

This story of the work preceding the establishment of the Ranch Experiment Station, Sub-station 14, is written from facts recalled by B.M. Halbert of Sonora and corroborated through correspondence on file at College Station. The facts contained herein were also corroborated by R.E. Taylor of Sonora, the other of the two surviving members of the group that began the work of founding the station.

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“It was bighead that built Sub-station 14 – our Ranch Experiment Station,” says B.M. Halbert of Sonora, who was among the leaders in the work of establishing the station. And he doesn’t mean “big head” brought on by man’s conceit. In 1913 and 1914, West Texas ranchmen had an unusual amount of trouble with bighead in their sheep and goats. Being average, run-of-the-mill ranchmen, they had no scientific explanation for the cause and no scientific knowledge that could offer a cure.

Early in 1914, two Sutton County ranchmen were talking the trouble over and one, Mr. Halbert, voiced the wish to his neighbor, R.E. Taylor, that an experiment station along the order of the series of such units in other areas of the state could be established in the sheep and goat country. There the matter stayed for a few months – a passive idea.

In the fall of 1912, Mr. Halbert and J.N. Ross had attended a meeting of the Edwards County Angora Goat Association at Rocksprings to hear a report presented by Johnston Robertson of Del Rio after a trip to Washington on tariff matters of interest to the ranchmen. Mr. Robertson was asked to repeat the report at a called meeting of the ranchmen at Sonora. Later the Stockmen’s Protective Association of Sutton County was organized, with Mr. Taylor named president and Mr. Halbert secretary.

During this time, while the ranchmen of the three areas – Rocksprings, Sonora and Del Rio – were becoming better acquainted with their mutual interests and problems and becoming conscious of their strength when united, a batch of correspondence between West Texas Angora breeders and J.M. Jones and Dr. B. Youngblood of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station at College Station resulted in a meeting called at Del Rio in early 1915.

The meeting was called by Johnston Robertson and J.B. Murrah of Del Rio, V.A. Brown of Rocksprings, B.M. Halbert of Sonora, and E.E. Strickland of Juno. The session was set for January 13, 1915, with the object being the discussion of scientific Angora goat breeding at A&M College.

Aubrey Gist of Bluffdale was among those principally interested in furthering breeding experiments. His attitude was expressed in a letter to Dr. Youngblood, director of state experiment stations since 1911, on July 31, 1914: “I was gratified to learn that you are keenly alive to the possibilities of improving the Angora goat and to the urgent need of concerted action with that object in view. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind about this country being able to evolve a much superior Angora than we have today, if the forces now at work are

directed in the right channels. The trouble is we are running at random and while progress is being made, it is uncertain in that we have no standard of which is a perfect Angora. I will very much appreciate it if you will tell me the plan you have for taking up experimental breeding of Angora goats at the Experiment Station, and to what extent you hope to carry this work.”

In the course of the meeting at Del Rio, the conversation turned to a subject uppermost in the minds of the practical ranchmen present: current diseases of their sheep and goats. R.E. Taylor turned to Dr. Youngblood and asked, “Why can’t West Texas have an experiment station to work on our problems such as these just as other sections of the state have?” Dr. Youngblood replied that he knew of no reason to prevent such a station being established.

The ranchmen named Mr. Halbert chairman of a committee to appear before the Texas Legislature on behalf of the station. Working with him were Johnston Robertson and J.S. Gething. An appropriation of \$15,000 was to be requested of the Legislature to establish the experimental unit.

Events of the preceding months brought home to these men the need for a statewide organization to represent their interests, so this same gathering served as the original organization of what is now known as the Texas Sheep & Goat Raisers’ Association. J.B. Murrah was chosen president of the first association and Julian LaCrosse, a young Del Rio attorney, was elected secretary-treasurer. The new organization also had a committee to work on the station, including Mr. Robertson, Mr. Halbert, Mr. Brown and Mr. Strickland.

Returning to Sonora, Mr. Halbert called a meeting of the Stockmen’s Protective Association of Sutton County and asked that the president of the organization, R.E. Taylor, take his place on the committee named to ask for the experiment station appropriation. This change was approved, with the association to manage expenses incurred, and wires were sent to other members of the committee. Of the group, however, only Johnston Robertson joined Mr. Taylor at Austin. Later in February, V.A. Brown of Rocksprings and J.B. Murrah of Del Rio went to Austin.

In presenting a brief to the appropriations committee, Mr. Robertson pointed out the growth of the Angora industry in the state, told of its utilization of the “wastelands” of Texas, presented data on tariff walls raised by Turkey and South Africa on exportations of Angoras, and told of the ailments of the rapidly expanding industry.

The answer to the appearance of the four West Texans by the Legislature was the appropriation of \$10,000 to establish a goat experiment station in or near Del Rio, with \$5,000 set aside for expenses in 1916 and 1917.

