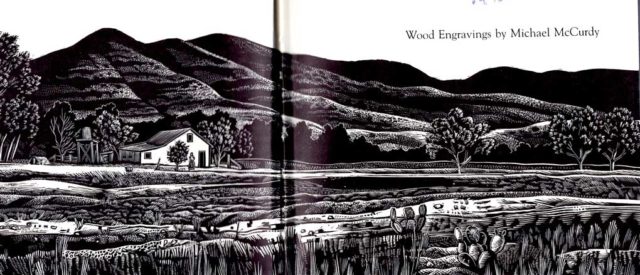
Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce

**A Beautiful, Cruel Country: Life on the Wilbur-Cruce Ranch**

*A Beautiful, Cruel Country* was published in 1987 when the author, Eva Wilbur-Cruce was in her 80's. This is a story of her youth on a Southern Arizona ranch near Arivaca in the early 20th century. It is the story of a young girl, being educated by her father in the harsh realities of life and the beauty that surrounds her.  At this time the Tohono O'odham still inhabited the non-reservation land around Arivaca, Arizona.

**[](https://14je0al6g153k7ias3cbadcy-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Wilbur-house-Engraving.jpg)**In Eva's world in this remote part of the desert, Indians were an integral part of life on the Wilbur-Cruce Ranch. Festivals and holidays such as the Feast of the Holy Cross and Harvest were celebrated together.

The Indians departed for the reservations sometime around the time Arizona became a state. It seemed to Eva that this was the beginning of the end of the lifestyle she loved. When the Indians left for the reservation, part of the heart of the land left with them. ( I have yet to find an exact year or documentation of this event, but Eva remembers that time vividly.)

I found out about this book while on a [**guided hike up Brown Canyon**](https://southernarizonaguide.com/brown-canyon-hike-foot-baboquivari/), part of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge and with a lovely view of Baboquivari. The Wilbur-Cruce Ranch is now also a part of the BANWR as well, and you can still visit the ruins, along the Arivaca Creek Trail, just west of Arivaca 2.2 miles.

**[](https://14je0al6g153k7ias3cbadcy-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Wilber-Cruce-Ranch-front.jpg)**A fire decimated the house in 2004, but much remains to visualize what life was like back then with the help of this book.

A Beautiful, Cruel Country is a rare glimpse into a bygone era, seldom experienced at such a personal level. After reading it, I found myself wanting to know what happened next, but the book was not about that. In the epilogue, it appears to have been about sharing life with the Indians and critters amidst the rare beauty and harshness of the country that is Southern Arizona. Or at least that is what seems to frame the book's timeline.

Things have changed, but the country around Arivaca is still as wild and beautiful today.  
**[](https://14je0al6g153k7ias3cbadcy-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Wilber-Cruce-Ranch-side.jpg)**Ms. Rosemary and I recently traveled out to the Wilbur-Cruce Ranch. It is a short hike from the trailhead, less than a mile. Then turn right up the hill the second chance you get, the creek on your left. That much is well traveled and marked. The remainder of the trail is not well marked. We ended up following a bunch of cow paths and patties.  We found our way back  by a climbing a hill where we spotted the Wilbur-Cruce Ranch in the distance.

Dr. R. A. Wilbur, "Grandfather", founder of the Wilbur Ranch, was a Harvard educated physician who landed a job in Arivaca as physician to the Cerro Colorado Mining Company. He had arrived in Arizona Territory sometime in the 1860's with Charles Poston, the man who is widely considered to be the Father of Arizona. (You can find [**Poston's gravesite**](https://southernarizonaguide.com/things-to-do-in-and-around-florence/)monument on top of a hill just outside Florence, AZ.)

When the Cerro mining operation failed, Dr. Wilbur began homesteading. His ranch grew from 140 acres to some 472 acres and 1170 leased acres. In 1989 Eva sold the ranch to the Nature Conservancy. The ranch ended up in the hands of the **[Buenas Aires National Wildlife Refuge, BANWR.](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjbw9fp1PfWAhVT1GMKHUfZDJwQFggoMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.fws.gov%2Frefuge%2Fbuenos_aires%2F&usg=AOvVaw3gkHIS516j5Y0FwAIYqzcz" \t "_blank)**

Eva writes about the horses of the ranch. The story of the Wilbur-Cruce horse is also an interesting one. The horses were brought to the Wilbur Ranch in 1885 from Rancho Delores in Sonora Mexico by Grandfather Wilbur. Rancho Delores was one of the Mission Ranches that Father Kino had founded. These "Rock" horses were direct descendants of the [**Spanish "Barb" horses**](http://www.milestoneequestrianbc.com/single-post/2017/03/07/Wilbur-Cruce-Mission-Horses) brought from the Old World to the far Northern Frontier of New Spain by Father Kino. These horses were bred for their strength and stamina. These descendants were almost extinct until it was discovered that Eva had over 100 of them. Here is an interesting story about the [**legacy of the Rock horse here.**](http://padrekino.com/kino-legacy/horseman/) From time to time the [**Tubac Presidio State Park**](http://www.tubacpp.com/events) presents talks about the origin of this horse. Some of these horses are used in the Anza Day Festival in Tubac.

**[](https://14je0al6g153k7ias3cbadcy-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/evaAntoniaWilbur-cruce.gif)**When Eva sold her Ranch to the Nature Conservancy the horses had to go, as it is the [**Nature Conservancy's**](https://www.nature.org/) job to protect the lands.  So Eva donated her precious Rock horses to the American Minor Breeds Conservancy, leter known as the American Livestock Conservancy. Eva stipulated that their [**Spanish bloodlines**](https://www.americanhorsepubs.org/newsgroup/11267/14745/) be protected. These horses had maintained their bloodlines due to the remoteness of the land and the isolation of the herd. A portion of  this herd is currently maintained by Robin Collins of [**Rancho Del Sueño**](http://ranchodelsueno.org/wilbur_cruce_horse.html)in Madera, CA.

