

The gnarled Shaggy Bark Juniper tree on Carolyn Hills-Hitney's ranch holds the memories of a family who carved a life out of Arizona's high country, starting with a man named John Thomas "J.T." Cooper.

In 1910 J.T. and his wife, Martha Brannan, arrived with their children and a restless determination. Born in Tennessee in 1862, J.T. had spent years learning the cattle trade in Texas before marrying Martha in 1888. They came to Arizona after scouting the territory for a place where livestock could thrive, settling on a patch of grassland called Clack's Barrels—today part of Talking Rock Ranch. Their first herd was modest: a few Angora goats grazing among granite outcrops and mesquite. But J.T. was a builder. By purchase, lease, and homestead, he added sheep, then cattle, and in 1915 secured grazing rights on Arizona State Trust lands.

The ranch quickly became a gathering place. In the summer of 1927, neighbors from miles around rumbled down dusty tracks to the Cooper spread for a grand barbecue. Three beeves, several sheep, and young goats turned slowly on spits, filling the valley with the scent of mesquite smoke. Cowboys raced their horses across the flats, ropers showed off their skill, and fiddles played well into the night as families danced under a sky so clear it seemed to echo with stars.

By the 1930s the ranch was known as J.T. Cooper & Sons. William and Roy, two of J.T.'s boys, worked alongside their father as the herds grew. But hard times shadowed the success. The Depression tightened markets. Martha died of cancer in 1932. Then, in 1938, a roping accident claimed Roy's life. Two years later, J.T. himself died from a ruptured appendix, leaving William to carry the burden alone.

Yet the next generation was already stepping forward. Learah Cooper, J.T.'s fourth daughter, had married Jack Morgan in 1928. Jack was a young construction engineer with the Santa Fe Railroad, tall and capable, with the quiet confidence of a man who could lay track through mountains. Around 1934, Learah and Jack bought William's share, and the Cooper ranch became the Cooper-Morgan Ranch.

Jack's work carried the couple far beyond Arizona. Between 1949 and 1953, they lived in Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela while he supervised major railroad and road projects. In their absence the ranch was left in the care of trusted managers, men who kept the cattle fed and the fences tight until the Morgans returned.

Back in Williamson Valley, Jack and Learah turned their attention to expansion. They specialized in red-face and white-face Herefords, and in 1963 they made their boldest move—purchasing the Jeb Stuart Ranch near Paulden for \$750,000. The deal added some seventy-five square miles of patented and leased land, the Muldoon Forest, and the coveted O-Bar and H brands. Over five years of steady acquisitions, the Morgans stretched their range from Williamson Valley to the Verde River headwaters, eventually controlling more than 7,000 acres of rugged Arizona country.

The ranch became a landmark of its own. By the late 1930s, even before the big expansions, county officials listed it as one of Arizona's premier guest ranches, a place where visitors could taste frontier life. Jack rose to lead the Yavapai County Cattle Growers Association, while Learah—once a schoolteacher—chronicled local history, editing *Echoes of the Past* and publishing essays in *Arizona Highways*.

But the land always demanded respect. In December 1968, a heavy snowstorm buried the range. Hundreds of cattle were stranded behind drifts crusted with ice. Jack worked with a crew to clear

fifteen miles of roads, guiding a bulldozer through the storm. As he leaned in to give the operator instructions, the engine's roar drowned out his words. The machine lurched forward, knocking Jack to the ground and pinning his foot in the steel tread. Quick-thinking hands freed him and rushed him by Jeep to the hospital, where surgeons saved the foot that had carried him across so many miles of wild country.

Jack Morgan died on November 3, 1978. Learah, strong and undaunted, kept the ranch running for another twelve years before retiring in 1990. She passed away the following January at the age of eighty-three. Soon after, developers acquired the property. By 1999 it had become part of the Talking Rock Ranch project, which preserved Inscription Canyon and its twelve hundred ancient petroglyphs. In 2006 Yavapai County set aside a portion as the Morgan Ranch Nature Park, a quiet space where visitors can still feel the sweep of history in the wind.

From a handful of goats to one of the largest cattle operations in Yavapai County, the Cooper–Morgan Ranch tells a story of grit and endurance, of family triumphs and heartbreaks, and of a landscape that continues to hold their legacy beneath the endless Arizona sky.

Kathy Lopez

Added to History: "I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER LEARAH COOPER-MORGAN ROUNDING UP HER CATTLE ON MY PROPERTY WE BOUGHT 50 YEARS AGO. I REMEMBER ALSO; TURNING IN CATTLE RUSTLERS STEALING HER CATTLE ONE NIGHT AT MY BACK GATE. I PHONED THE POLICE AND THEY WERE CAUGHT!"

Carolyn Hills/Hitney