INTRODUCTION TO

Texian Exodus: The Runaway Scrape and Its Enduring Legacy

by Stephen L. Hardin

IT HAD RAINED FOR WEEKS.[1]

Even old-timers could not recall such a deluge. Creeks became rivers; rivers swelled into torrents, flooding prime bottomlands, making them swamps. Downpours reduced unpaved roads —really little more than cattle trails—to meandering troughs of muck. Yet, thousands had taken to those boggy traces. The churning of wagon wheels and slogging of shoe leather whipped mud into a feculent paste. It encrusted their feet, making them stumble like drunkards. In their misery, some took to the bottle, then staggered with an authentic intemperance. It was deep, that mud, the kind that sucked off shoes, bogged oxen, and smothered spirits.

All kinds of people hastened from snug homes for the rain-lashed paths. Here, pasty clerks tottered beside bronzed backwoodsmen; there, trudged somber farmers and raffish adventurers; yonder, harried matrons shepherded squalling urchins clinging to tattered skirts. Clad in bell-crowned hats, with thumbs hooked into elegant waistcoats, attorneys hobbled through the sludge, miserably out of place beside hunters in greasy deerskins brandishing Kentucky "nail-drivers" and foot-long "Arkansas toothpicks." And above it all, the figure of an eccentric, middle-aged general, sporting muttonchop whiskers and straining to corral an amateur army comprised of far too many beardless boys.[2]

It was a relocation, a passage, and a war. They fled before a tyrant who had vowed to rid Texas of those he called “these damn foreigners,” to show no mercy, to offer no quarter. His prior actions had proven him a man of his word. Hell-bent on reaching the borderline, refugees subjected their families to the dangers of the road and exposure to the elements. Once across the Sabine River, they would find safety on U.S. soil.[3]

Or, so they prayed.

It was also unseasonably chilly. Well into late March and early April, when bluebonnets and Indian paint brushes typically heralded the arrival of spring, winter maintained its icy grip. Sweeping away beaver hats, buckshot winds roared along footpaths and bottoms. They set trees to rustling and tavern signs to screeching. Those gusts heralded squalls whose massive drops thrummed on the wagons’ canvas covers, the men’s palmetto hats, and the women’s cotton dust caps. Many wore woolen blanket coats—*capotes*—against the chill of moving wetness but once drenched they locked in the cold and became heavy, saturated cocoons. Evacuees hunched against the weather, trying to shrink freezing bodies inside sopping clothing. Above the storm clouds, Texas stars may have been “big and bright,” but below, nights were as black as crows’ wings. Still, frenzied Runaways dared not halt and stumbled through the gloom.[4]

They might have endured a soaking and even abided the frigid temperatures, but the combination spawned an array of fluxes, fevers, and flus that carried away hundreds of them. Yielding to the shivering wet, they collapsed along the roadside, dying miserably in the viscous mud; too weak to move from exhaustion, hypothermia, or disease.[5]

Texians—as the Anglo-American colonists then styled themselves—later recalled their trudge to the Louisiana border as the “Great Runaway,” the “Sabine Shoot,” or, most commonly, the “Runaway Scrape.” Whatever they called it, the wild flight during the sodden spring of 1836 was a nightmare of sorrow and suffering for every soul involved. This ordeal caused cataclysmic destruction, wholesale dislocation, and acute misery. It branded them, and Texas, forever. For its settlers, northeastern Mexico had always been a difficult, often hazardous, place to live, but the mass exodus added turmoil, hunger, illness and collapses in communication, transportation, and law enforcement.

Nowadays, most folks (even Texans) have forgotten about those intrepid evacuees, their anguish, and their exultations. The pages that follow aim to correct that lapse of collective memory. A good number of them wrote about their experiences or, if they could not write, told their stories to some literate friend or family member. From this distance, it’s hard to reconstruct the event in broad sweeps because none of the “Runaways” saw it in its entirety. [6]

For the people who lived it, this surge of human misery was intensely subjective. What lingered in their remembrances were random bits and snatches, viewed through a veil of tears, grief, and intense emotion—unexpected dints of sound, spectacle, or stench, notable for their distinctiveness. Mere glimpses. In sources that survive—diaries, dispatches, letters, government documents, newspapers, and reminiscences—the predominant feelings were those of dislodgment, anxiety, and fatigue. Yet, there also appears the realization that they had experienced something historic, a satisfaction that they had prevailed, and a deep-rooted pride in their hardihood. Their accounts form the backbone of this book. It is the

story of what they saw on those roads, what they suffered, and what befell them during, what was for most of them, the most harrowing period of their lives.

