

Legend of the Circle G

By Dade Rayfield

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One of the oldest ranches in Texas, Gallagher Ranch- The Circle G- has been owned for almost four decades by Mrs. Amy Shelton McNutt, millionaire financier, rancher and philanthropist. It still embodies the original 10,000 acres granted Peter Gallagher by Santa Anna and is the largest working ranch in Bexar County.

Ancient live oaks which Gallagher saw when he first entered the Valley of the San Geronimo shade the vast patio, which surrounds the sprawling ranch house. The original buildings constructed by him as a home and fortress still stand. Almost a mile of aqueduct built to lift water from the San Geronimo River to Gallagher's grain fields is a showpiece on the old ranch, and the San Geronimo follows its ancient course east of the patio garden.

The legend of the Circle G is kept alive by Mrs. McNutt, and as guests relax before huge fireplaces on wintry nights, they often hear stories of Indian attacks, early days on the frontier, outlaws and gunmen who rode the Old Spanish Trail, and buried treasure yet to be found on the Gallagher spread.

"Peter Gallagher was a civil engineer, born and reared in Ireland," Mrs. Mac will tell listeners "He came to America to help build docks in New Orleans and from there he went to Galveston, known in those days as Galvez Town. It was in the days when the Spanish were encouraging pirates to prey on French and English shipping. Merchant ships would be plundered and then the pirates would cross the Gulf and hide their loot on the Texas coast until such a time as they could dispose of it. It was at Galvez Town that they often cashed in their booty. Peter Gallagher was employed to build that port's first docks.

It was while Gallagher was building the first Galveston wharves that he got in very solid with the Mexican Government," Mrs. Mac says "It may have been during this period that he became known to Santa Anna. Because of the outstanding job he did in the port construction, the young engineer was commissioned by the Mexican Government to carry out an even more important mission."

Santa Anna planned to strengthen his forces at San Antonio de Bexar before launching his campaign against the Austin colonist. Dragoons and their mounts would require food, which could not be supplied easily from south of the Rio Grande. El Presidente's expanded forces would need a supply depot in the vicinity of San Antonio de Bexar and its fortified mission, in the Alamo. It was to be Peter Gallagher's job to find a suitable spot for such a base and he embarked on his mission at least three years before the fall of the Alamo in 1836.

Operating first from San Antonio, Gallagher and his party of explorers cast about in search of an area where there was an abundance of good water and where there was an abundance of good water and where the land was fertile for the growing of grain for men and mounts. Santa Anna had prescribed that the site must be within the twenty-five miles of San Antonio de Bexar.

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In the course of his exploration, Peter Gallagher and his party eventually rode northwest toward what is now known as the Texas Hill Country. They may have followed a path, which one-day would be followed by Gallagher's stagecoaches rattling and banging between San Antonio and Bandera. A day's ride from the Alamo City, they may have spent their first night on the banks of Leon Creek, where, in later years, there would be a stage stop and where in modern times is the small community of Leon Valley, a fifteen-minute drive by modern expressway to downtown, San Antonio.

Probably late in the afternoon of the party's second day out, Peter Gallagher topped a rise twenty-odd miles from San Antonio de Bexar and saw spread out before him to the peaks of distant mountains behind which the sun was setting the lovely Valley of the San Geronimo River. Below him was the site he would select for Santa Anna's supply base. Below him in this fertile valley with its deep canyons and rugged hills, he would claim 10,000 acres under a grant from the Mexican Government and establish what would become the historic Gallagher Ranch.

Included in Gallagher's party were some 250 Mexican laborers. Their first task was construction of temporary shelter against the heat of Texas' summer and the bone-chilling cold of winter's blue northerners. They built crude huts under the live oaks, which shade the present-day ranchhouse and its surrounding gardens and patios.

Peter Gallagher's first construction job probably was the building of his fortress home. He and his party were in a hostile land infested with Comanche, Lipan and Kickapoo Indians. His building site was at the foot of Council Mountain, whose peak was the assembly point for redskins of the area. From its lofty heights smoke signals swept up into the blue, cloud-painted skies in daylight hours. At night, council fires blazed as chiefs and their warriors planned raids on the few white settlers who had invaded the Indian's wilderness.