Read the book, it is insightful and haunting. After visiting the ranch, even more so.  [***A Beautiful, Cruel Country***](https://aax-us-east.amazon-adsystem.com/x/c/QlTDrDixxMGY2uiPU7Eh-uwAAAFhJNq-WgEAAAFKAfWFLXk/https:/www.amazon.com/gp/product/B01GJOL23E/ref=as_at/?imprToken=F3rScuPKJbG9TAK1toFz.A&slotNum=0&ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B01GJOL23E&linkCode=w61&tag=essentialtucs-20&linkId=90ca89dbed55f749028056c783800a9b)https://ir-na.amazon-adsystem.com/e/ir?t=essentialtucs-20&l=am2&o=1&a=B01GJOL23E

PostScript:  
After reading this book, I wanted to know more. Perhaps I should have stopped there. There is much more to the life of Eva Wilbur-Cruce,  which reads more like the story of the Hatfields and the McCoys than the romanticized picture of the tough upbringing of the wild young girl painted by Eva in her book. After reading these accounts, certain things about her development become more clear though, much of it hinted at by her own words. She was bone tough.

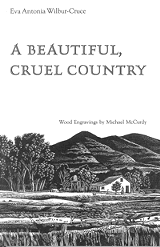
The truth of the war between the Wilbur-Cruce Ranch and the Arivaca Land and Cattle Company (aka Chiricahua Ranches Company) which purchased the Empire Ranch in 1928), will most likely never be known. The truth assuredly lands somewhere in the middle and may be lost to the winds. Undoubtedly, it involves grazing rights, land rights, water rights, even women's rights. By this time the Indians had lost their rights. In any case, you decide. It is a tale more interesting than fiction. I for one, fell in love with this woman's character. She left an indelible mark on my psyche.

Here are a couple of links to portions of what happened next:  
from the Tucson Weekly's archives, 2002.

**La Pistolera**

The Wilbur Ranch near Arivaca was 'beautiful, cruel country,' and its owner--Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce--lived a hard, romantic life there.

By [Leo W. Banks](https://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/ArticleArchives?author=1063843)

click to flip through (2)[](https://media1.fdncms.com/tucsonweekly/imager/la-pistolera/u/zoom/1158322/feat-9078.gif)

**Next week in the Part 2: Eva Wilbur-Cruce, *La Pistolera*, fights for her land, her horses and her pride.**

Books written by aging memoirists rarely capture public fancy. But Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce struck a bit of literary lightning with her 1987 work, *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*, published by the UA Press.

It described her childhood on the Wilbur Ranch near Arivaca, southwest of Tucson, a now-vanished life on the open range, herding and branding cattle at age 5 and playing with Tohono O'Odham children before that tribe's reservation was formed.

The *New York Times*reviewed the book favorably, and Eva was celebrated as a living relic of history, personified by the inside-the-book photo of her as a 13-year-old on horseback. Little Tonia, as she was called, had a rifle draped across her lap and wore an oversized sombrero as she stared steel-eyed into the distance.

But her depiction of a hard, romantic life in the wilds near the Mexican border was only part of Eva's past. Behind the image was another story, one that to this day, more than 60 years later, causes descendants and friends of those involved to clam up, claim faulty memories and slam down the phone in anger.

At issue is the long cattle war Eva fought with neighboring rancher, Charlie Boice. To her dying day, she believed that he, as head of the Arivaca Ranch, part of the giant Chiricahua Cattle Company, was trying to drive the Wilburs off their land.

Their feud consisted of grisly episodes of violence and retaliation that reverberated through southern Arizona ranch country for 11 years. In 1933, it even drew front-page coverage in a Los Angeles newspaper. Headline: Machine Gun Bands Bring Reign of Terror in Arizona.

These events defined Eva's life in a profound way, shaping her character, thoughts and everyday movements, even causing her to sleep with a .32 caliber revolver under her pillow until her death in 1998, at 93.

But she only spoke of the trouble in vague terms, explaining to close family that she'd prefer not to be hung, and many longtime friends remain only dimly aware that it occurred. Even fewer know of the 10-month stint she served at the Arizona State Prison for cattle rustling, an episode linked to the war.

The women's pen in Florence was an unlikely place for the five-foot-three-inch, brown-eyed Eva, who, in her 1944 prison mug shots, looks somewhat bookish in her wire glasses and close-cropped hair.

In fact, she was a jailhouse rarity, a woman with two years of college education sharing a cell block with toothless check-kiters and waitresses turned man-shooters who'd never heard of *David Copperfield*, one of Eva's favorite books, and probably couldn't read it even if they had.

They must've wondered, too, about the incessant taping coming from her cell. Throughout Eva's life, and especially in prison, she wrote continually. Her typed prison letters to friends and family show a nimble mind, keen to the day's news and cultural issues.

She also worried deeply about whether any proceeds from her writing might pay for the education of her nephews. And at age 40, she wrote of her responsibility to behave in a certain way around the younger inmates.

In a May 1944 letter to a friend, she described being ostracized after suggesting that female prisoners undergo an "intensive course in reading and correct thinking," believing it would "fortify their spirits" and "redeem their natures."

Eva wrote, "I am still in the doghouse. Wa-ha! You can't blame them. They think I'm contriving some vicious method of punishment. They are suspicious of me because I don't join in their escapades. God forbid! I am no model, but because I'm older, I do believe I should be less frivolous."

But as always with Eva--like the book that told only the pretty stories--there was a flip side, aspects of her character that seemed completely contradictory. Yes, she loved Copperfield and her precious typewriter, yet she was one of the toughest customers, male or female, Arizona ever produced.Wyatt Earp could've taken lessons from her.

She possessed a singular ferocity when crossed, and an almost animal-like determination to make the transgressor pay. Even the rigors of confinement couldn't change that about her.

She got her colorful nickname, *La Pistolera*, for her nasty habit of shooting at people who ventured too close to the Wilbur property.

Her grand-nephew, Tucsonan Robert Zimmerman, who cared for Eva in her last years, tells of her prison sessions with a priest. He often met with inmates to get them to acknowledge their crimes and seek repentance.

The priest would say, "Now Eva, do you know why you're in prison?"

She'd say yes. Then the clergyman would lean forward and say softly, "Vengeance is a sin, you know."

And Eva would respond, "Yes, father, and I'm a sinner. And as soon as I get out I'm going to sin again."

