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**AMANDA AND WILLIAM FRANKLIN BURKS:
A NUECES COUNTY PARTNERSHIP**

by Johnye C. Sturcken

Personal letters are an excellent source of early Texas history. The forty-six personal letters written by Amanda and William Franklin Burks from June 10, 1867 to January 9, 1876 provide information about the stock business and life in Nueces County after the close of the Civil War.¹ Thirty-eight letters are from W.F. Burks to his wife Amanda, and eight letters are from her to him. All of the letters were written while he was away on trail drives, buying and selling horses, cattle, and mules.

Before moving to Nueces County, the Burks lived on Shawnee Prairie, fourteen miles from Homer in Angelina County, where they moved after their marriage on October 14, 1858, when he was nineteen and she was seventeen years of age. During the eight years they lived on Shawnee Prairie, Burks was away much of the time serving in the Civil War as a member of the Texas Cavalry.² The young couple had two children, John, who lived about nine months, and Lucy, who lived a little over three years.

After the war, Burks decided to go into the stock business at Banquete in Nueces County. The move began on October 1, 1866. Moving with them were Burks' sister Rhoda, his half-sister Margaret, his half-brothers Mark, Bob, and John, and two black servants, Uncle Ike and Liza. Two wagons held their possessions, which included \$2200 in gold. They also drove thirty-five head of horses. The trip lasted six weeks, taking them by Crockett, Bryan, Cuero, Goliad, and finally to Banquete, where they bought land and built a five-room house.³ Burks soon established his stock business and made a cattle drive to Natchez, Mississippi, during the summer of 1867.

Four letters survive from this drive, all from Burks to his wife. After trading horses for beef cattle, he wrote from Caldwell in Burleson County on June 10, telling Mrs. Burks that he was about ready to leave for Natchez and that "the crops are fine & flourishing, watters are high creeks full and the Brazos up." He described a recent frightening experience:

I will tell you how near you came being a widow — the fact is I came as near drowning in the Creek near Caldwell as ever a man did in this world I started in on my horse and he got half way across and got in to a Suck and went under and as he rose to the top he come up rearing and Splunging in the water and hit me with his foot or head and stunned me and Sunk me and also Strangled me in the water and I was exhausted too and I tried to Swim But was too week also I was right in a whirlpool and after Doing all that I could to get to the land just as I went Down the bottom for the last time I come to the Bottom (the water just to my chin) or I should have been in eternity oh it makes me Shudder to think of that moment.

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He was plagued by swollen creeks and rivers on much of the trip but lost few cattle. On August 6, he arrived at Natchez with seventy-nine head of cattle.

Burks next drive occurred in 1868; seven letters survive, three from Burks to his wife and four from him to her. He sold horses for beef cattle, and by the time he reached San Saba County, he had acquired 139 head of cattle. Although some horses remained unsold, Burks decided to start the drive to market in order to get away from the Indians, who were stealing horses in San Saba County. When he reached the Brazos River near Bryan, he left the unsold horses with an employee, intending to return for them after the cattle drive was completed. On October 5, he wrote from Owensville in Robertson County, "If I could have sold all of my horses I would have made \$1,000 clear of all expenses But as it is I cannot tell what I will make if I get a good price for my Beeves I will make a good trip after all." The drive reached Natchez the second week in November. By November 21, Burks had sold all his stock, spent three days in New Orleans, and after a trip across the Gulf of Mexico, wrote to his wife from Houston to say that he made good money on the trip.

While Burks was away, Mrs. Burks took care of their interests at Banquete. Four of the eight letters written by her were written during this drive in 1868. By then the Burks had opened a general store in partnership with Dr. Jefferies, a local physician, who managed the store when Burks was on a cattle drive. The Burks had also acquired a great deal of horse stock. On August 2, she wrote that the store was not doing well because of competition from another store in the area, but her main concern was with their horse stock, which included about sixty colts. On August 15, writing that Jeff, one of the horses, had been stolen, she told her husband that the "crounty has bin full of men running from goliad they have bin killing ever body that had a bad name." She believed one of these men took Jeff. Five days later, she wrote that someone had "traided A large bay horse with our brand on him A bout thirty five miles from hear to a mexican." Mrs. Burks sent a neighbor to investigate, and he brought Jeff home.

