



# SPREAD OAKS RANCH

*Go Deeper Into the Heart of Texas*

Founded by  
**STEPHEN F. AUSTIN**

**DE WITT'S COLONY**



**MAP OF TEXAS**  
With Parts of the Adjoining States  
COMPILED BY STEPHEN F. AUSTIN  
PUBLISHED BY H. S. TANNER PHILADELPHIA

Note: The Latitude and Longitude of all the Western  
Sides, Rivers, Mountains and the Coast when the Survey  
was first made, before any of the observations  
of GENERAL TERREY of the MEXICAN ARMY.

SCALE OF MILES  
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

## Stephen F. Austin and the “Old Three Hundred”

*Tracing the history of Spread Oaks Ranch to its first American landowners*

Rob Sawyer, author of *A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting: The Decoys, Guides, Clubs, and Places, 1870s to 1970s*; *Texas Market Hunting: Stories of Waterfowl, Game Laws, and Outlaws*; and the upcoming *Texas Waterfowl Hunting Images from the 1900s* is currently delving into the history of Spread Oaks Ranch.

Sawyer, a semi-retired petroleum geologist who also guides waterfowl hunts and leads retriever training at Spread Oaks Ranch, is attacking his historical research with his usual laser-focused approach and has unearthed fascinating historical data on the property.

Arguably some of the most intriguing research has led to the discovery that the first two American owners of land that now comprises Spread Oaks Ranch were among Stephen F. Austin’s “Old Three Hundred,” a group of settlers who the Mexican government enticed to settle its northern province of Texas—undoubtedly to help Mexico keep a foothold in this wild frontier after both France and Spain had failed to do so.

### Prior Attempts at Settlement

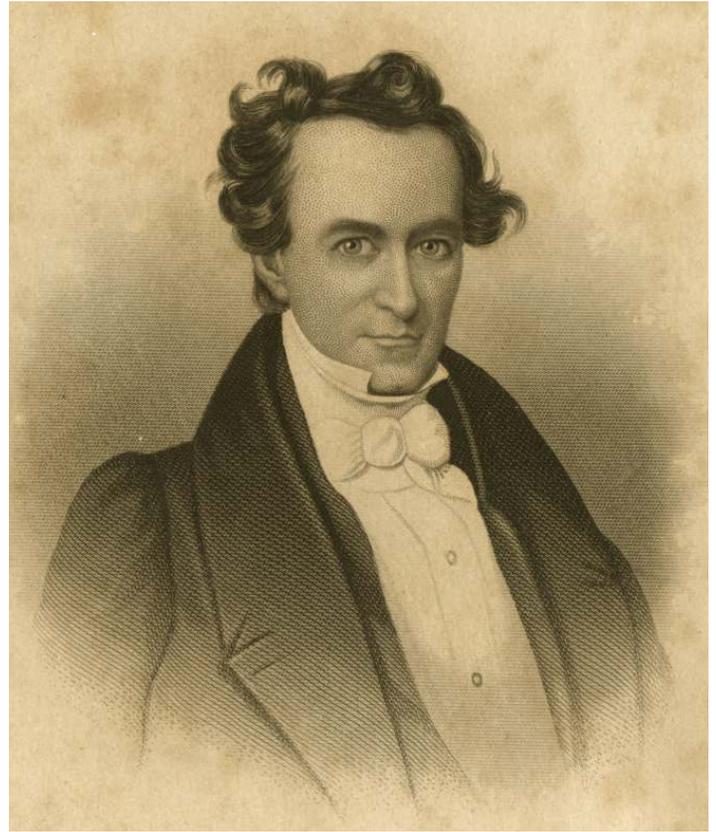
French colonization had begun in 1685, when explorer Robert Cavelier de La Salle established a fort on Arenosa Creek, which flowed into Matagorda Bay. But La Salle and five of his men would be murdered in a mutiny two years later. By then, the Spanish had caught wind of La Salle’s endeavors, and fearing that the French colony could jeopardize their stake in New Spain, mounted several expeditions to locate and destroy the French fort. They succeeded in doing so in 1689, but by then, most of the French colonists had already succumbed to Karankawa depredations and disease.