THE WILBUR RANCH, established about 1868, was one of Arizona's oldest. Its founder was Ruben A. Wilbur, a graduate of Harvard Medical College who came to the Territory to work as a physician for the Cerro Colorado Mining Company, located near present-day Arivaca.

The doctor had three children, including his oldest, Augustin, who was born on the ranch and seemed to savor its remoteness too well. He walled himself within its boundaries, avoiding interaction with neighbors and creating in his five children--including Eva, born February 22, 1904--a powerful suspicion of others.

"My father built a corral around himself and his family, and wanted his family to live in isolation," Eva said in a recorded 1989 interview with Tucson author Patricia Preciado Martin. The isolation even extended to speaking Spanish in what Eva described as "corral dialect," understood only by other Wilburs.

Augustin arranged for Eva to be educated at the ranch by his sister, a secretary, rather than at the local school. Her day started at 6 a.m. in the barn, where she and little sister Ruby sat at either end of a plank held up by boxes. The teacher sat in the middle, working with a small piece of slate and a few Spanish readers. The school day lasted until 6 p.m. The Wilbur girls were taught in that primitive way for seven years.

At the same time, Eva was required to do difficult ranch work. At 10 years old, her father told her, "When I go away, you're the boss. You're responsible. You tell the men what to do and see that they do it."

When the ranch hands were building a fence, Eva would ride out to oversee them on her Spanish mustang, Diamante. If the men were standing around, she'd give them her best little-girl glare and tell them to get on with it.

"But it wasn't fun to be boss," she said. "Mexican men were not bossed by women, especially in those days. And by a little girl? They would say, 'Are you crazy? Don't tell us what to do.'"

Sometimes they laughed at her. "It was difficult for me to take that," Eva remembered, "and my father would get angry and say, 'Why can't you make the men work and not talk to you like that?' But I couldn't do any more as a child."

But Augustin, a stern disciplinarian and taskmaster, asked more and more of his oldest daughter. In addition to fence work, Eva rode the range to check on the Wilbur herd and cleaned water holes to keep them running. Some were located as far as 20 miles from the ranch along the wide-open Mexican border.

"The first two years I worked there were very difficult," Eva remembered. "I was resentful. I felt as if I was the only girl in the country that was doing that. And why? Alone over there all day, and then to come back at night? It was very difficult.

"I was raised alone. I knew the animals, but I didn't know the people. My happiest years were with the animals. I learned brotherhood from them. They were such good friends."

In the Martin interview, a session with this writer in 1994 and in her own published words, Eva made it plain that she saw herself part of the terrain, intimate with its contours, its canyons, the rhythms of the seasons, and profoundly intuitive about everything upon it.

The land had wind and wolves, and it had Eva--each untamed, each sharing the same life and each drawing sustenance from the other as they struggled together to survive on the unforgiving desert. She told one story of approaching a water hole and feeling hot, sick and tired. She dismounted, laid across the branch of a fallen oak tree, and felt a strange sensation. Her father told her it was from the pressure of her body against the branch.

But she believed it was something coming from the tree, some unknown power. "If I tell that to you or anybody else, they'll say she's crazy," Eva said. "But this is true. I felt it from the tree, some sort of nutrition. It gave me the stamina I didn't have."

She talked often of the prairie dogs she fed and the curious Mexican hawk she befriended. Every time Eva went to a certain spring, the hawk would sit on a rock in the water and watch her. She joked that the only way she could get rid of it was to sing to it. Then the bird would soar to the sky and perch in a hackberry tree, far from the sound of her voice.

Living the way she did, amid aching silence, unencumbered by human voice or concern, she developed keen sensory abilities.

"The distance speaks and the wind thinks, and it moans and does all those things," she said. "When you are not alone, you don't know it because you don't have to listen. But when you are alone, you listen."

Eva's solace, in addition to the animals, was writing, even though her father was staunchly opposed. He scolded his daughter whenever she wrote a poem or a *corrido*, a Mexican folk song. "The cowboys write *corridos*, why can't I?" she protested.

Her father also threatened to blister Eva if she showed any interest in boys. Eva wondered why her mother, Ramona, didn't rein in Augustin, protecting her from his worst instincts. At the same time, she described herself as a "terrible child," with her own ideas about everything.

"I was so independent and self-willed that I think my mother gave up," Eva said. "She used to call me *La Loca*. 'Come on, Loca! Come to eat!' If I was ready to eat I would go. If I wasn't, I wouldn't."

In one of the most tape's riveting segments, Eva said of her father, "I told my mother I wouldn't have stayed if I married a man like that. As I told my grandmother, I would have poisoned him." Then she laughed with gusto. "He never broke my spirit," she said. "Nothing ever did."

AT 14, EVA LEFT ARIVACA to attend the Guardian Angel convent school in Los Angeles. For someone more accustomed to wolves than humans, the experience was initially disastrous. Eva would cower behind the piano in the playroom while the music teacher, a Sisters of Mercy nun, gave lessons.

One day a girl said, "Sister, what's the matter with Eva? What kind of person is that? Where did she come from?"

The nun said, "Someplace in Arizona--some wild place. I don't know where it is but they eat chicken and spareribs with their hands, and they point at people. Horrible people! You must be kind to her because she doesn't know anything."

She told Robert Zimmerman, who called her Bonnie, that she behaved like a stray cow.

Once at a school picnic, she tried to show off by pulling an old ranch trick. She'd grab a calf's tail and twist it until the animal flipped onto its back. But when she tailed the calf at the picnic, the animal flipped onto the food and drink, ruining the afternoon for everyone.

Said Zimmerman, "Bonnie raised me and she always said, 'You need to learn how to act. When I went to school I didn't know how to act and this is what I did.'"

Eva cried her entire first year there. But by the start of the second year she'd adjusted, and couldn't wait to get back to school.

Her eagerness was due in part to an unusual relationship she forged with Leona Chipley, an English writer who lived near Guardian Angel and became, in many ways, Eva's literary guardian angel.

Eva told of sneaking away from the school to visit Chipley to engage in good conversation about books, make cookies together and to finally find what she sorely lacked at home--someone to nourish Eva's deep longing to write.

