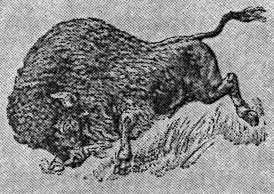
THE REAL *WILD WEST*

THE 101 RANCH AND THE CREATION OF THE AMERICAN WEST



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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

Chapter 9

TRAILS SOUTH

When I die, I may not go to heaven.
I don't know if they let cowboys in.
If they don't, just let me go to Texas.
Texas is as close as I've been.[1]
—Country and western song

COLONEL George Washington Miller was six days away from his twenty-ninth birthday on the morning of February 16, 1871, when he started on his first overland trip to Texas cow country. He did not go alone.

Perry Britton, the twenty-one-year-old former slave, drove a camp wagon full to bursting with food staples, a water barrel, utensils, tools, bedding, medicines, and a little grain for draft animals. Also accompanying Miller were his brother-in-law, George W. Carson; George Van Hook, a Kentuckian who had followed the Millers to Newtonia from Crab Orchard; and hired hands Frank Kellogg, Luke Hatcher, and James D. Rainwater, a native of the hilly country near Fayetteville, Arkansas.[2] Like his boss, Rainwater was going to have a birthday during the long Texas journey. The slim boy, who rode a trained pony as well as any grown man, soon would turn fifteen.[3]

Rainwater typified the very young men and boys who went on cattle drives. As John Rolfe Burroughs explained in *Where the Old West Stayed Young*, "Few operators could afford to pay the twenty-five or thirty dollars a month which was the going wage for a grown man. Consequently a large number of the herders employed on the long cattle drives were boys twelve to fifteen years of age, who could be hired for as little as five dollars a month and found. It was this circumstance that added the common noun *cowboy* to our vocabulary."[4]

Rainwater kept a diary in 1871 in which he described many of the

things that happened to the Miller party on its first Texas trek. Prior to November 1933, when he died in Saint Louis at age seventy-seven, Rainwater corresponded with Miller family members and shared with them his account of those days so long before.[5]

Miller also enlisted, in addition to his small band of horsemen, hearty teamsters to man ten large wagons loaded with twenty thousand pounds of cured hog meat to swap for lively longhorn steers when the party reached Texas.[6]

The going was predictably slow. That first day out, the Miller party arrived only at Rocky Point, on the southern boundary of Newton County, in time to have noon dinner. At nightfall, they camped at Keysville, near the Arkansas border, still 120 miles north of Fort Smith. At first light, everyone was saddled up and the wagons were rolling southward into Arkansas. The trip that afternoon took the Miller bunch along Sugar Creek and the site of a Confederate defeat at the Pea Ridge battleground.[7] There the riders spied trees still standing that had been shattered by cannon fire on March 7–8, 1862, during the Battle of Pea Ridge, also known as Elkhorn Tavern, one of the few major Civil War engagements west of the Mississippi.[8]

As they rode beneath broken limbs, Rainwater later noted in his journal, Colonel Miller doffed his hat. Perhaps G.W. thought of the damaged trees as mute remembrances of the thousands of men, especially those in gray, who had fought and died in two days of fierce combat on that scarred plateau in the northwestern corner of Arkansas.

The caravan proceeded south. The riders forded uncounted streams and creeks, camped at Nubbin Ridge, and by their first Sabbath on the trail, reached Rainwater's hometown, Fayetteville. Formerly a stop on the old Butterfield Overland Stage Route, it would become the home of the University of Arkansas, which opened the following year as Arkansas Industrial University.[9] Miller made sure his drovers enjoyed a hearty Sunday meal just south of town before they pressed on. That afternoon, they forded the west branch of the White River at least a dozen times before they collapsed for a night's rest on the river's banks in the shadow of the Boston Mountains.[10]

The next day, the caravan took until high noon to climb the steep mountains and reach the summit, prompting Rainwater to observe, "The world sure looks big when you are on top of a mountain."[11] The journey down the mountain went much faster, but Rainwater pointed out that they still had to splash across Lee's Creek sixteen times before the party reached the outskirts of Van Buren, on the north bank of the Arkansas River. "We

heard frogs holler," wrote Rainwater while he doctored saddle sores by the evening fire.[12]

On February 20, four days after their departure, the mounted Miller escorts and the procession of ten wagons bearing heaps of smoked meat ferried the broad Arkansas River near its junction with the Poteau River and entered the town of Fort Smith, on the Arkansas side of the border with Indian Territory.[13] Once a small military outpost established to keep peace between the Osages and Cherokees, Fort Smith had grown into a supply terminal and departure point for travelers headed west.

