

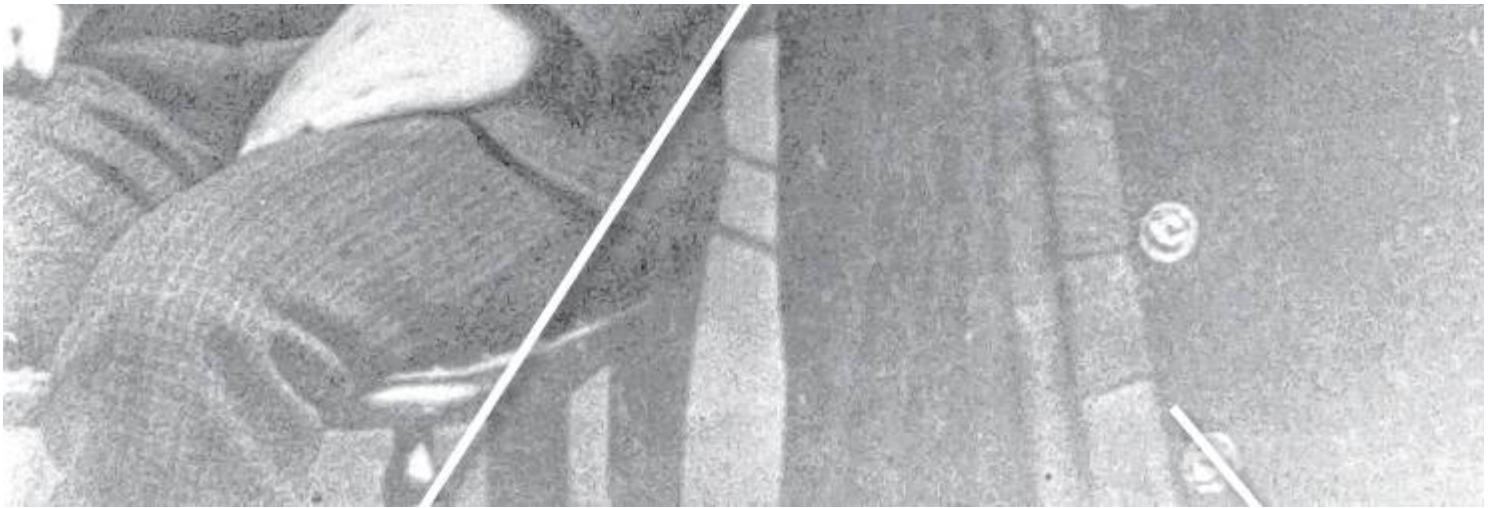
# A real murder mystery

## CAPROCK CHRONICLES/ Has first homicide on South Plains been solved?

BY CHUCK LANEHART FOR A-J MEDIA

James Jarrott was the first documented murder on the South Plains. After his shooting death, Jarrott's wife, Mollie, photographed shortly before they arrived in Lubbock in 1901, married real estate developer Monroe Abernathy. She is considered Lubbock's first businesswoman. (Provided by Chuck Lanehart)





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**Authors speculate "Deacon Jim" Miller murdered James Jarrott in 1902, committing the first homicide on the Texas South Plains. He was one of the most infamous gunmen of the era. (Provided by Chuck Lanehart)**



Author Bill Neal reveals the man hired to kill James Jarrott, the first homicide on the Texas South Plains, was M.V. "Pap" Brownfield, a powerful rancher. Neal writes the assassin's fee was likely covered by the deed to a plot of land that eventually became the city of Brownfield. (Provided by Chuck Lanehart)



Lanehart

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Cap-rock Chronicles is written or edited by Paul Carlson, emeritus professor of history at Texas Tech. Today's essay, by lawyer and historian Chuck Lanehart, reviews the long-unsolved 1902 murder of James W. Jarrott, husband of Lubbock's early entrepreneur and philanthropist Mollie Abernathy.*

In 1900, thousands of cattle grazed vast ranches on the South Plains of Texas, but humans were few and far between.

Lubbock County residents totaled fewer than 300. A few dozen ranchers occupied the unorganized counties west of Lubbock.

