

“A Hard Lot”:

Texas Women in the Runaway Scrape

by

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From the beginning, the women of Gonzales had supported the Texian revolt. In October, 1835, when Mexican dragoons attempted to reclaim the town's cannon, the ladies had urged their men to resist. When the shooting started, Naomie DeWitt took scissors to her wedding dress to provide a flag that depicted a lone star, the cannon, and a belligerent challenge to the Mexicans: "COME AND TAKE IT!" Later the women saw their husbands off to the siege of Béxar and welcomed them upon their triumphant return. Many thought the war over until February 24, 1836. On that day couriers galloped into the settlement with grim news. A Mexican army under Dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna had surrounded the Alamo and the garrison desperately need reinforcements. On February 27, the "Gonzales Company of Mounted Volunteers" rode to the aid of their fellow Texians. Again the Gonzales women saw their men off to battle—this time with more apprehension.

The Gonzales women did not fret without reason. They eagerly awaited news from loved ones inside the old mission; when it finally came, it was devastating. On March 11, two Béxar *rancheros* reported the fall of the Alamo to General San Houston, who had arrived in Gonzales to take command of the relief force that had gathered there. To prevent the spread of dangerous rumors until he confirmed their accounts, he arrested the *Tejanos* as spies. On March 13, scout Erastus "Deaf" Smith arrived with Susanna Dickinson, who had been inside the Alamo throughout the thirteen-day siege and final assault. Her husband, Almeron, had died along with all other of the fort's defenders. Accompanied by Angelina, her infant daughter, and Joe, William Barret Travis's body servant, Mrs. Dickinson brought a message from Santa Anna—all who opposed him, he declared, would share the fate of those at the Alamo. Upon learning of the

widow's ordeal, Houston, that hard-drinking, loud-swearing frontier veteran, wept like a little boy.

Reports of the Alamo slaughter stunned Texians, but nowhere was the grief greater than in Gonzales. There the anguish was intensely personal. George Kimball, the friendly hatter, had fallen; Prudence, his young wife, lamented the death of her second husband. Gone also was nineteen-year-old Johnnie Kellogg; his pregnant bride was alone and bereft. There was not a family in the entire settlement that did not mourn the loss of a friend or kinsman. At least twenty women, many with small children, now found themselves widows. John Sharpe, one of Houston's officers, described the scene on the night of March 13: "For several hours after the receipt of the intelligence, not a sound was heard, save the wild shrieks of the women, and the heartrending screams of the fatherless children."

Bitter misfortune had not finished with the Gonzales women. No sooner had they learned of the loss of husbands and sons than the fortunes of war forced them to flee Santa Anna's anticipated advance on the settlement. All were unprepared for flight and wagons were in short supply. Captain John Bird told of two widows who were at supper when word came that the Texian army was pulling out. "Having no means of conveyance," Bird recalled, "each woman tied up a bundle of drygoods. Then, each with two children holding to her skirts and one carrying an infant in her arms, they departed." The bedraggled appearance of these two women so moved the soldiers that they discarded vital military stores to make room for them in an army wagon. In the confusion, the soldiers forgot the blind Mary Millsaps, another Alamo widow, and her six

children. Upon discovering the oversight, Houston dispatched a squad back thirty miles to retrieve them.

Not wishing them to witness their homes put to the torch, Houston led the civilians out of Gonzales. But then he ordered soldiers left behind to not leave a roof, “large enough to shelter a Mexican’s head.” Long afterward, memories of that day troubled Captain Sharpe, recollections of women fleeing their homes, “leaving all they had for years been collecting—ALL, everything they had, whilst they themselves fled they knew not whither . . . many of them without a dollar or friend on earth.” Houston’s efforts to spare their feelings were in vain; that night the dull glow on the horizon proved an aching reminder of their dashed hopes and shattered dreams.

The terror in Gonzales spread throughout Texas. Even in Nacogdoches, far from the Mexican threat, residents convinced themselves that the Cherokee tribesmen had allied with the enemy and were coming to massacre them. Frightened, they fled in disorder toward the Sabine River, the international boundary between Mexican Texas and American Louisiana. “The panic,” observed colonist John A. Quitman, “has done its work. The houses are all deserted. There are several thousands of women and children in the woods on both sides of the Sabine, without supplies or money.”

