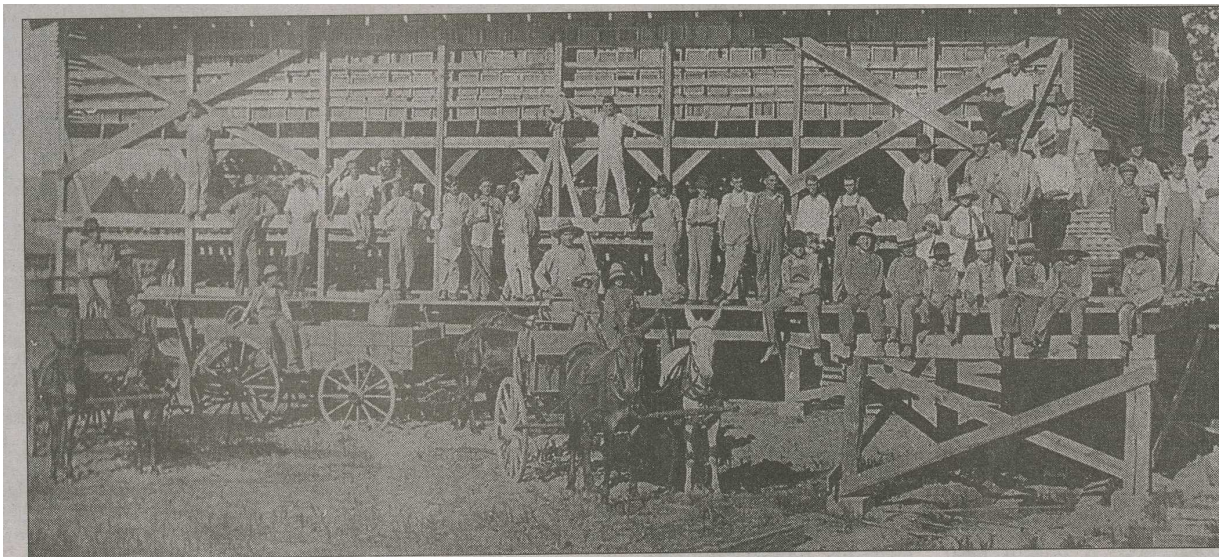


A Picture Leads to a Family History: The Ross Family in Southwest Arkansas

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Hope Star 3

Mary Jo Ross of Longview, Texas, recently sent this picture of men and boys gathered at a cantaloupe shed in northern Hempstead County to the Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives at Washington. She dated the photo at about 1922. She identified her father Joe Ross and her brother Minto Ross, born about 1914, in the wagon to the far left. Minto was named for Dr. Minto Bell, a doctor who practiced in the Blevins area at the time of her brother's birth. She also wrote: "I don't know anything else about the picture. I know you can dig something up. Ha!" With a challenge like that how could I resist?



Submitted Photo

Men and boys gather at a cantaloupe shed along the Prescott and Northwestern Railroad a few miles east of Blevins in the early 1920s. The shed faces the tracks of the railroad which are just visible in the lower right-hand corner of the picture.

The search took me on some surprising twists and turns. The patriarch of the Ross family turned out to be John Ross. Born in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, on March 17, 1800, John Ross left the Mississippi River town halfway between Memphis and St. Louis and settled in Hempstead County, Arkansas, as a young man. He patented 120 acres of land east of Shover Springs in the vicinity of Oak Grove in 1837. In 1839, he acquired an additional 80 acres adjacent to his existing farm.

John Ross appeared in the 1840 and 1850 censuses as a single man living alone on his farm in early Arkansas. However, that was soon to change. On March 13, 1853, Ross, who was then just four days shy of his 53rd birthday, married Annis Galloway Rothwell, a widow whose husband had died shortly after their arrival in Arkansas. Thirty years the junior of John Ross, she already had two young sons, John Richard and William Rothwell, from her first marriage. She had come from Tennessee with her Galloway relatives and settled near the Ross Farm.

Within two years of her marriage to Ross, she had two more sons—George Washington and Martin Van Buren, both named for admired American presidents. John Ross patented more land for his farm in 1855, an additional 120 acres. He needed it. Between 1853 and 1868, John Ross and his wife had eleven children, five sons (one pair of twins) and six daughters.

John Ross and his family survived the Civil War. He was too old to serve, and his step-children and children were all too young. He lived to see his oldest son George Washington at age eighteen marry his neighbor's fourteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth Priscilla Edmondson on June 4, 1871. How he felt about this youthful marriage in the difficult years just after the Civil War is not known. John Ross, who had become a family man so late in life, died on April 7, 1872, and was buried in the Ross Cemetery on his property just off present-day County Road 125. His wife Annis, who died on July 31, 1888, is buried with him, as are other family members.

George Washington Ross sought his livelihood away from his father's farm. He moved around in southwest Arkansas and lived in eastern Howard County. Following a pattern that was not unusual for the time, he and his wife had eleven children between 1872 and 1896, five sons and six daughters. His wife died on March 14, 1896, less than two months after the birth of her last child in late January of the same year. She is buried in Liberty Cemetery in Buckrange Township near the Hempstead/Howard County line.

With a houseful of children to care for, George Washington wasted no time in finding another wife. He married his second wife, Margaret Elizabeth Smedley Moore—a widow, on August 11, 1896. He would have three more children with her. They were still living in Blackland Township in eastern Howard County near Columbus in 1900 with their large blended family of ten children. His son Joe who is in the cantaloupe shed photo was then ten years old.

By 1910, George Washington was living with his family in Nevada County along the Prescott to Washington Road. By 1920 he was sixty-six and living near Wallaceburg in northern Hempstead County. Though those around him were renting their farms, he owned his land free and clear. The large family of children were grown and gone and only the youngest daughter, then a teen-ager, was still at home. His son Joe was then thirty and living in the next house with his wife and two children, his son Minto and his daughter Lucille. Still a young man, Joe was renting his farm, probably with the hope of owning his own land someday. Other relatives were nearby. It was as it should be.

The farmers gathered at the cantaloupe shed were probably at Dunlap east of Blevins on the Prescott and Northwestern Railroad. They had turned to growing cantaloupes and other produce crops to escape the tyranny of the cotton market where prices could dip to less than the cost of production. Joe Ross and his young son were there to help deliver and crate up the crop for shipment to Prescott and then on the mainline Missouri Pacific railroad to markets in the cities of the Midwest.

It was a golden age for this type of agriculture in southwest Arkansas. Now it is largely forgotten, but it would continue for years prior to World War II. George Washington Ross died on July 21, 1938, and is buried in Union Grove Cemetery behind the Union Grove Church east of Blevins. The *Washington Telegraph* did not carry his obituary, but they did announce a big event planned for Deanyville near his gravesite. The Southwestern Cantaloupe Producers Co-op planned to have music, singing, group singing and political speeches on August 3—just the sort of entertainment that was popular at the time and an excellent opportunity for the politicians.

Joe Ross remained in the area and raised his family of three children at a place called Hickory Shade. The cantaloupe sheds are now gone as are the Prescott and Northwestern tracks that once crossed the region. The world of farming is much changed. The descendants of John Ross, George Washington Ross and Joe Ross are scattered across southwest Arkansas, Texas and who knows where else.

The professional photographer who took this picture was "Evered of Blevins". We know nothing of him. If you have other photos he took or information about him, please contact the Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives at Washington at 870-983-2633 or peggy.lloyd@arkansas.gov

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