But changes were coming. In 1895, the Texas Legislature had passed the Four Sections Act, authorizing homesteaders to purchase four sections of land (2,560 acres) from the state under very favorable terms.

Small entrepreneurs scurried to take advantage of the wonderful opportunity. Among them was James William Jarrott.

Jarrott was born in Alabama in 1862, but his family soon moved to Texas. In 1886, he married Mollie Wylie, a beauty from Hood County, and the couple moved to Weatherford.

Representing his area, Jarrott served in the Texas House of Representatives and there won respect among his peers, developing a reputation as “fearless in speech.”

He met fellow legislator Charles Rogan, soon to play a pivotal role in the settlement of the Llano Estacado.

After Jarrott left the Legislature, the family moved to Stephenville, where he studied law and was admitted to the bar. Although elected Erath County attorney, he was restless.

Early in 1900, he traveled to Plainview to visit relatives, exploring the windswept, treeless Llano Estacado. Afterward, he heard important news from his friend Rogan, now the Texas Land Commissioner.

Rogan had discovered a slice of state-owned land west of Lubbock that had not been surveyed. He intended to place the land for sale under the terms of the Four Sections Act.

However, the Act required the land to be surveyed. Jarrott paid for the survey, gaining an advantage over others coveting the land, soon to become known as “The Strip.”

The Strip extended westward 60 miles from the western boundary of Lubbock County. It crossed the unorganized counties of Hockley, Terry, Cochran and

Yoakum, reaching in a narrow band to the New Mexico border.

Jarrott recruited 24 families from the Erath County area to join him, Mollie, and their children on the arduous 300-mile horse-and-wagon journey to the almost vacant South Plains.

Each family claimed four sections of fertile land. It was May 1902.

Cattlemen already in the area did not greet the settlers warmly. Ranchers had long grazed cattle on the grassy unfenced Strip.

They threatened violence, withheld precious water from windmills, and filed lawsuits against the “nesters,” claiming Jarrott unfairly failed to share his survey with ranchers. Among the settlers’ chief rivals were ranchers from the Lake-Tomb Cattle Co.

In far-flung courthouses scattered across the plains, Jarrott defended the settlers against the ranchers. He won all the lawsuits.

He traveled to Austin to assert the settlers’ rights in the Texas Land Office. By August, the settlers were legally established on The Strip.

On Aug. 27, Jarrott left Mollie and his children at Lubbock’s Nicolett Hotel, where Mollie was recovering from an illness. The unarmed lawyer was bound for their homestead on The Strip in Hockley County. He never returned.

Someone found Jarrott’s lifeless body lying in a stock tank near present-day Ropesville on land owned by the Lake-Tomb Cattle Co. He had been shot to death.

Jim Jarrott was 41 years old. It was the first documented homicide on the Texas South Plains, and went unsolved for more than a century.

Those responsible for Jarrott’s death thought the nesters would be scared away, but they were wrong. The settlers persisted.

