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Squabbling Heirs Rock Former Texas Governor's Ranching Empire

The late Dolph Briscoe Jr., once known as the state's largest individual landowner, thought he had ensured his legacy. He didn't account for bad blood, and tragedy.

By [Laura Kusisto](#) and Anne Tergesen

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UVALDE, Texas—In a family photograph taken in 1958, future Texas Gov. Dolph Briscoe Jr., wearing a starched white cowboy shirt, is pictured with his wife and three young children in front of their wooden ranch house, surrounded by Briscoe land as far as the eye can see.

The governor, known to some close relatives as “Big Daddy” and to the rest of the world as the largest individual landowner in Texas, was determined to keep his roughly 600,000 acres in the family long after his death.

In estate documents he signed a few years before he died in 2010, Mr. Briscoe expressed his wishes for his three children to share equally in the land, and to use it primarily for ranching.

His plan succeeded—but only for a time. Now, in ways even Big Daddy wasn't able to control, the ranching business at the heart of the Briscoes' fortune for nearly a century is tearing the family apart.

Mr. Briscoe's oldest daughter, Janey Briscoe Marmion, died of cancer in 2018 at the age of 68, leaving no heirs after her only child, Kate, died by gunshot a decade earlier. The families of the surviving siblings, Cele Briscoe Carpenter and Dolph Briscoe III, known as Chip, are fighting in court over how to divide up Janey's portion of the Briscoe fortune. The outcome will determine who gets control over an estimated \$1 billion of assets and will shape the ranching and philanthropic legacy of one of Texas's most prominent families.

Cele and her three grown children, in lawsuits filed in Uvalde County court, are accusing Chip of manipulating his frail older sister into signing documents that disinherited them

from her estate, tilting control of the Briscoe ranching fortune to him and his two sons in contravention of their grandfather's wishes.

The dispute is about “an older brother's systematic domination and improper exercise of influence—both directly and indirectly—to secure a disproportionate share of the family's inheritance for himself and his descendants,” Cele's children allege.

In court documents and interviews, Chip, now 68, and his sons in turn have portrayed 65-year-old Cele as an extremely wealthy woman who drifted away from the family business after moving to Dallas and marrying into a dynasty with a fortune of its own. Chip's side says Cele's family is using the litigation to try to force a breakup of the family holdings, and accuses them in a court document of “breathtaking audacity” in seeking to overturn Janey's will and jeopardizing her plan to leave a substantial share of her fortune to charity.

Growing up, the Briscoe children split their time between a modest home in the town of Uvalde, about 85 miles southwest of San Antonio, and the family's two ranches. One property sits in the Texas Hill Country, a rugged region of central and southern Texas where former President Lyndon B. Johnson was born and raised. During hot Texas summers when the family stayed at the sprawling midcentury ranch home they call the “Big Home,” Cele recalls the whole family would sometimes sleep together in their parents' bedroom, the one room with air conditioning.

The family's main ranch holdings were near the town of Catarina, in southern Texas close to the Mexican border. In 1980, Big Daddy purchased a three-story home built by the half brother of President William Howard Taft, and, in a huge undertaking that involved cutting it into three sections, moved it to the ranch and added an elevator.



Clockwise from top: Janey Briscoe and her husband, former Texas Gov. Dolph Briscoe in front of their Uvalde, Texas, ranch home in approximately 1997. Gov. Briscoe addresses Texas legislators in 1977, and chats with President Jimmy Carter in the White House.

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS (2); GETTY IMAGES

Gov. Briscoe, who traced his family roots to a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence, was steeped in the culture of the state. As a child, he watched his father slowly rebuild the family ranching business from the Great Depression.

By the time he was a teenager he began learning how to be a working rancher himself, laboring alongside his father and the ranch hands to singe the thorns off prickly pear cactuses so they were edible for cattle in the dry months, he said in a book co-written with historian Don Carleton, “Dolph Briscoe: My Life in Texas Ranching and Politics.” In college at the University of Texas, he had a “U” and a “T” branded on his chest as part of an initiation rite in the student organization the Texas Cowboys.

The future governor was a four-term Texas state representative when his father died unexpectedly of a heart attack in his early 60s. Mr. Briscoe cut his legislative career short and returned to run the ranch. His father had made sure the family business had enough cash so his son didn’t need to sell land to pay the estate tax. “He had seen too many examples of heirs who couldn’t hold onto what they were fortunate enough to inherit,” Mr. Briscoe wrote.