For several years after the Civil War, Fort Smith continued to play an important role in commerce and as a military post for troops patrolling the countryside in search of guerrilla bands and helping to relocate refugees displaced by the war. But in early 1871, just about the time Colonel Miller and his party arrived, the townspeople learned that one of their major sources of income—the United States Army—had plans to depart.[14] The government decided that the military post had outlived its usefulness. The frontier was moving farther west, and the post no longer could function as an efficient provisions depot.

By July 1871, most of the garrison troops were due to evacuate, leaving only a small detachment to guard the government buildings until the United States marshal took charge of the old post that autumn.[15] The marshal was necessary because great numbers of lawless individuals and outlaw bands swarmed the town and countryside, especially in Indian Territory. Because of treaty rights, fugitives from justice could operate and live there outside the reach of the law.

"Into this sanctuary [Indian Territory] came horse thieves, bandits, murderers, gunfighters, gamblers, renegades, prostitutes, hoodlums, rustlers, and desperadoes of every description," William J. Butler wrote in *Fort Smith, Past and Present.* "They used Indian Territory as their home base for raiding banks, trains, and stage coaches throughout the immediate areas and all the surrounding states.

"Indian tribal law officers and a few United States deputy marshals did their best to maintain order but it was simply too great an undertaking for them to handle. The criminal population of the territory continued to increase, and murder, rape and robbery became everyday events."[16]

Terrified by this wave of crime, tribal leaders and white settlers alike from throughout Indian Territory and Fort Smith beseeched the federal government to rescue them from the robbers, rapists, and cold-blooded killers in their midst. Just a few weeks after Colonel Miller left Fort Smith

on his Texas journey, Congress responded to the pleas by transferring a federal district court to Fort Smith with jurisdiction over Indian Territory.[17] It was not until 1875, however, that law-abiding folks got any substantial relief. That was when ardent Republican jurist Isaac Charles Parker, known as the "hanging judge," came to town to administer swift justice, in his courtroom and at the gallows, where a sign read, "The Gates of Hell."[18]

Judge Parker, along with his dour Bavarian hangman, George Maledon, and two hundred deputies sometimes called "the men who rode for Parker," had not yet arrived in Fort Smith that winter morning when Miller and his dauntless bunch crossed into the unknown. Despite the area's reputation, Colonel Miller, never cowardly, could not be discouraged from reaching Texas cow country. He ordered the procession of wagons and men to move forward. Leaving Arkansas, they forded the Poteau River, Indian Territory's only north-flowing major stream, and stopped alongside a tributary creek so Perry Britton could cook a hot supper and they could spend the night.[19] Colonel Miller broke out a jug of spirits that evening, perhaps to celebrate their safe passage. In his diary entry for the day, Rainwater wrote about Miller passing the bottle around the fire, the young drover's only mention of the consumption of strong drink on the trip to Texas. Even fourteen-year-old Rainwater got a sip of the potent beverage. The drink was not to his liking and he quickly spit it out, for which the other riders heckled him for the remainder of the trip.[20]

If the lack of journal entries is any indication, Colonel Miller's party must have had a run of good luck. Rainwater had little comment about the trip through Indian Territory, a route that took them between the Sans Bois and Jack Fork Mountains. They generally followed the east-west California Road to a point called Cross Roads on the heavily traveled Texas Road. In 1870, James J. McAlester, a white Confederate veteran from Arkansas with a Chickasaw wife, had opened a tent store there.[21] From this settlement, which eventually was named McAlester, the Miller party proceeded at a southward angle through the Choctaw Nation down the Texas Road—a historic path used for many years by white explorers, hunters, trappers, traders, military detachments, emigrants to Texas, and cattlemen.[22]

The wagons and riders passed near Kiowa Hill, east of the Pine Mountains; Stringtown, a stage stop on the old Butterfield Overland Route that sliced across Indian Territory; and Atoka, a trade center founded only a few years before and named for a Choctaw subchief.[23] They stopped briefly at Boggy Depot, located at the junction of the Texas Road and the But-

COWBOYS

STARTING WITH HIS first trip to Texas, Colonel George Miller spent his life in the company of cattlemen, bronco busters, and drovers. He quickly became associated with certain of the so-called cattle barons and prominent ranchers of the time, including the Harkey family and others from San Saba County, the renowned Abel Head "Shanghai" Pierce, and Lee Kokernut, a noted Texan who became Miller's first ranching partner.

