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Serving Coke County

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Celebrating Coke County's 125th Year!

Coke County enjoys a colorful history

[Editor's Note: The information for the following article appeared in the July 21, 1989, issue of *The Observer/Enterprise*, with credit given to Mrs. Jessie Yarbrough's "History of Coke County".]

Indians roamed the area now known as Coke County and the Southwest long before Columbus discovered America according to Mary Jourdan Atkinson's "The Texas Indians."

The main Indians who lived, hunted and scouted the country of the Colorado and Conchos were Comanches, the Lipan Apaches and the Jumanos. Many creeks on the east side of Coke County are named for the Kickapoo Indians.

There are still many Indian springs and petroglyphics in the country. More than twenty Indian campsites have been found in Coke County.

It is believed that Coronado, along with his armed columns of Spanish grandees and scouting parties, crossed through this area in search of the Seven Cities of Cibola in 1540.

A letter, dated February 8, 1842, from Henry Francis Fischer, Burchard Miller and Joseph Baker to Sam Houston, President of the Republic of Texas, is the first written document mentioning Coke County. The letter requested a grant of land on which to settle 1,000 families of German, Swiss, Norwegian, Swedish and

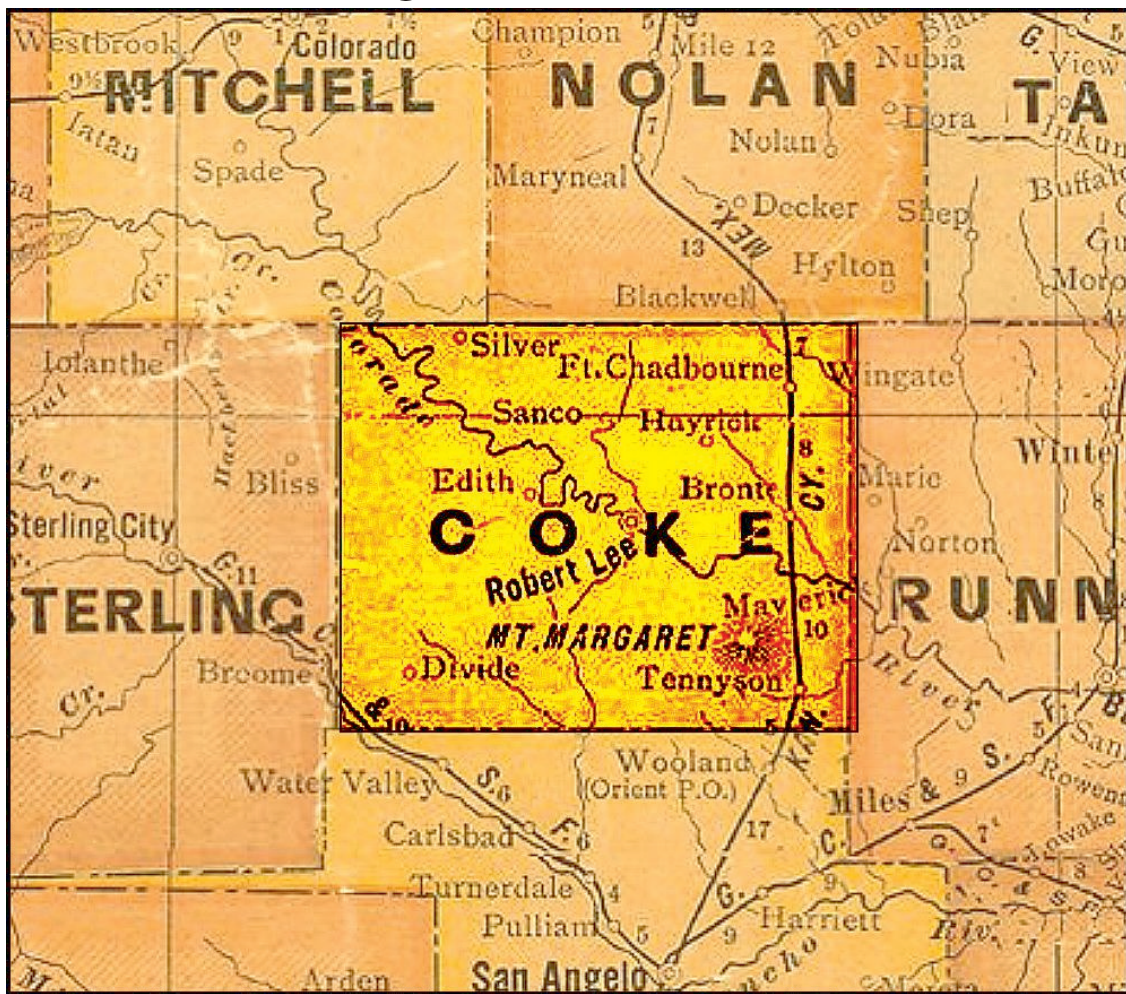
Danish immigrants. On the lower left hand corner of this letter is a note. "Let the contract be made Feb. 23, 1842, Sam Houston".

