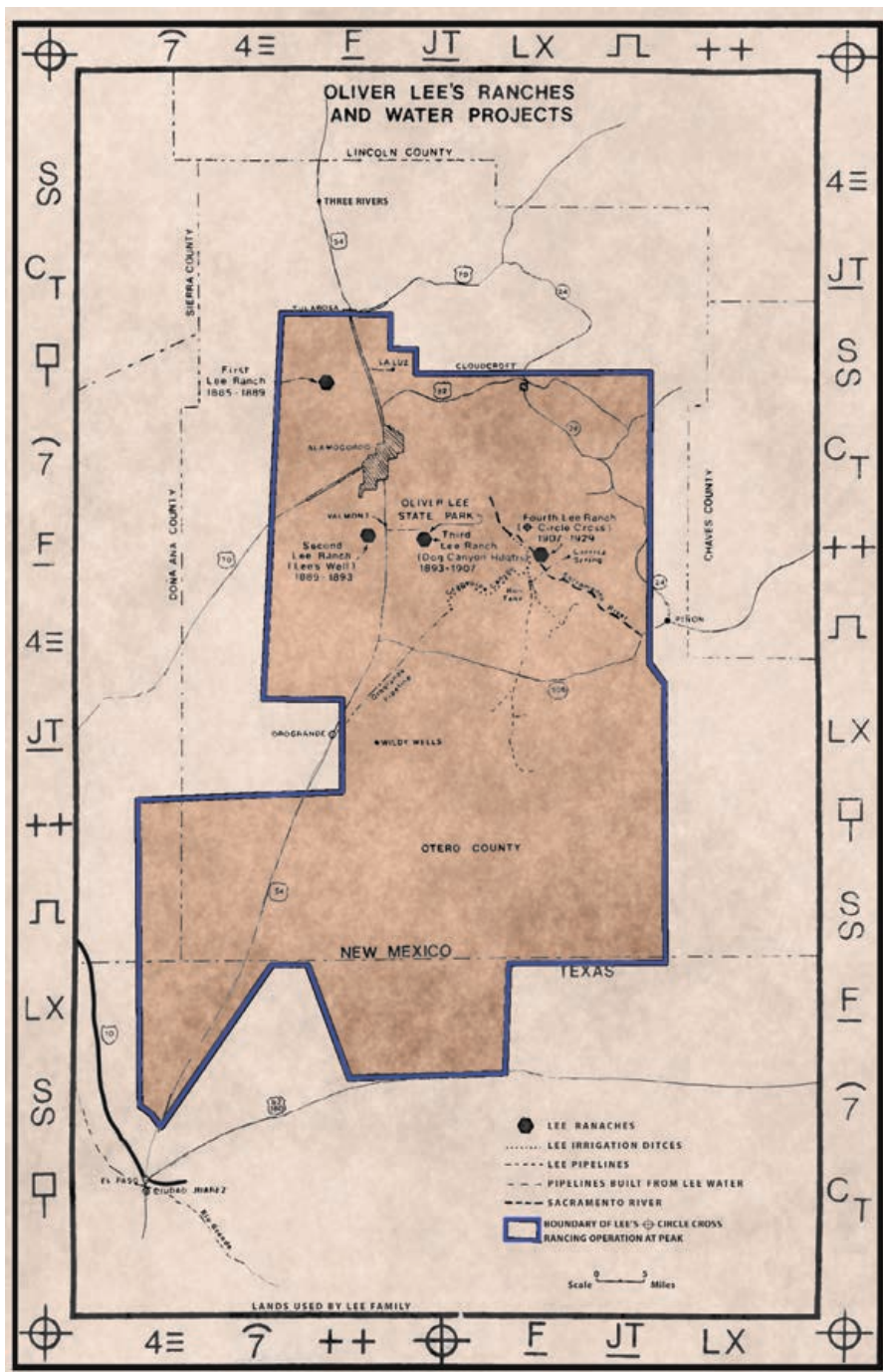
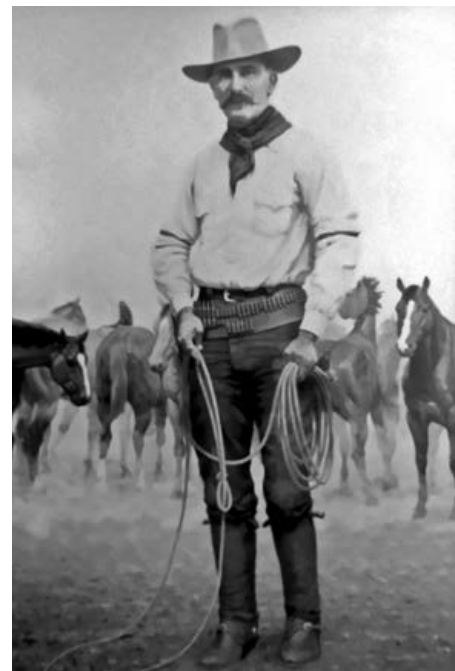