Literally thousands of cowboys eventually would draw wages from Colonel Miller or would ride and rope for his sons on the sprawling 101 Ranch. But it was the cowhands from those early years—the men and boys of the rugged cattle trails and feisty cow towns—who served as models for all future 101 cowboys and cowgirls. The later cowboys and cowgirls were often men and women who never branded a calf or slept a single night wrapped in a bedroll under the stars, but instead worked as flashy entertainers for the Millers' Wild West show or became motion-picture heroes and heroines. Their lives were far different from those of the men who inspired the name "cowboy" many years earlier.

Some historians claim the word *cow-boy* first was used in medieval Ireland to describe boys who tended cattle, but others say the name was bantered about in colonial America, when youngsters such as Daniel Boone herded cows.[1] Even so, only after the Civil War did the term *cowboy* come into common use.[2]

The heyday of genuine cowboys was brief, starting in 1865, when Texans returned home after serving the Confederacy, poor in cash but rich in rangelands teeming with ubiquitous longhorns. Prior to the war, those who had trailed cattle across the country usually were known as drovers. In the late 1860s, Texas ranchers used the term *cowboy* more and more as they gathered tens of thousands of unbranded wild longhorns during roundups at first called "cowhunts."[3] To herd cattle up the trails to northern railheads and markets, ranchers hired youngsters whom, by about 1870, they generally referred to as cowboys.

Some, like Jim Rainwater, were only twelve to sixteen years old. Some of them were hardly big enough to climb into a saddle, let alone combat

stalked red-handed, and the Indians took full toll of human life, combating the frontiersman's rights to home and land."[4]

The settlers of San Saba sent sons and grandsons, brothers and uncles off to fight with Sam Houston for Texan independence in the Mexican War of 1846 and to ride as Rebel cavalrymen in the War against Yankee Aggression. They hacked out homes for themselves in the thickets along streams and rivers and throughout the valley of the San Saba, where there was plenty of sweet water and tall grass. They "lived in the unprotected frontier, with no shelter but the crude log cabins where winds whistled, Indians yelled, and wolves howled and mobs roared," as settlers later recalled.[5]

Many of the settlers joined companies of Texas Rangers to guard homes and livestock from marauding Comanches and cattle thieves and to break up feuds. Temporarily disbanded during Reconstruction, the Rangers reached the peak of their power between 1874 and 1880, when lawlessness became rampant and the last of the Indian raids occurred in the San Saba country.

Local cattlemen warned Colonel Miller shortly after he arrived that the much-feared Comanches lived just west of San Saba, Comanche, and Bosque Counties. But although he regarded the Comanches as "troublesome," Miller and his men experienced no real difficulties with Indians.[6] Miller must have realized that he shared crucial traits with the Comanches. They were a nomadic people and they wanted no one to encroach on their lands. For the Comanches, the choice was between freedom or death; Miller felt exactly the same way.

"It was the custom of the Comanches," Jim Rainwater related in his diary, "to leave their camps and ride into San Saba and the counties east just at the time the moon would be getting full. Then, when the moon was full, they would return to their homes, frequently killing settlers as they went and taking with them horses and other property."[7]

Upon arriving in San Saba cattle country, after washing off layers of dirt and sweat in the San Saba River, Miller sought out Riley Harkey, a member of one of the county's pioneer Anglo families and the cattle agent for the county.[8] Harkey's ancestors came from the bluegrass region of Kentucky, and his heritage impressed Colonel Miller.[9] With his parents and brothers, Harkey had moved to San Saba County from Arkansas in 1855 and settled in the area around Wallace Creek. During the "Lost Cause," Harkey rode with a company of Texas Rangers, or "minutemen," whose job was to protect settlers' cattle and horses from raids by Comanches and whites.[10]

After the war, Harkey prospered in the cattle business and as a breeder of fine horses.