Imaginations ran wild. Harriet Paige, a New York native, described the conditions surrounding the so-called “Norton Panic.” The town drunk—a fellow named Norton—had exhausted his supply of whiskey. Unable to secure more, he “wandered about weak and nervous and on the verge of delirium.” One of his neighbors had set fire to a cane brake and as the flames rose they began to snap and pop, “like volleys of guns firing.” As Mrs. Paige explained:

Norton was seized with fright and ran down the prairie shouting that the Mexicans were coming to make an attack, burning as murdering as they came. The terrified people soon gathered at his cries and hastily prepared to flee for their lives leaving all their belongings behind them.

Texians knew their rush to the Louisiana border as the “Runaway Scrape,” the “Great Runaway,” or the “Sabine Shoot.” Whatever they called it, the wild exodus was a nightmare of terror and suffering for the women. On April 15, Quitman observed, “We must have met at least 100 women and children, and every where along the road were wagons, furniture, and provisions abandoned.”

Texas females, of course, sacrificed more than furniture. They detested the enemy whom they held accountable for the loss of husbands and homes; only the burning desire for retribution enabled them to carry on. After San Jacinto, Rebeca Westover—whose husband, Ira, had fallen in the Goliad Massacre—expressed outraged upon learning that officials within the interim Texas government were planning to spare the captured Santa Anna. Even years later, a trembling voice and clenched fingers betrayed her efforts to remain calm. “If the women whose husbands and sons he murdered could have reached him,” she exclaimed, “he would not have lived long!”

One son described his mother’s remarkable resignation when forced to abandon her cabin. “If mother shed a tear I never knew it though there was an unusual huskiness in her voice that day. Mother was brave and resolute, and I heard her say . . . that she was going to teach her boys never to let up on the Mexicans until they got full revenge for all this trouble.” No doubt many a Texian soldier shared similar feelings, or recalled such feminine admonishments, as they charged the Mexican camp at San Jacinto.

If Texas women seemed unrelenting, so did the Texas weather. The spring rains of 1836 were the heaviest in memory. Roads, still little more than trails, became quagmires. A soldier recalled conditions.

Delicate women trudged . . . from day to day until their shoes were literally worn out, then continued the journey with bare feet, lacerated and bleeding at almost every step. Their clothes were scant, and with no means of shelter from frequent drenching rains and bitter winds, they traveled on through the long days in wet and bedraggled apparel. . . . The wet earth and angry sky offered no relief.

Ann Raney Coleman, a native of Great Britain, recounted what it was like. “The Praries [were] full of water, and maney places up to the saddle skirts of my horse. My cloaths and feet were wet every day for weeks. It was only when we stopped for the night [that] I could dry them by the Camp fire.”

The misery seemed interminable. Six day out of Gonzales, Alamo widow Signey Kellogg gave birth to her baby in the back of a rain-soaked cart. Other women aided as “willing hands held blankets over mother and babe to protect them from downpours and chilling storms.” Years later, an old Texan veteran of the Mexican War wrote: “I have passed through the fields of carnage from Palo Alto to Buena Vista, [but] I have never witnessed such scenes of distress and human suffering.”

Constant exposure to the elements caused, “measles, sore eyes, whooping cough, and every other disease that man, woman, or child is heir to,” recalled Dilue Rose, who, at the time, was twelve years of age. Her little sister came down with an unidentified ague. People did what they could—a kindly ferry man allowed families with ill children to cross first—but no one could remedy the weather. The fever worsened. Dilue’s mother watched helplessly as her little

girl shook with convulsion and, at length, died. “Mother,” wrote Dilue, “was not able to travel; she had nursed an infant and the sick child until she was compelled to rest.”

Yet, other dangers were always present. One woman and her two children rode a horse that bolted at a swollen creek and plummeted into the torrent. Horrified refugees on the opposite bank could only watch as the swift current swept away horse, mother, and children.

