



Meet Margaret Borland...the only woman to ever run a Texas cattle drive

Six hundred and forty eight miles of dust, daily peril and daunting cattle trail faced Margaret Heffernan Dunbar Hardy Borland when she left her ranch in Victoria, Texas, and led 2,500 longhorns, drovers, two young sons, an even younger daughter and a granddaughter, up the trail to Wichita, Kansas, in 1873. No woman had ever run a trail drive before, but it was not the first time Margaret Borland had faced dangerous challenges head on.

She was only 5 years old when her family came to Texas by ship, with the first wave of Irish immigrants in 1829. They settled in San Patricio, in the prairie of the Coastal Bend, where her father was killed in an Indian attack when she was twelve. With no time to grieve as the Texas Revolution broke out, her widowed mother grabbed the children and ran in front of the advancing Mexican armies, taking refuge in the fort at Goliad. Somehow they escaped the massacre there, possibly because their fluent Spanish helped them pass as Mexicans.

After Texas had won its freedom, the family returned to San Patricio to renew their lives. At nineteen, Margaret married Harrison Dunbar -- the first of her 3 husbands. Within a year, she was both a mother and a widow, when Harrison was killed in a pistol duel on the streets of Victoria.

Margaret married Milton Hardy a few years later, and they built their combined 2,912 acres into a prosperous cattle ranch. Four children followed, one dying in infancy, as was tragically common back then. Cholera then took the life of her second husband and her lone surviving son. For the next 4 years, she ran the ranch herself, with some help from her brother.

In 1860, just as the Civil War broke out, she was already a wealthy and fearless woman when she met and married one of the richest cattle ranchers in South Texas, Alexander Borland. Between them they had a herd of 8,000 longhorns when word of trail drives to Missouri and Kansas had reached South Texas. The army needed beef to feed its soldiers, and for many, the pay was worth the peril. But the Borlands stayed at home, having more children and living a full Texas ranching lifestyle.

When the war ended, a deadly yellow fever epidemic spread across the area and, in 1867, the disease claimed the lives of her husband, three daughters, a son, and an infant grandson. Of her seven children, born to three husbands, only three survived this latest scourge.

Like her mother before her, Margaret had no time to mourn her loved ones as she took over running the huge ranch by herself. There was to be no respite for her, even after the multiple tragedies she had managed to survive. A freak blizzard, in the winter of 1871-72, killed thousands of her cattle by simply freezing them to death where they stood.

Margaret's challenge was to find a way to get more money for her remaining steers than the \$8 per head paid at the San Antonio market. Hearing that she could earn \$23.80 per head in Kansas, she decided to push part of her herd north, for richer markets.

So, at age 49, Margaret packed up children and supplies and headed up the Chisholm Trail to Wichita. When she arrived two months later, her unique feat earned her headlines in newspapers everywhere, but it was "the end of the trail" for Margaret's health as well. On July 5, 1873, she died of what a doctor named "brain congestion" and "trail driving fever". Selling the herd was left to her young sons, who then brought their mother home to be buried in Victoria Cemetery.

To this day, Margaret Borland is the ONLY woman known to have driven a herd up the Chisholm Trail, serving as her own Trail Boss. Margaret spent her lifetime facing down calamities, overcoming misfortune and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and suffering the deaths of many loved ones. Her courage and will to not simply survive, but to succeed in an alien and often hostile territory earns her special distinction as one of the frontier women who personified the "can-do" spirit that settled the West! ♦

("Learning from our past to influence our future" is a second and fourth grade Social Studies program sponsored by the San Jacinto River Authority in Conroe ISD schools. The program teaches water conservation to today's youngsters through Texas history.)

