

## Chapter 5

### **The Waddy T. Burnham, Sr. Chisos Ranch** Big Bend, Brewster County, Texas

Waddy Thompson Burnham, Sr., born October 21, 1844 in Fayette County, Texas, and wife Sarah Louise Hubbard Burnham, born July 19, 1849 in Tippah County, Mississippi married January 26, 1871, in Fayette County, Texas.<sup>1</sup> Waddy was named after the first minister of Mexico, Waddy Thompson.<sup>2</sup> It is believed Waddy Burnham worked as a stock rancher for a livelihood before moving to Brewster County in 1908 from Menard, Texas.<sup>3</sup> They purchased and homesteaded approximately 11,103 acres or 17.34 sections of land<sup>4</sup> that extended north from the Chisos Mountains to Paint Gap Hills, east to Grapevine Hills and west to Croton Springs.<sup>5</sup> The headquarters of the ranch was located 75 miles south of Marathon at Government Springs and Grapevine Hills Road within stone's throw of the Chisos Mountains Basin Junction in the present day Big Bend National Park. Waddy, Jr. said his father originally intended to stay only three years, but after three weeks, "they couldn't [have] run him off."<sup>6</sup>



Burnham Chisos Ranch Facing Chisos Mountains, 25" x 30", Circa Late 1930's Collection of Mrs. William Jesse "Bill" Burnham.

Marathon is the second largest town in Brewster County, which was an early shipping and supply point for area ranches because of the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway that arrived in approximately 1882. The GH&SA later merged into the Southern Pacific Railroad Company on November 1, 1961. The ranchers had to have the railroad to move their stock and bring in needed supplies. The railroad also served the mining operations at Boquillas down on the Rio Grande River. There were two types of ranches in the Big Bend: cows and goats/sheep.<sup>7</sup> The Burnham ranch always raised Hereford cattle because it was thought the hardy breed endured the harsher desert conditions better than other breeds.<sup>8</sup> One of the great unrecognized attributes of the Chisos Mountains that attracted ranchers was the abundance of water. There were, at that time, springs all the way around the base of the mountains that were fed from the basin and higher. Today they are gone.<sup>9</sup>

The Burnham ranch grazed most of the land surrounding Lost Mine Peak. It is the second highest peak in the Big Bend National Park listed at 7,550 ft. elevation. While out checking

cattle one day, Waddy, Jr. luckily happened to find a small bar of silver bullion beside an old trail thought to have been a Spanish pack-train route in Smugglers Gap west of the Lost Mine and Panther Peaks. Waddy, Jr. always the optimist, thought it was a pretty good day's pay for riding the range. The bar weighed a little more than 12 pounds and was slightly wedged-shape. It also looked as though it might have been molded in a crude clay matrix. Although the silver bullion bar was quite a unique find, Waddy, Jr. said, "I kept it as a relic". That is until his ranch house burned down in 1934 and the silver bar melted.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 1900's, a small smelter operated near the little Mexican village of Boquillas, across the Rio Grande River. The processed ore came from the old Boquillas mine about 5 miles southeast of Boquillas and contained lead and zinc; some of the lead contained a little silver. In all probability the silver bullion bar came from the Boquillas smelter and was lost in transportation during the long pack trip to Marathon where it would be shipped by train to its final destination which was normally San Antonio.<sup>11</sup>

Waddy T. Burnham, Sr. unfortunately died on July 24, 1911, at the Santa Rosa Infirmary in San Antonio, from what was thought to be cancer of the stomach, only three short years after acquiring their ranch. Sarah moved to Marathon to live with her two single daughters, Emma and Nannie after the death of her husband. She died on August 13, 1922 from complications of a cerebral hemorrhage. Both Waddy, Sr. and Sarah are buried in the Marathon Cemetery. The Burnham's were survived by their seven children, Jessie, Millie, Emma, Charlie, Nannie, Nena and Waddy, Jr. The operation of the ranch was placed in the hands of 27-year old Waddy, Jr.<sup>12</sup>

Waddy Thompson Burnham, Jr. was born November 5, 1883 in Menard, Texas. He married Dessie Ferol Hopkins who always went by her middle name of Ferol, born January 17, 1893 in Waelder, Gonzales County, Texas. Waddy, Jr. and Ferol lived in a simple frame home common in size for that time and location. Like their neighbors, they also had a garden, fruit trees and

an ample supply of needed water. Having a garden and fruit trees was a must have necessity of the times. In 1920, Ferol's parents, William and Jonna Petty Hopkins, moved to the ranch in order to help Waddy, Jr. and Ferol. The Burnham marriage produced two sons, Waddy III (Waddy T.), born circa 1919, and William Jesse (Bill), born October 27, 1923.