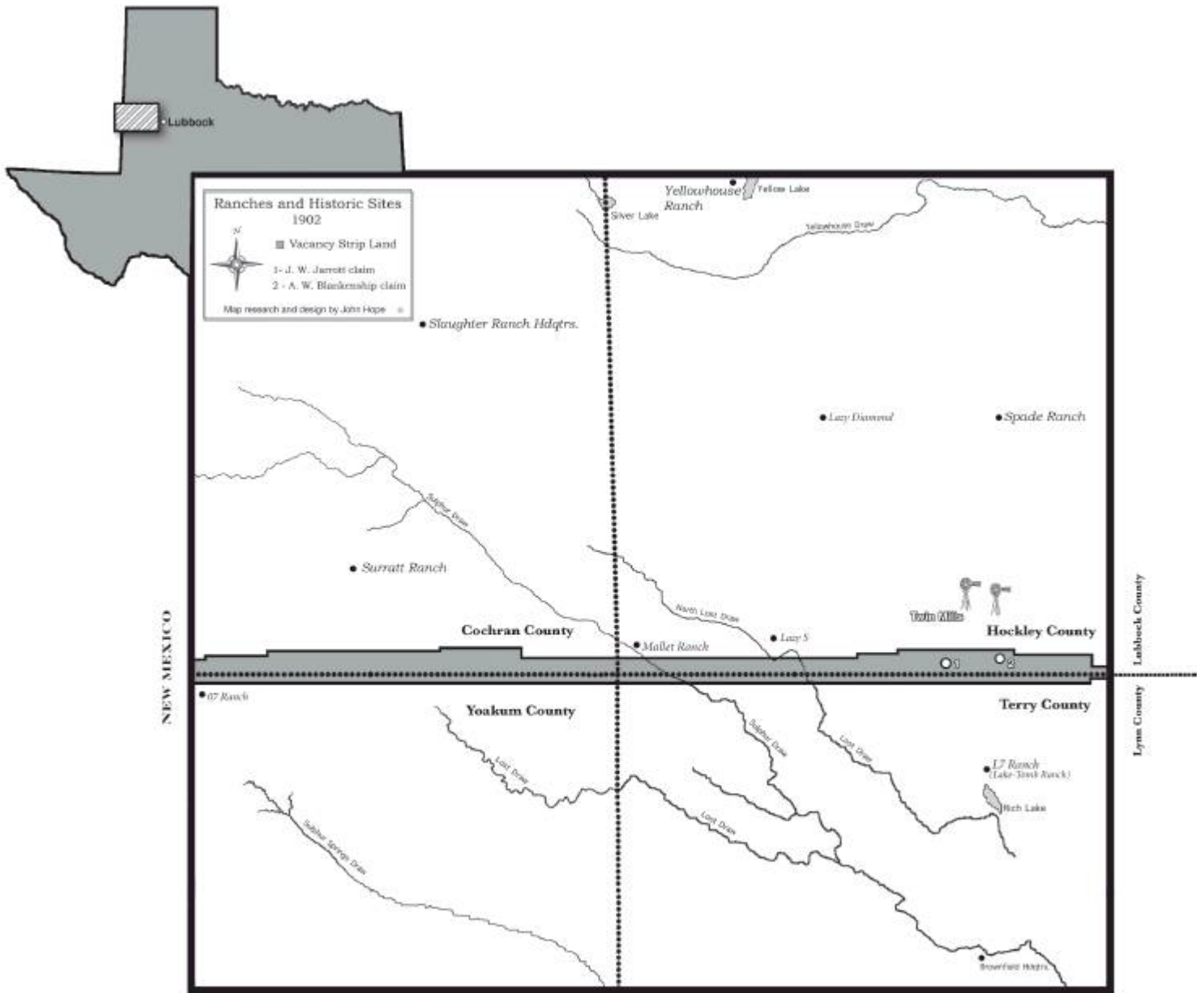
Burdened with three young children, Jarrott’s 36-year-old widow developed the land that had cost her husband his life. She expanded the original claim to 16 sections and raised a prime herd of cattle.

Mollie married a second time. She wed real estate developer Monroe Abernathy. Mollie and Monroe were instrumental in bringing the railroad to Lubbock in 1909, and Mollie is considered Lubbock's first businesswoman.

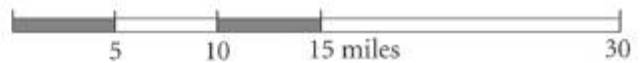
Descendants of the Jarrotts, the Abernathys and other Strip settlers still reside on the South Plains.

But who killed James Jarrott? The assassin was likely "Deacon Jim" Miller, one of the most infamous gunmen of the era, responsible perhaps for 50 killings. In his recent book, "Death on the Lonely Estacado: The Assassination of J.W. Jarrott, a Forgotten Hero," author Bill Neal connects Miller to the Jarrott murder, and then goes further.

Neal's research clearly identifies the man who employed Miller to kill Jarrott as M.V. "Pap" Brownfield, a powerful rancher allied with the Lake-Tomb Cattle Co.



A map of the Strip Land, ranches and historic sites. (Provided photo)



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Until recently, Pap, who died in 1929, was not suspected of the crime. Ironically, the assassin's fee was likely covered by the deed to a plot of land that eventually became the city of Brownfield, named in Pap's honor.

By contrast, the man who brought the first wave of settlers to the South Plains is largely forgotten. There is no town, no school, no street named in honor of James William Jarrott. That's a shame.