

Flower of the Wilderness,  
Mother Neff and  
the State Parks of Texas



Martha Deeringer

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## **MOTHER NEFF AND THE STATE PARKS OF TEXAS**

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Early Life on a Plantation**

Isabella Eleanor Shepherd was born on her grandfather's plantation a few miles above Roanoke, Virginia, on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1830. After a carefree childhood, her life would take an adventurous turn leading her to the Texas frontier where she would make a place for herself along with her youngest son in the history of Texas.

Isabella's parents and grandparents owned and operated the Roanoke plantation, but during the school year Isabella's father, Louis Shepherd, was a well-respected teacher in Roanoke. Her grandfather had come to America in 1777 from France with the Marquis de Lafayette, a wealthy French soldier who crossed the ocean to fight on the side of the colonists during the Revolutionary War. In America, Lafayette joined forces with General George Washington, and Isabella's grandfather served as minister to the troops. When the war ended, he bought the plantation in Virginia, married and raised a family. His son, Louis, stayed to help out with work on the plantation when he was not teaching, and Isabella and her twelve brothers and sisters were born and raised there.

Grandfather Shepherd told exciting stories of his adventures during the Revolutionary War. The horrors of the winter of near-starvation at Valley Forge came to life for Isabella and her brothers and sisters in Grandfather Shepherd's stories. He told them about "firecake", an unsavory mixture of flour and water that was the only thing most soldiers had to eat that winter. The smell of burned flour seemed to fill Isabella's

nostrils as he described the way the soldiers mixed flour, water, and a little salt if they had it, shaped the dough into a flattened loaf, and baked it on a rock in the fire. Isabella's heart swelled with pride when he talked about the courage of the Continental Army. The starving soldiers trained all through that winter of terrible hardships. The next spring, they marched off to fight with newfound confidence. Five years later the colonists defeated the British and founded a new nation. The stories made Isabella dream of having adventures of her own.

Isabella's childhood overflowed with pleasant memories. She and her brothers and sisters played games under the shade trees that lined the lane leading to the plantation house. Supervised by their mother and a few beloved servants, the children led privileged lives. On nice days, they rode their ponies across the wide tobacco fields. The cool water of the creek beckoned them to take off their shoes and wade or swim. Sometimes they visited the workers' cabins to play with the children there. One of the grandmothers stayed behind to take care of the children while their parents worked in the fields.

Isabella loved books and learned to read early. The plantation had a large library of books collected by the family over generations. Some were brought over from France by her grandfather. He taught Isabella about the Bible and the important lessons it contained. Young ladies in Virginia modeled their lives around the teachings of the Bible. Before he came to America, Isabella's grandfather had studied the Bible in Paris. He made sure she learned her lessons well.

The Shepherd children also lived by the strict rules of Virginia society. Isabella's parents insisted that she and her brothers and sisters be polite, neatly dressed, and well behaved. The girls learned to fix their hair in elaborate braids or piles of curls. They wore dresses with delicate smocking, frills, and bows. Skirts lined with great, stiff petticoats were held away from the body with metal hoops. The wide skirts gave young women the appearance of having a slim waist, which was laced tightly into a corset to make it look as small as possible. Isabella envied her brothers their freedom to wear britches and go barefoot.

In the "great house" on the plantation, servants cooked and cleaned. The Shepherds did not own slaves. The workers on the plantation produced enough food for everyone. Isabella's grandfather, as owner of

the plantation, was responsible for the welfare of all the Negro workers. Some of the field hands learned trades, training as carpenters, blacksmiths and stockmen. Isabella's mother and grandmother taught the house servants the skills they needed and supervised the cooking and cleaning. When Isabella was old enough to supervise the servants herself, her mother explained:

“Be to their virtues very kind,  
Be to their faults a little blind.”

Unlike slaves, the Shepherd servants were paid for their work.