The family of Grey B. King of San Felipe made its way through the treacherous swamps near Anahuac. Quicksand was a constant danger and, when the wind rose, high waves buffeted the refugees. Worst of all, alligators infested the murky waters. King, having secured his family on dry land, swam back to retrieve the horses. Dilue Rose told what happened next:

He had nearly gotten across, when a large alligator appeared. Mrs. King saw it first above the water and screamed. The alligator struck her husband with its tail and he went under water. There were several men present, and they fired their guns at the animal, but it did no good. It was not in their power to rescue Mr. King.

A June 9, 1836, letter, penned by a correspondent for the *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, described Mrs. King’s fate following this ghastly incident:

Thus in a moment was Mrs. King left a widow, with three helpless children, on the Bay shore—the enemy close in her rear—had lost nearly everything at the burning of St. Felipe—but finally was taken off by a passing boat, and landed at Galveston Island, in a most destitute condition. She was, however, made as comfortable at Galveston Island as circumstances would admit. . . .”

Yet, “circumstances” did not favor Mrs. King. Before the year was out, disease on the island took her from her children.

Determined to survive by any means, a Mrs. Dulaney strapped a featherbed across her pony's back, then tied her eldest on top and the two younger offspring on each end of the mattress. The barefooted mother plodded along holding an infant, "at times so exhausted that she would sink down almost unable to rise and proceed."

Others did not even have a pony. Zoroaster Robinson had taken his family's only mount when he rode off to join the army. His wife, Martha, had given birth to their third child just before she was forced to flee their home in the Town of Washington. Joining other refugees, she was able to deposit her two older children in a cart, but that left no room for her. Knowing that to fall behind was to perish, she kept pace by holding onto the leather straps attached to the cart's tailgate.

But the Robinson story had a happy ending. Zoroaster, who had deserted the army to care for his family, caught up with them on the road. To his mud-splattered wife he observed, "Madam, you have a hard lot to wade in the mud and carry that babe." Too drained to even recognize her husband, Martha replied, "Yes, sir, my husband is in the army and my lot is hard." Zoroaster cried out, "Why, Martha, don't you know me?" In a display of genteel propriety, she exclaimed, "Why, it's Mr. Robinson!" Few reunions were as joyous as the one along that muddy road.

Martha Robinson was among the lucky ones. During the absence of their men, many women found themselves in unaccustomed roles. As one of the troopers noted: "When a cart became mired—which was an hourly occurrence east of the Brazos—there was no dearth of

helping hands. But in proportion the men were few, and so the women and children were forced to perform most of the labor.”

At least one wife even protected her man. A Mrs. Moss was transporting her invalid husband in their ox-drawn cart when a foraging party tried to impress her team for the Texian army. Aware that the loss of the beasts meant certain death for her disabled spouse, Mrs. Moss leveled a cocked pistol and coldly announced: “I will kill the first man that attempts to take my oxen.” The soldiers reconsidered.

On another occasion a full-figured matron balked at fording an icy creek where the water was waist deep after the rest of her party had already made the crossing. One impatient frontiersman, frustrated by the delay, re-crossed the creek, hoisted the hefty widow over his shoulder, and plunged in. About halfway across the man lost his footing and both went under. He came up sputtering for the drenched woman to save *him*. She did.

Even when crossings enjoyed ferries, the refugees encountered problems. Their operators worked day and night, but they could not accommodate the large volume of traffic. “There was,” Dilue Rose recalled, “fully five thousand people at [Lynch’s] ferry. . . . Every one was trying to cross first and it was almost a riot.”

At many rivers women had to cross without benefit of ferries. The thirteen-year-old Texian soldier John Holland Jenkins remembered that “it was pitiful and distressing to behold the extremity of families, as . . . a team would bog down, and women with their babies in arms, surrounded by little children, had to wade almost waist deep in places.” Especially discomfiting was the plight of a Mrs. Wilson, whom Jenkins characterized as “one very large lady.” While

traversing a stream, she “bogged down completely and could not move until pulled out by others.”

S. F. Sparks recalled the “courage and fortitude of our women.” Floods swelled streams and “the bottom lands were from a foot to waist deep in water.” At such times, “the younger and stouter women would take the feeble ones on their backs and shoulders and wade through the water to dry land, set them down, and then go back for another load, and continued until all were over.” Sparks exclaimed, “there is no one who can do justice to the women at that time. God bless the women of Texas!”

