

# Mother Neff State Park

Mother Neff, as she is often referred, was born Isabella Eleanor Sheppard in Roanoke, Virginia, in 1830. She was the youngest of 12 children. She married Noah Neff in 1854, and after a few days of marriage, they decided to move to Texas. Because they did not drive on Sundays, it took them 52 days by carriage to drive from Roanoke to Belton, Texas. They lived in Belton for three months, eventually moving into a small log cabin near Eagle Springs. There they reared a family of nine children, who later bore them 18 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. The Neffs were very proud of their youngest son, Pat Morris Neff, who became a school teacher, lawyer, governor of Texas in 1921 and president of Baylor University. In 1882, Noah Neff died before seeing his son in the governor's mansion; Mother Neff lived with her son in the mansion until her death in May of 1924.

The Neffs owned the six acres of land that originated the park. Often groups would call Mrs. Neff requesting the use of her land for meetings and gatherings. One specific group, the Woodsmen of the World of the Whitson community, would gather every year for a picnic and celebration. Since 1905, they have used the grounds. Many times the Woodsmen offered Mother Neff payment for the use of the grounds, but she wouldn't have it. Mrs. Neff told them, "As long as the Woodsmen of Whitson maintain

a lodge, the picnic grounds shall be free to them, and they shall be open for song fests, revival meetings, and other meetings that have a moral and spiritual community uplift."

After the death of Mother Neff, Pat Neff fulfilled the wishes of his mother and deeded the land to the public. In 1934, Gov. Neff donated another 250 acres adjoining the original six donated by his mother. Oftentimes forgotten, a gentleman by the name of F.P. Smith donated three and one-third acres to the park, and we are very grateful for his contribution. All of this makes up the present 259 acres of Mother Neff State Park.

In 1934, the Civilian Conservation Corps set up a camp at the park until 1938. They developed the park as you know it today. They built the rock tabernacle, rec-hall, roads throughout the park, the stone water tower that held 11,000 gallons of water at the time it was built, the park residence and the drainage system. Keep in mind, bulldozers and backhoes weren't a part of the technology of the 1930s. It was all done by hand and by the sweat of their brows.

Thanks to the generosity of the Neffs and the efforts of the CCC, Mother Neff State Park is considered the first official state park in Texas.