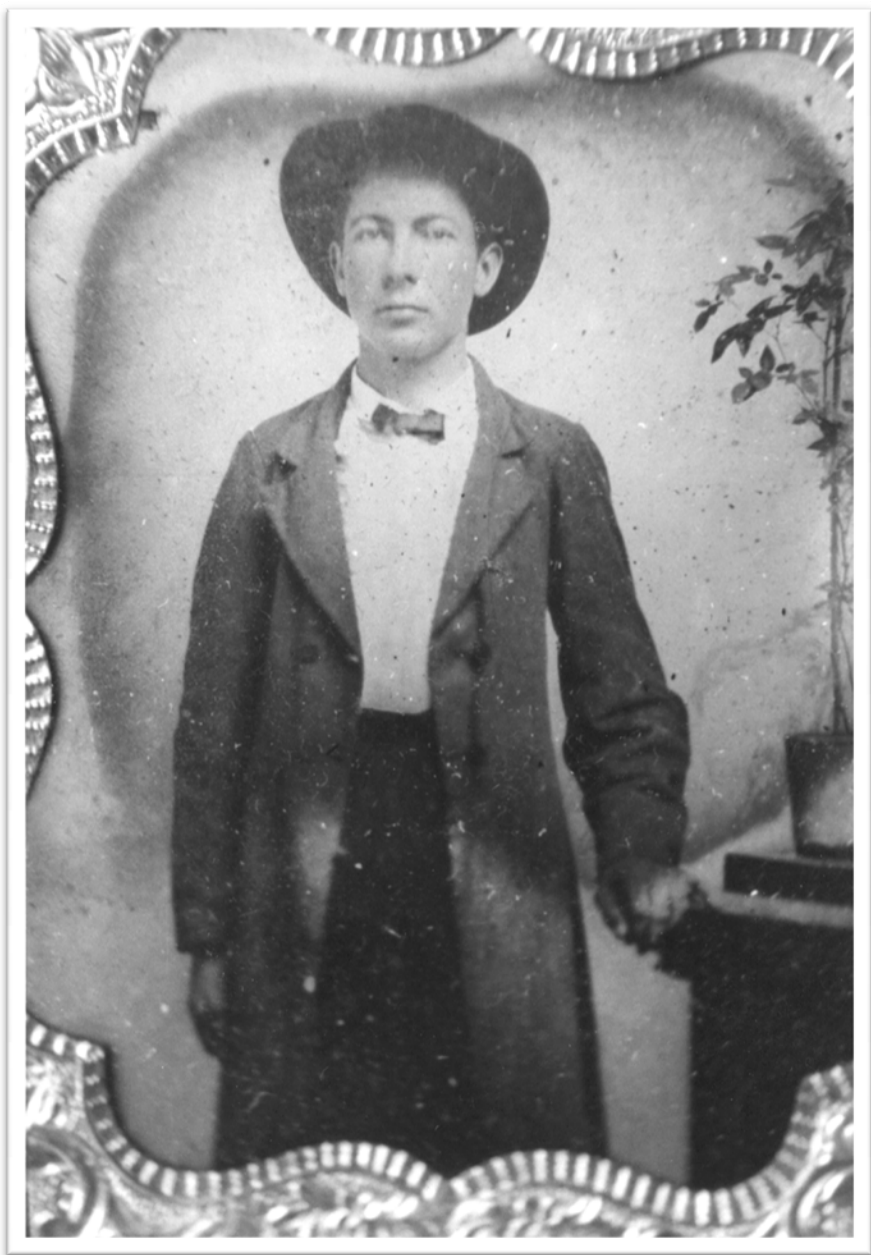
On her sixteenth birthday, Isabella joined her father as a schoolteacher. Walking into the schoolroom on that first day made her stomach flutter. As she gazed out over the eager faces, she realized that she was not much older than some of her students.

Now Isabella had another set of rules to follow. The principal of the school explained that as a new teacher she would be expected to teach for ten hours a day. Afterwards she would clean the schoolroom and make quill pens for the students. Any remaining time she might spend reading the Bible or other good books. And women teachers were not allowed to marry.

Isabella was twenty-four and had been teaching for eight years when Noah Neff proposed to her. Soon she would be considered an “old maid” by the standards of Virginia society. In Noah, she found everything she admired; a gentleman who was adventurous, thoughtful, kind, and brave. Isabella fell in love with him right away. When she looked into his dark eyes, she saw courage and strength. Noah was a Virginian but had traveled to Texas to see the frontier he had heard so much about. While he was there, he bought land in Bell and McLennan Counties and planned to return to Texas and settle there. When he proposed, he asked Isabella accompany him. Marrying Noah was her chance to escape from a life of rules. It was a challenge that beckoned to her, an opportunity to experience adventures like the ones her grandfather told about.

In the lavishly decorated ballroom of the plantation house the minister pronounced Noah and Isabella husband and wife on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1854. Three days later, they loaded their belongings into Noah's wagon and started for Texas, well over a thousand miles away.

*FLOWER OF THE WILDERNESS*



*Noah Neff*





*Young Isabella*

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