

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Henrietta King, Rancher, 1832-1925

For 40 years Henrietta King was sole owner of the largest ranch in North America, presiding with both moral authority and business acumen.

Henrietta was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister who moved his family from Tennessee to Brownsville. They were living on a houseboat when it was nearly rammed by steamboat captain Richard King. King let loose a volley of cuss words until 17-year-old Henrietta stepped on deck to reprimand him. From this encounter sprang a four-year courtship between the seasoned frontiersman and prim Victorian lass. In December 1854, Reverend Chamberlain officiated at his daughter's marriage to Richard King.¹



King brought his bride to inhabit his newly claimed tract on Wild Horse Prairie. Their first home was a mud-and-stick *jacal* so small that they hung their cooking pots outside the door. Wild Horse Prairie in that era was dangerous and disputed territory. On one occasion Henrietta looked up from bread-making to see an Indian brandish his tomahawk above her sleeping baby. She hastily handed him some bread, and he left.²

During the Civil War, King was involved in smuggling Confederate cotton to Mexico. Told that Union troops were marching to arrest him, King fled forthwith, enjoining a Mexican man to protect his family. Soldiers shot the guard dead on the porch, then proceeded to ransack the dwelling before Henrietta's eyes. Soon thereafter she gathered the children and took shelter in San Patricio, where she gave birth to a son.³

When Richard King died in 1885, Henrietta, age 53, took the helm of the ranch. For the rest of her life, she wore widow's black. As before, she made arrangements for health care and education of the Mexican ranch hands. She adopted many Mexican folkways and spoke Spanish on the range. True to her Presbyterian heritage, she forbade drinking, swearing, and card-playing among the *Kineños*.⁴

With son-in-law Robert Kleberg as manager, the ranch expanded its holdings to more than one million acres and developed a new breed of cattle that could withstand Texas heat. Henrietta eventually moved to Corpus Christi, where she donated to churches, schools, and railroads. At her funeral, 200 ranch hands rode round her coffin in salute.⁵

Quotation

*I doubt if it falls to the lot of any a bride to have so happy a honeymoon. On horseback, we roamed the broad prairies. When I grew tired, my husband would spread a Mexican blanket for me, and then I would take my siesta under the shade of the mesquite tree.*⁶

Photo

ITC 88-231. Mary Fearey, San Antonio, Texas.

Endnotes

¹ Henrietta's youth is discussed in Ann Fears Crawford and Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, *Women in Texas: Their Lives, Their Experiences, Their Accomplishments* (Austin: State House Press, 1992), pp. 90-91; in Edgar P. Sneed, "King, Henrietta Chamberlain," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/KK/fki16.html> (April 13, 2005); in David Uhler, "In a barren place, a legend grows," *San Antonio Express-News*, October 19, 2003, online <http://www.mysanantonio.com/salife/stories/1071809.html> (December 19, 2005); in Dr. James Lewis MacLeod, "Henrietta Chamberlain King," *The Presbyterian Tradition in the South*, 1978, online <http://faithinwriting.com/Tradition/Pioneer/index.htm> (December 19, 2005); and in "King Ranch," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Ranch (December 19, 2005). Other sources for this article are Murphy Givens, "King's fortune was made during the Civil War," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, August 19, 1998, online <http://www.corpuschristi.bbb.org/mgivens/single19.html> (December 19, 2005); Jane Clements Monday and Betty Bailey Colley, *Voices from the Wild Horse Desert: The Vaquero Families of the King and Kenedy Ranches*, 1997, online <http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/excerpts/exmonvoi.html> (April 13, 2005); "King Ranch: A Living Legend," King Ranch, <http://www.king-ranch.com/legend.htm> (December 19, 2005); and Gene Fowler, "Speaking of Texas: King Ranch," *Texas Highways*, September 2001, online <http://www.texashighways.com/currentissue/departments.php?dept=speaking&id=121> (December 19, 2005).

² The incident with the Indian is described in MacLeod, *The Presbyterian Tradition in the South*, online; and in "King Ranch," *Wikipedia*, online.

³ King's smuggling during the Civil War and his wife's encounter with Union troops are described in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, pp. 93-94; in "King, Henrietta Chamberlain," *Handbook of Texas Online*; in MacLeod, *The Presbyterian Tradition in the South*, online; and in Givens, "King's fortune was made during the Civil War," online.

⁴ For Henrietta King's management style and relations with employees, see particularly Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, pp. 92-97; Monday and Colley, *Voices from the Wild Horse Desert*, online excerpt pp. 5-6; and MacLeod, *The Presbyterian Tradition in the South*, online.

⁵ The salute at her funeral is described in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, p. 89; in "King, Henrietta Chamberlain," *Handbook of Texas Online*; in MacLeod, *The Presbyterian Tradition in the South*, online; and in "King Ranch," *Wikipedia*, online.

⁶ This quote appears in Uhler, "In a barren place," online; in MacLeod, *The Presbyterian Tradition in the South*, online; and in "King Ranch," *Wikipedia*, online.