The Runaway Scrape flung people together who, under normal circumstances, would have never heard of each other and never met. While many of their stories are tragic, taken as a whole, the experience was not a tragedy. Indeed, years later looking back on the event, the survivors regarded it as their finest hour. They tended to stress the courage, cooperation, and sense of community. Because most (but not all) of the evacuees of 1836 did what Americans historically did in times of natural and man-made disasters: they stepped up, pitched in, and lent a hand. It was all those helping hands and willing spirits in which old Texians took so much pride. And so can we.

They were a dissimilar lot, these Runaways. The painfully proper New York Episcopalian (many would have called her pompous) Mary Sherwood Wightman would have had little in common with Susanna Dickinson, an illiterate backwoods widow; Ann Raney Thomas, a twenty-six-year-old native of Great Britain and plantation mistress, would have had little to say to "Uncle" Jeff Parsons, an enslaved black man from the Coastal Bend; General Sam Houston, the "Sword of San Jacinto," may have been hard pressed to recall John Holland Jenkins, who served under him as a thirteen-year-old private; ten-year-old Dilue Rose would not have known what to say to Harriett Page, a mother of two who, after her ne'er-do-well husband abandoned her, had accepted the "protection" of the notorious maimer Robert Potter.

The individuals who inhabit these pages were as varied an assortment of characters as ever faced life's worries, from the good Samaritans to the ruthless rascals. Yet, chains of

fellowship forged in the fires of adversity bound them all. The shared experience also created a cultural solidarity and singularity that remains to this day, one that mystifies (and frequently annoys) those from other states. In the years that followed, the words, “I was in the Runaway Scrape,” earned the speaker a status that the Johnny-come-latelies who migrated to Texas afterward never knew.[7]

[2]An “Arkansas toothpick” was a heavy dagger with a 12-to-20-inch pointed, straight blade. Combatants employed it for both thrusting and slashing. Historians credit blacksmith James Black, famed for his work on the Bowie knife, with inventing the blade.

[3]Antonio López de Santa Anna to Tornel, October 26, 1835, Archivo Histórico Militar XI/481.3/Expediente 1101 fojas 196-206.

[4]David Holman and Billie Persons, Buckskin and Homespun: Frontier Texas Clothing, 1820-1870 (Austin: Wind River Press, 1979), 47-57; Mary Reid, “Fashions of the Republic,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 45 (1942): 244-254.

[5]Mrs. Kate Scurry Terrell, “The ‘Runaway Scrape,’” in Dudley G. Wooten, A Comprehensive History of Texas, 1685 to 1897 (Dallas: William G. Scarff, 1898), 669-671.

[6]Since I employ the term "collective memory" in a specific context, I should probably define it. In its simplest form, it is the memory of a group of people, passed from one generation to the next. More broadly, collective memory is the shared interpretation of a group's past based on a common identity. Intellectual and emotional factors may well affect the formation of collective memory, but it always functions within the context of interactions with other people or cultural artifacts. Narratives form and convey collective memory. Because these shared stories intercede in the designation, maintenance, and utilization of social identities, they profoundly impact relations within the group. While collective memory influences the present, current psychological states and requirements also shapes communal remembrance.

We will revisit this theme in the Epilogue.

[7]It is probable that citizens of the Texas Republic used that specific term. Oxford English Dictionary citations indicate that "Johnny-come-lately" first appeared in The Adventures of Harry Franco (1839), a humorous novel by Charles Frederick Briggs, a journalist and former sailor. The Grammarphobia Blog, <https://www.grammarphobia.com/blog/2013/03/johnny-come-lately.htm>.