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# GONE TO (SOUTH) TEXAS

by Janet McCannon Simonds



The lore of the nineteenth century Texas frontier includes many stories of pioneers leaving their homes in the North to seek new homes in Texas, and of their difficult journeys and more difficult lives after arrival. Regardless of the motivation, it took great courage to leave the known—families, friends, homes, businesses, and their very ways of life—for the unknown, which was often full of discomfort and privation. This pioneer spirit and courage, however, did not stop at the end of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, vast areas of Texas were yet unsettled, and there were still people in the northern United States with the same courage, adventurous spirit, and desire to make a new start that characterized their predecessors. The Rio Grande Valley of Texas was one of those last twentieth-century frontiers, and a destination of many such pioneers.

The area of South Texas between the Rio Grande and Nueces Rivers was for many years after the Texas Revolution a contested area called the Nueces Strip, maintaining a virtual dual nationality even after the 1836 Texas Revolution when Mexican President Santa Anna was forced to cede all area north of the Rio Grande. In the 1840s, ranchers in Matamoros, Mexico, grazed their cattle in the area north of the river, near present-day Brownsville, and Mexican outlaws raided ranches in the area, driving the stolen cattle across the river to Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Three years after Texas' annexation to the United States, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, following the Mexican War, again declared the Rio Grande River as the official boundary between Texas and Mexico, but little or nothing changed on the ground. The Nueces Strip remained an area of contention and banditry well into the twentieth century.

In the southern-most tip of this untamed strip, the fertile delta area of the Rio Grande River, lies the area known as the Rio

Grande Valley, which includes the present-day counties of Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy, and Starr. Although the Texas Rangers, under the leadership of Captain Leander McNelly, had cleared out most of the large bandit gangs in the 1870s, the Rangers, and even the Army, were still frequently called in after the turn of the century to suppress banditry in the area. Albert Hughes, who came from Indiana to the Valley with his family in 1915, at the age of thirteen, told of his experience in a 1960s interview:

We made the trip by train. After leaving Kingsville, the lights within the train were turned out and armed guards sat at the windows. We realized the full meaning of that precaution when we reached Lyford about ten o'clock that night and found two companies of the 26th Infantry camped in our hotel yard and two bandits chained to a mesquite tree. We spent the night in the hotel and went on to the ranch the next day; an armed guard rode on the wagon carrying our luggage.<sup>2</sup>

He went on to tell of a neighbor being killed from ambush by bandits. After the family fled, the bandits burned their house. The area would remain a wild and dangerous place until economic growth in the nation began to effect changes in the 1920s and '30s.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the United States was rapidly becoming urbanized. This, coupled with the advent of World War I, brought an increased demand and rising prices for agricultural products. Although the Valley had been used primarily for cattle ranching through the turn of the twentieth century, the great cattle drives were over, and beef prices were down. Mild winters, rich soil, and available irrigation water from the Rio Grande made the Valley an ideal farming area. By 1908, the citrus fruit industry had been launched in the Valley, and by 1929 there were an estimated five million citrus trees in the Valley, plus numerous commercial farms producing vegetables.<sup>3</sup> Banks and land developers in the northern United States began to see the Valley area as a

potential land bonanza, and they started to buy up land and promote it in the North. They cleared the land of the scrubby mesquite and cactus, laid out town sites, and marked off farming tracts. One of the major land developers, W.A. Harding, bought 53,000 acres of Valley land in the 1920s. J.E. Wilkins, who was contracted to clear the land, recalled in a 1960s interview that he hired a total of 10,000 men, with a payroll of \$75,000 every two weeks, and finished the clearing in two years and one month. (Every pay day he had two foremen with sawed-off shotguns and a sheriff and a Ranger with Winchesters to guard the payroll.)<sup>4</sup>

