

Chapter 13

The Jess M. Walbridge Ranch

Sierra Blanca, Texas

Lawman, Cattleman, Businessman and Legend

Jess M. Walbridge was the son of Rufus J. Walbridge (May 20, 1839 – January 30, 1904) and Mary Jane Bible (June 5, 1850 – March 2, 1919),¹ born December 7, 1876 in San Saba, a small town in San Saba County located in the central part of Texas.² Rufus and Mary were married around 1867 and lived on 600 acres of farmland in Lampasas County. Their marriage produced three children with Jess being the middle child having one younger and one older sister.³

In 1879, the Walbridge family sold their 600 acres in Lampasas County and moved to Snyder, Scurry County, Texas which is located in what is referred to as the lower part of the Southwestern Tablelands ecological region of Texas. There they purchased 5 sections or 3,200 acres and leased additional properties to raise cattle.⁴

In 1885, Walbridge once again pulled up stakes and moved his family to Jeff Davis County the home of the U.S. Army Fort Davis and the town also named Fort Davis. At nine years of age, Jess assisted his father and others in moving their livestock from Snyder to Fort Davis which was considered to have far better grasslands. Walbridge bought 13 sections and leased thousands of other acres for his new ranch. Jess remained on the ranch working with his father until 1900, when his parents decided to sell most of their ranch properties and move the entire family to southern California where they bought a citrus farm.⁵

Jess moved with his parents to southern California where he stayed a short time before returning to the Fort Davis area. Apparently, Jess did not see himself involved in the future of the citrus farm business.⁶ He had already decided his future was the cattle business and it did not include taking care of a bunch of fruit bearing citrus trees. He was born and raised around cattle so it is easy to understand his desire to be a life-long cattleman.

Upon Jess's return from California to Fort Davis where the Walbridge family still retained several sections of land, it is unclear if he used this available land for his own cattle raising. He by nature was always a determined hard-working young man that kept busy all the time involved in various activities. He was either in the saddle moving or down on the ground working. Well that is to say, most of the time.

He did take time in 1900 to meet and marry Mary Ann Kelly, born in Fort Davis, Texas in 1875. There are no marriage records available to time the exact event, but one would assume they married in the Fort Davis area after his return from California. Jess and Mary decided to leave the Fort Davis area and move to Ysleta, Texas, just outside of El Paso sometime in 1900.⁷ It is reported he also held a job as the first brand inspector in west Texas.⁸ This may very well have enabled Jess to seek his first job as a mounted night policeman in the roughest area of Ysleta

and the surrounding El Paso valley. Although they had moved to Ysleta, they soon moved back to the Fort Davis area at an unknown date. It is thought that it was cattle related and the acreage still owned by his parents in Jeff Davis County. By 1903 Jess was again back working for Chief Wooten as a night mounted patrol officer in Ysleta.⁹

At 27 years of age, this was again one of Jess Walbridge's many jobs in law enforcement. Around this same time or shortly there after he also became a partner with the majority stockholders in the State National Bank of El Paso. He was hired and made a partner to protect the interests of some of the owners of the bank who were trading guns for cattle with none other than Pancho Villa.¹⁰ Villa was to become a famous Mexican revolutionary general and one of the most prominent figures of the Mexican Revolution (born June 5, 1878 – assassinated July 20, 1923).¹¹

Pancho Villa was stealing cattle and using those stolen cattle to pay for guns used to fight the revolution. He would advise the owners where and how they could retrieve their cattle. On several occasions after picking up their cattle, the owners were ambushed by Villa's Mexican revolutionaries. The stockholder partners in the cattle operation needed someone very tough, determined and capable to retrieve their cattle and deal with Pancho Villa and his revolutionaries.¹²

The partnership flourished for a time and Walbridge and his associates assembled a large herd of cattle, but the risks to the operation were always steadily increasing. It wasn't long before a bitter battle erupted with the Mexicans over the cattle the owners had retrieved from Villa and several of Walbridge's associates. Approximately fifteen Mexicans were killed during a violent gun battle across the border. Walbridge, as one could imagine, was unhappy with the operation and the turn of events. It wasn't long before he reportedly informed his partners he had not signed on to start another Mexican war and that he wanted to sell his interest back to the controlling group of stockholders.¹³

This would not be the first, nor the last time Jess Walbridge and his nemesis Pancho Villa's paths would cross. He saw Villa as a two headed snake. One was that of a hero who fought for the common man and another was that of a violent untrustworthy criminal.¹⁴

It is believed that when the cattle operation Walbridge was running for the partnership was divided, he ended up with approximately 600 head. After selling his interest, he was again back working part time for Chief Wooten as a night mounted patrol officer in Ysleta. During this time, he was also was raising cattle and leasing ranch land, paying a flat fee of \$.16 cents per head he ran on property near McNary, 23 miles west of Sierra Blanca.¹⁵

Walbridge did not have a car or truck in those days, he had something better. He would take the train from El Paso to McNary and put his horse in a cattle car pulled by the train. It was a time saver. The nice thing about the train was there were no flat tires and he always had his much-needed horse for inspecting and working with his cattle.