# The Lees of Tularosa Basin

*Hold on to your "hat."*  
By Stephen L. Wilmeth



PHOTOS & MAP COURTESY LEE ARCHIVES



Oliver Lee (1865-1941) was a giant among early New Mexico pioneers.



Charlie Lee, Oliver's grandson, traded lands taken by the government for the expansion of the missile range and secured the land making up the Hat Ranch today.



COURTESY CAREN COWAN, NEW MEXICO STOCKMAN

Current Hat Ranch patriarch, Bebo Lee, is Oliver's great-grandson. He is seen in this picture on the cover of *New Mexico Stockman* when he was named Cattleman of the Year in 2009-2010.

*“Texas is a blend of valor and swagger.”*  
—Carl Sandburg

**P**rior to 1874 and the defeat of the Comanches in the Red River War (that brought Quanah Parker to surrender at Fort Sill a year later), West Texas was not for the faint of heart. In fact, the folks who ventured into the range of the great southern buffalo herd were brave beyond their own comprehension. The limitless horizons and virgin opportunities shaped them into a form of American that can’t be recognized today. On their back tracks, though, the mobs of civ-

went on strike. One source says 325 cowboys were involved. The LIT, LX, LS, LE, and the T Anchor were struck. Their cowboys didn’t agree with office-bound English and eastern accents demanding quick profits.

Further south, the magnet for settlers in the Tom Green, Irion, and Edwards counties was being impacted by the civilization and presence of Fort Concho, the confluence of rivers and trails, and the arrival of railroads. The settlement that would soon be San Angelo became a magnet for yet more settlers. It was time for the hungriest of the Old Rock to seek new pastures.



**“Well, Oliver, this country is so damn sorry I think we can stay here a long time and never be bothered by anybody.”**

PERRY ALTMAN, HALF-BROTHER OF OLIVER LEE

ilization were on the march. Much like today, immigrants across their administrative (eastern) border were filling in the open spaces.

By 1880, things were changing even more dramatically. Ranches that had started with the allegiance of loyal cowboys were being squeezed by the entry of European and corporate ownership. Where the spoils had been shared in the form of cattle in lieu of salaries, the branding of mavericks, or small herds allowed to run amongst larger herds, the accountants and absentee owners were reading from the memories of the Riot Act and putting the wonder of individualism in its worldly place.

Increasingly cowboys were simply employees expected to toe the line for corporate missions. By 1883, things had become so tentative that cowboys on five Panhandle ranches in and adjacent to Oldham County



*“If a man is from Texas, he’ll tell you. If he’s not, why embarrass him by asking?”*  
—John Gunther

### The Tularosa Basin Lees

The Lee family that became well-known in the Tularosa Basin country of south-central New Mexico was part of the migration from the San Angelo area that started variously, but in their case began at Buffalo Gap. Representatives of the family rode into the basin in 1884 to look around. With water the defining factor, Oliver Lee and his half-brother, Perry Altman, were guided to Dog Canyon by outlaw and fellow Texan, Cherokee Bill. What they saw was described in a quote attributed to Altman. “Well, Oliver,” he began, “this

country is so damn sorry I think we can stay here a long time and never be bothered by anybody!”