The plight of the Texas ladies also stirred Dr. Nicholas Labadie, a surgeon in the rebel army. He recounted a “spectacle” he observed along the Brazos River:

The cries of the women were . . . distressing, as they called our attention to their forlorn situation, raising their hands to Heaven, and declaring they had lost their all, and knew now where to go; expressing their preference to die on the road rather than to be killed by the Mexicans or Indians, and imploring with upraised hands, the blessings of God on our arms, and encouraging us to be of stout heart, and avert if possible, the disasters that were threatening the country.

Dr. Labadie had no way of knowing it, but his own wife and two small children were suffering similar privations. Mrs. Mary Norment Labadie and the youngsters had fled toward the border, but the swollen Neches River hindered their progress. About three hundred families camped on the river’s west bank waiting for the flood waters to subside. But the ground there was wet and muddy, creating an epidemic of dysentery and whooping cough. The sickness killed many youths, as well as some adults. Mary Labadie’s young son fell victim. She nursed him the

best she could, but the damp weather and lack of proper medicines proved too much. There, on the slimy banks of the Neches, she watched her child die.

Illness also took the infant daughter of Harriet Paige. Her husband had abandoned Mrs. Paige and their two young children, but Secretary of the Texas Navy Robert Potter took pity on the forsaken family. Potter escorted them to Galveston Island. Yet, even there they could not escape the cold hand of death. As an elderly woman, Harriet still had vivid memories of what she called her “great sorrow.”

My little girl sickened, poor little thing; she had passed through many of the hardships of life; and while she lay there ill it seemed hard that while safety for us seemed so near, she should be beyond the reach of it. The end came, and we buried her on the island. God had taken his wee lamb away from the loneliness and hunger, fright and exposure, and gathered her into the eternal safety of his loving arms. But I was left to grieve for my little one, and miss he clinging arms and pretty baby ways.

While many women like Mary Labadie and Harriet Page struggled on without their husbands, some would have been better off without them. Sparks recalled one who fled with her spouse, four children, and about a dozen head of cattle. As she approached the Town of Washington, a group riding by them shouted that the Mexicans were following just behind them. The reasonable course, the husband informed his wife, would be for one to escape rather than for all to perish. With that, he pulled his wife and younger child off their nag, mounted, and rode off. With nowhere else to turn, the forsaken wife continued to drive the bovines along the trail and across the Brazos River. It was there that she found her craven husband snoozing under a tree.

Employing the Brazos as a natural obstacle, Houston’s men had constructed a barricade of cotton bales to contest the enemy’s crossing. “Now you get behind this breast-work of cotton

bales and fight,” the wife told her husband. He refused. Any such action, he protested, “would not be worthwhile” since the Mexicans would simply kill anyone who stayed to resist them. Disgusted with her lily-livered spouse, the wife shouted, “Well, I will. If I can get a gun, I’ll be durned if I don’t go behind that breast-work and fight with those men.” Overhearing her, one of the soldiers called out, “Madam, here’s a gun.” She took the musket and, according to Sparks, “remained over half the night behind the breast-work.” Fortunately for them, no *soldados* tried to cross on her watch.

Another Texas woman stood guard over the entire government. Following the evacuation of the Town of Washington, Interim President David G. Burnet and his cabinet took refuge in the home of Jane Birdsall Harris. For a brief period, Harrisburg functioned as the seat of government. Mrs. Harris knew the enemy was nearby and feared Santa Anna might attempt to capture Texas officials. After seeing to the comfort of her visitors, she and a dependable slave woman rowed a skiff across the bayou in the dead of night. The pair stood guard at a neighbor’s, ready to provide early warning if the Mexicans launched a foray. Mrs. Harris returned in time to prepare breakfast for the president and his cabinet, who remained unaware of the *full* attendance of their hostess.

