





Acknowledgements

The changing mission of Fort Bliss led the Fort Bliss Environmental Division Conservation Branch to contract MIRATEK and HNTB Corporation to prepare documentation on the historic context of ranching in the Tularosa Basin, highlighting the significance of the Coe Home Ranch and Mary Coe Blevins in the ranching history of New Mexico. This public brochure builds upon the technical report that explored the development of ranching in the Tularosa Basin in New Mexico, defined the contribution of rancher Mary Coe Blevins (1862-1953) within the broad patterns of the history of the Tularosa Basin (parts of which are included in Fort Bliss). This public oriented publication and its distribution is intended as an education tool that documents the contributions of Mary Coe Blevins in the Tularosa Basin. The Coe Home Ranch was determined eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places by the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer.

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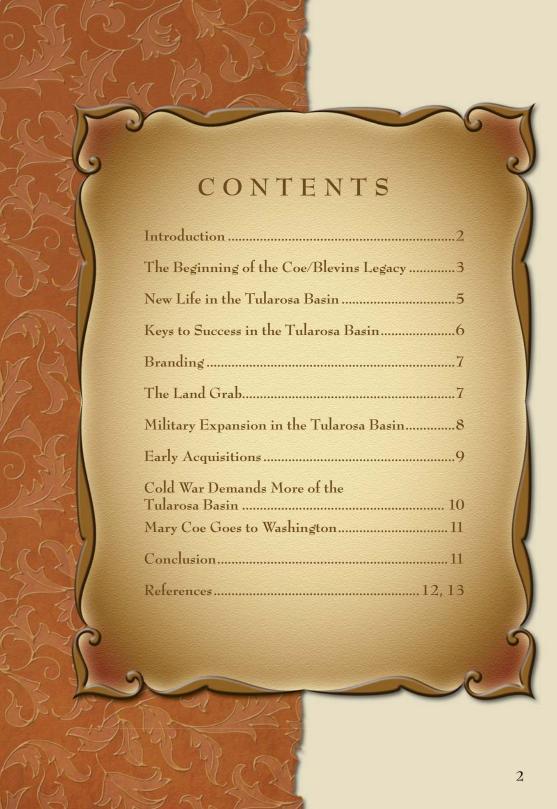
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Introduction

The Southwest has long been familiar with the daily military activity at Fort Bliss, Texas. Since the base was established in 1849, West Texas and New Mexico have supported military troops at Fort Bliss through historical battles and military initiatives. As a result, the modern Fort Bliss of today hardly resembles its humble beginnings. It began with a few companies stationed at a small outpost in what is now downtown El Paso. It grew into a state-of-the-art military installation that spans more than one million acres across Texas and New Mexico.

After the Civil War, a tremendous wave of Anglo-American settlers began a multi-decade migration from east of the Mississippi River to the western plains and Rocky Mountains The location of Fort Bliss was originally established to help protect travelers who were encouraged by the United States (U.S.) government to move west. There, they were to settle and develop an area that was sparse and arid. Individuals brave enough to relocate often faced the danger of territorial raids from American Indians and Mexican bandits, both of whom were common and deadly. Two years after it was founded, the installation was officially named Fort Bliss after Brevet Lieutenant Colonel William Wallace Smith Bliss He was General

Zachary Taylor's assistant general during the Mexican-American War and later served as secretary during Taylor's presidency.

Also at this time, the U.S. government conducted a comprehensive survey and produced a favorable report that stimulated settlement in the area known as the Tularosa Basin. Soon thereafter, the Homestead Act of 1862 was passed to encourage settlement

As time passed, Fort Bliss survived multiple domestic and foreign wars. The installation also endured several relocations, reestablishments, realignments and closures. But despite all of this, Fort Bliss continued to grow and expand as a strategic military establishment to meet the needs of the U.S. government.

As a result, ranches established by the early settlers of the Tularosa Basin was needed, and eventually acquired, by the government to support the needs and demands of military operations at that time.

One of the early settlers of the Tularosa Basin was a woman named Mary Mayhill Coe Blevins (nicknamed Mollie by her family). As pioneers in New Mexico Territory, Mary and her family proved successful at ranching and acquiring land. Her natural intellect for land

ʻit is not merelu a housekeeper' I want, I can assure you, but a pleasant and agreeable companion. – Albert Coe

development, coupled with her business savvy, allowed her to successfully develop acres and acres of arid land that many thought impossible to utilize for permanent grazing and agriculture. As a result, her role in developing her ranch lands in the Tularosa Basin was of great importance to regional growth.