Harkey also was known throughout the San Saba cattle country for driving a hard bargain when he bought or sold mustangs or steers. But Colonel G. W. Miller, too, had years of experience in haggling over everything from human flesh to champion mules, and he knew his ten wagonloads of smoked ham and bacon were worth their weight in gold. Much to his surprise, Miller not only negotiated a satisfactory deal, but also got twice as many head of cattle as he had expected, swapping fifty pounds of hog meat for every steer.[11] Harkey took a band of cowboys up the San Saba River and rounded up a great herd of cattle. Colonel Miller and his brother-in-law George Carson culled out the best of the bunch to form a herd of four hundred snorting and bellowing longhorns.[12]

In his diary, young Rainwater wrote of the considerable "red tape" Colonel Miller had to cut through with Harkey before the final deal was made. Miller's men and the San Saba cowboys then drove the cattle from a huge holding corral and walked them single file through a chute so the county treasurer could note the age and trail brand on each steer.[13]

With bill of sale in hand, Colonel Miller and his trail herders—reinforced by some freshly hired San Saba riders—and Perry Britton began the long trip north with the mess wagon replenished. Strong and willing, most of the new hands were horse breakers, called bronco busters, who knew how to handle spirited Texas cow ponies.

One San Saba cowboy, John P. Robbins, recalled such cattle drives. "Three to four months were spent in taking the cattle up the trail; food and clothing being carried in the grub wagon, drawn by two yoke of oxen. From daybreak to about an hour by sun the herd moved about ten miles, camp was pitched about sundown, and the cattle were left to bed for the night. A regular camp cook drove the grub wagon and cooked for the gang. After supper the Indians would often come into camp and get something to eat; very hostile Indians were found on the trail."[14]

The journey up the trail was grueling for men and beasts. Daily rations of greasy bacon, brown beans, flour bread, and stout coffee—called by some drovers "coffin varnish"—were the only things to look forward to at the close of a day spent in the saddle. In his handwritten journal, Jim Rainwater left a faithful account of Colonel Miller's first northbound cattle drive.

"We are going to have one hell of a storm," Rainwater wrote, quoting the prediction of a San Saba trail foreman identified only as Sanders. The

thunderstorm brewed in the evening heavens that Easter Sunday of 1871 as the herd neared Fort Worth, and Sanders told each cowhand how to react if the herd became spooked.[15]

When the storm finally erupted, the longhorns stampeded. Throughout the ordeal, Rainwater rode with Miller, helping to maintain order despite lightning and thunder and torrents of rain. "That morning," Rainwater wrote, "Col. Miller had given me a $5 raise per month in wages, placing me on an equal scale with the rest of the men." As the herd stampeded, most of the horses ran with them, carrying their riders away. Miller, George Carson, and Rainwater, astride his trained pony, managed to control their mounts and hold the herd together. They worked with the runaway steers until late in the evening, not daring to pause for even a moment of rest until all the cattle had finally quieted down.[16]

As dawn broke, Colonel Miller rode out to count the cattle as they left their beds to feed on grass along the trail. To his delight, he discovered that not one was missing. At that night's supper fire, G.W. called up Rainwater, just turned fifteen years old, to stand before the others. For Rainwater's courage in the face of the storm, Miller gave him a black-and-white two-year-old steer which he could sell at market value when the party reached home.[17]

A few days later, the herd reached Sherman, just before the much-anticipated Red River crossing. Miller rode into town to fetch supplies, and at the general store, he purchased a slicker overcoat and a pair of pants for Rainwater.[18] "This was the greatest treat of my life up to that time," noted Rainwater. "It was the first time in my life that anyone, who wasn't any kin to me, had given me anything." But Rainwater did not have much time to savor his new outfit. Indian Territory loomed ahead, just across the Red River.

Even more than they feared renegade thieves and Indian raids, Miller and his crew dreaded violent storms and dangerous river crossings a half-mile wide, some of which involved quicksand. The Red and Canadian Rivers were especially treacherous. The patches of quicksand often snared slow-moving cows. Cattle could get caught in swift waters or step into sinkholes and drown. A crossing rarely went without a hitch.

In fording the Red River on that first northbound trip, Miller got lucky and lost only a lone two-year-old steer.[19] As Rainwater recounted the incident, the steer broke away from the herd and moved up a canyon on the Texas side. When it became clear that he could not head off the runaway and return it to the herd, Rainwater pulled his rifle from the

saddle scabbard, aimed, and shot the animal. He and other cowboys skinned and butchered the steer, and Rainwater rode into camp on the Indian Territory side of the Red with a quarter of beef tied to his saddle. Once more, Miller had nothing but praise for the young cowboy's quick thinking. It was far better to have fresh beef to eat or to give to a party of Indians that might come calling than to allow the steer to escape.