Like other ranchers, they were able to sustain themselves, but it was always difficult. Compounding their financial strains, it was necessary for the Burnham's



**Adobe House**, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1937, Possibly Pete Salas and Carlos Picasso, Courtesy of Bosque Crossing Gallery.

to maintain a second household in Marathon for their two boys to attend school, leaving Waddy to tend to the remote ranch with hired hands. In 1930, Ferol was living with their two sons and her father, William Hopkins, in Marathon, where she was teaching in the public school.



The Cattle Pen, Burnham Chisos Ranch, 24" x 30", Oil on Canvas, Circa late 1930's, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Ars 2006.

“The Burnham’s had two long time employees, Pete Salas and Charlie (Carlos) Picasso, Mexican nationals that worked and lived on the ranch for many years. They were considered to be both excellent workers and experienced vaqueros that knew what they were doing.”<sup>14</sup>

Having skilled ranch hands was a must for any ranch. Prior to the late 1930's, moving cattle to market entailed at least a seven-day trail drive to the railhead at Marathon, in order to ship their cattle to one of the major

processing plants. The return trip was a short couple of days ride back to the ranch. Ten days away from any working ranch is a long a time. <sup>15</sup> Life became easier when they could haul cattle to Marathon by truck. <sup>16</sup> Please note the load-ing ramp on left hand side of painting.

Ranching has always been a challenging life even when things went well, however, there are times when things didn't go well at all. Life was not easy even in the best of times, and those days weren't often. On one occasion, a cow with horns hooked out one of Waddy, Jr. eyes. It hung on his cheek as his family covered the injured eyeball and carried him to safety. They placed him in the bed of a buckboard and started for Marathon to seek medical help. After a ten-hour, 75-mile trip, bumping and lurching through gullies and arroyos, they arrived in town where Dr. Worthington skillfully replaced the eyeball back in its socket and saved his vision.

The next serious accident to beset Waddy, Jr. was just as bad. While riding in the mountains with his son Bill and niece, Florine Hopkins, Waddy Jr., wearing slick soled cowboy boots, slipped on some rocks in a creek as he helped Florine across and broke his femur. He told Florine to hold his head up from the creek so he wouldn't be under the water and could breath.

He next sent Bill back to the ranch headquarters to fetch the ranch hands and a buckboard to transport him to Marathon.

Once Bill and the ranch hands returned with the buckboard and pulled Waddy out of the creek, it was back into the wagon once again for the ten-hour, 75-mile trip to Marathon bumping and lurching through gullies and arroyos to see Dr. Worthington. One would certainly have had to have been tough if you wanted to keep up with Waddy Thompson Burnham, Jr., but then again, that was the life of ranching and living in the Big Bend. This man was simply not going to be kept down for long and he would be the first to tell you.<sup>17</sup>

The stories and happenings emanating from the Burnham ranch are just too interesting to leave anything out. Ginger Hopkins Hughes's father, William Kerr Hopkins, a nephew of Waddy, Jr. and Ferol, spent summers at the Burnham ranch along with his two sisters, Robbie and Florine, and brother Maurice. Mrs. Hopkins related this remarkable story told to her by her father of an event that occurred sometime between 1932 and 1936 about the scary visit from the two gunslingers.

“Maurice and I were alone at the ranch house that hot Texas summer afternoon. Uncle Waddy and Aunt Ferol had taken the wagon and gone to Marathon for mail and supplies on that old dirt washboard road and wouldn't be home till late the next day. We weren't expecting visitors, but weren't surprised when the two rough looking cowboys rode in. When they dismounted and came to the porch, we offered them water but they walked right past us into the house, sat down and demanded to be fed. We quickly filled their bowls with beans and biscuits, got them cups of water and kept our distance as best we could. I started to get mad at their rudeness especially when they got up to leave and never even tried to clean up their dishes, but Maurice warned me with a look that told me in no uncertain terms to keep my mouth shut. When they rode off, Maurice said he'd heard the cowhands talking about how two gunslingers had murdered a couple of men a half days ride away and that these guys fit the description. We were lucky that day that we were left in one piece and able to tell the tale”.