The unwritten rule in the West, and especially the Tularosa Basin, was "if you controlled the water, you controlled the land." For both Mary Mayhill Coe Blevins and the U.S. Army, this rang true and was a commonality that eventually connected the two. I can't tell Just what

The Beginning of the Coe/Blevins Legacy

Mary Coe was born Mary Mayhill in June of 1862. She was a young 18 when she married 37 year old Albert Coe in Schuyler County, Missouri in May of 1881. Just a few days after their marriage, the newlyweds headed west and joined "the great migration" in search of a homestead land grant.

Albert was eager to head west and he was no stranger to New Mexico. He had spent several years in the region before uniting with Mary.

> Below: Letter of proposal from Albert to Mary.

I will be there one day

write as simil as you get

again before I come four lines of semain yours Devotedly



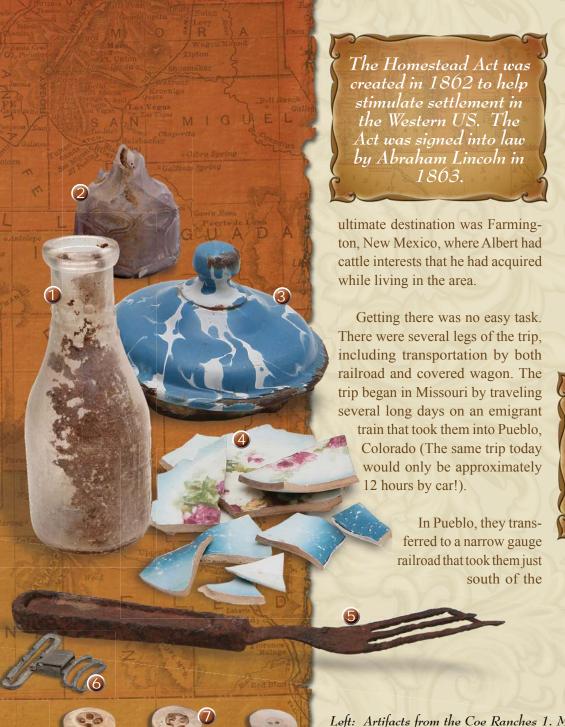
Above: Albert and Mollie Coe

Born in what is now West Virginia and raised in Missouri, Albert was only 18 when he grew restless and moved west to Denver, working as a freighter in the Arkansas River Valley.

> In 1867 when Albert was 23, he migrated south to Fort Stanton, New Mexico, where he worked as a military scout, an experience that introduced him to the beauty of the Sacramento Mountains. Albert quickly grew fond of the area and soon settled just east of the Sacramento Mountains on Peñasco Creek. Settlers were attracted to the lush forests, fresh springs, lakes, and the fruitful land.

Albert and Mary set out on their journey accompanied by several members of both families. The

ncouracen trangers



Artifact photography by Lencho Guerra of

Lencho Guerra Photography

Colorado border into Chama, New Mexico. After arriving in Chama, they purchased a covered wagon and horses for the rest of the trip. This part of the journey proved to be the most grueling, taking several long days to travel a little more than 100 miles. The slow pace, navigating unfamiliar country and watching for hostile American Indians made the trip seem even longer.

Despite the grueling travel conditions, the Coes successfully made the long trip to Farmington where they stayed with Albert's relatives until late summer.

Spanish Colonial
and Mexican land
grants were private
grants given to
individuals to help
stimulate growth in the
New Mexico area.

In September of 1881, the Coe family made the decision to relocate to Albert's former residence in the Upper Peñasco River area on the east side of the Sacramento Mountains (see page 7 for location map). There the Coes would enjoy

land rich with orchards, lakes, and irrigation canals, and they would benefit from much cooler weather than in the Basin.

Under the Homestead Act, Albert was able to acquire 160 acres for \$18 in government fees, with commitment to live on and cultivate the land for at least five years.