He ensured his children got their hands dirty. A Saturday Evening Post story from 1959 shows a 2-year-old Cele in a striped dress clambering up a barbed wire fence at the family ranch.

Cele spent her last two years of high school in Uvalde while her parents moved to the capital when her father was elected governor in 1972. In an interview, she said she was lonely and leaned on Chip, who was attending the University of Texas at Austin. When she called his fraternity house, whoever answered the phone would yell, "Hey Briscoe, it's your kid sister!" A six-year age gap meant Cele's relationship with Janey, who also attended college in Austin, was less close in those years.

Over the decades Cele's path diverged from those of her brother and sister. When it was Cele's turn for college, she said, Chip advised her to enroll in Southern Methodist University in Dallas, a more-conservative venue that would shield her from her father's critics in liberal Austin.

She fell in love with John W. Carpenter III, the heir to an old-money Dallas family. When they were married in 1980, Mr. Carpenter sought Big Daddy's approval, while Cele sought Chip's, seeing him as a kind of father figure.

The Carpenters, who made much of their money in the utilities and insurance businesses, were also big-time landowners like the Briscoes. But they weren't as keen on hanging onto the family ranchland, which stood smack in the path of urban growth between Dallas and Fort Worth.



The Briscoe family outside the Governor's Mansion in Austin circa 1991. The adults from left to right: Jill and Chip Briscoe; Janey and Gov. Dolph Briscoe; Cele and John W. Carpenter III; Janey Briscoe Marmion. The grandchildren from left: Leigh Briscoe; D.B. Briscoe; Benjamin Carpenter; Bonner Carpenter; Austin Carpenter; Kate Marmion.

PHOTO: BRISCOE FAMILY ARCHIVES

After riding out the crash of the Dallas real-estate market in the 1980s, the Las Colinas development they envisioned now features upscale homes, country clubs, luxury resorts and high-rise office buildings occupied by tenants including Exxon Mobil Corp. and Kimberly-Clark Corp., which make their headquarters there. The Carpenters retained their stake through the downturn and eventually sold it to business partners.

Cele, John and their oldest son, Benjamin, now run Miramar Holdings LP, an investment firm with 16 employees that manages the family's wealth, including oil-and-gas holdings, according to its website. Their philanthropic efforts include a \$1 million donation toward a 55,000-square-foot livestock center named for their fathers at Fair Park in Dallas, where they recently purchased a prize hog to help raise money for children in rural areas.

Robin Lewis, Cele's friend for four decades, said Cele avoids glitzy social functions and instead prefers hiking, taking in rescue dogs and visiting small-town craft fairs in the North Carolina mountains. "She's real comfortable shopping at Walmart," Ms. Lewis said.

While Cele built a life in Dallas, Janey and Chip remained near their parents in South Texas. Chip took over the day-to-day running of the ranch business three decades ago. He lives on his own 30-acre spread about 20 minutes from the family's main ranch near Catarina.

Chip spends "probably all of his time managing the ranch and working on the ranch," said Dr. Carleton, who now serves as executive director of the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

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What advice do you have to make the inheritance process move smoothly? Join the conversation below.

Dr. Carleton said a typical story about Chip came from a friend, who while driving to Chip's home saw a couple of cowboys working on a barbed wire fence with gloves on. When he pulled over to seek directions to Chip's house, he discovered one of them was Chip.

"He looked like a regular cowboy with a straw hat on and he was out there working with them," he said.

When Big Daddy was alive the three siblings and their children would get together for Christmas at the Big Home, Easter egg hunts at the Catarina ranch and picnics on a high bluff above the Rio Grande river. In a photograph taken around 1991, Mr. Briscoe beams down over his three children and six grandchildren from the steps of the columned white governor's mansion. A family photo from around 1993 portrays Cele and Chip's young children playfully posing together on a trip to the Alamo in San Antonio.



Leigh Briscoe, D.B. Briscoe, Austin Carpenter, Bonner Carpenter and Benjamin Carpenter at the Alamo around 1993.

PHOTO: CELE CARPENTER

Those gatherings weren't enough to close the gap between big-city Dallas and rural South Texas.

Chip's younger son, 37-year-old James Leigh Briscoe, who goes by Leigh, has worked on the ranch since 2008. In an email, he said he spends most of his waking hours tending to the

land with his father. “The ranch has been a solid, constant thread throughout my life,” he said. Chip’s other son, D.B.—short for Dolph Briscoe IV—is a lecturer at Texas A&M University in San Antonio, where he specializes in Texas, U.S. and Mexican history. Now 40, he said in an email he visits the ranch every month to six weeks.