**The other story of equal interest that William (Bill) Hopkins related could be titled, “Time to Go.”**

“In fact, a little past time to head back to the ranch, Billy Hopkins thought as he stepped out of the adobe Boquillas cantina and swung his leg over the saddle on old Red. They followed the narrow dirt trail down to the shallow crossing of the Rio Grande. The moon was hiding behind the Sierra del Carmen Mountains but the stars overhead, those millions and billions of twinkling lights in the pitch-black night sky brought out the cowboy ballads. Billy sang to pass the time over the open trail from one rise after another bringing them ever closer to the ranch. Old Red didn't slow down or give a warning, she just stopped in midstride jolting Billy upright. And she wouldn't budge. No problem. Too much sotol to drink along with the good company anyway. Time to hit the bedroll, gaze up at the stars and dream. With dawn came a shock. As Billy stretched, yawned and opened his eyes, he

tuned to his side and saw open space where there should have been ground. He had camped out on the very edge of a steep canyon. One roll, one turn in his sleep, and he'd have been over the ledge lying hundreds of feet below in the rocky ravine. Good old Red. She nuzzled his shoulder, he patted her neck, swung his leg over the saddle and off they trotted to the ranch beneath the Chisos".<sup>18</sup>

**There were always rumors of the government wanting to turn the Chisos Mountains and Big Bend surrounding area into a state or national park. It became a reality when the Texas State legislature passed a bill in March of 1933 establishing Texas Canyons State Park in the Big Bend, later to be renamed Big Bend State Park. The legislature finally appropriated \$1.5 million to acquire 600,000 acres of land for the park in 1942. The State, with the expertise of Everett Townsend, credited as the father of the Big Bend Park, moved swiftly to appraise land values and arrange for the purchase of much of the private land needed to establish the park. In a ceremony handing the land deeds to the Department of the Interior in September of 1943, Townsend was the one individual singled out in recognition of his efforts to see his decades-old dream realized. The Big Bend National Park was officially established on June 12, 1944.**<sup>19</sup>

The State of Texas used their power of eminent domain to force the ranchers off their property. Some were happy for the offer to sell and others were not happy at all for many good reasons.

Waddy Burnham, Jr. was one of the ranchers who was very unhappy. According to son Bill, "he was offered \$6 an acre for the land in 1935 when things were not good, and then the State of Texas comes along in 1942/43 and tells him "they're gonna" take his land for \$3 an acre although he had offered to give them some land if they would leave the rest of it alone. Well, they didn't want that, they wanted it all and, ah, I can recall hearing the man from the state tell my dad "you will." "[My dad] said he wouldn't take \$3 an acre for it, no way, he was fighting. [The agent] said you can fight it and we'll just put you out, take you to the court and break you and then take your land, if that's the way you want it".<sup>20</sup> The Burnham Ranch was acquired by the State of Texas for the National Park Service under the threat of eminent domain at a cost \$44,412.00.<sup>21</sup>

The original Burnham home, built by Waddy, Sr. and wife Sarah burned to the ground at some time in 1934. Waddy, Jr. and wife Ferol built a larger stucco home with two fireplaces and a screened in porch. Most families slept outside the home in the summertime to avoid the heat. After their land was purchased for the National Park Service in 1944, the house was used by park service employees for social functions since it was an attractive home close to Panther Junction.<sup>22</sup>

Waddy, Jr. died at their home in Marathon, at age 64 on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1947. Wife Ferol died in Fort Stockton, in Pecos County at age 74 on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1967. Both are buried side by side in the Burnham family plot in the Marathon Cemetery. Ferol never forgave the State of Texas and National Park Service for forcing the Burnham's off their land and taking control of the

ranch and remained steadfastly bitter at both for the rest of her life.<sup>23</sup> Who could blame her? Building the Burnham ranch was Waddy, Jr. and Ferol's life-long work of heart, body and soul only to have taken away from this close-knit Burnham family for the benefit of others to enjoy.



