

Wilna Zellner,

My father was Irl Dewitt.

Later they moved their family to Coleman County. They had a fine place there. A creek ran through their property and it was full of fish. They would set out a sien at night and the next morning they would have fish for breakfast. In 1905 they moved to Mitchell County. Marion bought the Cross Cattle Ranch, about 3 1/2 miles north of the little town of Loraine. Loraine was only a railroad stop for water. The original property that he purchased had about nine sections, then he leased about three more sections as he controlled about twelve sections of property. There was a school on part of this land and it was known as the Zellner school. It was just below the Lone Star Mountains. The ranch was infested with rattlesnakes and the cattlemen used to cut and keep the rattles of all the snakes they killed. They had cigar boxes full of rattles, some long and some short.

All his children grew up on the Zellner ranch. My father, Irl, tried to escape. He loved to play baseball. He was good enough to play semi-pro ball and was playing ball in Lakeside California in 1914 when grandpa made him come home. Grandpa didn't think it was a fitting thing for a young man to be doing, (I expect he needed him to help on the ranch.). I have a picture of the ball team with the year on it.

In the book "A No Ordinary University" by Dr. John C. Stevens, The History of a City set on A Hill, published in 1998 these things were said about Marion Zellner.

"He was once introduced as a 'wealthy citizen' attracted to Abilene for the advantages of the college. Three of his children were enrolled at this time. They were Viola, Wilna and Irl. These were the three youngest children and I guess the only ones at home at the time. The college opened in 1906, then known as The Childress Institute. Marion was involved with the College from its beginning. From 1906-1924 all funds, were the responsibility of the President of the College. The President then answered to the Board of Trustee's; therefore, Marion Zellner was in on all transactions and things such as meeting the payroll, purchasing books, etc. that the college needed. According to this book, the college had some very hard times during the early years.

Lots of decisions had to be made. He was appointed to the Board of Trustees in 1908 and was elected Chairman of the Board where he served from 1911 to 1916 until his death. (It as been told though the years that whenever any money was needed for the college, he and grandma would sell some land or cattle to help keep the school going. Needless to say the ranch was much smaller when it was finally sold. After grandpa died, Grandmother Zellner sold the ranch and moved to New Mexico. But that is another story---

In June 1917, a contract was let for a new dormitory for men. It was named Zellner Hall in honor of the family that had done so much for the school. In 1919 it was necessary to convert Zellner Hall to a women's dorm. I attended ACC in 1946 and I stayed in this dorm feeling like a celebrity.

"Although it was first an institution, then a college and finally an university, it was always first and foremost a school."

Grandpa and Grandma Zellner are buried on the hill in the Loraine Cemetery at Loraine, Mitchell County, Texas. Also buried there are my mom and dad, Irl Dewitt and Sloan Erwin Zellner. Ola Belle Brown Greene, daughter of Lulalia and Eugene Brown is buried next to them.

I wish I had been able to know my grandfather. Evidence shows that he truly was “A GREAT MAN.”

Addendum: I am still looking into other aspects of Marion Zellner’s life.

First, I would like to know about his education. Surely a man of his interest in schooling for his children; and also his knowledge of running a ranch and helping control the finances of a school, he would have had to have had some good schooling. Also, 9 sections of land is a lot of land. I am looking into the purchase of this land.

Sources: My Cousin, Deloras Riddell Woodson-Aunt Viola

The Zellner Genealogy on Internet

A letter from my Aunt Winnie (Uncle Henry’s wife) in California

She had lived on the ranch with the Zellners. (written in 1978)

“No Ordinary University”, The History of a City Set on A Hill

by John C. Stevens

The Optimist – Student newspaper at A.C.C.