During the years from 1900 to 1916, Walbridge had been running some cattle on both private and various state-owned lands between McNary and Sierra Blanca Mountain.

Between 1916 and 1918 he was able to purchase much of the land in this area. He originally acquired approximately 16 sections of private deeded property and the balance was comprised of leased private and state-owned lands. The ranch had 225 sections enclosed in two strand barbwire and cross-fenced into four sections. He dutifully kept up all the good leases with water and used thousands upon thousands of acres of state lease lands and never paid a penny on the leases.¹⁶ It is thought he may have eventually acquired over 60 sections of deeded land and it is believed in some circles the deeded sections may have exceeded 80 sections.¹⁷



Headquarters, Sierra Blanca, Texas, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa early 1950's, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. McKee III

A cattle ranch of this size needs a headquarters and a bunkhouse for various employees such as the ranch hands that tend cattle, build and maintain fences and cooks to feed all the hands and visitors. The days start at early dawn and end at dusk. There are windmills that need to be maintained, horses to be shod and cared for, fences to be mended, corrals to be built and leather tack

to be maintained. The days are long and so are the weeks. There is always something that needs attention.

A first look at this painting may likely draw the viewer's attention to the Aeromotor windmill and water tank in the center just under the top of Sierra Blanca Peak. The next focus could be the headquarters building that looks like it has been added on to several different times. The old saying, "Rome wasn't built in a day"; and neither was this ranch nor its headquarters.

The Walbridge Ranch was located approximately 17 miles west of the town of Sierra Blanca on the north side of U.S. Highway 10. The portion on the right side of the building was built with railroad beams using standard pier and beam construction techniques. The room to the far left of the house was built by Walbridge sometime around 1906. It was one room with a cot and acted as feed storage area as well.¹⁸ During this early period Jess was leasing all of the

property. To the left of the headquarters building, not seen in the painting, are the ranches corrals, stock holding and working pens.

After acquiring the deeded property between 1916 and 1918 of the headquarters land area, Jess started the second portion of the building project which was the kitchen sometime in the late 1920's. Once the kitchen was added it became possible for the family to come to the ranch when the children were out of school. Jess also added a three-room bunk house for ranch hands just behind the room on the far left.¹⁹

In far West Texas, modern conveniences are very slow to catch up. The family always referred to this collection of buildings as the "camp", which was a pretty fair description when considering what they had and didn't have. The ranch headquarters house never had anything but cold running well water and outdoor toilets. The nearest utility electric pole was 14 miles away. The ranch did get electricity in early 1990s when a company laid fiber optic cable down the railroad right of way one mile from the house.²⁰

Notice the two horses patiently standing in front of the house. Fred Darge, in all probability painted these into the foreground to give the headquarters dwelling a more lived in look. And besides, everyone knows he liked horses and was good at painting them. He could almost paint them in his sleep.

As is usual in life, just about the time things appears to be going well, the worst of tragedies strike. On January 6, 1907, while giving birth to their only child, Jesse, Mary died from complications. As one can imagine, it was a tremendous shock and setback for a loving husband, a new father and an ambitious young man determined to make something of himself. Mary was taken back to Fort Davis and laid to rest in Hillcrest Cemetery.²¹ Now having a very young son without a mother, he resigned from ranching full time and went back into law enforcement as a Deputy Sheriff in El Paso for Sheriff F. J. Hall and later for C.M. Bassett in order to remain closer to home at all times.²²



Jess and Juanita Walbridge on their wedding day, December 31, 1912.

As a resident of Ysleta that was known by just about everyone in the community, Juanita Loewenstein, born December 27, 1882, daughter of Meier Gunant Moritz Loewenstein and Juanita Diaz Buchanan,²³ caught the eye of Jess Walbridge. Or maybe they just caught each other's eyes. Either way, it just happened. Further reading will bring on understanding of why Jess and Juanita were married.