Spain would then try its hand in settling this region, holding sway over Texas from 1690 until 1821, with its reign defined by three phases: the first, an evaluation of the land and its resources; second, a period of cultural absorption spearheaded by missionaries in which Spanish influence seeped into native American culture; and third, a period of defensive occupation, which was dictated by the need to fend off other nations—notably England and France—eager to make inroads in Texas.

Although France had ceded all territory west of the Mississippi to Spain prior to the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the retrocession of Louisiana to France in 1800 and its subsequent sale to the United States in 1803 left its western boundary in contentious dispute. That messy boundary issue, coupled with Mexico’s fight for independence, which began in 1810 and would ultimately succeed in September of 1821 when Mexico won its independence from Spain, wrested Texas from Spanish control.

So in 1821, the Mexicans—having witnessed the toll that disease, pestilence, and depredations by Apache, Comanche, Karankawa, and Lipan Indians had taken on the Spanish missions and the missionaries sent to spread Christianity among the natives—thought they’d try a different plan to hang onto Texas when France and Spain could not: They’d recruit those pugnacious *Norteamericanos* to settle Texas, and let them bear the brunt of it.

We all know how that would turn out, as Texas won her independence from Mexico just 15 short years later. But what happened during the course of those 15 years would change Texas forevermore.



An 1836 engraving of Stephen F. Austin

### Stephen F. Austin, Empresario by Chance

In January of 1821 Moses Austin had received a permit from Spain to settle 300 families in Texas. Moses died in June 1821 and his son, Stephen Fuller Austin, persuaded Antonio María Martínez—who would be the last governor of Spanish Texas (as Mexico became a sovereign nation in September of 1821)—to allow him to assume his father’s role as empresario.

Being an empresario—basically a land agent—was a pretty sweet deal: An empresario received just over 23,000 acres of land for every 100 families he could recruit, so Austin’s “Old Three Hundred” meant more than 70,000 acres to his name. By the summer of 1824, he had most of his colonists in place.

Not that Austin wasn’t choosy, however: As he wanted to avoid issues with his colonists, most were of substantial means and well-educated. In fact, only four of the 300 were illiterate.

Along the rich river bottomlands of the Brazos and Colorado rivers—the heart of Austin’s colony—the grantees found ample water for crops and livestock, and abundant possibilities in the free-roaming Spanish mustangs to bend to saddle or plow, the multitudes of longhorned cattle and bison that could be utilized for hides, tallow, and meat; the trees that could be felled for lumber; the bounty of mustang grapes and other wild edibles; and the proliferation of wild game and waterfowl for sustenance.

Two of those freshly minted Texas landowners, 36-year-old Tennessean Hosea H. League and 24-year-old Arkansan John Crier would stake their claims on lands that are now part of Spread Oaks Ranch.

# A Glimpse into Early Texas History

Original Mexican land grant documents prove Spread Oaks Ranch's unique legacy

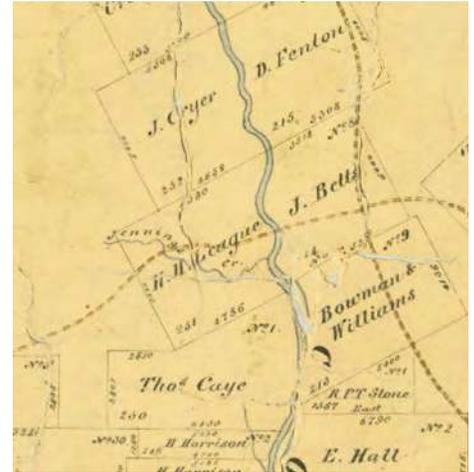
Mexico's 1823 state colonization law opened the way for Americans to settle in its northern provinces of Coahuila and Texas. For a modest fee, heads of families could obtain as much as a league (*sitio*) of grazing land—4,428.4 acres—and a labor—177.1 acres—of cropland after becoming citizens of Mexico.

Below are the first pages of four-page land grant documents on what is now Spread Oaks Ranch, each granting a *sitio* of land to Hosea H. League and John Crier, that reside with the Texas General Land Office. The second and fourth pages of both documents were signed by then-empresario Stephen F. Austin.