The governing board of the experiment station was comprised of P.L. Downs of Temple, Charles Rogan of Austin, J.E. Boog-Scott of Coleman, and Dr. Youngblood. This board, after an investigation, estimated that it would take \$20,000 to establish such a station and suggested that ranchmen raise the needed \$10,000 by subscription. V.A. Brown began this work in the Rocksprings area and Mr. Halbert did similar work at Sonora.

There was considerable disagreement among the goat men with the Legislature's proposed location of the station in or near Del Rio. It was felt that this was not the true center of the goat country and that practical experiments could not be carried out there that would hold true in other sections where Angoras were run. With this in mind, the Sonora list carried the restriction that the money would be used for a station located within 25 miles of Sonora.

Dr. Youngblood, J.M. Jones, J.E. Boog-Scott and Dr. H. Schmidt were in Sonora on July 12 and 13 in 1915 in response to an invitation to attend a Trades' Day. This invitation was extended to provide an opportunity to acquaint the members of the governing board with possibilities of a station located in that area.

At that time Mr. Halbert was in New Mexico on a vacation; on his return, he was handed a subscription list by John Allison. This list carried names of eight men offering \$900 toward the station. Mr. Halbert's name raised the total to \$1,000. He then took the list and began calling on his neighbors, asking them to "sweeten the pot." While he worked he was also hunting a possible location for the station.

Thinking that two or three sections of land would fill the requirements, Mr. Halbert located a one-section improved place owned by Jim Merck, and Sonorans put up \$50 for a six-month option at \$10/acre. Adjoining this country was the D.B. Cusenbary ranch, and negotiations were started to include two sections of this land in the deal.

Mr. Brown, who had circulated a list at Rocksprings, was invited to inspect the site and the two men pronounced it ideal for the purpose. The country was covered with live oak, shinnery, catclaw, sacahuista, rolling hills and a variety of native grasses, and had an elevation of about 2,400 feet.

Within a short time, Mr. Halbert's list was raised to between \$3,000 and \$5,000. His solicitation met refusals from only two ranchmen.

At a quarterly meeting of the Texas Sheep & Goat Raisers' Association, the president, J.B. Murrah of Del Rio, requested the Sonoran to remove the "strings" from his subscription list. The goat breeder put the matter up to the boys back home who were responsible for the final figure on the funds and the Sutton County men stood firm on their choice of location.

An invitation was issued in February of 1916 to the governing board to inspect the proposed sites, one on the Sutton and Edwards county line, the present location, and another on Devils' River. The board returned to Austin without having made a decision and later a wire requested that Mr. Halbert come to the capitol.

In company with Mr. Cusenbary, Mr. Halbert went to Austin on March 7, 1916. After a conference with the ranchmen, it was decided conditionally to purchase five sections of the Cusenbary ranch at \$6.50/acre, with the station assuming about \$2,000 due to the state. One condition was that the West Texans would supplement the \$10,000 station appropriation with \$8,000 cash. Mr. Halbert wired his Rocksprings co-worker and before the wire was cold, he had a reply to the effect that the money was coming. This left only the necessity of securing Mrs. Cusenbary's agreement to the trade and the approval of the abstract. Mrs. Cusenbary agreed and the abstract was sent in for the approval of the attorney-general and the governor.

While awaiting the signatures of the state officials, Mr. Halbert made a trip to College Station. There he found that the infant station was numbered 13. This set off strenuous objection. "It can't be done," the Sonoran told them. "You can't pin a number like 13 on this goat station. It'll be Jonahed from the start." The college skipped 13.

Final date for closing the transaction with the Cusenbarys was set for June 1, 1916. At that time no word had come from Austin and Mr. Cusenbary asked for a thousand dollars forfeit to put the date forward 60 days. Mr. Halbert requested three days to raise the money and he, W.L. Aldwell, R.E. Taylor, John Allison and J.T. Evans put up \$500. A wire was sent to Mr. Brown at Rocksprings to set a meeting place between the two towns. The next day, Mr. Halbert, Mr. Brown and J.D. Pepper met on the old Rocksprings road to attempt a solution to the latest difficulty facing the nascent station. Mr. Brown wrote a check for the remaining \$500 and Mr. Pepper signed a note with him for the amount.

On June 22, 1916, the trade was closed at the First National Bank at Sonora during the first annual convention of the Texas Sheep & Goat Raisers' Association, making it a doubly momentous occasion.

It was discovered later that the delay in hearing from Austin on the abstract was caused when the attorney-general told the governing board that the land should be patented before the state could make the purchase. Judge Rogan took the matter up with Gov. Jim Ferguson and was told to go ahead with the deal, that the Legislature would provide the funds. (This incident, Mr. Halbert claimed, made him a "Ferguson man" for a while. He voted for Ferguson at the next election, but then said he'd been sorry ever since.) The abstract finally got the approval of the attorney-general and the way was cleared.