"I used to recite to her the little poems I wrote when I was at the ranch," Eva said. "She was the first person to listen to me and encourage me to write. She showed me the books she wrote, and suggested the books I should read."

Her meetings with Chipley usually took place at suppertime. At the clang of the school dinner bell, Eva would sneak out. Once on the other side of the fence, Eva would dart up the hill and through a wash to Mrs. Chipley's.

The Sisters of Mercy nuns educated Eva until 1921. When she returned to Arivaca, she resumed ranch work for several more years, but the California experience had dimmed the appeal of life on horseback.

More importantly, though, as Eva said, "The animals didn't know me anymore, so I was quite bored."

In April of 1933, she was back in California, attending Woodbury College, when she received word that her father had been thrown from a horse and killed. He was 56. With her brothers and sisters uninterested in the ranch, Eva, then 29, took over ownership.

She walked straight into a passel of trouble between Augustin Wilbur and Charlie Boice.

As she was leaving her father's funeral, an old woman pulled Eva aside and whispered, "I hope you go back to school, back to where you came from. Don't stay here. Your father and that man are having a cattle war, and if you stay you are going to get it."

Eva said, "I thought to myself, it isn't my cattle war. Why should I get it? Get what? But the guy, he gave it to me. He didn't stop. He was having a war with my father, but I thought that didn't concern me."

DETAILS OF THE CONFLICT come from newspaper accounts, court testimony and the recollections of longtime Arivaca residents and members of the Boice and Wilbur families. Not surprisingly, each blames the other for a nightmare time of poisoned wells, livestock shot between the eyes, multiple search warrants and assassins' bullets fired on lonesome desert roads at night.

And legal cases. In less than a decade beginning in 1933, Eva and Charlie Boice met in court five times. She joked about that in an exchange of prison letters with friend, Catherine Murphy, who'd excitedly told Eva about a book she'd read called *Lawrence of Arabia*.

"Frankly, I have not heard of it," Eva responded. "In fact, all I have heard for the past 10 years is 'versus Eva Wilbur-Cruce.'"

Someone once asked Eva if she believed Boice was trying to drive her away because she was a woman, or because she was Mexican. She said neither. It was about water. The Wilburs had it, and in their view, Charlie Boice wanted it.

He was the youngest of three brothers, described by his wife, Frances, now 99 and living in California, as well educated, quiet and a gentleman. The Boice boys ran the Chiricahua Cattle Company, which had holdings throughout southern Arizona, including the Rail X, the Empire and Arivaca ranches.

The family acquired the Arivaca property in 1930, and began buying out smaller ranchers in the vicinity. Frances and Charlie and their kids lived in a sprawling house with three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a dining room table that seated 20, a screened porch and a big swimming pool out back.

The Wilburs were close neighbors, separated only by Boice's wire-and-pole fence. But a portion of that fence was usually knocked down, allowing his cattle easy access to Eva's precious year-round spring, a short distance from her ranch house.

In her 1943 rustling trial, she testified that the fence was first uprooted in the spring of 1934, and had to be re-built every week for the remainder of that year.

"Every time we put the fence up in those days, Tom Renier was working for Charlie Boice there, and he would go and rope one of the posts and pull the fence down," Eva told the court. "Then Chiricahua cattle would come down and water at the Wilbur ranch."

One of Boice's own cowboys, E. S. Pepper, corroborated that. He said Boice's other fences were good, but the one abutting the Wilbur property had been down for three years, allowing his boss' cattle to go wherever they pleased.

Eva said the practice of tearing down her fence stopped during several wet years in the mid-1930s, but resumed in a drought that began in 1938 or 1939. She estimated that 500 to 700 of Boice's cattle watered there every day during the summer. "There is no way to keep them out," she said.

Nor was there any way to protect the Spanish mustangs that had roamed Wilbur land since the late 1870s. They were first brought to the area by a Mexican horse trader named Juan Zepulveda. He was driving 600 head from near Rancho Delores, Mexico, about 100 miles south of the present-day border, to Kansas City, and selling portions of the herd along the way.

When Dr. Wilbur bought some of the horses, Zepulveda told him they were direct descendants of the Spanish mustangs that Jesuit explorer Fr. Eusebio Kino first brought to the New World from Spain in the late 1600s. That story became folklore in the Wilbur family, handed down through the generations.

But Eva knew the animals simply as the family herd, the small and loyal mounts she'd ridden since girlhood. They were so tough the ranch cowboys nicknamed them rock horses, for their ability to scale steep mountain slopes. Eva recalled men trying to shoe them and watching in amazement as the nails bent against the hardness of their hooves.

Whenever she needed a horse to ride for her ranch work, Eva would rope one of the wild mustangs and break it to the saddle. "They took me wherever I wanted to go," she said.

At her father's death in 1933, the ranch held 700-800 of these Spanish barbs, as they were called. By 1943, the number had dwindled to 70.

Asked on the witness stand what happened to them, she said her understanding was that Boice had shot them. That was the only time she accused Boice, publicly and by name. On every other occasion, she referred only to the cattle baron.

In a flippant letter to a friend, written from prison in June of 1944, Eva described what happened when she returned to Tucson after her father's death:

"Buoyed by youth, no doubt, I don my chaps and spurs and bravely accepted the onus of coping with the intrepid, heroic cattlemen of that region! Consequences: My head is bloody but unbowed. What will it take to bow it? Ha!! Anyhow, the following will refresh your memory.

"While I was trying to acquaint myself with stock and pastures, cowboys and equipment, neighbor cattle baron, of no mean ability, drove 100 head of saddle horses into the national forest and slaughtered them with a machine gun. Effects: Sentiment was running high in Tucson, and I was utterly spoiled by the sheriff's office."

Sarcasm aside, Eva believed, rightly or wrongly, that law enforcement was lined up against her, and in favor of what newspapers then called the big cattle interests, meaning Chiricahua Cattle. After the horse-slaughtering episode, she cut her brands off the carcasses and brought them to county attorney Carlos Robles.

In court testimony, Eva said he was downright hostile to her, saying, "Well, you cattle people talk about caring for a horse like it was the Virgin Mary. Don't come over here and talk to me about it."