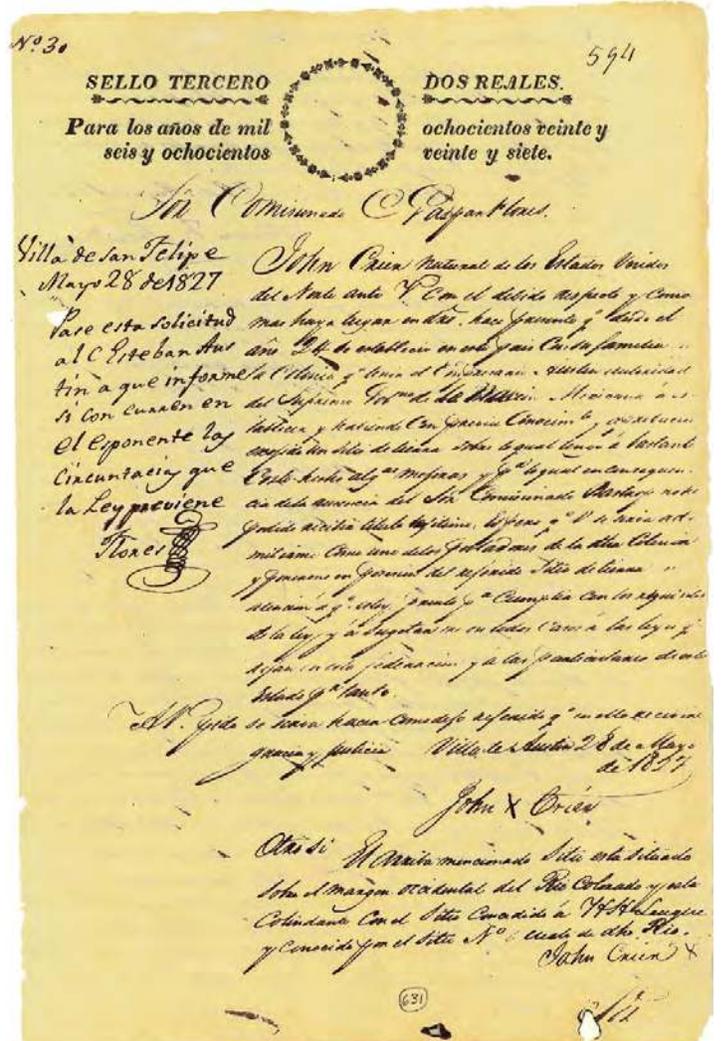
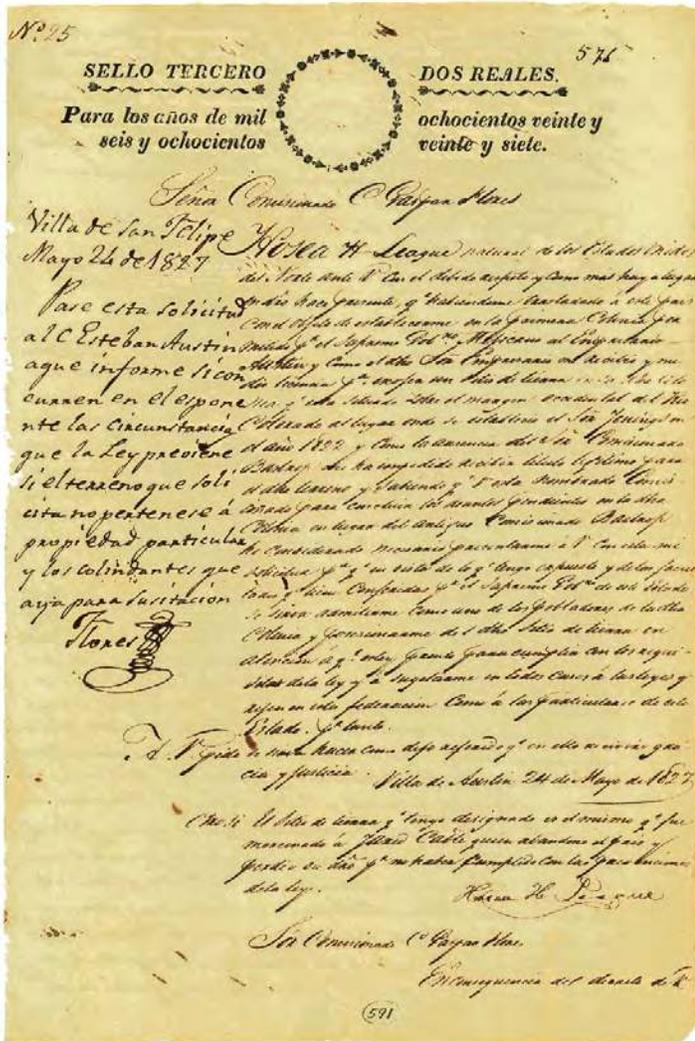
Note the additional text on the lefthand side of both documents, signed