The next major stop for the cowboys and their cattle was the Indian Territory town of Okmulgee, named for the Creek word for "bubbling water."[20] A small settlement with a few stores, a blacksmith, and a doctor, Okmulgee had served as the capital of the Creek Nation since 1869.[21] Miller and his trail hands found Okmulgee's muddy streets filled with Indian lighthorsemen, hunters, drifters, bootleggers, and Creek freedmen.

Several large cattle and horse ranches, owned by Creeks or by adopted tribesmen, operated in the area.[22] Most of the herds, like Miller's, had been purchased from Texas ranchers in the spring and brought into Indian Territory to be fattened in rich pasturelands before they were shipped north to market in the autumn. Few cattle were wintered in Indian Territory; when they were, ranchers fed them seed from cotton gins or let them eat stalks left in fields along creek banks.[23]

Besides cattlemen and visiting trail herds, the town and surrounding countryside also drew its share of whiskey peddlers, shady characters, and undesirables trying to elude warrants for their arrest, sworn out at the federal court in Fort Smith. These unsavory types often preyed on the ranchers and settlers in the remote areas surrounding Okmulgee; as pioneer Minda Geer Hardin recalled, "If a man would ride up to my door, draw a gun on me and tell me to get him something to eat, well, I did it and asked no questions. They were well behaved if no questions were asked."[24]

Rainwater's journal does not mention any encounters with outlaws, and at last the journey neared its end. Soon the herd crossed the broad Arkansas River at Childers' Ferry. Within a few days, the Miller party forded the meandering Neosho, the Osage word for "clear water," then Cabin Creek and Rock Creek, and entered the corner of southeastern Kansas. The cowboys drove the longhorns into pens near the railroad tracks in unruly Baxter Springs, "the first cowtown in Kansas."[25] From there, they would be shipped to slaughterhouses in Kansas City, Saint Louis, and Chicago.

Rainwater and the other cowboys were not sorry to end a trip spent herding ornery steers, eating trail grub, and sleeping through cold midnight rain. Their rest would be brief, however; soon there would be another big

drove of longhorns to handle, and the cycle would start once again.[26] The young Texans and Missourians drew their wages from Colonel Miller and made a beeline for the old Corner Saloon to celebrate. After four grueling months, the cattle drive was completed.

Once his paperwork was in order and he had collected the earnings from the cattle sale, G. W. Miller saddled his tired cow pony. Hardly stopping, he rode straightway to Newtonia, where Molly and his sons waited.

G.W. yearned to hold his wife in his arms. He could not wait to see how much his boys had grown. He was anxious to tell all of them that at long last, the Miller family was in the cattle business.

On March 6, 1872, Colonel Miller and a party of his cowboys departed on a second cattle-buying trip to San Saba County, Texas.[5] It was a difficult decision for Miller to leave because only five days earlier, his grandmother Mary Fish had died in Kentucky. She was almost eighty years old.[6] Word of her death had reached Miller just as he was making final preparations for the cattle drive. In addition, Miller was somewhat anxious because his youngest son, John Fish Miller, not quite two years old, was ill with fever. Molly assured her husband that he could do nothing for the little boy by staying home and pacing the floor. Miller finally agreed, and he and his cowboys set out for Texas. Because he could not return to Crab Orchard, Miller did his grieving from the saddle while his grandmother was laid to rest beside her husband at the plantation's old burial ground.[7]

Included in the band of trail drivers once again was James Rainwater, the young Newtonian who had chronicled Miller's first Texas journey. Rainwater brought along the well-worn diary and hastily jotted down impressions along the way, but not as often as before. Most of the notations of the trip through Indian Territory were routine, such as his mention of fording the Arkansas River near Muskogee and crossing the Red River above Sherman, Texas.[8]

This time, moving due south through Indian Territory to Texas, Miller's party had no procession of creaky wagons filled with smoked pork and hams to fret over. Instead of hog meat, Colonel Miller carried saddlebags crammed with gold.[9] He had learned from his first visit that Texas ranchers had no use for paper money because most of them had been paid in worthless Confederate scrip after the war. Gold coins were more to their liking. Miller was pleased because gold was easier to transport than thousands of pounds of ham and bacon. Best of all, only three dollars' worth of gold fetched a steer priced at six dollars.

