

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Elise Waerenskjold, Author and Journalist, 1815-1895

The young Norwegian woman looked to be a freethinking, modern intellectual. At age 19 she founded a private school for girls. She married a sea captain without the customary reading of the banns in church, then, when they parted ways three years later, she reclaimed her maiden name. Advancing the precepts of her pastor father, she published tracts against excessive drinking. She pursued journalism—a highly unusual field for a woman—and became editor of a magazine promoting emigration.¹

Elise Waerenskjold (née Tvede) left this stimulating environment behind when she sailed for America in 1847. At age 32 she landed in Texas and immediately married a fellow passenger seven years her junior. The Waerenskjolds settled at Four Mile Prairie and began raising cattle. Elise adapted to the demands of frontier life without complaint. She parented three boys, ordered reading material from Norway, walked miles to share news with her neighbors. She built community among Norse immigrants, who welcomed her into their homes “like a bishop,”² and she continued to write letters and essays, speak out against slavery, and support opportunities for women.³

In 1866 tragedy struck. The couple lost their youngest son, Thorwald, age 7, in January.⁴ Elise wrote that he had been “the dearest thing we possessed on this earth.”⁵ In November her husband, Wilhelm, was stabbed to death by a neighbor Methodist preacher.⁶

Elise persevered in managing the farm. When money was scarce, she supplemented her family’s income by teaching school and selling books and seeds. She never stopped writing articles and letters. Elise lived long enough to see her dream realized of a Norwegian Lutheran pastor for the community.⁷ Today her writing provides a firsthand record and window onto the Texas immigrant experience.



Quotations

This is indeed a strange woman, my wife, who prefers reading books and writing down what she thinks.—Svend Foy, Elise’s first husband, a Norwegian sea captain⁸

*I am convinced that slavery will be abolished by gentle means or by force, because I believe that institutions founded on injustice cannot survive.*⁹

*Drinking, quarreling and fighting are common here [in Texas].*¹⁰

*In this country a tiller of the soil is respected as much as anyone else, be he official or merchant.*¹¹

*I believe to the fullest degree that human beings are born with equal rights.*¹²

Photo

ITC 68-2591.

Endnotes

¹ Sources for biographical details in this article are Lorraine Barnes, “Lady with a Pen,” *Texas Star*, January 30, 1972; Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, “Waerenskjold, Elise Amalie Tvede,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/WW/fwa5.html> (March 23, 2005); Anne Fears Crawford and Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, *Texas Women: Frontier to Future* (Austin: State House Press, 1998), pp. 39-49; W.A. Frachmeier, “Elise Amalie Tvede Waerenskjold,” in Evelyn M. Carrington, ed., *Women in Early Texas* (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 263-69; Sherry A. Smith, “Elise Waerenskjold: A Modern on the Prairie,” in Francis Edward Abernethy, *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), pp. 79-82; and Ruthe Winegarten, *Texas Women: A Pictorial History from Indians to Astronauts* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1986), pp. 27-29.

² This quote appears in Barnes, “Lady with a Pen,” *Texas Star*; in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Texas Women: Frontier to Future*, p. 48; and in Smith, “Elise Waerenskjold: A Modern on the Prairie,” p. 79.

³ “Waerenskjold, Elise Amalie Tvede,” *Handbook of Texas Online*.

⁴ Thorwald was born Oct. 4, 1858; see Crawford and Ragsdale, *Texas Women: Frontier to Future*, p. 46.

⁵ Quote appears in Smith, “Elise Waerenskjold: A Modern on the Prairie,” p. 81.

⁶ Crawford and Ragsdale, *Texas Women: Frontier to Future*, p. 47; Smith, “Elise Waerenskjold: A Modern on the Prairie,” p. 81.

⁷ Frachmeier, “Elise Amalie Tvede Waerenskjold,” p. 269; Crawford and Ragsdale, *Texas Women: Frontier to Future*, p. 45.; Smith, “Elise Waerenskjold: A Modern on the Prairie,” p. 80.

⁸ Quoted in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Texas Women: Frontier to Future*, p. 41.

⁹ Quote appears in Frachmeier, “Elise Amalie Tvede Waerenskjold,” p. 266; and in Winegarten, *Texas Women: A Pictorial History*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Quoted in Barnes, “Lady with a Pen,” *Texas Star*.

¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid*.