William Jesse "Bill" Burnham and "Antelope", 32" X 26" Oil on Canvas Circa late 1930's, Collection of William J. Burnham, Jr.

Ferol had every right to be bitter, especially when park service employees used their former home for social gatherings and when there was a shortage of operating funds to maintain the facility, it was demolished.<sup>24</sup>

Many large ranching families have interesting stories. Nannie C. Burnham was one of those stories that had a large "WOW" factor. She was the fifth oldest child of Waddy, Sr. and Sarah, born October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1879, in Blanco County, Texas. "Miss Nannie" as she was called began her teaching career in Marathon at the age of 17 and lived in a hotel owned by her teacher friend Ella Hatch. She never married and remained single her entire life. Her teaching career lasted from 1908 to 1921. Most of her teaching career was at Marathon, but occasionally she would be assigned to San Vicente located at the base of the north side of the Chisos Mountains. She

invested part of her \$75.00 a month teaching salary in the Burnham Ranch and eventually gained controlling interest. She died February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1937, in Marathon and is buried in the Burnham family plot in Marathon.<sup>25</sup>

The Thursday, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1937, edition of the Dallas Morning News included a small single paragraph article titled: "Fred Darge Leaves for the Big Bend Country." It goes on to say, "Painter of the Southwest, has left Dallas for the Tom Burnham (Waddy Thompson Burnham, Jr). ranch in the Big Bend country. Mr. Darge plans to remain until fall, painting the scenes for which he has become known for in this region."

As a follow-up to the spring article, included in the Monday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1937, edition of the Dallas Morning News was a small single paragraph article titled: "Fred Darge Returns, Plans Exhibit". "Fred Darge, local painter of Texas subjects, has returned to Dallas for the winter after five months spent on the Tom Burnham [Waddy Thompson Burnham, Jr.] ranch, seventy-two miles south of Marathon, Texas. During the summer, Mr. Darge made many sketches of the Big Bend country and painted several portraits of pioneers of the cattle country, among them Sam Nail. There will be an exhibit of Darge's work at the Harry Lawrence Galleries".

These two newspaper articles give us a clearer understanding that when Darge went to the Big Bend ranches he did not stay at a single ranch the duration of the trip. He may have visited

the Burnham ranch initially, but then moved on over to maybe the Nail, Wilson and then Buttrill. Like everything else, he unfortunately failed to leave us a map and an excursion diary.

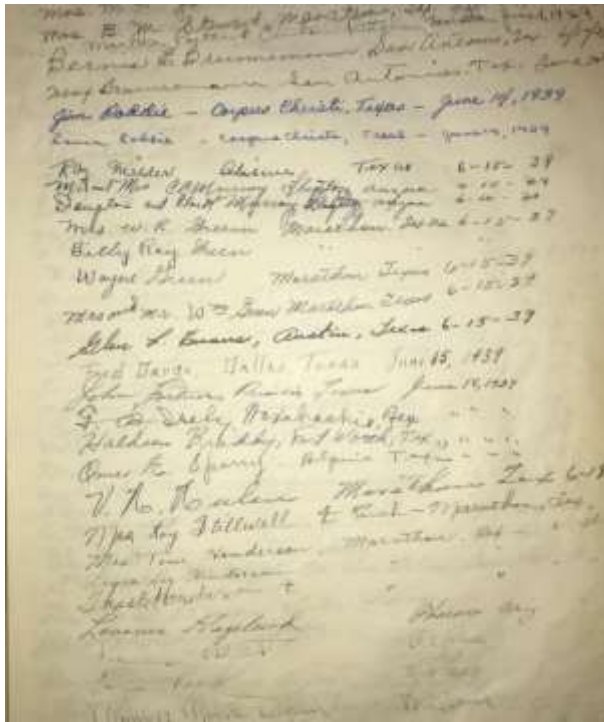
No writings about Darge and Big Bend ranches would be complete without retelling the very amusing story told by Patricia Wilson Clothier in her passionately written book, *“Beneath the Window”*. It is a richly detailed memoir of growing up on a 28,804-acre angora goat and sheep ranch prior to it being acquired by the State of Texas for the National Park Service.