As a family group, they returned the following year, 1885. They brought horses and cattle and intended to stay. Worried about the threat of Indians, they sent women on a northern route to Roswell and on through the Hondo Valley and modern-day Ruidoso. The men came around the toe of the Guadalupe Mountains in a more direct albeit more dangerous route.

The Circle Cross was born and would remain in the Lee family until the Great Depression. It would also form the core investment that expanded Lee ranges in more than 40 transactions that witnessed eventual ownership by six of Oliver (Papa) Lee’s nine offspring on a million acres of the eastern edge of the basin, into the Sacramen-



FROM TOP LEFT: The Otero Mesa is home to the modern Hat Ranch. Alamo Mountain is seen here on the horizon. ▶Maddy and Bebo Lee’s daughter, Dalton, rides with her dad to help with cow work. ▶Bebo instructs his young son, Colton, in the craft of ranching.

to Mountains, and as far south as the outskirts of Ysleta, Texas.

Oliver Lee wasn’t just a great stockman. He was also a businessman. One of his sons, Don, became a prominent leader who would steer the family through wartime years when so many ranchers were evicted off ranges they had been on for 60 years because of the insatiable wartime and postwar expansion of Fort Bliss and the White Sands Missile Range. It was a time in American history when the federal government further subjugated the private citizen into an increasingly tangential position to the Constitution. Government business took precedence over the citizenry and the absentee, partisan rule of Washington agreed and allowed it to happen.

All of Hop Lee’s ranch was taken. Vince Lee saw more than a third of his ranch confiscated. The heart of Don’s own ranch was acquired through eminent domain when the

next iteration of the federal expansion took place for what is known as the McGregor Range. He was left with a few sections on the extreme north end of the original ranch as well as 35 sections on the extreme south. The government gave him a price and told him he could take it or seek an appraisal, but the appraisal would seal the price that would be paid. The suggestion to him was that he might be better off simply taking their offer and leaving. The then elder, Mr. Lee, chose an appraisal and history proved he made the right decision. It was a transaction he neither wanted nor sought.

The noted north-end property was important historically for several reasons. The Lees had long looked south onto Otero Mesa with high interest. The problem, however, was the availability of water. It was deep, often poor quality, and of low volume. In a marvel of cowboy engineering, Oliver Lee built a pipeline with rights for water acquired in the Sacramento River on the north end and ran it in a straight line 100 miles south onto the northern end of the mesa.

Witnesses to the stream of water that flowed out of the two-inch steel line indicate it produced 300 to 400 pounds of pressure under the largest elevation drops. Although it wouldn't reach their next (and what would become their final home ranch), the continuation of the Hat Ranch, it certainly made their eyes look south onto higher stretches of the mesa.

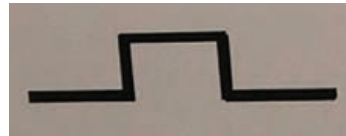
*"Texas may have taught us,  
but New Mexico gave us [a] home."  
—Lee Rice*

### To the Modern Era

To those who understand what they observe, Otero Mesa is at once a wonder as much as it is totally unexpected. Compared to nearly all other upper Chihuahuan grasslands of similar latitude, these lands look like ranges further east and north. When the government made it known that Oliver's son, Don, and Don's son, Charlie, were the next targets for

the expansion of missile testing grounds, one ranch was of particular interest to them.

A.B. Cox, a fellow Tularosa Basin rancher and relative, had traded out his ranch across the valley on the west side under the Organ



*FROM TOP: The current Lee men, Bebo and son, Colton, sort cull cows. Colton is emerging as the next generation Lee patriarch. ▶ Oliver Lee was a rancher, law officer, state legislator and businessman who arguably left a much longer-lasting legacy than his famous contemporary, John Chisum. ▶ The famous Hat Ranch brand remains on Lee cattle to this day.*

stroke of good business sense and luck, A.B. had preempted disaster by trading for a ranch on the mesa that would eventually become the next, permanent home of the Lee family.