The developers ran special excursion trains to bring potential buyers to the area. "Land parties" of potential buyers were treated to (usually) three days of luxurious accommodations in "Club Houses," where they were entertained and served exotic meals with fish and shrimp from the Gulf of Mexico. They were driven in groups in large touring cars to see the property. The developers worked hard at making the property attractive. They began building canals to move river water to the farms. They built roads and lined them with palm trees from Mexico. The Harding and Gill Land Company even showed some 40-acre blocks already cleared and planted in citrus trees.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1920s, as many as 200 land-seekers a day were being brought into the Brownsville area.<sup>6</sup> However, the Valley was mostly still untamed, raw land. E. G. Pinkston, at one time a Field Superintendent for the Harding and Gill Land Company, told of the area where he lived and worked:

Monte Alto had only about 25 acres cleared when I came here in 1928. No roads were paved or even graded. It was a busy place during working hours with about 250 laborers at work; but after working hours, it was a very lonely place to live. No entertainment was available, and most of the laborers had no means of transportation. When it rained, the roads were totally impassable because all had lagoons at one place or another. When these lagoons were full of water, not even a tractor could

get through. The brush was full of deer, *javelina* and rattlesnakes. Those snakes were large and abundant. In the summer time, employees often killed 50 to 75 rattlesnakes a day in the normal operation of their jobs.<sup>7</sup>

The Valley was in need of adventurous, hard-working families—pioneers—to turn it into the paradise the developers envisioned, the “Magic Valley” that it came to be called in the second half of the twentieth century.

The George T. McCannon family, from Ames, Iowa, and the Ernest P. Mollenauer family, from Canonsburg, Pennsylvania—my grandparents—were two of the brave pioneer families that helped settle this semi-tropical new frontier of Texas. Here are the stories of their pioneering experiences.

#### THE MCCANNONS

George T. McCannon (1867–1949) was a third-generation American whose great-grandfather came to America from Ireland in the 1790s. In 1910, George T. sold his 200-acre farm near Numa, Iowa, and moved his wife Alice and four children to Ames, so the older two children could go to college there. In 1911, a fifth child, George Elmer (my father) was born and, for a while anyway, enjoyed all the attention of his four older siblings. Soon, however, the siblings finished college, married, joined the Army, or otherwise had gone their separate ways. In 1920, when “Elmer” was nine, George T., attracted by bank and land company advertisements and encouraged by his father Daniel Sylvester McCannon, who had relocated to Katy (near Houston) in 1912, decided to look into the land deals being offered in the Rio Grande Valley.

George T., Alice, and Elmer traveled by train to Houston, where they visited with Daniel Sylvester and his second wife, and then took the “Excursion Train” to Harlingen, in the Rio Grande Valley. There they were met by representatives of the land developers and were put up in a large hotel/boarding house in Harlingen,

while they looked at various parcels of land. George T. bought forty acres of land south and west of the little village called Santa Maria in Cameron County, only about a mile-and-a-half from the Rio Grande River. After returning to Iowa to sell their property there, they came back to the Valley and began the task of clearing the land and preparing it for farming.

Although the Valley lies in the river delta and the soil is rich, good farm land, the area is hot, and at that time was shaded only by twisty, thorny mesquite brush, and littered with prickly pear and other cacti. Several of the families who had bought land got together and helped one another clear the land and build houses and barns. The women and children lived in a boarding house in town. The men camped out in tents on the land, where George T. said they ate mostly boiled pinto beans and Mexican tortillas, both of which could be easily cooked over a camp fire. They got regular, home-cooked meals only when they came into town on Saturday



George T., Elmer, and Alice Jane at home near Santa Maria, 1923

afternoons for the weekends. Building supplies and bulk food-stuffs, stored in great warehouses, were available in Harlingen. Staple foods like flour, beans, coffee, and bacon could be obtained from a small proprietary store in the area.

The McCannon farm took shape and maintained the family well in the following years. There was a small house and a barn and garage. George T., in his late 50s now, farmed the land—on a much smaller scale than the original farm near Numa. He kept a few cattle for meat and milk, plus pigs and chickens. On the acreage, George T. and Alice had a kitchen garden, and grew corn and cotton as cash crops. New friendships were established, and family visited from Iowa and California. Visitors were always taken to the special places—Mexico, the piers at Port Isabel, or the pretty beaches at Boca Chica, near the mouth of the river. (There was no bridge to Padre Island at this time; it was inhabited mainly by birds and sand crabs.)