by "Flores," with his distinctive flourish. Gaspar Flores de Abrego represented the Mexican government as the Bexar land commissioner, and recorded deeds for most of Austin's original 300 settlers.

Flores, a pivotal figure in early Texas history, played a key role in the Texas Revolution by formally denouncing President Santa Anna, and later refusing to surrender his official documents to Mexico. Branded as a traitor with a price on his head, he donated all his goods and cattle to the Texians who remained in Bexar to face Santa Anna's army, and fled to East Texas in the exodus known as the Runaway Scrape. He would have returned a hero after the Battle of San Jacinto, but died of a fever along the route back at the age of 55.



Detail from a certified copy of the 1833 Connected Map of Austin's Colony, showing the original land grants on what is now Spread Oaks Ranch.



Thirty-six-year-old Hosea H. League brought his wife and five slaves with him from Tennessee in 1827, and John Crier, a 24-year-old widower who hailed from Arkansas, also brought five slaves, along with his daughter and his son Andrew, who would later serve in Sam Houston's army during the Texas Revolution.

## We're Counting Down to the Hunting Season Opener

*Fewer than 100 days remain until the opening of dove and teal seasons, so book your dream hunt now*

Spread Oaks Ranch Business Manager Tim Soderquist, who grew up in neighboring Wharton, has a vision. "I want to bring back 'The Gentleman's Duck Hunt' of the Texas MidCoast," he says.

Noting that he's been on numerous duck hunts himself that involve heavy slogs through gumbo-bottomed marsh in the predawn, Soderquist's habitat goals include careful planning for hunter accessibility so guides can put hunters "on the X" in five to 10 minutes from the lodge, without putting them through a long, strenuous journey to the duck blind before sunrise.

"We've enhanced and augmented the natural infrastructure around our ponds to achieve this," he says, "which will be completely evident to our hunters the first time they go afield with us. I predict they'll be delighted."

In addition to accessibility and blind placement, a crucial component is correctly matching the hunting blinds to the habitat.

"Our array of blinds is very diverse and habitat-driven," says Soderquist. "For example, we have very low-profile blinds—such as pit blinds—for our prairies and flooded crop fields. We have pontoon-mounted blinds that are very stable and can be moved around to where the birds want to be, and other mobile floatable blinds that are quite luxurious, in addition to a wide variety of strategically placed fixed blinds."

Spread Oaks Ranch has recently added six new ponds, averaging about 40 acres apiece, with some of these doubling as rice fields. Currently, the ranch boasts 38 water impoundments—with more being built—stretching across seven miles.

This abundant waterfowl habitat provides stellar shooting opportunities plus refueling/loafing habitat that keeps ducks on the ranch instead of moving southward in search of groceries.



Speaking of "duck groceries," Spread Oaks Ranch withstood early June's deluge—more than nine inches in less than six hours—in good shape, and is draining nicely. "Some of the native sunflowers took a pounding," says Soderquist, "but should rebound. The brown-top millet and milo fields are doing well, as are the rice crops."

In addition, the native seed bank will respond well in the flooded fields with the growth of duckweed, smartweed, sago pondweed, and other sub-surface and emergent aquatic plants favored by dabbling ducks.

Booking is underway for the 2019-2020 waterfowling season, and choice dates are going fast. To book your dream waterfowl hunt, please contact Tim Soderquist at [tim@spreadoaksranch.com](mailto:tim@spreadoaksranch.com) or call him at (281) 814-5442.