Jess was a hard-working lawman and wanted to be a rancher. The Loewenstein's were a wealthy and influential family. Juanita's father was a Jewish emigrant from Germany. Her

mother, Juana Buchanan Lowenstein, was from Juarez, Mexico and was a devoted Catholic married to a German Jew. His interests were business and gambling.²⁴

Juanita Loewenstein Walbridge was a very special and social person belonging to all sorts of organizations. As one can probably understand, she would refuse to move to the ranch in Sierra Blanca because of her interests in Ysleta social organizations.²⁵ Jess bought her great aunt's house adjacent to George Buchanan's home and mercantile.²⁶ The marriage of Jess and Juanita produced two children: and Monroe Morris Walbridge, born November 25, 1913, and Mary Lee Walbridge, born June 28, 1919.²⁷

Her interests were always focused on her family. It was said she absolutely idolized Jess. She always had one or two maids and supervised all the meals at the ranch and organized every one's daily routine when she was there. She was the absolute power in her household. All business matters were left to Jess and son Monroe.²⁸ Her grand-children always referred to her as Nana. Juanita is credited with having raised 11 indigent children plus her own.²⁹

Junita throughout her life brought children without families or without means of support to the ranch to live. They were clothed and sent to school just as her children were. Over the years numerous children came to live at the ranch. Some stayed only a few months, many stayed for years.³⁰

She was particularly upset that she raised a Negro boy and after graduation, he moved out and was never heard from again. He moved away around 1939 and just disappeared. It was suspected that he had been killed.³¹

Pauline Gomez came to live at the ranch when she was around 12 years old. She ultimately married the ranch foreman Leon Gomez. She and her new family eventually moved to Safford, Arizona where Leon became foreman of a large farming co-op. Monroe and his sister Mary Lee, were said to have loved her a great deal. She was a very ambitious person and pushed her husband to become fluent in the English language. All of their children went to and graduated from college.³² That in its self is a remarkable story for that day and time.

Jess M. Walbridge joined the Texas Rangers, serving as a Special Ranger (unpaid) under Captain Bill Davis assigned to Company "L" in Ysleta from March 23, 1918 to May 7, 1919.³³ Company "L" was later changed to Company "E" and no longer exists. During this time, he was both a Texas Ranger and Captain of the Ysleta Police Department.³⁴ It is believed that Jess worked in law enforcement and ranching up until 1950 when he retired from both. As a law enforcement officer, Jess had the unbelievable distinction of been shot 6 times and killed 7 men. It wasn't that he was hard to get along with, he just didn't like bad people, especially when they shot at him. Jess grew up in rough times and grew to be as tough as the country in which they lived.³⁵

To say that Jess Monroe Walbridge led a quiet unassuming life of cattle ranching would be a vast understatement. As we have learned, it was just not his life style. When he was not on duty upholding the law, he was assembling and operating his immense cattle ranch which was his passion. He regrettable had to give up ranching in 1950 and returned to Isleta to live out his last few years and quietly died on May 14, 1954.

His loving wife of 42 years, Juanita, died twenty-one years later on June 15, 1975. The Walbridge ranch was eventually purchased by prominent Dallas and San Antonio oilman and equally large rancher, Jack Frost (1900-1970) in 1955 and added it to his other ranch holdings he owned west of the Walbridge ranch at Finlay. It is reported by the Walbridge family that Mr. Frost told Fred Darge he could have the run of any of his ranch properties and he would also buy every painting he could not sell. Once again, Fred Darge makes another long lasting friendship. Jack and Myrhl Frost would eventually assemble a collection of twenty-seven Darge paintings. It is the second largest accumulation of Darge paintings we have found to date.

The Two Headed Snake



Francisco "Pancho" Villa astride famous Silver Medallion Saddle under rifle in scabbard.

Pancho Villa's life of crime started at the age of 15 when he shot a man who was harassing one of his sisters in 1894. In the late 1890's, he worked as a miner in Chihuahua in addition to selling stolen cattle. But it wasn't long before he added more serious crimes to his record, robbing banks and taking from the wealthy.

In 1910, while still living as a fugitive, Pancho Villa joined Francisco Madero's successful uprising against Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz. With Villa's skills at reading, writing, fighting and his knowledge of the land, he was soon named one of Madero's top lieutenants as a revolutionary leader and his company won the first Battle of Ciudad Juarez in 1911. The rebels eventually drove Diaz out of power, and Madero took the position of President, having named Villa a colonel. ³⁶

As one can imagine, helping run a revolution and trying to take over a country is a costly operation. On one occasion, Walbridge had sold Pancho Villa 200 head of mules that were needed for his army with the terms being half down and the balance to be paid at a later date. Villa never seemed to be able to take care of the debt. Walbridge and an unknown Texas Ranger went to Mexico to find Villa to collect the balance of the debt in cash or bring back the mules. ³⁷