The Anglo residents in and near Santa Maria established a small English-speaking community school which Elmer attended. He



**George T., Alice, two visiting daughters, and neighbors pick up supplies at the warehouse, 1923**



**Elmer with his sister Myrtle visiting from California, 1923**

rode his horse in the chaparral with his Anglo and Mexican friends, and learned to speak Spanish like a Mexican. The Depression of the '30s had little effect on the McCannons; their small farm sustained them. However, after high school, with jobs hard to find, Elmer (now called "Mac" by his friends) enlisted in the Civil Conservation Corps in 1933, at Fort Brown in Brownsville, Texas. He was assigned to the "Tree Army," where he worked with crews cutting fire lanes in the forests near San Augustine and Center, Texas. Mac and his friends hitched rides into Nacogdoches for a little recreation on their time off. After his discharge in 1934, he worked for a time in San Antonio, and returned to the Valley in 1936. There, in 1938, he met and married another child of a Valley pioneer family, Mary Louise Mollenauer.<sup>8</sup>

## THE MOLLENAUERS

Ernest P. Mollenauer (1878–1958), the third child of a first generation German-American father and a German immigrant mother, was born in Pennsylvania. His mother did not speak English, and she required the children to speak German at home until they were sixteen years old. After finishing high school and working at various jobs, Ernest P. went to Pittsburgh and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in January 1902. That September he sailed to Panama, where he was sent ashore at Colon to guard a railroad. In January 1903, he was sent to the Philippines as part of the occupation army. He attained the rank of sergeant before he was discharged from the Marine Corps in January 1906, and returned to Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> After the war, he joined his brothers in a company they called The Mollenauer Brothers, laying oil pipelines all over the eastern part of the United States. While laying pipelines in West Virginia, he met and married Julia Parthenia Ellis in Milton, West Virginia, in 1908. They returned to Pennsylvania, where they established their home on a mortgaged 112-acre farm six miles south of Canonsburg. There they reared eight children. They worked hard on the farm, selling their produce, milk, and eggs in the local community.

Mary (my mother) was the seventh of the eight Mollenauer children. She and the other children were required to work long hours doing chores on the farm, but had a barrel of fun as well. At family gatherings in later years, Mary and her siblings would tell the many (by now, iconic) family stories of life on the farm in Pennsylvania. Among the tales of how hard they had to work digging potatoes and such, they told of swiping the best peaches or strawberries (which their dad would have sold) and sneaking cream from the spring house to dip them in. They told of walking to school in snow so deep the smaller children had to walk behind the bigger children who “plowed” a path for them, and rolling snowballs down the hill—the ever-growing snowball hitting the neighbor’s rail fence at the bottom so hard that the rails went flying into the air. They told how the girls avoided their mother’s wrath by

raising their skirts and sliding down the snowy slopes on their underpants on the way home from school (so they didn't ruin their skirts). And they told how their father always knew when they had been swimming in the horse trough, because the horses would rear and refuse to drink the water. The horses got especially skittish after the kids had blown up toads with oat straws and floated them in the trough, an incident which earned the irrepressible kids one of many "skinnings" they received.

In 1927, Ernest P., suffering from "catarrh" (recurring bronchial problems probably left over from malaria contracted in the Philippines), needed a change of climate. Responding to an advertising campaign by one of the banks, he and Julia and the baby, Dorothy, took the "land excursion train" trip to Texas' Rio Grande Valley to see what it might offer. They paid a nominal fee for the trip, and were treated to luxury accommodations, including exotic foods from the Gulf of Mexico. Julia said they were served shrimp, but she didn't like those "little balls of lard." They bought forty acres six miles east of Edinburg, near the San Carlos community in Hidalgo County, and returned to Pennsylvania to prepare for the move.

