

The Families of Frijole Ranch

A pair of pioneering brothers, a farming family of 12, and father-and-son conservationists are the beginning, middle, and (not-quite) ending chapters of the story of Frijole Ranch in Far West Texas.



In 1876, the Rader brothers found a plot of land near the Guadalupe Mountains that they believed was ideal for raising cattle. The site was close to Frijole Spring (then unnamed), one of five water sources all located within a two-mile radius. The siblings built a small stone house, the first permanent residence in the region. While their stay ended in the late 1880s, and they left without making a legal claim to the land, the pair laid the foundation for what would become Frijole Ranch—and eventually a part of Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

The property remained unclaimed (though the Rader's house was occupied for a few



Top: John Thomas and Nella May Smith, shown with five of their 10 children, made significant improvements to Frijole Ranch during their 36-year tenure on the property. Photograph in the public domain. Bottom: Guadalupe Mountains National Park was established in 1966 but did not officially open until 1972. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service. Original in color.

years by newlyweds George and Ida Wolcott) until 1906 when John Thomas and Nella May Smith filed for homestead rights on the land, calling it Spring Hill for six years before the site was renamed Frijole Ranch. The couple, who had married in 1889, brought up their 10 children while cultivating a 15-acre orchard and vegetable garden, as well as raising cattle, chickens, pigs, and horses. They made a living by selling their fruit and produce in Van Horn, a 66-mile journey south.

The Smiths added a kitchen, bedrooms, and a second story to the Rader's original two-room stone structure. In addition to the construction of several outbuildings—including a barn, water tower, bunkhouse, storage shed, and greenhouse—a tin-roofed schoolhouse was built that served the Smith children and others from nearby ranches. Also, the Frijole Post Office was established on the family's property in 1916, and matriarch Nella served as postmaster for 25 years until the facility was relocated elsewhere.

In 1942, Jesse Coleman (J. C.) Hunter, Sr., bought Frijole Ranch from the Smiths after they had decided to relocate to Hawley, near Abilene. The new owner was a successful businessman, who made his fortune during the oil and gas boom. Hunter was introduced to the Guadalupe Mountains region while exploring for oil in the 1920s and was captivated by the beauty of the landscape. He began buying properties in the area, particularly during the Depression. After purchasing the Smith's ranching complex, the land became part of the Guadalupe Mountains Ranch (GMR), Hunter's now 43,000-acre hunting preserve and livestock enterprise, where Angora goats as well as cattle, horses, and sheep were raised. The Smith's stone house served as living quarters for GMR's foreman Noel Kincaid for the next 27 years.

Hunter, however, had acquired his land holdings in the Guadalupe Mountains for a purpose beyond the livestock business. As an early conservationist, he envisioned the region as a preserve and lobbied state and federal government officials towards that goal in the 1920s and 1930s but failed to secure support for his



idea. There would be efforts by others in the decade that followed, but those also would not advance beyond discussion. Still, Hunter remained a good steward of the ecosystem by allowing only limited hunting on his ranchlands and no grazing on acreage he owned in McKittrick Canyon, a little more than 10 miles north of Frijole Ranch.

After his death in 1945, his son J. C. Hunter, Jr., became caretaker of GMR, purchasing even more sections of neighboring properties that expanded the size of the ranch to 72,000 acres. He believed in his father's vision to protect the Guadalupe Mountains natural habitat and ensured the family's commercial use kept true to leaving a light footprint on its flora and fauna.

In 1958, Wallace Pratt, a successful petroleum geologist and contemporary of J. C. Hunter, Sr., offered 5,632 acres of land in McKittrick Canyon to the National Park Service (NPS). He did so with the intention that the acreage could be added to Carlsbad Caverns National Park, located in the northeastern end of the Guadalupe Mountains in New Mexico. His actions, though, renewed interest in establishing a separate national park for Texas' section of the mountain range, 32 miles south of the Caverns. While he did not have means to donate GMR acreage, J. C. Hunter, Jr., notified the NPS that he would be willing to sell his property if the agency was interested. At that time, however, using federal funds to purchase private land to add to the na-

tional park system had never been considered. Eight years later, with dedicated efforts by Pratt, Hunter, Jr., and Texas officials, Congress passed

a resolution establishing Guadalupe Mountains National Park (GMNP). The NPS paid a history-making \$1.5 million for the Hunter family's expansive ranch, and the park, which also included Pratt's donated land, officially opened in 1972.

Today, the Rader/Smith stone home-
stead serves as the Frijole Ranch Cultural Museum, a National Register historic site within the GMNP. Visitors can tour the home, along with several outbuildings, and learn about the region's history and the families who shaped—and conserved—its landscape. —*Pamela Murtha*

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Above: From 1972 to 1980, Guadalupe Mountains National Park's first ranger Roger Reisch lived in the Frijole Ranch house, which subsequently was reopened as a cultural museum in 1992. Photograph courtesy of the Portal to Texas History. Original in color. Below: Oilman J. C. Hunter, Sr., worked to preserve the land and ecosystem of the Guadalupe Mountains. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service.