Gallagher and his Mexican laborers built well. Testimony to the permanence of their work is that Gallagher and his family survived repeated Indian attacks over the years and that the fortress home he built in 1833 still stands.

The original building contained four rooms. It was about a story and a half high, with an immense loft room above the four ground-level chambers. Constructed of matched limestone blocks quarried on the ranch, the massive walls were two feet thick. Its single door was made of hand-hewn oak timbers and its windows were protected by both iron bars and stout oak shutters, which could be closed when danger threatened.

Loop holes and rifle slits on both the ground floor and in the loft room commanded a 360-degree field of fire. The loft was the "citadel," the fortification's strongest point from which the defenders could fire down on any who might dare to attack. A number of these firing positions remain in the building today, protected now by glass.

The end room was the chapel. It was the first room Peter Gallagher completed. His Mexican peons were Catholic, and Gallagher probably was, too. He had a priest out once a month to conduct Mass. It was a two-day trip, then, each way, from Bexar to the Gallagher Ranch. The priests made the trip by horseback.

With the completion of his home, Peter Gallagher undertook the largest engineering project involved in development of the supply base. A considerable area of the valley, north of his home and on the west side of San Geronimo River, had been cleared for planting of grain. To assure adequate moisture to produce abundant crops, the engineer set about to irrigate the area.

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“The San Geronimo was quite a river then,” Mrs. McNutt says. “Later accounts say that it was quite impassable at times. There were no bridges of course, and settlers would keep one another informed as to the condition of the river. Trips to San Antonio could not be made when the San Geronimo was up.”

Although the river ran strong at all seasons, its water was not where Peter Gallagher wanted it for his farming enterprise. So he decided to do something about it. Using massive limestone blocks quarried from the surrounding hills, his labor force constructed an aqueduct more than a mile long from the river’s edge to the cleared fields. Constructed without the benefit of modern heavy equipment, without cement and concrete, the aqueduct of huge stones, bound together with primitive mortar still winds along the left bank of a lovely lake created 100-odd years after the aqueduct was built.

“The construction was a marvel of engineering know-how.” Mrs. McNutt says. “It operated efficiently when it was built and it operated equally well when I put it in use during World War II. I turned some of the old fields, which I had used as grazing land, into Victory Gardens after we got in the war. With only relatively minor repairs, the aqueduct carried the San Geronimo’s water up to the old irrigation ditches.”

Peter Gallagher built his fortress home, the aqueduct, and cleared his fields but his work was not completed when Santa Anna’s Army put the sword and torch to the Alamo in 1836; only to be destroyed soon after by Sam Houston and his Texas at San Jacinto. Santa Anna was sent back in shame across the Rio Grande from where he had come, but his representative on the San Geronimo and his enterprise in the river valley survived the ebb and flow of the bloody fight for independence. Peter Gallagher had never taken Mexican citizenship, but was merely an Irish citizen in the employ of the Mexican Government. When Texas became a Republic, Peter Gallagher became a citizen of the new Lone Star State. The early land titles were not affected.

Mrs. Mac explained, “After the war was over, he just went on selling to the Texans. He kept on building, using his skill as an engineer here at the ranch in San Antonio and throughout Texas.”

In the years to between the defeat of Santa Anna and the post-Civil War days the people at Gallagher Ranch faced the problems of survival on the Southwestern frontier. Foremost of these was saving their scalps, livestock and buildings from Indians who, in the early days, outnumbered the whites and who were determined to drive them out.

Peter Gallagher’s home was more fort than domicile and its defenders withstood repeated redskin attacks and kept their hair, although retention of live-stock was sometimes another matter. The Kickapoo, Lipan and Comanche’s soon learned that the two-foot thick walls and stout oak timbers of Gallagher’s home were impregnable; but if the people inside the fortress were safe, cattle and other ranch animals outside were not necessarily so. That the Indians were often successful in their raids on the Gallagher livestock is attested to by and account by Mrs. Griff Jones, Gallaghers’s niece.