At that time, the two major methods of ranch land acquisition were (1) securing water sources and land from the public domain through various homestead acts or (2) obtaining ownership of large privately owned land originally obtained through Spanish Colonial or Mexican land grants. After the Civil War, a tremendous wave of Anglo-American settlers took advantage of these opportunities and began a multi-decade migration from east of the Mississippi River to the western plains and Rocky Mountains.

The early 1880s were an ideal time to settle in the area because of the availability of land and because precipitation was normal or above normal on the Southern Plains, which improved the conditions of range and farm lands and overall ranching.

Left: Artifacts from the Coe Ranches 1. Milk bottle, 2. Ink well, 3. Coffee pot lid, 4. Pieces of china and tableware, 5. Kitchen spatula, 6. Clothing buckle, 7. Clothing buttons.

New Life in the Tularosa Basin

In 1882, Mary's mother and father came to live with the newlyweds and their 5-month old son, Wiley. After only a short time in their new home, Mary's family established the small community of Mayhill in Otero County, New Mexico. Albert and Mary Coe built a modest, singlestory house that served as their main residence while living in this area and was one of the first houses ever constructed in the region.



Above: Coe children, True, Viola, Pearl, and Wiley.

The Coes quickly began to develop and grow their interests, including ranching, commerce and land acquisition and development. Mary's shrewd business sense flourished as she became the town's first postmaster, coordinating weekly mail pickups and deliveries within the community.



"After a time we began to figure how we could manage to get our mail. It was a long way to go to Lincoln or Ft. Stanton for mail so we decided to have it sent to Blazer's Mill and hire an Indian to bring it to us once a week. Each one who wanted his mail brought this way threw in a little money and we paid him two dollars per trip. He came to our house and we gave him a place to sleep."

Letter excerpt from Mary Coe to her niece in 1937.



The Coes also purchased and operated a notions store in the nearby town of Weed as well as managed a continually growing herd of livestock.

Although success was not foreign to Mary, it did not come easily. The Coes were always leery of American Indian and bandit attacks. Getting goods to sell at their store was another challenge. At one point, the Coes had to buy flour in 100-pound bags and travel by wagon in a mountain-

Right: (standing) True, Viola, and Wiley, (sitting) Mary and Albert with Pearl.



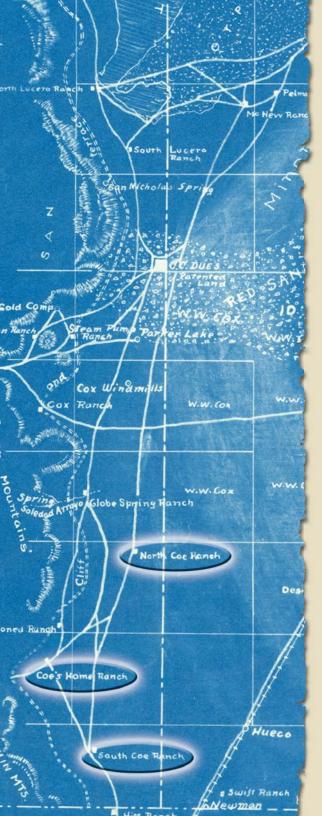


Left: (back row) Albert, Mollie, True, Wiley, John Mahill (front row) Elmer, Opal, Viola, Pearl, Sarah Mahill

ous region nearly 50 miles to pick it up in Ruidoso, New Mexico. The flour was usually of poor quality, but the Coes had to make due with whatever they were able to acquire at the time

In light of the struggles, progress marched forward in the area as railroad development made its way through the West. Railroads provided local settlers, like the Coes, access to larger markets for their livestock and produce, and brought them a greater variety of goods at lower prices. The railroads also stimulated population growth in Mayhill, which contributed to increased business.

Life was busy for Mary and Albert, who continued to rapidly grow their assets and their family. After the birth of Wiley in 1882, Mary gave birth to Viola, also known as Nola in 1885; Alonzo (better known as "True") in 1890; and Laurel in 1894. The Coes had another daughter, Zuba, in 1886; she died when she was only eight months old. Their other children included Pearl in 1894; Albert Elmer in 1900; and Opal in 1903.



Key to Success in the Tularosa Basin

"If you controlled the water, you controlled the land."