Photograph of Pancho Villa at unknown date

Jess and the Ranger arrived at Pancho's camp and began a friendly poker game. Pancho finally got around to asking Jess why he had ridden all the way into the Sierra Madre Mountains to find him? He was sure it was not just a social call and it couldn't be the poker game because they had those back home. Walbridge informed him he had come to collect his money or his mules. Villa just laughed and said, "Hell I've got 150 soldiers here. How do you think you can do this"? Walbridge said, "I want your word as a Mexican General and gentleman that you are going to pay me and a substantial portion of that money now". Villa agreed he would indeed pay him and in fact he would give Walbridge his Silver Medallion Saddle. On leaving, the Ranger purportedly asked Walbridge; "what chance they had of getting out alive?" At which time he said he thought they had at least a 50% chance. ³⁸ It is thought this incident occurred when Jess Walbridge served as a Texas Ranger between 1918 and 1919.

Shortly after Walbridge returned from his meeting with Pancho, his wife Juanita had the opportunity to meet Pancho Villa face to face and hide him in her house in Ysleta. Soldiers were in hot pursuit of Villa. As he rode by, he jumped off his horse and asked her to hide him. The Army Lt. in charge stopped and asked if she had seen the Mexican bandito Villa? She said indeed she had; "he just went down the street." Villa was less than 20 feet away hiding in a locker on the front porch as they spoke. Jess said, "it was a damn good thing Juanita hid Villa, as he didn't want that SOB to get caught until he got his money." Within several weeks Villa had paid Walbridge the final debt he owed on the mules and retrieved his prized silver ornate saddle. ³⁹



Photo Courtesy of the El Paso Museum of Art

This saddle sold at the High Noon Western Americana Auction in Mesa, Arizona for \$750,000 on January 28, 2012 and is now on display in the El Paso Museum of Art. ⁴⁰

The Mexican Revolution was a major armed struggle that lasted from 1910 – 1920 and affected the U.S. border from Columbus, New Mexico down into the what is now the Big Bend National Park and along the Rio Grande River that marked the border between the two countries.

Pancho Villa may have had his silver saddle, but Jess Walbridge had something near and dear, his fancy pistol. Every lawman carries a pistol. As a lawman, one of Walbridge's favorite pistols was an engraved silver-plated single action Colt 45. It was

a very expensive and unique hand gun in that era. Three men robbed and shot up a local bar in Ysleta and made their getaway to Cloud Croft, New Mexico with lawman Walbridge in hot pursuit. He came upon the fugitives horses tied up in a small clump of trees by a stream. It appeared to Walbridge they were settling in for the night. ⁴¹



Jess Walbridge's engraved silver-plated single action Colt 45.

When he approached the horses the fugitives ambushed him from positions in tops of trees. They left him for dead taking his unique pistol. That turned out to be a big mistake thinking they could kill a tenacious lawman like Jess Walbridge and walk off with his prized pistol. The three robbers would end up dearly paying for this transgression. ⁴²

The next day a local Mexican found him and was kind enough to transport him into town still unconscious to seek medical care. After several weeks of recovery, Jess became well enough to be able to return to Ysleta. There after he asked any and everyone if they had ever seen a pistol of that nature. Several years later he received a tip from a prisoner that such a pistol existed for sale in a store near Raton, New Mexico. Jess quickly contacted the locals in Raton and confirmed that such a pistol did exist.

He was able to track down the person that sold the pistol to the merchant. Over a period of seven years he tracked down each person and killed all of them. This story was told to his son, Monroe Walbridge by Jess and was confirmed by Jess Mosley at a party at the Ed Love ranch circa 1937. ⁴³



The Poker Game, Pencil on Paper, 1937, Neely Family Collection

The Poker Game

Charcoal sketch by Tom Lea of Billy Tidwell, Jess Walbridge and Ed Love in the middle of poker game at Love's Ranch near Sierra Blanca. Lea was a muralist, illustrator, best-selling novelist, historian, World War II War correspondent, and studio painter. His work reflects the motivating ideas of the modern twentieth century. Additional information about this historical West Texas artist can be found at: www.tomlea.com

Like his father, his son Monroe Morris Walbridge was also to become a lawman when he was elected sheriff of Hudspeth County only to die of a heart attack on April 18, 1960 in his first term in office. Upon the death of Monroe, his wife Neven was appointed sheriff to serve out her husband's term in office. She didn't carry a gun, that was left up to the deputies.



Portrait of Jess Monroe Walbridge, Sierra Blanca, Texas. 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1954, Collection of Monroe and Patti Walbridge.

This wonderful painting was completed by Fred Darge at the request of Neven Walbridge after the death of her husband when Darge visited the Walbridge ranch in the summer of 1954. The portrait portion of the painting was taken from a family photograph. From observing this painting, one would never know this unassuming dignified looking gentleman was a true West Texas legend right out of the Old West.