Leigh said he got along with Cele’s children growing up but didn’t feel particularly close to them since he only saw them on holidays and didn’t communicate between gatherings. He said he had a closer bond with Janey’s daughter, Kate, in part because he and his family had weekly lunches with his grandparents and Kate would often join.

Kate was also a favorite of the Dallas cousins. According to Cele, Kate and her daughter, Bonner, were particularly close, and the two attended the University of Texas together.

Cele recalls that her niece was a “bubbly, energetic kid,” but at a Christmas gathering one year, Kate was inconsolable, sobbing at the table. Cele offered to take her for help in Dallas, but she recalls that Janey said she had it under control.

In 2008, when she was a sophomore in college, Kate died from a rifle shot directly to the chest at her father’s ranch. News reports said a county judge ruled the death an accident.

Chip’s son D.B., who was in graduate school at the University of Texas at the time, and used to meet Kate at football games with their grandfather, said, “Kate’s death in January 2008 remains one of the most painful moments of my life.”

Janey was devastated, according to court documents. Helen Burgin, a waitress at a local restaurant who befriended the heiress, wrote in the Uvalde Leader-News that after Kate died, Big Daddy came to take Janey for a drive to get her out of bed and out of the house. When she told him she wasn’t going, “He then had his driver honk the horn. Not just honk the horn but lean on the horn,” Ms. Burgin recounted in her article.

The tragedy marked a turning point in the future of the Briscoe fortune. After her father died, Janey, who no longer had an heir, rewrote her will to direct her share of the inheritance among her niece and nephews, according to her estate documents. This meant that Cele’s family, with three children, would inherit more than Chip’s, with just two, and thus have more say in the future of the ranch holdings.



Former Texas Gov. Briscoe and his daughter Janey in 2004 with the University of Texas at San Antonio President Ricardo Romo.

PHOTO: JERRY LARA/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS/ZUMA PRESS

Janey's trials were only beginning. Around the time of her father's death in 2010, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She divorced her second husband in early 2014.

Shortly after her divorce, Janey signed a new will and made some changes to the agreements governing key trusts, according to her estate documents. Unbeknownst to Cele, the moves entirely bypassed the three Carpenter children. Under Janey's prior estate plan, the three Carpenters stood to inherit about \$480 million of Janey's approximately \$940 million fortune, according to the Carpenters.

Under Janey's new estate plan, a foundation in memory of Janey's late daughter got about \$500 million and Chip's two sons received about \$440 million, according to the Carpenters. Cele's children received nothing.

Chip already had the authority to vote a majority of the shares in the ranching business. The changes ensured his family would continue to control the business after he dies.

Raising the stakes considerably, oil-and-gas operations on the property became more lucrative, meaning the family fortune wasn't so tied up in land.

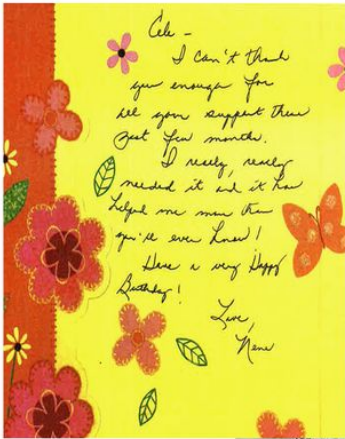
A few days after Janey died, Cele and Chip met in their late father's wood-paneled office on a November morning to pick out hymns and scripture readings for her funeral. They were getting up to leave when Chip told her he needed to show her something.

"You're not gonna like this," Cele recalls Chip saying as he handed her the will.

She drove to the local Sonic Drive-In, where she ordered a large ice tea with two lemons and read the will.

After digesting the document, Cele was bewildered how her sister could have written a document that threatens to cut off her children from their ranching heritage. It was also hurtful, with Janey cutting out Cele's daughter from receiving Janey's jewelry. In 2011, Janey had named Cele's son Benjamin to succeed her upon her death at the foundation in Kate's memory, according to a document Benjamin provided to The Wall Street Journal. She later gave control to one of Chip's sons.

Despite gaps of geography and age, Cele said, the sisters had a loving relationship. Shortly before she died, Janey, who Cele called Nene, wrote her sister a note: "I can't thank you enough for all you suggest these past few months. I really, really needed it and it has helped me more than you'll ever know!"