Successful ranching operations in the Tularosa Basin learned to embrace three principles: large land holdings, the development of water systems, and the creation of partnerships for support in hard times. Without all three of these key characteristics, bankruptcy or a sell-out



was inevitable.

Each was important for various reasons:

1. Large land holdings were critical during the settlement period of the late 1800s because native grasses were sufficient to graze only six to twelve cows per section of land (640 acres). The Coes

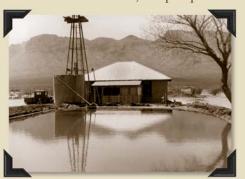
Left: Tularosa Basin map highlighting Coe Ranch property locations.

continued to patent and purchase land throughout their ranching careers, allowing them to raise more livestock as well as continually increase real estate, water sources and other marketable products.

- 2. The availability of water was a defining factor throughout the Tularosa Basin for historically successful ranching facilities in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several vital sources for this resource included runoff from the Organ and Sacramento Mountains into the Tularosa Basin; natural springs; and later in the 20th century, drilled water wells. These sources provided multiple sources of water that ranchers were seeking. The Coes and other successful ranchers used water to run their ranches and as a sellable commodity in the form of water rights.
- 3. Ranching partnerships were the third critical element of success. Partnerships provided ranchers ways to garner additional financial resources. An example of a ranching partnership is the arrangement between Mary Coe and George Blevins in 1908. In that year, Mary Coe filed a miscellaneous record in Doña Ana County on a contract she made with George Blevins (who worked at the Coe ranches as early as 1907). Mrs. Coe contracted to provide 200 cows and a herd of range mares to George

on the Coe range east of Earlham near Anthony, New Mexico. She also promised to provide bulls, range land and water. In exchange for providing care, branding and other services for the Coe herd, George received a portion of the herd increase.

4. All three of these principles were prominent in the Coe business model. As a result of Mary Coe's insightful business diversification, she was able to survive multiple economic and environmental disasters, including droughts, blizzards, economic depressions and financial hardships. She continued to not only survive as a rancher, but prospered

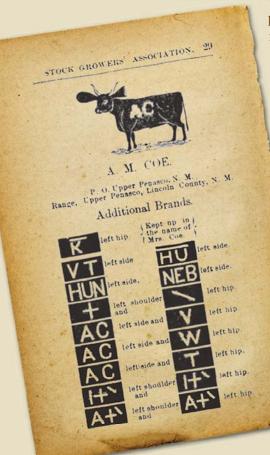


Above: Representative photo of Tularosa Basin ranch with stock pond, windmill and bunkhouse.

and increased her net worth.

Branding

Men and women worked both together and separately to establish thriving ranches using one or more cattle brands to mark their herds which grazed on the open range. Branding became an important component to the development of ranching in the Tularosa Basin.



Above: Coe brands as listed in the New Mexico Stock Growers Association Handbook.

Cattle were unfenced and the range was open, allowing the cattle to drift onto other ranches. At times, cattle drifted from the northern part of the Tularosa Basin down to the forests on the Rio Grande.

One way ranchers kept track of their cattle was by registering and owning multiple brands for their livestock. Multiple brands were very common and might accompany the purchase of an entire herd, identify a particular partnership, or indicate a specific year. Families gathered at least once a year for a general roundup to identify and brand calves as far away as the Rio Grande.

> The Coe family used a variety of brands that reflected the acquisition of other ranches and herds as well as the various partnerships their ranching business shared. Trading cattle or water for services like branding and care for the herd was commonplace in successful ranch businesses. The following are some of the Coes' brands, as listed in the 1895 Southeastern New Mexico Stock Growers As-

sociation Handbook

ARCHULETA The Land Grab Between 1891 and 1895, the Coes continued to acquire land holdings through programs like the Homestead Act, Desert Land Act and the Timber Culture Act, among others. They also continued to grow their family, having another son in 1900 and daughter in 1903. In 1901, after two decades in the Sacramento Mountains, the Coes decided to relocate their ranch to Doña Ana County in the Tularosa 0 Basin (see map at right). They sold A most of their land near Mayhill in Otero County and leased land near Anthony, New Mexico. The precise motive for moving their ranch operations to the Basin area remains a mystery. Stewart Lake was also called "Cheese Lake" because Mexicans from El Paso would herd their goats around the lake and make goat cheese.