*“When Fred came to paint, he stayed with us at Oak Creek, with the Nails below Burro Mesa, or with the Burnham’s below Green Gulch. Once, when the Burnham’s left their house for a time, Mr. Darge stayed at their home to paint. While Fred bunked there, mother’s sister and a friend from St. Louis stopped at the ranch house to ask directions to our place. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows from the mesquite and sotol on the hillsides. My aunt bounced up to the porch and asked, “Where is your bathroom?” “Oh, anywhere out there,” said Darge as he waved his arm in a careless manner toward the hillside of cactus and grasses”.*<sup>26</sup>

Darge’s social skills at that time were certainly not quite equal to his artistic skills, but it was hoped that better times were around the corner and would arrive soon. And they did.

The Burnham ranch may not exist today, but thanks to the extraordinary talents of Fred Darge, there are a number of great paintings of a bygone era with a remarkable legacy. What the infinite wisdom of the National Park Service removed from the ranch, Darge had recorded. Many important scenes of historical significance to the Burnham ranch were preserved for a grateful extended Burnham family, art collectors and the remarkable and interesting history of the Big Bend area.

The Burnham family does not have the ranch chuckwagon any more, but they have retained the chuck box as a family heirloom. There is also a guest book to bring back the memories and help relive the times of welcomed hospitality the Burnham family extended to visitors passing through the Big Bend area.



Drawing by Fred Darge for Burnham Family Guest Book

Note that Fred Darge signed guest book on June 15, 1939  
Carefully note how Darge shaped the letter "D"

Darge made a connection with the Burnham family that was to last a life time and has given the family many memories that exist to this day. Part of the fondness by the family, and others was his ability to encase their geographic surroundings with his gift as an artist. They were presented with lasting impressions of themselves and the big open country they loved and in which they were content and happy. The *something* that drew them together was the unrivaled Texas size beauty and grandeur of the Big Bend. It can be said it was a match made in heaven. When one got to the top of the Chisos mountains, they weren't all that far away.



Burnham Chisos Ranch Headquarters, Corrals and Working Pens, 12" X 16" Oil on Canvas Board Circa late 1930's, Courtesy of Dallas Fine Arts Auction 2012.



A Friendly Encounter, Burnham Chisos Ranch, 14" x 17", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa Late 1930's, Collection of Chris Deprez.





**Storm Clouds, Burnham Chisos Ranch**, Rider on horse is either Bill or Waddy, Jr. Burnham, 18" x 24", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa Late 1930's, Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Robert E. McKee, III.

There was just something about those high Chisos Mountains with their up-thrusting bare peaks that Darge liked to paint. The rain-filled clouds and the red rock peaks gave him the shadows and highlights that he excelled in painting. The horses standing still on their own shadows with sunlit mountain peaks further emphasizing the dramatic Big Bend panorama that drew Darge to the area. The three tall peaks at the bottom of the clouds are Pummel, Wright and Panther. In this painting, one of Darge's lasting artistic trademarks of his art had been cast.

**Darge developed highly skilled, early trademarks that art critics and collectors alike may subconsciously have missed: sunlit highlights, reflections and shadows. Darge believed there was no better way to enhance a painting than putting to good use the extraordinary gifts made available by mother nature.**

**Darge developed highly skilled, early trademarks that art critics and collectors alike may**

**The art of Fred Darge will always be in many ways a dynamic visual testament to the vastness and un-spoiled beauty of the Big Bend and the rest of the Trans-Pecos area of West Texas. Only those connected by personal interest can develop a great love of a land that yields art that records the soul of time and place.**



Waddy Burnham, Jr. and son Bill, Life Magazine 1943, Photograph by Alfred Eisenstaedt.