**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MARK YOUR CALENDARS:** Both South Zone dove season and teal season open on September 14, 2019. At Spread Oaks Ranch, you can combine a morning teal hunt with an afternoon dove hunt, or choose to add in a hog hunt, an alligator hunt, freshwater fishing on the ranch, or a saltwater fishing excursion.

## Summertime Recreation Abounds at Spread Oaks Ranch

*Choose from a variety of indoor and outdoor pastimes—or simply choose to relax and unwind!*



**SUMMERTIME AND THE LIVIN' IS EASY:** (Clockwise from top left) Lounge poolside and take a refreshing dip in our endless swim-spa and infinity-edge pool; retreat to the well-appointed gameroom with pool table, card table, board games, snack bar, and television; catch a bass in our five-acre stocked lake; enjoy s'mores and cocktails around the firepit; indulge in a game of horseshoes; and hone your shooting skills in a friendly round of skeet.

## Let's Meat Up!

*Chef Ric Rosser goes "whole hog" in preparation for hunting season*



**C**hef Rosser recently received a delivery of organically raised heritage hogs from Hill Country farmer Bobby Buff of Twisted Oak Farms in Hondo, Texas.

To prepare for the upcoming hunting season, Rosser procured 10 Tamworth heritage hogs from Buff, which were slaughtered and inspected at J&J Packing Co. in Brookshire.

"Even after that, the delivery of the chilled carcasses weighed more than a ton," says Rosser, who did most of the butchering himself and spent three days inside the ranch's meat locker. "It was pretty overwhelming. I couldn't have done it without the help of Bobby Buff,

Wharton Game Warden Scott Blackburn (a childhood pal of Rosser's), and Warren Lowery, who assisted with the heavy lifting and primal cuts."

Once the initial butchering was completed, the work of preparing the meat for the table began. Rosser trimmed, cured, wrapped, and hung 20 hams, trimmed 20 loins (leaving a two-inch fat cap), cut numerous two-rib pork chops, and vacuum-sealed trim to make both link and bulk sausage.

"Many of the shoulders will be utilized for what I foresee to be one of Spread Oaks Ranch's signature dishes—carnitas with organic polenta," says Rosser. "I've also removed the shoulder blades

from a number of them, so I can make buckboard bacon."

Buckboard bacon, also called Montana bacon, is made by smoking boneless hog shoulder to a safe internal temperature, then pan-frying it in a skillet; it's meatier and less fatty than regular bacon.

There'll be plenty of regular bacon, as well, made from pork bellies that will be cured and lightly smoked. Also look for plenty of ribs to hit the smoker.

"I'm saving the tenderloins," says Rosser, "to make lonzino, I'll apply a wet cure and then age in the meat locker." This air-dried, lean Italian salame is also destined to become one of Spread Oaks Ranch's signature treats.



**TOP:** Bobby Buff displays two loins, each weighing about 35 pounds; Primal cuts await final butchering; Game Warden Scott Blackburn with pork ribs. **ABOVE:** Two-rib pork chops will be trimmed, vacuum-sealed, and frozen; Chef Rosser, who spent several days inside the meat locker, trims one of the 20 hams he will be curing.

## A Forager's Delight

*Chef Rosser exploring ranch for Spread Oaks Ranch's wild edibles*

It's almost like a 5,500-acre grocery store, I marvel; no wonder some of Texas' first settlers chose this location to forge their future.

Chef Ric Rosser agrees: He's constantly on the lookout, as he explores Spread Oaks Ranch, for unusual wild edibles, and ways to incorporate them into his menus.

A recent discovery is a substantial-sized clump of elderberries—only found in a few dozen of Texas' 254 counties. Elderberries are high in Vitamins A and D, and in calcium. The flowers can be used for syrups and for homemade St. Germain's elderflower liqueur, and the berries can be used in pancakes, muffins, pies, syrups, jellies, and elderberry wine.

Chile pequins—sometimes called chiltepins—also grow in the wild here. They have a citrusy, smoky flavor, are the official wild pepper of Texas, and pack a Scoville rating of 40,000 to 60,000 units, as compared to jalapeños, which measure 2,500 to 8,000 Scoville units.

Two kinds of wild grapes can be

found at Spread Oaks Ranch: the earlier-ripening mustang grape at the eastern end of its native range, and the Southern classic muscadine grape at the western end of its range. Lucky us!