In 1902, Mary and Albert purchased property on the west edge of the Coe Lake, drilled a well 350 feet deep for valuable water access, and established what would become well known as the North Coe Ranchs

Above: 1. Sacramento Mountains where the Coes lived from 1881-1901. 2. Location where the Coes relocated in 1901.

Right: Executive Order from President William Taft regarding land acquisition.

In 1905, the Coes continued their land expansion and purchased property on the south end of Stewart Lake.

The following year, Mary purchased 160 acres east of the future site of the Doña Ana Range Camp and established the head-quarters for her ranch, called the Mary Coe Home Ranch.

By 1912, the Coes had holdings and livestock valued at \$2,980 (approximately \$66,000 in 2008 dollars).

As the Coes contin-

ued to develop their land holdings and business enterprises, the military was also working on its future expansion plans within the Tularosa Basin. This initiative began only a few years after the governmental push to put public land into private hands. This program would begin the reversal of decades of ranching and land development in the region.

EXECUTIVE ORDER

It is hereby ordered that all public lands comprised in Towndien, in Dona Ana County, New Mexico, be and the same are hereby
not be subject to reservation, and set apart for the purpose of a
poses.

The post of Fort Blise, and for other military pur-

ML. H. TAFT

The White House,

December 29, 1911,

(No. 1450).

1848-1948: Walma III

APP 14

Military Expansion in the Tularosa Basin

The Tularosa Basin was targeted for acquisition by the U.S. Army because the ratio of population to acres of land was small. Only 10 percent of the total land was deeded, 15 percent was state-owned, and 75 percent was federal or public domain.

Because of the Tularosa Basin's arid conditions, the land could not support a large number of people and/or livestock per acre. The sparse population made the land attractive to the military because there were few people to relocate.

Water access was very important to the military and another major factor that made the Coe Home Ranch lands attractive for acquisition. The access to water supplied the military with the sustenance needed for day-to-day operations and gave the military a source of power. By limiting access to water resources, the military could limit the possibility of new settlers in the area.

Early Acquisitions

The onset of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 quickly turned the U.S. government's focus to border security. As a result, the U.S. Army stationed additional troops at Fort Bliss. In addition, the government began to improve training facilities and acquired land to establish

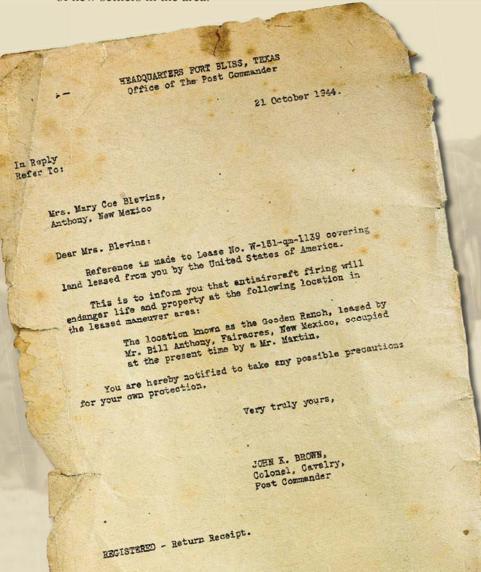
a target range and Doña Ana Range Camp, where soldiers lived in tents while training.

The initial Coe property the U.S. Army acquired for this endeavor was the Stewart Lake Tank property, which the Coes bought in 1905 and sold to the Army in 1911. This transaction was the first in a series that would eventually transfer all of the Coe ranches in the Doña Ana Range to Fort Bliss military use.

In 1912 Albert Coe, died at age 68. He left Mary as the executrix of his estate. Mary continued expanding the Coe Ranch, buying and selling property throughout the El Paso area. A little more than a year later, in 1913, Mary married her long-time ranch hand, George Blevins. George was 17 years her junior. Together, Mary and George ran the ranch with livestock that included cattle, sheep, horses and hogs.