Cele and Benjamin Carpenter tour the Uvalde Memorial Hospital imaging center in October, 2021, funded partly by the Carpenters. Above, a card from Janey to Cele.

PHOTO: CARPENTER FAMILY (2)

Cele's children are contesting the will in Uvalde County court. Cele and her children initially filed a separate lawsuit in Dallas alleging that Chip breached a legal duty as a trusted figure

in Cele's life to inform her of changes to Janey's estate documents. The cases have now been consolidated in Uvalde County court. In their pleadings Cele and her children allege that Chip manipulated her sister Janey into signing the later will when Janey was suffering from depression, anorexia and the effects of chemotherapy. When Janey signed the revised will in 2014, she had become disoriented and highly forgetful as the chemo caused "a severe form of cognitive impairment commonly known as chemo brain," the Uvalde lawsuit says.

Cele said she believes Chip was angry that Janey was giving her family control of the ranch. She said Janey's new will violates their father's express intention in his own estate documents that the three children share equally in his estate. Chip "resented that I wasn't working there and was an equal owner," she said in an interview at the Big Home.

In court documents, Cele's children said that Chip referred to Cele and her family as "city kids" and as a "rat in the woodpile" and called their family "Dallas."

One of Chip's attorneys, Troy Ford, said this isn't true.

He provided a court document showing that Cele visited Janey at any of the family's ranches only once from 2010 until her death in 2018, arguing this demonstrates how little connection she had to the family properties in recent years. The same document shows that Cele saw Janey about 20 times during this period, in Uvalde and other places. She said Chip makes it difficult for her and her family to come to the ranch.

Chip said in response to written questions that he never tried to persuade Janey to change her will. "It was Janey's decision on who she wanted to be in control of the ranch for the next generation," he wrote. He said he saw no evidence that Janey became forgetful around the time she rewrote her will and that she managed her extensive assets herself her entire life.

Mr. Ford said Mr. Briscoe left his estate equally to his three children but didn't restrict what each of them could do with their share, beyond some broad parameters.

Chip's lawyers provided an email that Janey wrote in February 2017 as evidence she understood and was committed to the will. In an email, one of her attorneys reminded her of the terms of the will and asked if she wanted to revisit them. "I am happy with my will at this time," Janey wrote.

D.B. and Leigh both said that they believe that Janey didn't trust that Cele's family would keep the ranch intact and believed Chip's family would be better stewards of the land.

“Janey adored my grandfather, and she knew splitting up Briscoe Ranch was one of his worst fears,” D.B. said.

Cele and Benjamin say they have no intention to divide up or sell any of the land if they get control.



Dolph Briscoe Jr's grandsons and others carry the former governor's casket at his funeral on July 1, 2010.

PHOTO: BILLY CALZADA/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Shortly after the governor died, Cele said she went to visit her parents' home in Uvalde and found for the first time that the doors were locked. When she called Chip, she said, he told her she could no longer visit without an escort. Mr. Ford disputed her account.

Chip said that Cele has keys to all of the ranches and can visit whenever she wants without asking permission.

Cele's children, who are all in their 30s, still live in Dallas. Her daughter, Bonner Acker, is an avid equestrian and works in interior design. Cele's son Austin is a Realtor and investor in various ventures in Dallas. They all rarely visit the family ranches these days.

Her eldest son, Benjamin, said he is fighting for control of the ranching business so his own four young daughters will have a connection to their family legacy.

“I never thought we'd be fighting in court with our family,” said Benjamin.

Mr. Ford said the Carpenter family's litigation is holding up the distribution of \$500 million to a foundation in memory of Janey's daughter that could have been used to donate some \$25 million a year to alleviate suffering during the pandemic.

Cele says she will agree to release the \$500 million. She provided The Wall Street Journal with multiple documents she or her children have signed to that effect.

Mr. Ford said Cele can't accept the portion of Janey's 2014 will where she funds the foundation while alleging that the rest of the will is invalid. "Chip and the boys haven't filed any lawsuits here," he said. The Carpenters "are the ones holding that foundation hostage."

The case is expected to go to trial late this year. Regardless of the outcome, both sides acknowledge it will be difficult to repair their relationships as both family members and business partners.

In November 2020, Cele and Chip's families gathered around the large polished wood dining table at the Big Home, in a last-ditch effort to avoid litigation. Once the scene of so many festive occasions, it by then had a deserted feel. When Cele's daughter went to sleep that night in one of the bedrooms she found nuts hidden by squirrels under the pillow. The families haven't gotten together since.

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