Filing a formal complaint against Boice, as the sheriff suggested, would've been pointless for another reason. Shortly after her meeting with Robles, Eva said the brands, her only evidence, mysteriously disappeared from his office.

But someone was indeed systematically slaughtering the Wilbur horses.

Eva's husband, Marshall Cruce, whom she met and married over a whirlwind four-day period in early November of 1933, said that when he started going to Arivaca, he saw many dead horses. Some lay in groups of two or three, and one batch numbered 15. Each had a silver-dollar-sized hole in its head, as though someone had fired at close range with a .45 caliber pistol.

The story of the machine-gun slaughter even reached Los Angeles, where the *Examiner* likened the goings on to "the famous Chisolm feud in New Mexico of Billy the Kid's day."

The newspaper reported that a vigilante band of unnamed Santa Cruz County cowboys had organized for the avowed purpose of hanging anyone caught stealing a cow. The head of the outfit, Patagonia cattleman O.A. Case, was its only member whose identity was known.

"We're going to stop cattle thievery and horse rustling if we have to string a dozen men to as many cottonwoods," Case declared. "And the law will be with us. No jury in Arizona would convict a vigilante of murder if he used some contemptible desperado to stretch hemp."

The *Examiner* said the Wilbur ranch, "near the flat-roofed adobes of Arivaca, historic cow village," was the target of most of the assaults. Horses have been driven away at night, and have either disappeared or been slaughtered. Cattle have been herded through isolated canyons where the brands have been changed before the animals were sold.

"The story of the raids on the Wilbur ranch sounds like a movie scenario," the *Examiner* wrote in the fall of 1933. "Mr. Wilbur died some time ago. The place is under the management of his daughter. According to the account she gave the under-sheriff, a wealthy cow baron has been trying to drive her out of business so that he might buy the range."

The country was said to be crawling with armed men hunting for tracks after night raids. They follow their quarry until the foot or horse prints end in a stream or on a rocky mesa.

"Usually the outlaw escapes into the wild mountainous country, or else goes home and is peacefully smoking a pipe when the vigilantes arrive," the paper reported.

Eva described herself as caught in the middle of the trouble.

"You can imagine how hard it was for me. I was alone," she said. "My brother Henry came one day and said, 'I'll help you look for the horses.' And we went and rode the country and found 18 horses dead in a ravine.

"And we kept on looking. We report it to the sheriff's department. The officers went over there and we rode over the country, and more horses, all over the country, dead."

But Eva was hardly a helpless innocent caught in a whirlwind of bullets. She was in the thick of the fight, giving as good as she got. Zimmerman said Eva and her cowboy used to sneak out at night and kill Boice's cattle.

"They'd kill 10-15 a night. Shoot 'em right between the eyes with a pistol," he said. "She even told Boice on the courthouse steps, 'I'm going to shoot 10 of your cows for every one of my horses that you kill.' That's why she never talked about it. What she was doing was a hanging offense."

Zimmerman said one of her lawyers allegedly advised her to kill Boice, believing he could get her off on murder because there'd be only one side of the story. And at least then the war would be over, he said.

"They were sworn enemies," Zimmerman said of Eva and Boice. "They tried to destroy each other."

Even the late rancher's wife, Frances Boice, acknowledged that her husband probably was trying to drive Eva off her land. But he had good reason.

"She was stealing his horses," said Boice in a telephone interview from California. "When his horses had colts, she'd take them and brand them. I know she was sent to jail for doing the same thing to somebody else."

Some contemporary Arivacans agreed that Eva was as much responsible for the trouble as anyone. They said she had too many horses and cattle on only four square miles of land, badly overgrazing it. To keep her stock from starving, she turned the animals loose on other people's property.

Mary Kasulaitis, who grew up on the Noon Ranch east of Arivaca, remembered peering over the Wilbur fence as a child and seeing Eva's horses, neglected and near death from starvation, the bark eaten off the trees as high as the animals could reach.

Three years ago, Kasulaitis wrote a long denunciation of Eva in *The Connection*, an Arivaca newspaper. She said it took her 12 years to muster the guts to publish it.

"A cowboy told me he saw one of her stallions actually break the fence down so the mares could get out and get something to eat," wrote Kasulaitis, now the town librarian in Arivaca. "Surrounding ranches had to fence her animals out, not the other way around."

In a telephone interview, Kasulaitis said it was Eva who was cruel, not the land she lived on, and expressed outrage at the acclaim she received after publication of *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*. She called it an inaccurate reconstruction of her life on the ranch, written to gain the respect she didn't have in Arivaca.

As for the cattle war, Kasulaitis acknowledged in her *Connection* story that Boice's dealings with small ranchers in Arivaca left some feeling they'd been forced out. She added that it's impossible to know exactly what went on between Eva and Boice, or to interview people who'll tell the truth about it, even today. But she scoffs at the depiction of Eva as a woman alone against a greedy land baron.

"Her cattle ran all over Charlie Boice's ranch and he was tired of it, I know that," said Kasulaitis. "This isn't to say that Charlie Boice was entirely innocent. He was tough, too. This was still the Wild West in the 1930s. You had to be tough to survive. But Eva's attempt to get revenge on Charlie touched everyone in the valley."

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**a Pistolera**

Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce lived in "beautiful, cruel country" near Arivaca. There were cattle rustlers, horse killers and pistol-packin' assassins. But Eva was a fighter. She went to prison herself for rustling, and she kept her pistol close at hand right

By [Leo W. Banks](https://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/ArticleArchives?author=1063843)

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Eva Antonia "Bonnie" Wilbur-Cruce acquired a colorful nickname, *La Pistolera*, for her nasty habit of shooting at people who ventured too close to her ranch near Arivaca. Even her grand-nephew, Tucsonan Robert Zimmerman, noted episodes in which Eva used her gun to back off intruders.

One day when he was about 9, Zimmerman said he, Eva and Eva's husband Marshall heard a car stop at the second gate near the ranch. No visitors were expected, and getting to the second gate meant the car's driver had already picked the lock on the first gate.

"When somebody did something provocative like that, it put Bonnie into a different personality," said Zimmerman. "It was like she became a man."