The need for additional military land was evident in March 1916, when New Mexico was attacked by Mexican revolutionary Francisco (Pancho) Villa. To increase security along the border, some 29,000 soldiers were sent to Fort Bliss by the end of July that year. To accommodate the troops, camps and training

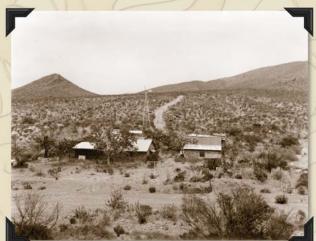
Left: Letter from Fort Bliss officials to Mary Coe Blevins in 1944.





areas were placed in various parts of the Tularosa Basin. The landscape continued to morph from a cattle range to a military base as alterations to the area continued. Within the Doña Ana Range, a camp was constructed and a small railroad was built on the northwest side of the Franklin Mountains to haul guns and equipment. Once at the top, troops would test fire toward the Organ Mountains and Boulder Canyon.

In 1918, during World War I, a Decree of Condemnation added 600 acres to the Doña Ana Range, some of which came from Mary Coe. She received \$15,000 for the property that was used to develop a major cavalry station.



Left: Representative of a Tularosa Basin ranch.

Cold War Demands More of the Tularosa Basin

By 1940, the military needed additional land for anti-aircraft training because of the increased involvement in the war in Europe. As a result, the US government leased more than

420,000 acres in Doña Ana and Otero counties in New Mexico on a "co-use" basis with the local ranchers. These demands soon caused conflicts, and problems developed between the ranchers and the military over ranchland use. As part of the "co-use" agreement, ranchers were required to leave when

Co-use describes land that is shared by both the land-owner and the military.

a firing was scheduled. However, many ranchers did not leave because it was difficult to finish ranching chores on the military's schedule.

After World War II, the rise of the Cold War progressed, requiring more and more military-used land in the Tularosa Basin. As the military continued to increase its activity, so continued the impact on ranches and livestock. The antiaircraft command refused to pay for killed or injured livestock on the coused land. Other events also affected



Above: Representative aerial photo of Tulsarosa Basin ranch.

Left: Viola and Sophie Coe.

residents. On July 16, 1945, at the Trinity Site in White Sands Missile Range, a nuclear bomb was successfully detonated, ushering in a new age of weaponry, and that required extensive testing space. Once again, the military chose the Doña Ana Range because of the low ratio of people per acre of land.

By 1946, the U.S. Department of



Above: Portrait of Albert Coe.

Defense approved the purchase of land necessary to use the Doña Ana Range exclusively for anti-aircraft and guided missile training. Many ranchers did not want to leave their property, but the combination of negative impacts on livestock, noise, disruption from military activity, and government pressure to sell, left some ranchers with no other choice

but to accept government buy-outs for their homes. Eventually, all the ranchers succumbed to the government and moved from their properties. Once the land was acquired, the government realized that it had to take additional steps to ensure that former residents would not attempt to reclaim the range lands. Government officials ordered most water tanks to be leveled and wells to be capped, and for most buildings to be moved or demolished, including the Coe Home Ranch.

Mary Coe Goes to Washington

By 1948, the Fort Bliss Military Reservation covered nearly 1.4 million acres and the military was trying to contain all remaining properties in the area. Although Mary Coe Blevins had been one of the first to sell land to the military in 1911, she was not willing to sell her entire livelihood. According to researcher Martha Freeman, "Like everyone else, Mary Coe Blevins was hard-hit by the condemnation proceedings that ate away at her ranch. Her spirit remained indomitable, however, and despite the fact that she was in her late eighties at the time, an apocryphal story circulated among her neighbors that she had chased off one U.S. Army representative with a broom." In 1948, she took her case to the Supreme Court, and two years



later she won the highest amount awarded to any of the ranch owner plaintiffs - \$24,400 (approximately \$213,000 in 2008 dollars).

Conclusion

Mary Mayhill Coe Blevins died in 1953 at age 91, and her husband, George Blevins, died only four months later.

The organization of the Coe Home Ranch did not affect the development of the Fort Bliss military landscape. Mary Coe Blevins was not the only Anglo-American woman to succeed as a rancher in southeastern New Mexico. However, her success was certainly not common either. What sets her apart from the rest is that she was the only woman who became a successful rancher in the Tularosa Basin.

For more than a half century, despite sporadic economic and environmental challenges, she remained a force to be reckoned with and managed to significantly increase her family's wealth. Although the end of a historical era of ranching in the wide-open the West came with military expansion, she was a key to success for both of them.

Below: Coe/Faulkner Families



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Tax Records

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1920 El Paso County, Texas

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