The following year, Ernest P. returned to the Valley and partially cleared the land for the house and the citrus orchard. Then, in August of 1929, according to family lore, Ernest P. and Julia sold the farm, auctioned off most of their earthly possessions—save a bed, a dresser, and some kitchen and farm implements—and packed up the family and went to Texas. The youngest child, Dorothy, was three years old; the oldest, Scott, was nineteen when the family set off on the ten-day trip to the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Scott and Paul (who was seventeen) took turns driving the Model-T Ford touring car carrying the children. Ernest P. drove the Model-T truck piled high with bed, dresser, family clothes, and farm implements. Julia and the baby rode with Ernest P. On the long trip from Pennsylvania, the car trailed the truck. They traveled west through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

On the fourth day, in St. Louis, the touring car got a flat tire. Paul had to pull off on the side of the road to fix the flat, and

Ernest P., in the truck, went on ahead, not realizing that the car had stopped. When the younger children saw their parents drive out of sight, they began to cry and worry that they had lost their mommy and daddy. Paul divided his time between fixing the flat and trying to calm the children down. “Shut Up!” didn’t work too well. By the time Ernest P. reached the bridge at the Mississippi River, he realized that the car was not following, and pulled off to the side and stopped. The bridge attendant told him he could not stop there; he must go on across the bridge. Ernest P. told him that a car carrying his children had not yet caught up, and he would stay right there until they arrived. After a while, the car did arrive, and the children were happy to see their parents, and the two Model-Ts crossed the Mississippi River together. They spent the next day resting in Joplin, Missouri, with Ernest P.’s older brother Fred, and were in Texas the following day. After five more days, and about 600 miles of hard, hot driving, they arrived at their property in the Valley.



**The Mollenauer family’s tent in the mesquite and scrub of the new farm, 1928**

This time, there was no welcoming representative or hotel or boarding house for the family to stay in when they arrived. Until they could build their own shelter, there would be only brushy land and bare dirt. They set up two tents, a 14'×15' Marine hospital tent, and a small 9'×9' A-wall tent, which were to be their home for the next three months. There was one bed—for Mom and Dad. Mattress tickings were stuffed with corn shucks for the kids to sleep on. The older girls, ages fourteen and fifteen, hated this new life. The younger children found it a great adventure—young Ernest's hatchet was handy for chopping up the ever-present water moccasins and rattlesnakes. All suffered from the heat and sand sores and fleas. The family kept a cow and chickens and a horse to pull the great wooden farm wagon. The children attended the county school in Edinburg, catching the bus at five o'clock in the morning and getting home late in the afternoon.

Ernest P. and the boys built a barn and animal pens, and what was ostensibly to be a garage for the farm equipment but would serve as a temporary house, just until a real house could be built. Instead of the big two-story house they had in Pennsylvania—the house with the big kitchen (with the cold cellar where they stored food, and the big dry attic where they dried and threshed white navy beans), the house with a parlor (where they put up the Christmas tree every year), the house with four bedrooms upstairs and one downstairs—the family now had a garage to live in. In this long, low building, a 10'×20' room served as kitchen plus dining/living area in one end. A larger adjacent area served as a bedroom for all eight children, with a curtained-off area on the end for Julia and Ernest P. However, they had plans for a better house. They cleared a long lane leading up to the site where the house would be built, and planted ebony trees on each side. (The lane would be used, but the house was never built. When Ernest P. died in 1958, he and Julia were still living in the “garage.”)<sup>10</sup>

Ernest P. was a citrus grower. He planted seeds to grow the root stock and grafted on the hybrid grapefruit and orange buds,



**A Mollenauer family portrait one year after moving to the Valley, 1929**

obtained from other citrus growers, to start his orchard. (The hybrid sweet-tasting oranges and grapefruit we now eat have to be grown on more vigorous root stock.) He planted grapefruit and orange trees for the commercial market and a few lemon and tangerine trees just for the family. Since it would take six years for the trees to bear a good crop, vegetables were grown between the tree rows for income. Working with the Texas Citrus Growers Association, he built concrete canals on two sides of the property to carry irrigation water pumped up through a system of canals from the Rio Grande River. Smudge pots, small ball-shaped oil burners,

were placed in the orchards on those unusual nights when temperatures dropped too low, to keep the trees and fruit from freezing. Though there were occasional ruinous freezes, the citrus orchard would thrive in the Valley's rich soil and mild climate, and until the years of the Depression in the '30s, there was a ready market for the fruit.