She ran to a hilltop near the house and hid behind a tree about 100 feet from the gate. Eva watched as a man picked that lock, too.

"As soon as Bonnie heard that chain drop onto the ground, she yelled, 'You sonofabitch!' and she pulled her pistol and went, 'Bam! Bam!' She fired twice and blew out two of his tires. I mean, she was fast. It was like in the movies. I've never seen anybody do that before."

The man jumped into his car and floored it, racing back to Arivaca on two flat tires. Eva, Zimmerman and Marshall jumped into their truck and chased him into town at 70 mph. They followed the intruder's tire marks in the dust to the town restaurant, and Eva confronted him inside.

Whatever his reason was for picking the locks, Zimmerman said it satisfied Eva. She invited him back to the ranch for coffee and they stayed up most of the night talking.

But the bullets flew both ways.

One night in 1941, riflemen in the hills above the Arivaca Road attempted to assasinate Eva as she drove with her sister, Ruby. The bullets shattered the windows of the Buick sedan in which she was riding, killing one of the German Shepherds with them at the time.

Neither Eva nor Ruby was hit and the shooters never identified. Eva's nephew, Raymond Zimmerman, Robert's dad, age seven when the incident occurred, remembers seeing Eva and Ruby when they arrived in Tucson after the shooting.

"That Buick had a bunch of bullet holes in it," said Zimmerman, 68, a retired Hughes Aircraft worker. "Eva was frightened as she talked about it, but you know, not too much." She reported the incident to lawmen, but as the *Tucson Daily Citizen* later reported, nighttime shootings around Arivaca had become so commonplace they took no action.

The feud coincided with the Depression, making the times even tougher. To survive those lean years, Eva and Marshall also spent considerable time in Tucson. He worked as an $18-a-week department store clerk while Eva operated a business out of the couple's home there.

But given her personality, nothing mundane or reserved would do. She invented an entirely new persona, becoming Elaine Lutrell, master spiritualist. Her business card said, "Psychic Readings and Advice Given on All Subjects."

Trading on the perception skills she developed as a child alone in the desert, Eva got hold of a crystal ball, a triangle with a pendant dangling from its center, dressed in a wild outfit and began seeing clients in her living room.

Robert Zimmerman said some of the most powerful names in Tucson became regular customers. "She was good at it," he said. "I know as a kid when she was raising me, you couldn't put anything past her."

In the 1943 case that sent Eva to jail, she was accused, with her longtime cowboy Luis Lopez, on four counts of killing a mare that belonged to an Eloy man, a former Arivaca resident, and branding its colt as her own.

Eva's story was that the mare did indeed belong to her, and had broken its neck jumping from her corral. After that, she and Marshall had no choice but to shoot the animal.

But Eva, Marshall and Lopez tripped over themselves in their court testimony, dooming their defense. Marshall swore that he shot the mare after the fall, but the prosecution raised doubts as to who actually did the shooting.

And Lopez admitted before the trial that Eva had ordered him to tell the

broken neck story. But he contradicted himself in court, going back to the version Eva wanted. It included a strange explanation for the disappearance of exonerating evidence.

After killing the mare, Eva and Marshall said they cut the Wilbur brand off the animal, and hung it from the corral as proof to anyone who happened by that the animal was theirs. They did this as a means of self-defense.

A few days before, according to her lawyer's closing argument, a

"friendly cowboy" approached Eva to warn her that they--meaning "the big cattle interests"--were after her again.

But the brand vanished. Eva and Marshall testified that their coon-hunting dogs ate it.

The jury didn't buy it. Eva and Lopez were convicted on all four counts, with a recommendation that Lopez, whom the jury believed acted under Eva's orders, be given leniency. Eva's appeal to the Arizona Supreme Court was denied.

Mary Kasulaitis, who grew up on the Noon Ranch east of Arivaca, said the conviction revealed Eva for what she was, a stock thief, and noted that the case did not involve her neighbor, and nemesis, Charlie Boice. But cowboy E.S. Pepper, who'd worked for Boice for 16 years, did provide important testimony against Eva, as he'd done in previous court cases.

Frances Boice, Charlie Boice's widow, said, "I know my husband was real pleased when she went to jail because her stealing our horses was a real problem."

The Wilbur family, however, believes that Boice set Eva up to win the conviction.

The son of old-time Arivaca cowboy Morris Shepard seconded that view. Shepard worked for Boice, and most likely was the "friendly cowboy" Eva's defense lawyer referred to.

"My dad always believed Eva was framed," said Shepard's son, Pete, a 64-year-old cowboy. "He said Boice was taking over all those homesteads down there, and they wanted the Wilbur ranch bad. If you wouldn't sell to them, they'd try to get it some other way."

According to one story, told and re-told by participants, each time with varying details, Eva at one point owed $1,000 on her mortgage. But she was flat broke, with no way of getting the money other than selling her precious Spanish mustangs.

She didn't want to do it. "Those horses were her babies," said Raymond Zimmerman. "It pained her awful to have to sell them." She arranged a selling price, and accompanied by four Mexican cowboys, drove the herd to Amado, 30 miles north.

With the deal about to close, the unidentified buyer--Boice himself in one version, someone in cahoots with him in another--declared that he was willing to pay only a fraction of the agreed-upon amount.

Angry at the double-cross, Eva turned to one of her cowboys and barked, "Turn the horses loose!" As soon as they were free, the mustangs headed on their own back to the Wilbur ranch, the only home they'd ever known.

That same day, Shepard approached Eva with an unspecified offer of help. "I'll be at your ranch tomorrow morning before the sun comes up," he said.

Even though deeply suspicious, and doubtful that anything good could come from a Boice cowboy, Eva agreed. At dawn Shepard galloped up to the ranch. "The thing you should do is go to town right away and pay off that mortgage," he insisted.

Eva laughed bitterly. "How am I supposed to do that with no money?" she asked, wondering what trick he had up his sleeve. Shepard handed her a rolled cigarette paper and said, "I told you I was going to help you and I did."

Still suspicious, Eva dropped the strange gift on the table and received from Shepard a warning that this seemingly worthless scrap of paper should not be treated casually.