The devotion of Jane Harris’s slave woman was fairly typical. It seemed only natural that slaves throughout Texas would take advantage of the turmoil and escape; certainly accounts revealed that whites feared slave uprisings. Those same accounts, however, pay homage to the blacks who stood by their masters. Dilue Rose stated that even though blacks in her party, “there was no insubordination among them; they were loyal to their owners.” In one crisis, “Uncle

Ned,” an elderly black man, took charge of the group. Dilue remembered: “He put white women and children in his wagon. It was large and had a canvas cover. The negro women and children he put in the [open] carts. The he guarded the whole party until morning.

Another slave who stood by his mistress was “Uncle” Jeff Parsons. Even years later, he recalled:

The women, children, and old men reached the Sabine before the battle of San Jacinto. There were a lot of scared folks in the “runaway” crowd. Some wen on sleds, some on contrivances made with truck wheels, some on wagons, some on horseback, some on foot, any way they could get there. I can’t describe the scene on the Sabine. People and things were all mixed, and in confusion. The children were crying, the women were praying and the men cursing. I tell you it was a serious time.

Mary Helm, a resident of Matagorda settlement, recalled, “There were very few white men; negroes seemed to be the protectors of most families.” She praised her “man of color,” without whose help “we might never have succeeded.”

Tejanas also participated in the Sabine Shoot. Most were neutral, looking after their families and striving to keep out of harm’s way until the storm subsided. Yet, those married to *Tejanos* who had cooperated with rebellious Anglos suffered Santa Anna’s wrath. Erastus “Deaf” Smith’s Mexican wife took to the road with her daughters because she was no longer safer in her San Antonio home. Neither was Josepha Seguín. Wife of Erasmo and mother of Juan Seguín, she was the matriarch of one of Béxar’s leading families. From the early days of Austin’s Colony, she and her husband had been loyal friends of the Anglo-American settlers. During the 1835 Siege of Béxar, the Seguíns had supplied more than \$4000 dollars-worth of food and provisions to the insurgent army. The following year, the family paid for its assistance when Santa Anna’s

forces ransacked their ranch. Josepha and Erasmo fled northward with Anglo Texians. Their son, Juan, commanded a Tejano company in the rebel army, which performed yeoman service at the Battle of San Jacinto. After a long and perilous journey, during which enemy soldiers captured most of their livestock, Doña Josepha Erasmo took refuge in San Augustine.

The Runaway Scrape proved even harder on *Tejanas* than on most women. Escaping to the Anglo regions of East Texas, they entered a land that was geographically and culturally foreign, a land where few understood their language, and where— despite their contributions to the war effort—many despised them as “greasers.”

Following victory at San Jacinto, many who had earlier damned Sam Houston as a spineless drunk, now lauded him as the savior of Texas. Nevertheless, the triumph on Buffalo Bayou greatly displeased the Widow Peggy McCormick, who owned the land where the armies had fought. She believed the presence of hundreds of decomposing enemy corpses devalued her property. A few days after the battle, she demanded that General Houston remove the putrefied bodies. To mollify the angry matron, he appeal to her sense of posterity. “Madam, your land will be famed in history as the classic spot upon which the glorious victory of San Jacinto was gained.” Mrs. McCormick was not impressed. “To the devil with your glorious history!” she snapped. “Take off your stinking Mexicans.” Houston, however, ignored her demands. For years afterward, the sun-bleached bones of unburied Mexican soldados littered the McCormick homestead.

While the malodorous consequences of the San Jacinto victory annoyed Peggy McCormick, the news left most other Texas women exultant. Mary Helm, a painfully proper

Episcopalian, remarked that members of her party were so excited that they “all turned shouting Methodist.” She recounted that people reacted differently—“some danced; some laughed; some clapped their hands.” For Mary Ann Zuber, the notification that her son, William, had fallen at San Jacinto greatly dulled the thrill of victory. Her grief was such that she could not begin the trip home. The next day another messenger arrived fresh from the battlefield. The first report had been false; William was alive and well. A relieved and euphoric mother quickly joined in the celebration.

After San Jacinto, the women made their way back home, but their troubles were far from finished. For many the return trip was the hardest. The Mexicans were no longer a threat but nature remained unrelenting. Gonzales women returned to burned homes and ravaged fields. For Josepha Seguín it was much the same. With reports of victory she and Erasmo traveled from San Augustine to Nacogdoches. There, they fell victims to fever. Far from home, without friends, and “prostrated on their couches,” the lack of money compelled the Seguíns, “to part, little by little, with their valuables and articles of clothing.” When at last they returned home, they found their ranch sacked and their cattle scattered.