The Depression was not devastating to the Mollenauers, but it took a toll on the family's resources. Citrus fruit was a luxury the rest of the country could little afford. With the years of reduced income from the orchard, many of Ernest P.'s dreams would never be realized. But the family was strong, and the Mollenauer children had learned to be hard-working and confident in their own abilities. They would grow up to embrace their new home state, and would achieve their own successes in Texas and elsewhere. Three boys would serve in the armed services in WWII, and two children would earn degrees from Pan American College, in Edinburg. Mary Mollenauer had finished two years of college when she met George Elmer (Mac) McCannon. (The story goes that she was dating Mac and a sailor at the same time, until on one visit Mac told her that if the sailor was there the next time he came, he would not be coming back. She got rid of the sailor.) Mary and Mac married on June 2, 1938, joining the two Texas pioneer families for all time.

Mac worked as a mechanic for several employers until 1953, when he opened his own repair garage and moved the family to Monte Alto, where Mary and Mac lived for the rest of their lives. After raising their three children, Mary finished her college degree and taught English in Valley high schools until she retired in 1985. George, Raymond, and I—Mary and Mac's first-generation Texan children—grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. As we were growing up in the '40s and '50s, we saw no indication that our pioneer grandparents had any regrets about their move to the Valley. Though they had had some hard times, those hard times were always followed by better ones. After WWII, their fortunes revived

along with the rest of the country; after all, they had the pioneer attitude of courage, hard work, and a strong belief that they could do what they set out to do.

We learned those traits too, and made our own memories in the security and love of our extended family. We fed the chickens and gathered the eggs for Grandma; we climbed up the cow stall onto the barn roof to pick buckets full of mulberries, and we played house or Cowboys and Indians under Grandpa's grapefruit trees. We heard many times the stories of our two families' pioneering days and took pride and delight in our heritage. We also—much like the early settlers of the eastern United States—had early lessons in eclectic cultures and tolerance, for we lived among a multitude of immigrants. The population of the four-county area of the Rio Grande Valley had grown rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century. Because of its proximity to Mexico, many immigrants came from there; many others were families who had migrated to the Valley from diverse parts of the United States. Many of these families, like ours, had traveled to the Valley—as pioneers—early in the twentieth century, while the area was still covered with mesquite and cactus.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Handbook of Texas Online*. s.v. "Cameron County." <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hcc4.html> (accessed December 5, 2006).
2. Mary R. Pharis. "The History of Monte Alto." A paper prepared for an American History class at Pan American College. Edinburg, Texas. 1969. 1.
3. *Handbook of Texas Online*. s.v. "Agriculture." <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/ama1.html> (accessed December 5, 2006).
4. Pharis. 2–3.
5. Pharis. 6.
6. *Handbook of Texas Online*. s.v. "Cameron County." <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hcc4.html> (accessed December 5, 2006).

7. Pharis. 6.
8. Dates and details for the McCannon family were taken from documents, photos, newspaper clippings, genealogical records, and interviews with George Elmer McCannon in the 1980s and 1990s.
9. From the Journal of E. P. Mollenauer, written between January 31, 1902, and February 10, 1906, while he was in the U.S. Marine Corps.
10. Dates and details for the Mollenauer family were taken from documents, photos, genealogical records, and personal reminiscences written by Edna Mollenauer Coleman (fourth child) and Ina Mollenauer Pollard (sixth child) in the 1980s and early 1990s.



**William Riley Marchman and Fannie Franks Marchman on their front porch, Grand Saline, Texas**