

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Lizzie Johnson (Williams), Cattle Baroness, 1840-1924

Lizzie Johnson stepped confidently into a man's world of trail drives, cattle brokerage, and real estate investments, accumulating a gilded-age fortune. She was capable of both secret hoarding and lavish expenditures. She dressed in high fashion and kept her own counsel. Few people could claim to know her well, even the husband whose ventures she financed and rescued.

Lizzie came to Texas from Missouri as a child. Her parents opened a boarding school southwest of Austin, where Lizzie was first a student, then a teacher. After the Civil War, cattle drives to Kansas rapidly swelled in number. Routes converged and passed through Central Texas, and Lizzie spotted a chance for making money. Always good with numbers, she began keeping records and tallies for cattlemen. She also submitted stories to Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly* in New York City. Because Lizzie kept her pen name secret, it is impossible to identify which stories are hers. But she earned enough from her writing to begin investing. She bought \$2,500 worth of stock in a Chicago cattle company that paid 100% dividends for the next three years, then sold it for \$20,000. She registered her own brand, laid claim to stray longhorns, and purchased both herds and real estate.

In 1879, at age 39, Lizzie married Hezekiah Williams. They signed a prenuptial agreement declaring that Lizzie's income during marriage would remain her property. Several times the couple drove herds together up the Chisholm Trail, but they always kept separate accounts. They traveled to St. Louis and New York, where Lizzie purchased silks, velvets, brocades, diamonds, and emeralds. She bailed out Hezekiah when his business enterprises failed, so in 1896 he signed a deed conveying all his stock, land, and cattle to her in exchange for \$20,000.

After Hezekiah's death in 1914, Lizzie became something of a recluse who hoarded firewood and refused to pay more than ten cents for home-delivered soup. When she died, relatives found thousands of dollars stashed into crevices, untouched bolts of luxury fabrics, and the fabled jewels hidden in a scorched cloth.