Mr. Halbert tells an amusing story of a mishap on a trip to Austin made by John S. Allison, R.E. Taylor and himself. Mr. Taylor visited with a relative in San Saba en-route to Austin and, arriving a day later than his friends, had a room down the hall from them at the hotel. Each morning Mr. Halbert would pass by and rap on Mr. Taylor's door saying, "Get up, Eli, and let's go feed the billies!" This happened each morning, becoming as much a part of the day as breakfast. When it came time to go home, Mr. Taylor left the other two men early in the evening, saying he had some calls to make. The next morning Mr. Halbert rapped on his door and said, "Get up Eli, and let's go feed the billies!" Nothing happened and he went back a second time with the same plea. A bootjack or something else about that size and weight hit the door and the Sonoran was treated to a plain and fancy exhibition of conversation that consigned all of Texas' goat men to a much warmer climate – all of this in a strange voice. Mr. Halbert hurriedly went to the desk and inquired about the occupant of the room. It was a Jewish traveling salesman from El Paso named Soloman. Mr. Halbert checked out next.

Following this visit to the capitol, Mr. Halbert returned home and assisted in the selection of stock for the experiment station. He worked with J.M. Jones in choosing registered Angoras and went to McKnight's with Dr. Youngblood to cut out the heifers later sent to the station. Particular credit was given by him to V.A. Brown of Rocksprings, who worked hand-in-hand with him in raising necessary funds. The two men didn't ask for a dollar, Mr. Halbert declared, without explaining to the possible donors the purpose of the station and the money it could save them by study, given the diseases that were taking toll on their livestock.

One donor, W.E. Glasscock, told the ranchman years later that he gave a hundred dollars at the beginning of the work and that he could have as easily given a thousand if he had been giving only a small percentage of what the station had saved him.

The general attitude of the ranchmen has always been, Mr. Halbert said, that the experiment station was created for them, and has been and is theirs for practical answers to their needs.

Mr. Halbert has a complete file of letters written by various West Texans and A&M University officials relative to the establishment of the station. It was from these letters and from incidents recalled that he reconstructed the series of events leading to the founding of the station.

A yellowed copy of the Sonora New Era, dated June 10, 1916, provided a partial list of ranchmen and business firms contributing money to the cause and Mr. Halbert recalled several other donors. It has been impossible to obtain a list of donors from the Edwards County area.

Listed were the following: R.E. Taylor, \$100; J.A. Cauthorn, \$50; Wool Growers Central Storage Co., \$250; Oscar Appelt, \$100; R.F. Halbert \$50; V.J. Turney \$50; J.N. Ross, \$200; T.B. Adams, \$100; B.M. Halbert, \$100; J.H. Luckie, \$10; Alfred Schweining, \$10; E.M. Kirkland, \$100; First National Bank, \$150; J.S. Allison, \$100; Simmons & Co., \$25; West Texas Lumber Co., \$25; C.O. Ridley, \$10; H.P. Cooper, \$25; George L. and R.E. Aldwell, \$100; S.L. Kirkpatrick, \$20; Jesse T. Evans, \$25; Bob Cauthorn, \$50; Thomas Bond, \$50; Robert Halbert, Jr., \$25; Allison Brothers, \$100; B.F. Bellows, \$25; B.B. Dunbar, \$25; Theo Savell, \$100; J.W. Trainer, \$25; J.R. Davis, \$25; J.G. Barton, \$25; E.F. VanderStucken, Co., \$200; Arthur Stuart, \$100; W.C. Bryson, \$20; D.J. Wyatt, \$25; H.P. Allison, \$100; S.H. Stokes, \$50; Walter Davis, \$25; Robert Johnson, \$10; George Allison, \$100; Sonora Mercantile Co., \$100; A.F. Clarkson, \$100; W.E. Glasscock, \$100; S.E. McKnight, \$100; J.E. Robbins, \$100; J.T. Shurley, \$100; City Grocery, \$50; Ira L. Wheat, \$50; Hull & North, \$50; J.E. Grimland, \$25; B.W. Hutcherson, \$25; B.F. Meckel, \$25; August Meckel, \$25; G.W. Stephenson, \$25; J.W. Wilson, \$25; Roy Hudspeth, \$25; R.H. Martin & Co., \$20; Russell Martin & Co., \$20; Wm. Mittle, \$10; W.F. Luckie, \$10; W.E. Hodges, \$50; D. B. Cusenbary, \$250; J.T. Evans, \$100; E.E. Sawyer, \$50; Cornell & Wardlaw, \$100; Sol Mayer, \$100; W.A. Miers, \$100; Fred & Joe Berger, \$25; McDonald Hotel, \$25; and G.W. Morris, \$25.