After he left, Eva unraveled the mysterious paper and found $1,000 rolled up inside. "I kept thinking something is wrong," Eva said later. "Maybe the money is fake. This must be a trick."

But it wasn't. Angry that Eva had been set up, Morris Shepard, who died in 1962, stepped forward with his own money to save the Wilbur ranch, providing a bit of Gary Cooper-style goodness amid a tale of blood and bitterness.

Ironically, said Pete Shepard, the money from his dad's good deed might've come from the bootlegging he did in the 1930s.

"My dad didn't talk a lot about what when on in those days, but I know one thing," said Pete Shepard. "Charlie Boice never went near Eva Cruce. She'd threatened to kill him and he knew she meant it, because she didn't

lie. I never knew her not to carry a gun."

One of Arizona's worst range wars ended quietly in 1944 when Charlie Boice sold most of his cattle interests and moved to California. Frances Boice said her husband was planning to get back in the cattle business in either Wyoming or Montana when he died of a heart attack 12 years later, at 54.

To the day of his death, no charge made against Charlie Boice by the Wilburs or anyone else was ever proved.

For Eva, the cattle war never ended. The events of those 11 years colored every breath she took from then on. Her prison experience in particular was transforming.

She spent much of her time behind bars dealing with the terrible summer heat and reading supportive letters from Catherine--"I'd much rather be inside and be honest than outside and be a crook, like some I know."

In their early letters, she and Catherine talked of Eva's innocence and the "rats" who put her there. But she soon resigned herself to doing her time, surviving by "putting armor around herself."

"I wish you could get in the jug, as you put it in your letter," Eva wrote to Catherine in July 1944, two weeks after starting her sentence. "The environment is tough on the nervous system. What can anyone expect under such a system of punishment? In my humble opinion it is all wrong."

In addition to her letters, Eva left behind a portion of her prison diary, a remarkable document that provides a touching, funny and sad look at daily life in the pen--the women lining up for syphilis shots, morning inspection by the matron, Eva killing time by reading the new Montgomery Ward catalogue, the gossip that a fellow prisoner was a morphine addict.

But the most riveting passages deal with the escape of two prisoners, who hoisted themselves over the wall with a garden hose. Eva knew of the escape beforehand, but kept quiet and wrote of it in her diary. She feared the guards would search the women's rooms, find her diary

and punish her for not notifying them. She decided to hide it.

"6 a.m. I got up and hurried outside to find a place to bury this diary. After I placed it inside of a tin can, I went behind my house and picking up a rock that had been in the corner for a long time I dug under it and placed the can in the hole and covered it up well, then I put the rock on top.

"'What are you planting there? Flowers?'" said a voice up on the catwalks.

"I looked up and saw a guard standing up in the corner. I ignored him and walked inside of my room. Once he was gone I got out and dug out the damn tin can. I walked in my room and looked for a place to put it, but not finding a safe place I decided to put it inside my shoes.

"So I put on a pair of thin white socks, then folding the papers carefully, I placed them in the bottom of my foot and then I put on another thin sock on top in order to protect the papers from the shoe leather ..."

The intrigue included the notation that one of the escapees was pregnant, and had been swallowing roach powder to try to induce an abortion.

Eva's loyalties throughout remained with the prisoners. She described settling into her cot for the night, shortly after the breakout, hoping the two women were across the state line.

"Don't make any difference which line," Eva wrote, sounding more like a moll than a college-educated woman.

Eva was released from Florence in early February of 1945. The immediate effects of confinement were obvious to her family in small ways. She'd stand before closed doors and wait for someone to open them, forgetting she was free to do so herself.

But other remnants of the experience were more long-lasting. She harbored considerable anger, especially if Robert Zimmerman called her Mama. It reminded her of the prison matron. "Don't ever call me that," she'd snarl. "I'm nobody's mama."

Family members acknowledge that prison made her a harsher woman, and it made the .32 on her hip a permanent fixture. If she heard a noise at night, Robert Zimmerman said she'd get out of bed and prowl the house, gun in hand. She stashed bullets in various rooms, as if preparing for a long siege.

When she was in her 70s, and still roping horses, she went cycling in a Tucson park. A man trying to steal her bike made the mistake of knocking Eva down, and she sprang to her feet with the pistol in hand, pointed at the man's belly.

The dumbfounded attacker stammered, "You c-c-c-an't have a gun in a park. It's illegal." She waved the revolver at him and said, "Then go find a cop." The man took off running, glad to be alive.

After Eva had a stroke in 1987, Zimmerman, fearful of an accident involving his children, snuck into her room and took the bullets from her gun as she slept. But she soon noticed them missing and demanded he give them back. He did.

"She was the authority," Zimmerman said. "There was one way to do everything--her way. But I think she was provoked into being the way she was. So many people tried to push her down, it made her a fighter. I think that's what kept her going."

Certainly circumstance--walking into a cattle war after her dad's death--played a part in forming her character. But Eva also was born with a rebel's streak an acre and a half wide. She did as she wished. She yielded to no obstacle. She fought to get what she wanted no matter what.

After being sentenced to prison, for example, she wrote a letter to the court claiming to be pregnant, but it wasn't true. She was angling for a way out of serving the time.

Present-day Arivaca rancher Jim Chilton recalled a conversation he had with Eva a few years before her death. She told him that as a teen-ager she and her father used to sneak onto Chilton's land--then owned by a homesteader--and steal his oats to feed their mustangs.

Chilton liked Eva, and considered her a friend, but he was surprised at the admission. "You should've seen the embarrassed look on her face when she told me," said Chilton.

But when it came to saving her horses, nothing was beyond doing. In one extraordinary episode, Eva acknowledged that she let her mustangs roam on her neighbors' land, including Boice's, but said she was guided to do so by nothing less than the voice of God.

It was during the cattle war, and a time of terrible drought. The land was so parched even her perennial spring was dried. And in addition to the fence around her own property, Eva said Boice had built a second fence, six feet from hers, around the Wilbur land.

Amid this desperation, her aunt, Rita, advised her to pray, but Eva wanted no part of it. "Don't tell me about prayer," she said. "I don't want to pray. I want to forget."