A few days into the journey, after Colonel Miller unsuccessfully attempted to buy cattle at Fort Worth, the cowboys rode far to the south to Kimble Bend in Brazos County, where they had to shell out a whole dollar for each bushel of corn to feed their horses.[10] "There are no farms west of this point," observed Rainwater in his diary as the Miller cowboys rode westward into Bosque County. He wrote that they did not come across "a town or village in the county, and I guess they didn't have any." Colonel Miller encountered trouble in Bosque County, where he discovered that one of his trail hands had stolen two thousands dollars in gold.[11]

Rainwater wrote,

> Miller showed one of the boys that much money in gold, and also he showed this same man where he hid it. Two days afterward when Miller looked for the money it was gone. We went on to San Saba, got our cattle and on the way back we again camped at the same spot where the money was stolen. The next morning we had a trial, the hats of all the boys were placed on the ground near a sack of shelled corn. All the boys were sent away from camp, each with a grain of corn, and returning he was to place the grain in the hat of the man he thought guilty. The result was that all the corn was put in one man's hat—we all suspected the same fellow. This man picked up his hat, looked at the corn, shook it out, put on his hat, got on his horse and rode away, and I presume he is riding yet.[12]

Rainwater described another noteworthy incident which occurred as Colonel Miller and the cowboys herded the longhorns farther north. One afternoon, the outfit was camped on the south bank of the North Canadian River, waiting for high water to subside so the herd could cross. Two young Indians rode into camp and asked Miller if he was interested in buying a couple of ponies. When he told them he was, they rode away. The next morning they returned, leading a pair of ponies as promised.

Rainwater recorded the incident:

> About two hours afterward, twenty or thirty light horse [sic] police came into camp and asked where we got the two ponies. We told them of the trade with the two Indians, one of whom was about twenty years old, the other twenty-five. The police explained the two ponies were stolen the night before, but told us to keep them and they could get the thieves. About twenty miles distant they caught up with the two boys and brought them back to our camp.
>
> The trial of the two young Indians was held the next morning within our camp, with our boys called as witnesses. The two were declared guilty. Their hands were tied behind them, their feet roped together and a rail placed between their legs. A rope was thrown over a limb, thus making the bodies of the prisoners stand up straight. The penalty consisted of lashes on their bare backs. One Indian was given fifty lashes, as this was his first offence [sic], and the blood ran down to his heels. It was the other's second offence [sic]. He was given 100 lashes and notified that under the Indian law, if he were convicted a third time, he would be shot

to death. When the whipping was over the police put a handful of salt in a pan of water, washed the backs of the two prisoners and turned them loose.[13]

The Indians' harsh attitude toward crime and punishment may have confounded some of Miller's young cowboys, especially having seen how mercifully he had treated the drover suspected of stealing his gold. Still, there was no time to ponder the punishment of Indians—the cattle trail beckoned.

Waiting for the swollen waters of the North Canadian to recede, the Miller party drove the herd across the first bridge built across the Canadian in Indian Territory. Only about two dozen head had made it across when the new bridge, perhaps already weakened by floodwater, collapsed under the great weight, sending cattle and cowboys into the water below. No serious injuries occurred, and by late in the day, all the cattle had swum back to rejoin the remainder of the herd on the south bank. After a few more days of waiting, the cowboys forded the entire bunch across the river. They headed straight for Okmulgee, then to the Arkansas River crossing at Childers' Ferry before tackling the short, final leg of the drive. After they turned some cattle loose in the pastures of the L K Ranch, the tired crew herded the rest to Baxter Springs, at trail's end.

When Colonel Miller reached his home in Newtonia, one glance at Molly's grim face told him tragedy had visited their family once again. On March 29, a little more than three weeks after he had left for Texas, the couple's youngest son, John Fish Miller, had died.[14] The boy's death had occurred just a month shy of his second birthday, following a brief illness. Molly and some of her brothers had taken his body back to Crab Orchard and buried him near his brother, Wilkes Booth Miller.[15] Four-year-old Joseph was the Millers' sole surviving child.

George Miller once again turned to work to relieve his deep sorrow, and he plunged into his cattle business with a vengeance. Working as much as twenty hours a day, he and Kokernut burned the L K brand into the hides and horns of thousands of beeves, thus initiating their odyssey to the slaughterhouse. As always, the relentless grind of hard labor among his cowboys proved to be Miller's best medicine.

Miller also possessed a well of inspiration and comfort he could tap when he needed support. Even though he usually avoided going to church, family members felt he had a strong spiritual source down deep.[16] Indeed, old-time cowboys who worked for the Miller family during the Newtonia

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