Six hundred families or single men over 17 years of age were to be introduced within three years of the date of the contract on land "beginning at the mouth of the Llano to the head of its southern branch, then due south 50 miles and north 45 degrees to the main southwest branch of the Colorado, following it back to the point of beginning."

The contract, renewed in 1843, was transferred in 1845 to the German Emigration Company with John Meusebach named as trustee. It included all of the land previously mentioned except 250,000 acres reserved for Fischer and Miller.

Due to surveying and transportation costs, not to mention trouble with Indians already on the land, many settlers were unable to take possession of their new allotments and returned to German settlements in Comal and Gillespie counties.

Meusbach took matters into his own hands and negotiated an important treaty with the Indians. Without the consent of Texas authorities, he met with Comanche and Choctaw Indians. An agreement allowing German immigrants to settle the territory between the Llano and Colorado Rivers was reached. Included in this agreement was



approximately 575,000 acres of land in what would become Coke County. Once this treaty was in place, the way was cleared for white settlers to arrive.

As the Indian and buffalo populations decreased, cattle and cattlemen began to take advantage of the vast grazing lands. The cattle operations comprised the majority of settlement in this area from 1860 to 1880. Some of these early cattlemen were L.B. Harris, Winfield Scott, the Wylie brothers, T. L. Odom, G.G. Odom, Jimmy Byrd, Wiley Bird, D. H. Snyder, J. W. Snyder, J.J. Austin, Bill Glass, Will Whiteside and Rufus Whiteside.

For many years, cattlemen enjoyed the free and open range, respecting each other's "range rights". However, once the T & P Railroad which ran through Abilene and Colorado City, began bringing in the "legal" owners of the land, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Disputes arose over land titles and boundary lines. "Nesters" began fencing off water and cattlemen began fencing the range. This led to the fencing war where fences were cut and fence posts burned.

Following the formation of a Cattlemen's Association, Ben Warren of Hylton was hired to find and prosecute wire cutters. The day before Warren was scheduled to testify in District Court regarding this matter, he was shot through the window of a hotel in Sweetwater. [Editor's Note: Fran Lomas has found that Ben Warren was a Texas Ranger with a young family.]

As they still do today, the Texas Rangers were sent in to gain control of the area. A special session of the Texas Legislature was called by Texas Governor John Ireland on January 7, 1884, where a law making fence cutting a felony was passed. The Warren murder was the beginning of the end of the fence cutting war in Coke County.

With homesteaders arriving in wagons, horseback, and on foot bringing with them all they owned, Coke County was well on its way to settlement. These first settlers made their homes in dugouts, half dugouts and tents. In order to satisfy requirements of the Homesteaders Law, they had to live on the land for three years.

The organization of the area into counties began long before the fence war ended and settlers

arriving in force. This area was originally part of Bexar County with San Antonio as the county seat. At that time, Bexar County contained approximately one half of the entire Republic of Texas.

Due to the distance and time required for traveling from the outer edges of Bexar County to San Antonio every time a deed needed to be recorded or any other business conducted at the courthouse, people determined to see other counties formed from Bexar County. Following all the legal requirements being met, the Texas Legislature created Tom Green County with Ben Ficklin as the county seat on March 13, 1874. However, the Legislature failed to designate a northern boundary for Tom Green County. Therefore, all the land north and west was included in the new Tom Green County. It remained this way until 1876 when 54 counties to the north and 12 counties to the west were created from the original Tom Green County.

On August 25, 1882, Ben Ficklin was destroyed by a flood and the county seat for Tom Green County was moved to San Angelo.

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**This issue of
The Observer/Enterprise
is almost entirely
dedicated to the
125th Anniversary
of Coke County.
Current news begins on
Page 21 of this issue.**