When it became increasingly clear that the original Hat Ranch would be taken by the government, Don and Charlie visited with A.B. At first there was no interest in selling, but when a deal became available to move back onto home country on the west side of the Organs and out of the missile range footprint, A.B. was ready to deal. A willing seller found willing buyers and a degree of permanence was again established when what was left of the Hat Ranch moved south lock, stock and barrel.

The vacated lands became part of the McGregor (Missile) Range. Over time, it

would impact the Hat Ranch in many ways. For example, one of the earliest versions of Hercules missile to be tested at McGregor went rogue and landed within a half mile of its headquarters. The explosion was so big that windows in the compound houses were knocked out, chickens quit laying eggs, and near disaster was narrowly averted when a little girl and her puppy playing in the barn were found untouched when a stack of range cubes 20 feet high tipped over and fell all around but not on her or her puppy!

It was also a time when the next generational change came into prominence. Charlie's son, Bebo, became the next Lee to run the operation. Charlie was spending a lot of time in Washington seeking help and protective measures for federal-land ranchers who faced similar threats his family had endured. One of his successes was to force the inclusion of Section 8 of the Public Rangeland Improvement Act. With

this, any management plan ordered by the secretary must be done in careful and considered consultation, cooperation, and coordination with the lessees, permittees, and landowners involved.

Bebo talks about his dad's influences on him. Notwithstanding the time he spent talking about ranch business from an early age, a good way to describe their relationship comes from a story his mother, Jean, told about a dustup with the commanding officer of Fort Bayard where his maternal grandparents lived and worked. The setting was a Christmas many years ago when Bebo was delivered for a visit. By and by a call was received from the commandant's office. The order was clear: If Granddad didn't get that kid off Rudolph, somebody would pay the price. It seems that Rudolph was pulled out of storage every Christmas season and mounted in full light and ornament regalia to greet staff and visitors to the federal military cemetery, village, and hospital facilities. He was a regular and highly anticipated holiday feature.

Young Bebo, seeing that bigger-than-life-size reindeer as a challenge, had probably

climbed up on him and was adding to the holiday spirit by riding him in his practiced and best bareback style while waving to passing vehicles. The extent of the punishment is clouded by time and perspective, but the advice from his father implied that a good cowboy needs to pick wisely what he should or should not ride to a standstill.

That continued influence and path was not just ranch driven, but statewide as he became a clear and trusted leader within the New Mexico livestock industry. Bebo was named Cattleman of the Year in 2009 and remains an outspoken representative on various boards, including the New Mexico Federal Lands Council.

He and his wife, Madalyn, talk about their children—daughter, Dalton, and son, Colton—as a source of pride and family representatives amounting to 138 years of Lee family presence in the greater Tularosa Basin. Dalton is carrying an ever-bigger role running the operation's office while Colton is taking on his dad's role. Both responsibilities are extensive, shadowed by a line of succession all the way back to one of the most colorful and influential ranchers in New Mexico history, their great-great-grandfather Oliver Lee.

Theirs is the accumulation of effort and longevity that brings them to this point of history. Like their predecessors, it will be a life with its own set of constraints and issues. They will learn that the range wars of the modern West are every bit as encompassing now as those of the past.

History will also eventually give more emphasis to Oliver Lee. In every sense, he had more impact than his transplanted New Mexico contemporary John Chisum, known subsequently because of promotion by Hollywood and the silver screen. Oliver Lee fit in a rarified world by remaining horseback and dignified—a mortal man and American pioneer. He set the stage for a continuing, living history, and it has lasting impact to this day.

American needs his sort of spirit. Thankfully, it remains in the image of the Hat iron, branded on the left rib of Lee cattle to this day. ■

*Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. More can be learned about the Lees from at least two books: "Tularosa: Last of the Frontier West" by C.L. Sonnichsen includes history that encompasses the impact of government on the Tularosa Basin; and "Fabulous Frontier" by William Aloysius Keleher. The family says the latter is a more accurate record because Keleher talked to them about events and happenings and Sonnichsen didn't.*