

## From Station Camp & No Business: A trek across the dusty trail to Texas

'Terry Tales' By Lillard Terry

“In the autumn of 1878 a wagon train prepared to leave Scott County and embark on a long, bold journey toward the Western Territory of Oklahoma. This little group, assembled in the vicinity of Station Camp, was made up of an odd assortment. There were no magnificent prairie schooners with their billowing canvas tops. Most were farm wagons with crudely improvised covers to keep out the weather. A few were merely carts. Some of these wagons were pulled by work horses or mules, others were pulled by sturdy oxen. However ragtag this little caravan appeared, it nevertheless was made up of families well-seasoned to the austerity of hard times and rugged living. Many of this group had been born and raised in the wilderness country of No Business, Parch Corn, and Station Camp Creek. Their ancestors, merely a generation or so ago, had dared the untamed wilderness of the South Fork region and established homesteads there. These people were friends and neighbors and relatives. They had fought and struggled together during the hard times and, during prosperity, had shared their good fortunes. This group would stick together on the long pull to Oklahoma. They were the Burkes, Slavens, the Hatfields, the Blevins and others. Haden Burke, a leader of this mobile community, had arrived early and now sat observing, unbeknownst to her, the look of anxiety on the face of his wife, Nancy. He could read the apprehension in her expression and perhaps a little fear, but mainly there was sadness. Nancy loved these hills and valleys and was reluctant to leave. She had never lived anywhere else. She especially loved the big log house on No Business Creek which held so many memories, but nevertheless, she trusted her husband’s word that there was a beautiful land awaiting them in Oklahoma.

“Nancy was with child as the journey began, but she was a hearty woman and never doubted she could make the long trip. The qualities of indomitable courage and perseverance ran deep in her heritage. Her paternal grandfather, Alexander Grant Lewallen, had migrated to the new world from Wales after the Lewallen Clan had been ousted as rulers there. His fourth son and her father, John Lewallen, had been the first sheriff of Scott County. Her maternal grandfather, Isaac Reed, had been the first trustee of Scott County.

“As she took her seat beside her lanky husband and grasped his arm to steady herself when the creaky wagon began to move, she thought of her father John Lewallen whom she had not seen for some 10 years. He had migrated to Texas in 1868 and although she seldom heard from him, her sisters occasionally wrote about the splendid climate there and extolled the wonders of the frontier.

“Nancy’s mother remained in Tennessee. She had died here in 1865, some three years before her father migrated to Texas. “Haden Burke patted the hand of his wife and her sad expression changed to a warm smile – a smile characteristic of her that he had learned to value and find reassurance in over the years. He was subtly aware of the deep affection he had for this woman and during the weeks ahead on the austere journey, he thought of their years together, back to their first meeting.

“It is not clear why this little group from Scott County, TN and Wayne County, Kentucky left their homes on South Fork and commenced the exodus to the unsettled territory of Oklahoma. This territory had not yet been opened to settlers – it was Indian Territory, but this did not deter them. Some of these pioneers had Indian ancestry. Haden Burke’s mother was part Indian. In fact, Haden and his brothers had a higher percentage of Indian blood than did the famous Cherokee Chief, John Ross, who was one-eighth Indian.

“Perhaps the hard life on the river, made more harsh by a series of bad crop years goaded them to seek a more opportune environment, or perhaps they had fallen prey to the propaganda of land brokers who were encouraging the settlement of the frontier.

“Whatever the motive, it was a move that was to culminate in tragedy and regret for the Burke family.

“As the journey ended, they settled on Indian land along the Canadian River in what is now Pittsburgh County, Oklahoma. The winter in this raw country, while not as cold as the Tennessee winters, had its cutting edge. Building materials were not as plentiful as in Tennessee and their improvised housing was not nearly so tight and weather-proof as the old log house on No Business Creek.

“Supplies were short, and game was not nearly so plentiful as had been expected. The trip had been long and arduous and had sapped their strength. Nancy, heavy with child when they arrived, was not in good condition when the baby came February 14, 1879. As the cold prairie wind whined outside the cabin, their eighth child was born. They named him Harmon after Haden’s younger brother.

“The courageous woman who had borne seven other children without difficulty now was beset with complications. She was weak, fever set in and her condition steadily deteriorated. A mid-wife did all she knew to do, and the Indian medicine people came from a nearby reservation and offered their herbs and potions, but to no avail.

“The fever raged to delirium and Haden, helpless and despondent, sat beside her bed or paced the floor of the cabin. Once he held her hand and asked if there was anything he could get for her. Her piteous request would stay in his memory for many years to come. Delirious and her voice barely a whisper, she murmured, “I want to go home”.

“On February 20, 1879, Nancy Lewallen Burke passed away –eight days short of her thirty-fourth birthday.

“Haden Burke was a broken-hearted man. Without Nancy his dreams of a new beginning in Oklahoma were shattered and her plea, I want to go home, weighed heavily on his mind. He could no longer endure the loneliness of the land. At least he could take the children home.

“During the first week of March 1879, when the baby was three weeks old, Haden and the Burke’s children loaded their wagon, hitched up the same old team of oxen, and commenced the long trip back to the big log house near the South Fork River.

“In the years that followed he devoted himself to the task of raising the children and became affectionately referred to as “Daddy Haden”.

“The children had grown up and were on their own. The century had turned. It was the fall of 1902, Haden Burke, his hands calloused and leathery from toil, sat on the old porch stoop and watching the sinking sun disappear behind the craggy distant hills, permitted thoughts to wonder back through the years. The memories, though by now like familiar friends, seemed to well with more vehemence as each day passed.

“Out beyond the big sturdy log house, fields of crops, laid by for the coming harvest, wavered ever so slightly under the autumn breeze. But the old man’s thoughts were on things less material in an era long past. His thoughts again caressed the image of a pretty dark-haired girl he had so sorrowfully left in Oklahoma territory a quarter century before an obsession to return there was growing within him with each passing day. His visions more frequently carried him backward in time. He knew in his heart what he must do.

“When the crops were in, Haden Burke boarded the train at the Oneida Depot to once again make the journey to Oklahoma. Some of his children, though reluctant to see him go, were there to see him off. He was 75 years of age.

“In March of 1903, Haden Burke died in McAlester, Oklahoma near where his wife had died nearly a quarter century before. He was buried in the McAlester Cemetery.

“The site where Nancy Lewallen Burke was buried is under the waters of Lake Eufaula. Before Lake Eufaula was built these graves were moved to the Canadian Masonic Cemetery near McAlester, Oklahoma.”