



HISTORY

Caprock Chronicles: Warner was settler, community-builder, State Park promoter of the Texas Panhandle

By June Steele Special for the Avalanche-Journal

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Editor's note: Jack Becker, Librarian Emeritus, is the editor of Caprock Chronicles. He can be reached at jack.becker@ttu.edu. Today's article is by June Steele a frequent contributor to the Chronicles. Her essay relates the achievements of a little known but important women who made early significant contributions to the South Plains.

The early years of the twentieth century represented a dynamic era in the United States and a time of rapid settlement and development on the Texas Panhandle. The period brought changes in the country's social and economic structure and became an era of rapid immigration and industrial development.

On the national level, progressive-minded men and women struggled to effect change in government, public health, education, and land preservation. Women of this era gained political strength through organization and education, the right to vote, and advocating for the prohibition of alcohol. Activities such as these effected rural America, specifically the Texas Panhandle.

On the Texas Panhandle, Phebe Kerrick Warner, a popular newspaper columnist, kept readers informed of such issues. Her articles appeared in over a dozen Texas newspapers between 1917 and 1933, addressing the conditions of rural life, promoting Panhandle settlement and development, and sparked an interest in the state parks movement that mirrored the country's National Parks movement.

Like many influential residents of the Llano Estacado and the Texas Panhandle, Phebe Warner was a transplant to the region, arriving from Central Illinois after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University and teaching at Illinois Women's University in the natural

science department. She traveled to Claude, Texas in 1898 to marry Dr. William Arthur Warner. Together, they became some of Armstrong County's first residents and dedicated their lives to progressive issues and community-building in the Texas Panhandle.

As William Warner tackled the challenge of setting up a medical practice in Claude, and in doing so, became the only doctor for hundreds of miles around, Phebe turned her energy toward what she recognized as the main obstacle to life in the Panhandle: social isolation.

William responded to many calls for medical treatment at farms where the wife and mother of the home appeared only tired, demoralized, and defeated, but with no scientific medical symptoms. On such occasions he returned home and reported to Mrs. Warner that her services, not his, were needed at a neighboring farm. Phebe happily complied, visiting as many "patients" as her husband. And in doing so brought companionship, support, and encouraging news to many Panhandle women.

Phebe Warner's unofficial social ministry soon took on more formal structure. Recognizing isolation as the main problem among the women of Armstrong and surrounding counties, she organized settlers to bridge the gaps between farms. Under her direction, Armstrong County women began to meet regularly for literary study. A group known as the Wednesday Afternoon Club grew in size and popularity and some of its members formed an organization known as the Panhandle Pen women.

Phebe Warner's inspirational talks gained regional attention and she began to receive invitations from as far away as San Antonio, Austin, El Paso, and Fort Worth. One of Warner's speeches at the Dry-Land Farming Congress in El Paso in 1916, caught the attention of Peter Molyneaux of the Fort Worth Star Telegram. Molyneaux asked Warner to begin submitting editorials and feature articles to his newspaper, thus launching her twenty-year career in journalism.

Involvement with the Boy Scouts was one of the driving forces behind Phebe Warner's active role in the state parks movement. Phebe and William Warner wanted to create a recreational area that the scouts could use for their wilderness activities. In advance of the park's creation, the Warners purchased and donated 160 acres of land in Palo Duro Canyon, adding themselves to the list of Panhandle residents who generously supported the idea of a state park at the canyon's site.

Phebe made sure that the boy scouts had special access to the park. She wanted Panhandle youth to be aware of the beauty that lay at their doorstep, believing that such an awareness

might prevent them from leaving the region in search of greater opportunities. Warner's boasting of a park at Palo Duro caught the attention of Governor Patt Neff in 1924, when Warner led him and other members of the State Parks Committee on a tour of the canyon. Neff was so impressed that he appointed Warner to two terms as secretary and statistician of the State Parks Board.

Located primarily in the Panhandle counties of Armstrong and Randall, Palo Duro forms a 120-mile break in the southern Great Plains, carved by erosion from a branch of the Red River. Many streams exposed Permian red beds and created an escarpment, known as the Caprock, that separates the High Plains and the Eroded Plains. Palo Duro Canyon is the most striking and significant of this, in a series of canyons that flank the escarpment, earning it the title the "Grand Canyon of Texas."

In May 1933, citizens of Amarillo, Canyon, and Claude, Texas formed a committee known as the Palo Duro Park Association. Its purpose was to support public works projects in order to take advantage of available federal dollars under the New Deal. In June 1933, President Roosevelt assigned four companies of the Civilian Conservation Corps to begin work on the Palo Duro Canyon Project. In August, hundreds of CCC workers begun building a road into the canyon, and by late November, the first visitors made their way down the trail. The park, formally dedicated in a ceremony on July 4, 1934, received 40,000 visitors during its first year.

Dozens of individuals played significant roles in creating a state park at Palo Duro Canyon in 1933, but Phebe Kerrick Warner, whose lengthy involvement as a publicist, promoter, and Texas Parks Board secretary, stood apart and drew praise from state and national politicians. Her obituary notice in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram on May, 18, 1935, read "Perhaps more than any other person, Mrs. Warner may be described as the founder of Palo Duro Canyon Park in the Panhandle. The existence of that magnificent park and playground today is one of the lasting monuments to her memory."