his business partners that he had “made several booze catches” the previous December including one lot of “fifty gallons”. In February 1922, Dowe recounted another seizure in a letter to his Detroit partners. “I just returned from El Paso, again yesterday, have had to make two trips there in a bootlegging case. They are the ones that came near to putting me out of business, one of them pulled a six-shooter, and then I beat him to it, and disarmed him, and didn’t have to kill him but he got killed about thirty minutes later. I had Harry Leonard helping me and this soldier [the smuggler] struck Harry with a Dodge crank and knocked his shoulder out of place. Leonard then pulled a gun and killed the soldier. I carried the other three men and 44 quarts of Tequila on into town. You all might send me two or three thousand as I can buy some cattle pretty cheap.”

In 1924, O. C. Dowe started building a large modern three-bedroom rock ranch house at the former Capote Ranch. The construction is said to have gone fairly quickly thanks to the efforts of a large Mexican work force from San Antonio, Chihuahua. Dowe brought in numerous wagon loads of doors, windows and lumber from Marfa. These building materials had to be transported over the Sierra Vieja rim rock on the steep old stagecoach trail. The rock for the ranch house came from Capote Creek. Dowe pressed his OC cattle brand into the fresh concrete floor in one of the rooms of the house. The workers used the cornerstone dated 1907 from the Calanche house in the southwest corner of the new ranch house. Seemingly a final demonstration of the Calanche Curse, the earlier ranch house had caught on fire and burned to the ground previously. In addition to the new ranch house, the Mexican workers also built a bunkhouse with an attached schoolroom and a somewhat mysterious rock room with steel bars on the windows that became known as the “jail house”. Near the old Calanche house, Dowe had water well drilled and a new Areomotor windmill installed. It is said when the water well driller arrived, he asked O. C. where he wanted the well. Drunk at the time O. C. replied, “Hell put it where ever you want”. Little is known about the schoolroom except that a ranch school operated in the schoolhouse room for several years. Today a blackboard still hangs on the wall. In the early part of the twentieth century, the State of Texas paid the salaries for teachers at ranch schools that had at least six students. Presumably the school served the children of the Dowe Ranch cowboys. Local folklore recounts that the “jail house” room never saw use as a jail. Instead O. C. Dowe used the room to secure his confiscated liquor. Perhaps he wanted to keep Myron Boyer out of the booze stash. During prohibition, the Dowe Ranch became widely known on the river as good place to purchase bootleg liquor with no questions asked.

The O. C. Dowe correspondence shows that all during the 1920’s Dowe urged his Detroit partners to move the ranching operation to Mexico where he thought it would be more profitable. At one point, O. C. Dowe approached Joseph Boyer about the possibility of purchasing a huge ranch in Arizona. O. C., however persisted in trying to convince his partners to move the ranching operation to Chihuahua. In 1922, the customs inspector wrote “Some time in the future we will have to sell this place and get a larger place over

there, and when this country recognizes Mexico things will be safer there, I think. When you all come down this year we will take a trip further down into Mexico and look around.” About 1926 Dowe and his partners bought a large herd of cattle for \$85.00 per head. In 1927, O. C. Dowe resigned from the U. S. Customs Service. The onset of the Great Depression caused cattle prices to plummet to less than \$10.00 per head. In 1929, O. C. Dowe moved his cattle and the Pinto Canyon Cattle Company to Mexico. Little is known about O. C. Dowe’s ranch in Mexico. Apparently his daughters joined O. C. and Millie at the ranch in Mexico in 1933. It is said that by this point, O. C. Dowe and his family had “built up a prosperous life” and “lived well in Mexico until 1949”. About that time O. C. and Millie came back to retire in El Paso. The old Texas lawman and rancher O. C. Dowe died on June 6, 1970 and is buried in El Paso. Millie joined O. C.’s wife the Ranger “almost shot” in death on October 27, 1977. Following O. C. Dowe’s departure from the Capote Ranch, at least two ranchers attempted to make it by cattle ranching today’s Circle Dug land. Pat and Francis Rooney lived in the Dowe rock house for several years. Then Bill Middleton made the Dowe house his home for better than twenty years while he ranched the present day Yelderman Ranch.