The story appeared in the August, 1928, issue of Holland’s Magazine. The author, Helen Raley, wrote of an interview with Mrs. Jones:

“It came in ’69 or ’70 that the Indians came. I remember that it had been misty all morning so that the hands had been called from the field work and put to smoking bacon. On the open flat across from the house a dozen or more work animals were grazing. About noon, I saw some queer looking riders circling and cutting in among the horses and mules.

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“Aren’t those Indians?” I called to my uncle.

“One look and he hurried to snatch a rifle from the stack always kept behind the door. Peeping out I watched the Indians as they rode skillfully on their wiry little ponies. There were fifteen, riding in squads of five. Scarecrow figures they appeared, with pieces of rawhide in which holes had been cut for the feet their only saddles. Those nearest the house... even in my fright I noticed... Wore soldier’s uniforms, cast-off or stolen.”

“Before my uncle could do anything the party had gathered up the stock and was on its way. They raided all the ranches on the way to San Antonio. We children grieved because our pet riding horses were carried off.”

“In that hurry scurry, one of the Indian ponies was left. It was a poor, raw-backed beast, and do you know it was two weeks before a detachment of troops rode out to the ranch in pursuit of those redskins.”

A sequel to the attack described by Mrs. Jones was heard a number of years ago by Mrs. McNutt at a meeting of the San Antonio Conservation Society.

“The first year I was here,” Mrs. Mac recalls, I attended this meeting, and a little bit of dried up, red-haired woman talked to us about the early days. She was a Wassenburg and the first white child born in this area.

“She said the Gallagher Ranch was here and that their ranch was on the other side of the mountains ringing the valley on the west. This was before the Civil War and the Gallaghers and the Wassenburgs had had their slaves cut a trail over the mountains connecting the two ranches. When Indians raid one ranch the people there would send a rider over the trail to warn the other of danger.

“One time, when she was just a little girl, her father and brothers and two trusted Negro men had gone to San Antonio for supplies. It might have been at the time of the attack on the Circle G described by Mrs. Jones because Peter Gallagher’s niece said the Indian raided all the ranches in this area and on in as far as San Antonio.

“At any rate, Mrs. Wassenburg, her two daughters, and some Negro boys were at the Wassenburg ranch when a Gallagher rider came over the mountain, his horse all covered with lather to warn that the Indians were out and were even attacking the Circle G.

“She gave the Gallagher cowboy a fresh horse and he, with the young slaves, went out to round up the Wassenburg horses and other work animals and drive them into the corral near the ranchhouse. She said her mother was calm and unafraid when she asked if the two little girls would like to have a tea party. Mrs. Wassenburg put a table outside the stockade, which surrounded the ranchhouse and its outbuildings and gave the children cups and saucers with which to play.

“While the children played party, apparently unaware of any danger from the redskins, Mrs. Wassenburg made a fire under the wash kettle and began to carry water inside the stockade as though she were going to do laundry. She filled all the kettles, tubs and barrels she had at hand and had just completed her work when she heard the horses coming in.

“Telling the youngsters their party was over, Mrs. Wassenburg, hustled her daughters inside the stockade just as the horse herd thundered into the corral. In the huge dust cloud raised by running animals flew Indian arrows loosed by redskins who had concealed themselves in the surrounding timber to ambush the horsemen as they dashed for the stockade.

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“Mrs. Wassenburg had made the bluff of making laundry preparations so that a she might collect water that would certainly be needed to withstand an Indian siege. She had fooled the Indians into thinking she did not know they were about by having her daughters play outside.

“ The stockade’s stout gate was closed and barred before the first of the Indians entered the clearing. The defenders had enough water for three days and nights, and weapons, powder and shot were ample to make it hot for the hostiles. The Wassenburg home was under siege for three days and two nights. On the third night, horses in the corral, which had been spooky, with the Indians in the woods around the beleaguered ranchhouse, settled down and the defenders figures the redskins had left. The next morning, Mr. Wassenburg, his son and the slaves arrived home.”