When Waddy and Ferol's son, Bill, was interviewed by Art Gomez in Fort Stockton on June 2, 1985, he was asked, "What were the memories that don't sit too well when you think back?" "Well, I can't think of anything that was really too hard during the period of time that I was there. I remember when we were moving out of that country though. It was real heartbreaking to have to leave." "The things that will always be special to me are the memories of having had the opportunity to be raised in that country. I love that country. I'd love to go back to that country and just wander around all over. I often think a lot of times, late in the afternoon, how I would like to be back sitting on the front porch of our ranch house down there in the late afternoon, the sun setting, and watching the colors change on the Sierra del Carmen Mountains in Mexico. The sunsets, there's nothing that beautiful anywhere else in the world to me. I was raised there, that was home. Not being able to go back and be there is still kind of heartbreaking".<sup>27</sup>



**Tack House, Burnham Chisos Ranch, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa Late 1930's, Collection of Jim and Sherry Carey.**

There is nothing that better displays the necessities used in the day to day operation of a working cattle ranch better than this skillfully executed painting, *Tack House, Burnham Ranch*, done in the late 1930's. It is a unique view of a real ranch room, expertly executed by an artist that painted the reality of the working ranchman.



**Range Gossip, Burnham Chisos Ranch, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa Late 1930's, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts.**

Note the jagged Chisos Mountain peaks in the far left background. The ranchhand attending to the right front hoof of one of the horses. The saddles and blankets hanging here and there along with the various bridles and other paraphernalia. See the various tools laying haphazard on the dirt floor. All used in a days work, portraying the real life of a cattleman.

The painting, *Range Gossip, Burnham Ranch*, features two cowmen who happen to cross each other's path 75 miles south of Marathon. There is no better way to get caught up on the latest happenings than to stop and chat for a few minutes before continuing on their way. The man in the wagon is likely bringing the lates news and supplies from town. Notice the high mountain peaks in the background and

The painting, *Range Gossip, Burnham Ranch*,

the shadows in the foreground. Darge masterfully painted the reality of what he wanted viewers to see.



**Corral, Burnham Chisos Ranch, Big Bend Texas, Man Standing in Corral** Thought to be Bill Burnham, 18"x 24", Oil on Masonite, Circa Late 1930's, Collection of The Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

*Burnham Ranch, Big Bend Texas*, is one of seven Darge paintings that were gifted to the Daughters of the Republic of Texas by noted Dallas physician, Dr. William E. Howard in 1943. It is believed the man in this painting is Bill Burnham. The use of horses for transporting goods and equipment was common. It appears Burnham may be getting ready to depart for a trip or is returning from a trip.

Darge, like all artists, needed models for his paintings. He repeatedly used Bill Burnham. He probably would have also liked to have used Waddy, Jr. who was always busy, but Bill seemed more available. During the frequent and long visits with the Burnham family at their ranch, Bill and Darge developed a close, long-lasting friendship.

Bill Burnham (born October 27, 1923) had grown up at the ranch. He and Darge both loved the land and the way of life. When the sale was finalized to the State of Texas and the Burnhams moved, Bill was in his early 20's. After earning a degree at Sul Ross State College (now Sul Ross University), Bill worked, married Elizabeth Irene Vickers on December 28, 1949 and earned a master's degree at Texas A&M University. Their son, William Jesse Burnham, Jr. was born February 13, 1951. Life had taken a different road than was expected but the friendship with the Burnham family, especially between Bill and Darge, endured through the years. Although the wonderful visits had become treasured memories, neither friend forgot the other.

In the summer of 1952 or 1953, Bill and Irene drove from San Antonio to Dallas and visited Darge. Irene recalls that he lived "out in the country" and that the "buildings were few and the roads were dirt." It is plausible that the house was on the edge of a post-war developing

Oak Cliff and could have been the house in Darge's painting, *Sabine Street*. (Refer to page #41 of Biography for picture of the painting, *Sabine Street*)

Bill and Irene had their son, Billy with them so Irene kept the baby entertained in the car while Bill and Darge sat on the front porch, reminiscing about their times together at the ranch they both loved. It was unusual that Darge was in Dallas at the time since he normally was gone during the summer months. The years and changes had altered Darge's routine, but he never forgot the sincere hospitality and friendship of the Burnham family for which he was always grateful.



Waddy, Jr. and Ferol in Their Wedding Clothes, Burnham Family Archive Photographs



**Waddy, Jr. and Ferol, Burnham Family Archive Photographs**



**Bill, Waddy, Jr., Ferol and Waddy T. Standing in Front of Tack House, Burnham Family Archive Photographs, [Refer back to Page 10 for painting](#). Circa Early 1930's**



**Waddy, Jr., Ferol, Waddy T. and Bill with Family Pets, Burnham Family Archive Photographs, Circa Late 1920's.**