But strange things began happening. On a trip to Tucson, Eva was crossing a downtown street and saw a book that had been run over by a bus. She picked it up and opened it to a random page and read the words, Try God.

She dropped the book and kept going. Later the same day, she went to a book sale at the University of Arizona library and saw a book in a bin standing out from the others. She opened it and read the same words, Try God.

"Again!" Eva said out loud. "I don't want to pray."

She finished her errands and drove back to the ranch, arriving after dark. Her 200 horses were running in circles on the parched ground, throwing up dust clouds that curled to the top of the cottonwoods. "There was nothing to eat," Eva said. "The horses were going crazy."

She began carrying her supplies into the house. A radio on the kitchen table was playing a sermon by the famed Catholic orator Fulton J. Sheen. When Eva heard Sheen say the words, "Jesus wept," something compelled her to sit and listen.

"He had a very beautiful talk," she said. "I thought of the sisters in the convent, and I could see in my mind their beautiful hems with their rosary beads hanging down. But no prayers came to me. Then I remembered something I'd heard at the convent school that ended with the line, God have mercy on me, a sinner."

She muttered that line over and over to herself and she went back outside. The horses were neighing in desperation. The end was near.

Eva looked up to the sky and shouted, "God, what do you want me to do? Send us some rain! We're going to die without it! And a voice said to me, 'Go open your gate and his gate.' I opened the two gates and the horses went out. I came back inside and ate my supper and went to bed."

Next morning she noticed water in the crack that ran through her kitchen floor and was mystified over how it got there. She tried to open the front door, but couldn't. Something soft was blocking it. She thought an animal had died and fallen against it.

Afraid to open the door, she went to a low window, got down on her knees as if in prayer, and raised the shade. She looked out at snow drifts four-feet high. "I was scared to go out there," she said. "I thought to myself, 'What if it's a dream? I'll crack up.'"

When she finally mustered the courage to go outside, she sat in her truck, dreamlike, gazing through the windshield at the beautiful snow. After a while she noticed a Bible on the dashboard, left there earlier in the day by her friend, Catherine.

She opened it to Luke, chapter 18, and her eyes went immediately to the words, God have mercy on me, a sinner. Eva was stunned. She took it as final proof that the almighty had answered her prayers and saved her Spanish horses.

The animals were saved again in 1990. The year before, Eva had sold the ranch--except for 10 acres and the house--to the Nature Conservancy. The property was then turned over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for inclusion into the Bueno Aires National Wildlife Refuge.

To protect the area's sensitive habitats, fish and wildlife ordered the removal of the horses, a process that began with an inventory conducted by biologist Steve Dobrott. He found 100 animals in terrible shape, suffering depletion by sickness, another drought, preying lions and even traffickers who were stealing them to pack drugs across the desert.

Three months into his work, Dobrott happened to read *A Beautiful, Cruel Country,* in which Eva spoke of the family folklore about the herd's connection to Kino's mustangs. He'd never heard the tale, which had gained little currency beyond the Wilbur family, and wondered if it could be true.

Could these be the same horses that Kino used to stock the chain of missions and ranches he established in northern Mexico and present-day Southern Arizona?

Blood testing was arranged to determine if the horses, concealed from time by the isolation and remoteness of the ranch, still bore the genetic traits of the Spanish breed. The results, remarkably, were positive, scientific confirmation of the story Juan Zepulveda had told Dr. Ruben Wilbur more than a hundred years earlier.

But if it hadn't been for Dobrott's chance reading of Eva's book, the genetic and historical importance of the horses--a breed that had carried explorers, settlers, missionaries and Apache raiders over 300 years--would never have been rediscovered. They likely would've been sold to random buyers, and the strain gradually diluted to extinction.

**As it was, Eva agreed to allow the herd to be dispersed to breeders pledged to keeping the strain alive. They were probably the last purely Spanish horses remaining in the U.S.**

This final rescue of the horses served as a fitting end to Eva's story. The two were much alike--tough, rock hard, willful, unwilling to yield to the elements, human or natural, machine gun or drought. But with the animals' removal, and Eva's sale of the ranch, a way of life ended forever. The cost to maintain it had been incalculable.

"There's always been a lot of heartbreak out at that ranch," said Raymond Zimmerman. "My mom used to say, 'I don't want to go there. I know Eva suffered a lot to keep it, and I was surprised she sold to the government when she did. But I know she had no regrets about the cattle war. There was a lot of hate there, but she never regretted fighting them."

Fighting was like food to her. Even at her lowest point, in jail, Eva refused to yield. In one diary entry, she talked of retreating to her cell to read a poem over and over, carving it into her memory. It makes a fitting epitaph. A portion of it read:

**Pain twists this body? Yes, but it shall not  
Distort my soul, by all the gods that be!  
And when it's done its worst, Pain's victory  
Shall be an empty one! Whate'er my lot,  
My banner, ragged, but nailed to the mast,  
Shall fly triumphant to the very last!**

Today, now as you read the story of Eva’s purposeful and colorful past these horses still endure and keep alive the history and Legacy of the Spanish horse brought for exploration of a New World. Saved by Father Kino herd management efforts to help the Spanish Colonists start new lives and for the great Missions and Ranchos of the Southwest. Brought to Alta California with the original colonizing efforts of Portola and DeAnza these Spanish horses became the backbone of the development of Alta California. With Eva’s wisdom, perseverance and love they were saved again, and again…

With an agreement and signed contract these Spanish horses were saved again when Eva transferred her passion and responsibility to Robin Collins (Keller) in 1990. Robin started the nonprofit, Heritage Discovery Center in 1992, Monterey Ca, to preserve California’s Colonial history and to conserve the Wilbur-Cruce Colonial Horses.

The horses still need to be saved…without support for the Heritage Discovery Center these icons of Colonial Spanish history will be lost. Extinction is FOREVER…please help save our horses and our history.

**To find out more go to** [www.ranchodelsueno.com](http://www.ranchodelsueno.com)

**To help go to the Donate button** on the web site [www.ranchodelsueno.com](http://www.ranchodelsueno.com) or

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Heritage Discovery Center (*Rancho del Sueno, is the Equine Division of HDC*)

40222 Millstream Lane, Madera CA 93636

Please help today…

Robin Collins