Upon learning of the San Jacinto victory, Mary Labadie returned from Anahuac to the family plantation near Lake Charlotte in Liberty County. There, she discovered that pillaging Texians had burned one of the buildings, slaughtered most of the livestock, and stripped the place of provisions. A few strips of bacon and the milk of a few remaining cows were all that remained.

But there was little time to lament. The constant exposure during the San Jacinto Campaign brought about Dr. Labadie's complete collapse. Mary nursed him for a full week while he remained in a coma. When at last he regained consciousness, he had lost his hearing. Few women paid a higher price for Texas independence than Mary Labadie.

During the first four months of 1836, Texas women had numerous occasions to mourn deaths of loved ones, and many found solace in their religious convictions. Fanny Menefee Sutherland lost her son in March but was unable to inform her sister, Sally, back in the "old states" until June. Mrs. Sutherland's letter is among the most poignant examples of a mother's faith in the face of crushing sorrow:

I received your kind letter of some time in March, but never has it been in my power to answer it 'till now, and now what must I say (O, God support me). Yes, sister, I must say it to you, I have lost my William, O, yes he is gone. My poor boy is gone, gone from me. The sixth day of March in the morning, he was slain in the Alamo in San Antonio. Then his poor body committed to the flames. Oh, Sally, can you sympathize with and pray for me that I may have grace to help in this great time of trouble.

The remainder of her letter chronicled her hardships during and after the Runaway Scrape. With her husband with Houston's army and her eldest son dead, Fannie Sutherland had to fend for herself and four young children. Still, she was able to persevere because, as she phrased it, "the Lord supported me, and was on our side for I may boldly say the Lord has fought our battles. . . . Mr. Sutherland's horse was killed under him [at San Jacinto], but the Lord preserved his life and brought him back to his family." George Sutherland finally found his wife and children among other refugees at the mouth of the Sabine River and took them home.

Like many Texas women, Fanny Sutherland returned to find much of what she had left behind had vanished; the family warehouse and one of their residences were in ashes. Even so, she accepted her losses with a strong sense of Christian grace. "If we can have peace and can have preaching," she vowed, "I won't care for the loss of what property is gone."

The Runaway Scrape had a profound and lasting effect on early Texians. Jon W. Dancy visited Texas soon after the war and kept a diary of his travels. The entry for January 18, 1837, recorded: "Wherever I go in this country I hear of what is called 'the runaway scrape.' . . . It would touch the soul of any one, not a monster, to listen to the accounts which [the Texians] give of the time when they were compelled to leave their homes with their little children, and fly before a bloodthirsty tyrant, through cold and mud & rain in hourly dread of being overtaken by the enemy." The As years passed, a strong bond formed between those who had endured common privations. Even forty-five years later, Mary Helm regularly corresponded with veterans of the revolution. In one letter she recalled with pride the, "stirring time of 1835-1836, when more lives were jeopardized by the hardships of leaving comfortable homes . . . than fell by the sword of the enemy." Writing to the annual meeting of the Texas Veterans, she assured the membership, "when you cease to get your annual greeting, you may know that one more veteran has passed to the promised land and been gathered to her fathers."

Runaway Women could, with considerable justification, regard themselves as "veterans" of the Texas Revolution. They had endured dangers and adversities as harsh as those faced by their soldier-husbands. And their efforts were every bit as important.

Santa Anna made no secret of his objective: he was determined to rid Texas of all “perfidious foreigners.” On April 21, 1836, vengeful Texian soldiers put the kibosh on those ambitions. But victory on the banks of Buffalo Bayou would have meant little if Texas families had disintegrated amid the chaos. In large part, it fell to the mothers to hold them together and instill the values required to survive. They responded to every tribulation with grit, grace, and extraordinary conviction. Modern Texans should, therefore, regard the women of the Runaway Scrape as the midwives in attendance at the birth of the Republic of Texas.