Peter Gallagher lived at the Circle G until after the War between the States, moving to San Antonio in later life to become one of the Alamo City’s leading businessmen and builders. He built the original Menger Hotel, the first good hostelry between the San Francisco and New Orleans. He built some of the buildings in the Quadrangle at Fort Sam Houston as well as the old San Antonio post office. He got stone for many of these projects from a canyon on the other side of Council Mountain and hauled it into San Antonio by ox sled. So many government buildings were built of stone from the quarry that the canyon was and still is called Government Canyon.

“I don’t know exactly how long Peter Gallagher stayed on this ranch, but in the late ‘60’s he moved to San Antonio and built a big three-story stone house on the present site of the Alamo Gardens. When they started to restore the Alamo and develop the gardens around it, the Gallagher house was torn down and its stones, quarried here on the Gallagher Ranch, were used to construct the wall now standing at the rear of the garden’s.”

One colorful project undertaken by Peter Gallagher was operation of an express stage between San Antonio and Bandera. Its equipment banged and jolted along hell-for-leather over the Old Spanish Trail which then connected San Antonio and the Bandera County town which later would be known as the Cowboy Capital of the World. His old fortress home at the Circle G was one of the changing stations. Other stops were at the old Onion house, which still stands on the outskirts of San Antonio in Leon Valley and at the two-story adobe and frame building in Helotes, now the home of Miss Marie Connaly.

Gallagher’s stages, ox-drawn timber sled, ranchers’ wagons and cowboys were not the only users of the trail linking San Antonio and Bandera in frontier days. Outlaws used it to prey on the commerce it carried. Some were notorious Texas gunmen of the day and others were members of Mexican bandit gangs, which swept across the Rio Grande to loot and kill. The latter has left a legend of buried treasure supposedly hidden in the caves and canyons of the sprawling Circle G, which was crossed by the old Trail as it snaked its way northwest from Bexar to Bandera.

One of the more colorful tales of lost bandit loot concerns two brothers who are said to have owned the Circle G after Peter Gallagher left the ranch. Always operated under the name Gallagher Ranch and claiming the same irregular boundaries of its original 10,000 acres, the ranch has had many owners and operators during the waning days of the “Old West” and into the early 1900’s. Leased by large cattle companies, it was once the headquarters of a 300,000-acre cattle empire. At other times it was leased or owned by individuals, two of whom were brothers.

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As the story goes, one of the men was out alone searching for stray cattle and was riding the banks of the San Geronimo in one of the canyons whose steep, rugged walls are pockmarked with caves. Just why he should have elected to look for stray cows in a cave is not explained, and possibly that was not his motive for exploration. Stories of buried treasure hidden near the Old Spanish Trail were probably even more numerous then than they are today. Perhaps he abandoned cattle for treasure hunting.

Whatever the explanation, the cowboy is said to have returned to the ranchhouse filled with excitement to tell his brother that he had found a vast treasure in one of the caves. He had marked the entrance with his shirt and had come hell-for-leather back to enlist help in moving the treasure. The loot was so extensive and in such quantity that a wagon and mule team would be required to haul it back to the ranch, he said.

The two men set out for the cave in a buckboard drawn by a team of fine mules. In the vehicle with them was a loaded shotgun, rattling and banging about their feet as the men put the whip to the mules to send the buckboard careening cross-country in a cloud of flying gravel and rock. A wheel crashed into a chuckhole, the buckboard bounced and swayed, the loaded shotgun discharged accidentally, and the brother who had found the treasure cave was mortally wounded. The surviving brother is said to have roamed the hills and canyons of the Circle G for years, searching for a cave along the San Geronimo marked with an old shirt.

During the years Mrs. McNutt has owned the Gallagher Ranch, treasure hunters have periodically shown up to ask permission to search the canyons and hills for treasure buried in a bygone day. They have come armed with maps and enthusiasm and many have searched for weeks on end, but none has ever found the fabled treasure once marked by a dead man's shirt, or any other for which they might have searched.

"Tales of the Circle G and its hidden fortunes are colorful and I love them," Mrs. McNutt smiles. "But I have never searched for that kind of wealth. I have lived in the Southwest so long that when I see a stream of clear, cold water gushing from a two inch pipe here in the patio of Gallagher Ranch, I am the wealthiest woman in the world."