About 1945, Albert Chambers and his son, Ronald Boyd, moved to the Coal Mine Ranch in the upper Big Bend. A World War I veteran, Albert hailed from Marathon, Texas where he married Troxie Chambers and started his family. Boyd was born in 1927 in Marathon and cut his teeth riding a horse. After ranching at the Coal Mine for several years, the Chambers moved their ranching operation to *Rancho Viejo* located just north of the Circle Dug. In 1959 Boyd married Johnnie Lois Slaughter Tucker. Like Boyd, Johnnie had been born in the Big Bend, her father being a miner in Brewster County. Johnnie and Boyd met in Presidio and the couple moved into a small ranch house they called the “white house” at *Rancho Viejo*. Johnnie had two children from a previous marriage; Theresa and Robert and soon the Chambers family began to grow. In 1960, the couple had their first son who they named Boyd Chambers Jr. Three years later another son, John Trox, was born to the couple. In 1964, Boyd and Johnnie began ranching the Circle Dug property and moved into O. C. Dowe’s rock house with their four children. It was the beginning of a ranching operation that lasted until the end of the twentieth century.

Johnnie graduated from Sul Ross State Teachers College and started teaching school at Candelaria in 1971. The first year she had six students in the two-room schoolhouse. After teaching two years at Candelaria, Johnnie taught at the Ruidosa School for four years and then returned to the Candelaria School where she taught until the little school closed in the 1990s after being in operation for almost a century. Initially, Boyd and Johnnie raised sheep and goats on their ranch and by the 1970’s their herd had grown to about 2,000 head. Predatory animals including coyotes, mountain lions and Golden Eagles, however, took a heavy toll on the herd killing and injuring large numbers of the goats and sheep. Despite attempts to control the predators and protect the herd, the problem almost put the Chambers Ranch out of business by the 1970’s. As a result, Boyd and Johnnie sold their goats and sheep and took up cattle ranching.

For many years each spring, Boyd and Johnnie hosted an annual meat-cutting and ranch barbeque event that eventually grew into a fairly well known Big Bend tradition. It began as a simple and practical way to slaughter and process ranch cattle to feed the Chambers family and their ranch hands. It was a vital ranch task and one that required the help of quite a few neighbors and friends to accomplish. Usually a cow and sometimes a hog or two were killed and everyone pitched in to cut up, process and

freezer wrap the meat. While most of the helpers worked cutting up the meat, others dug a barbeque pit north of the rock house and started a big fire. Part of the beef, including the entire head, usually complete with horns, then got wrapped in wet burlap toat sacks and placed in the coals before being buried in the pit to cook overnight. This is true pit barbeque ranch cooking and a method that produces the finest, most delicious and tender barbecue possible. No part of the animals went unused. The pork skin got fried in a huge iron kettle in lard, producing homemade pork skins or *chicharonis* as they are known on the border. Boyd prided himself making “son of a gun” stew from the various remaining animal parts. According to Boyd, his stew was known as the “gentleman from Marfa” since it had been produced west of the rim rock. The stew was seasoned with liberal amounts of cayenne pepper and eagerly consumed by many who had no idea of its true ingredients. It gained the reputation of being a first class hang over remedy.

The Chambers’ meat cuttings drew a quite mixed and always interesting fun loving crowd that sometimes grew to as many as hundred people. In addition to ranchers and an assortment of Big Benders, lots of city folks got to try their hand cutting up meat ranch style for the first time. The meat cutting attracted Austin hippies and yuppies, Houston oilmen, teachers, professors, writers, lawmen, musicians and just plain folks. People came from all over the state and some foreign countries. For many it became an annual event, one that each year always took precedence over anything else during spring break. No small amount of the crowd caught the “Big Bend bug” and eventually left the cities to live on the border. As Boyd’s mother, Troxie Chambers put it, “Once you get a taste of the Rio Grande, you always want to come back for another little drink”. The Chambers meet cuttings continued for many years with the last one being held in the spring of 2000. The turn of the century also saw the last of the Chambers cattle being driven over the rim rock and sold. An important era in the history of the Big Bend came to an end.

Boyd and Johnnie’s contributions to the Big Bend community are many. Boyd Chambers was a master storyteller and a walking encyclopedia of knowledge about horses, cattle, ranching, history, wildlife and the land. He was a man of his word and always the mediator on both sides of the border. No one, even strangers, went hungry or without a job on the Chambers Ranch. In addition Boyd served for as a Presidio County Commissioner, sat on the Candelaria Water Board and conducted countless elections in the Candelaria School as election judge. Johnnie spent many years teaching and was one of the only female Boy Scout Masters in the United States. Even after her recent retirement for teaching, she continues to be active in her church and sits of the board of the Big Bend Regional Medical Center. Boyd passed from this life in 2001 and the Big Bend lost one of its finest ambassadors.