During trail drives, the Burks endured long separations. On October 5, she wrote to tell him that she had received her first letter from him in two months. Expecting him home any day, she was disappointed to learn that he would be away longer:

I am so sorry you cant come home ... you have bin gone five months
I dont think the time is as long to you as me I hope not who have
I to care fore no one in this world but you and have to stay away
from you I have not bin with you five months since peace was made.

In a letter dated October 26-28, she told him that her stove was worn out and she was cooking in the fireplace. She wrote of her hardships and loneliness:

I have had a hard time this year more hard work than I ever done in my life I live in hopes you will come home and stay with me I can not stay away from you so long again ... I have put up forty pounds of butter for you to eat this winter I have a turnup growing to you told me you wood be hear to plant turnup do you remeber it I have had a turkey up amounth thinking you wood come ever day.

His last letter on this drive was dated November 21, 1868 from Houston. He had sold out in Natchez and was on his way home but had to go by Bryan to sell the horses left there early in October.

Twenty-one letters were preserved from the drive in 1869, seventeen from Burks to his wife, and four from her to him. On May 12 he wrote from Concrete, located near Cuero in DeWitt County, where he was selling horses. He had had two stampedes but had lost no horses. By May 21 he reached Burnet County and expected to sell his horses for a good profit. Writing to his wife about affairs at Banquete, Burks expressed complete confidence in her judgment and said, "I want you to write to me how my Business is doing at home and if you think it is not doing well I want you to make things different you need not be affraid to act in any way you see proper." He was riding toward Lampasas Springs and told her to write him there in care of a man named Snapp Bean. By May 28 he was selling horses at Lampasas, averaging about \$48 a head. He was not getting cash for them but was taking beef cattle at \$10 a head.

Burks moved on to San Saba and wrote on June 3 that the Indians had stolen most of the horses in the area. Writing again on June 11, his thirtieth birthday, he stated: "I have sold about 65 head of horses have got 275 head of Beeves and am going to start to gathering up the Cattle I will make some money." By July 17 he was ready to start the drive to market with about 330 head of cattle. Worried about the Indians, he expected to be out of danger in two days and wrote "then we can all sleep one night all night for we are all worn out with fatigue and hard work." He was in high spirits and expected to be home in September, stating "if I have good luck I will have a pocket full of rocks and (Money makes the mare go) all Right you can cut wood and make your own fires for a short time but there is a better day coming."

Early in the drive, Burks had trouble with a young man named Johnny, who was the son of Dr. Jefferies at Banquete, Burks' partner in the general store. The young man was on his first cattle drive. Burks, angry and disgusted with him, wrote:

I have a Dutchman driving the wagon for us and cooking Johnney cant eat fat meat cant eat corn Bread cant drink Black Coffee cant eat old Butter cant set up at night cant drink Claber milk in fack he cant do nothing that the Ballance Does grumbles all the time keeps the hands thinking that I ought to Bye more than I do and I bye all that I can I wish he was at home he has Been doing this way all the time since we first come to Lampasas County. (July 22)

Johnny grew up on the drive, for after it reached Natchez on September

8, Burks wrote home, praising Johnny for his hard work. Burks found the cattle market depressed, and instead of returning home in September as he had planned, he was forced to remain in Natchez for several more months.

During his stay in Natchez, Mrs. Burks wrote of affairs at home. Four of her surviving letters were written during this drive, and in two of them, she discussed the serious illness of Liza, the black girl who moved with them from Angelina County. Liza had been bitten by a rattlesnake, and Mrs. Burks described her condition vividly:

lizzar got bit by a rattle snake I cant tell you how much she has suffered I have bin up nearly ever night with her she has not set up anny yet the flesh has come of on the top of her foot ... the Doctor says he think lizar will git well ... I thought twice she was dying. (June 8)

A week later on June 15, Mrs. Burks wrote that Liza was better, but still could not walk. It had been twenty-two days since she was bitten, but she was not expected to walk for several more weeks.

On August 28, Mrs. Burks wrote that "all the men have gone west to stop stealing in the cattle." She said that horse buyers were beginning to come into the area, one from as far away as Mississippi, and she expected more soon. Her last surviving letter is dated November 6. She told her husband that the store was closed and suggested "if you was by your self I think you could do a good business hear this winter."