Other readily available wild edibles include cattails (the tubers and young shoots are edible, and the pollen can be used as a high-protein, gluten-free flour substitute), acorns, a wide variety of edible wildflowers and greens such as dayflower, passionflower, Queen Anne's lace, primrose, chickweed, corn salad, and cat's ear, and edible aquatic plants such as arrowroot, duckweed, pickleweed, smartweed, and young river cane.

Non-edible—but useful!—plants we've identified so far include the prickly ash, or "toothache tree," so-called because its bark, leaves, and berries contain a natural anesthetic, released when chewed.

We look forward to hosting you on a plant identification tour on your next visit to Spread Oaks Ranch!



**CONTINUOUS SEASONS OF BOUNTY:** Old-growth native pecans (above) show promise of a strong fall/winter crop. At right, from top: Dewberries proliferate throughout the ranch during the spring; Elderberries have bloomed and will ripen in July; Wild chile pequin peppers will be harvested in August and September; Wild mustang grapes (shown) will ripen in mid-summer, followed by wild muscadine grapes in late summer/early fall.

## Loggerhead Shrike, the “Butcher Bird”

*This two-ounce, seriously badass songbird takes down prey up to three times its body weight*

As you ease down our ranch roads, you might occasionally see the corpses of insects, lizards, and small snakes impaled on the barbs of the barbed-wire fences. Start looking around for this little masked rascal—the diminutive loggerhead shrike, whose Latin name *Lanius* means “butcher” and is commonly known as the butcher bird.

Smaller than robins, these masked, carnivorous songbirds might well be raptors masquerading as warblers. As do raptors, they stalk their prey from above—usually from utility wires or tree branches—and swoop down to grab insects, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, and even other birds with their sharply hooked, raptor-like beaks. They’ll also snatch flying prey such as moths and dragonflies mid-air.

Grasping their prey at the nape of the neck, butcher birds then rapidly roll their thick-necked heads from side to side—about 11 times per second and exerting about 6 G’s—with enough force to separate the vertebrae of even a large rat.

Since they don’t have talons to tear into their food as do raptors, butcher birds then impale their prey on thorns, sharp twigs, and fence barbs. They’ll return to their cache later to feed. While both sexes exhibit this hunting and feeding behavior, during the summer breeding season, males will often create an expansive array of impaled carcasses along a section of barbed wire to demonstrate their suitability for mating.

Once a female has selected a mate, both will inspect many potential sites before selecting one and gathering materials to build a nest. The female, however, usually constructs the nest on her own, building a neatly woven, well-insulated open cup lined with soft materials such as flowers, grass, feathers, and fur. She’ll hatch one or two broods each summer, typically with five to six chicks in each brood.



Loggerhead shrike populations have fallen precipitously. According to the North American Breeding Bird Survey, loggerhead shrike numbers have declined by 76 percent from 1966 to 2015. They’ve been listed as endangered, threatened, or of special concern in several states and in Canada.

Biologists hypothesize that the species’ decline may result in part from the shrike’s ingestion of pesticide-laced prey, but also list habitat loss caused by conversion of hayfields and pasturelands to development and decimation of hedgerows among causes of the decline of these remarkable birds.

Happily, because of loggerhead shrikes’ potentially high reproductive rate, the species may be able to

stabilize—and perhaps even recover—if the causes for its decline can be identified and eliminated ... or even just staunched.

We love to see these delightful, extraordinary birds thriving along the fencerows of our organic croplands and pasturelands at Spread Oaks Ranch and hope you will be, too: Just be on the lookout for the telltale signs of tiny carcasses impaled on the barbed-wire fences!



### COMING NEXT MONTH:

In the July newsletter, we’ll highlight Spread Oaks Ranch’s waterways and their impact on a property that integrates waterfowl habitat with large-scale farming and ranching operations with holistic care. Sign up for our newsletter at [spreadoaksranch.com](http://spreadoaksranch.com)—don’t miss a single issue!

*“Ninety minutes from Houston,  
yet a world away.”*

Visit Spread Oaks Ranch online at [spreadoaksranch.com](http://spreadoaksranch.com).

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