

# NARRATIVE TEXTS

## **Margaret Hefferman Borland, 1824-1873, Independent Rancher**

In 1829 Margaret Heffernan was a five-year-old passenger on the first ship bringing Irish colonists to Texas. She grew up on the wild prairies of the Coastal Bend, where the Texas ranching industry was born. Her father died in an Indian attack in 1836. With the outbreak of the Texas Revolution, Margaret's mother gathered up the children and fled the advancing armies. They may have sought protection in the fort at Goliad. A legend says that Margaret and her siblings escaped death in the Goliad massacre by speaking Spanish so fluently that Mexican officers believed they were native Mexican children.

After the Battle of San Jacinto, the family was back home in San Patricio. Townspeople were compelled to lodge the retreating Mexican army. Officer José de la Peña, whose diary relates the execution of Davy Crockett, described spending a night in the Heffernan home.

Margaret married at age 19 and gave birth to a daughter a year later. Soon afterwards her husband died in a gun battle in the streets of Victoria. Margaret's second husband succumbed to cholera in 1852, leaving her with two more young daughters to support. Within four years Margaret married the richest rancher in the county. She bore four more children and partnered in running the ranch until 1867, when a yellow fever epidemic spread along the Texas coast. Margaret ministered to her ailing family as best she could, but death relentlessly claimed her husband, four-year-old son, 15-year-old daughter, two daughters who had married the previous year, and an infant grandson.

Now sole owner of the ranch, Margaret capably managed operations and enlarged its holdings. In 1873 she drove her own herd up the Chisholm Trail, accompanied by several ranch hands, her three surviving children, and her six-year-old granddaughter. The group succeeded in reaching the booming cowtown of Wichita, Kansas, but Margaret fell ill with "trail fever" and died in a local boardinghouse before she could sell her cattle.

Margaret Borland's life parallels the momentous social, political, and economic changes of 19th century Texas. She was earnest and resourceful until the end.