Ten letters remain from 1870, and all of them are from Burks to his wife. He sold horses and mules near Victoria during late January, moved early in February to Concrete, where he lost eighteen horses in a stampede, and on February 14 wrote from La Grange that he was selling horses for a good price and expected to be home in three or four weeks. Promising to spend more time at home, he said:

Amanda hire all your wood hauled and be sure to do it for I felt like I had not treated you Right and if you will forgive for it and I know you will that I will not do so any more You know that I like to stay at home first Rate and that I deprive my self of all the Comforts and pleasures at home to try to make money for you and me however I will stay with you until you are tired of me when I come home.

Dispirited on this trip, he wrote again on February 19 from Hopkinsville, located in Gonzales County about twenty-five miles from La Grange: "Amanda I am very anxious to come home and I am not going lye to you no more for I sware to you I will stay at home if I do not mak one cent in 12 months Amanda I do not think that I will mak one Dollar on the trip."

Burks' promise to stay home was unrealistic, if he was to remain in the stock business, and they both knew it. By May 28 he was gone again, writing from Rio Grande City, where he was waiting for Mexican fillies to be delivered at Camargo by Don Jose Maria Pena. On July 24, he wrote

Mrs. Burks that he had been 150 miles into Mexico but did not buy many horses.

Few letters remain after 1870. From 1871, no letters survive because Mrs. Burks went up the trail to Kansas with her husband when he drove 1000 steers to market. Her account of this trip appears in *The Trail Drivers of Texas* (1924). After a drive in 1872, Burks wrote from Ellsworth, Kansas, on August 18, saying: "I have tryed to sell ever Since I came here But cant Do it at a fair Price— Damn—this Country any how nothing here But gamblers—Fancy women and Texas Fools—all mixed up together." One letter survives from a drive to Natchez in 1873; the last two letters, written December 21, 1875 and January 9, 1876, were from Louisiana where he was selling horses and mules.

After his return to Banquete, Burks decided to move to a new area where he would have more open range for his horses. In 1876, while traveling with a party of surveyors in La Salle County, he found land he liked and filed a homestead. He and Mrs. Burks, accompanied by his sister Rhoda, moved to La Salle County in the fall, arriving on November 26, 1876. Unfortunately, Burks, who was ill with tuberculosis, died two months later on January 27, 1877 at the age of thirty-seven. He was buried in the family cemetery at La Mota Ranch.

Before he died, Burks advised his wife to sell the horses and establish a sheep ranch. Later, after the brush began to destroy the prairie grass, she switched to cattle. Widowed twelve days before her thirty-sixth birthday, Amanda Burks remained in La Salle County and developed the property that she and her husband had homesteaded. She continued to buy land, and at one time owned 43,000 acres, 33,000 acres in La Salle County called the La Mota Ranch and 10,000 acres in Webb County known as Los Pintos Ranch. She outlived William Franklin Burks more than fifty-four years, but she never remarried. She died on the ranch on September 15, 1931⁴ at age ninety and was buried beside her husband in the cemetery at La Mota Ranch.

The forty-six personal letters written by Amanda and William Franklin Burks between 1867 and 1876 provide information about the stock business in Texas after the Civil War. These letters also reveal the devotion and mutual respect felt by a young couple who built an enduring partnership on the Texas frontier.

NOTES

¹Letters written by Amanda and William Franklin Burks have been made available to me through the courtesy of Amanda Bell Newman and Virginia Bell Sturges of Cotulla, Texas. They have assisted generously in my work.

²Civil War letters from W.F. Burks to his wife indicate that he was a member of the Thirteenth Texas Dismounted Cavalry Regiment under the command of Colonel John H. Burnett from April 6, 1862 to December 29, 1862. No letters survive from 1863. By July 7, 1864, Burks was on his way to join the Rio Grande expedition under the command of

Colonel John S. Ford and remained with this group until the end of the war.

³Amanda Burks, "East to West: Reminiscences of Mrs. Amanda Burks, Pioneer Woman and One of La Salle's Largest Ranch Owners," *Cotulla Record*, May 3, 1924.

*In my paper "Amanda Nite Burks, Willie Baylor Bell and J. Frank Dobie: A Brush Country Friendship," in *Purview Southwest: Proceedings of the Southwest and Texas Popular Culture Association Meeting for 1989*, edited by Reed Harp (Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1989), pp. 335-45, I cited the death date for Mrs. Burks as September 16, 1931, based on information found in *La Salle County: South Texas Brush Country 1856-1975* (1975) by Annette Martin Ludeman, p. 146. The correct date is September 15, 1931, as cited in this paper.