

FYI on Texas History

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*LaJuanna Faught
as Molly Bailey*

WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL!

As you can see, there has been a change of name and format of this monthly e-mail publication. It has been expanded and changed in several ways. The intent is to make it more useable and informative. If we have not accomplished this, please let us know.

Most people do not have the time to read a lengthy newsletter which is why the old format was chosen. The decision was made on the new format to continue providing quickly readable information that gets to the point.

The focus will continue to be on giving teachers the things they need to improve the teaching of Texas history, but the distribution will be open to anyone who wants an e-mailed copy. We will give all Texas history enthusiasts the latest information on what we know is happening in the field of Texas history....well, at least those people who own up to being interested. And if you know something we don't, please share it with us so we can share it with others.

LEGENDS OF THE ALAMO

Legends are topics we love and hate. Legends are those parts of history that cannot be proven, but many believe they are true. Let J. R. Edmondson, author of the definitive book, *The Alamo Story*, and I jump into the fray. **Legend:** Travis came to Texas because he killed a man in Alabama.

*Life is too short
not to live it as a
Texan!*

A popular version of why William Barret Travis left Alabama is that he killed a man for fooling around with his wife, Rosanna. Basically, the story goes that he killed the man and then left Claiborne in the middle of the night. A legend on top of that legend is that a Negro man was accused of the crime. Travis, believing he could get the man acquitted, took his case and defended him. When the man was convicted, Travis couldn't let the man die for his crime, so Travis went to his friend, Judge Dellet, and told him what had actually happened. The Judge told Travis, as a friend, to leave town immediately and he did.

Actually, the reason for Travis' fleeing Claiborne was far less dramatic. Business was not going well for Travis. He found himself about to be put in debtor's prison for incurring far more debt than he could repay, and, like a lot of other men, decided to run for the safety of another country...in this case it was Texas. Travis left Rosanna (who was pregnant at the time) and his son Charles with Rosanna's parents who could easily care for them. He left with the promise he would take care of matters and that they would be together again. He eventually paid his debt but he and Rosanna never got back together.

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RIP FORD

Part 21: The War Is Over—Reconstruction Begins

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The battle at Palmito Ranch was the last fight of the war and Old Rip Ford had won it. The War Between The States was now over and Reconstruction began. A nation had been defeated and must now submit to the victor. The costs had been very high for both sides, but now the Confederate States of America must re-enter the Union as the vanquished. “There was no formal surrender in Texas after Palmito Hill. The Confederate army and state government simply melted away.”¹

“Ford was sick again. This time it was pneumonia, brought on by the privation, fatigue, and exposure endured in the field during the past few years [not to mention the attacks from the malaria he had contracted during the Mexican-American War almost 20 years earlier]. He had no money for medicine or for food. And Addie was pregnant again.

“Fearing that the Federals might persecute them the Fords crossed the Rio Grande and purchased a small shack on the edge of Matamoros. In a few days a Federal officer came to visit Ford. The officer, assuring Rip that President Johnson had no intention of persecuting loyal Confederates, asked him to help persuade ex-confederates in Matamoros to accept amnesty pardons and return home. Ford said he bore the United States no malice and agreed to help. A few days later General Frederick Steele heard about Ford’s promise and made him a parole commissioner. While gravely ill Rip Ford did more than any other man to get the Texas Rio Grande country started on the long road to recovery.

“In the spring of 1866 Ford felt well enough to help his old friend Jose M. J. Carbajal drive Maximilians’s French troops from Matamoros. Carbajal then proclaimed himself military governor under authority of Benito Juarez and made Ford a brigadier general. Rip stayed in Matamoros for several months until malaria compelled him to go to Brownsville, where his family, including a new baby boy, John William, was now living.”²

“Once they had won the backing of the moderates, the [Republican] Radicals in Congress proceeded to impose their own terms upon the South. They summarized them in an amendment to the Constitution, submitted to the states in June 1866. Besides settling the Negro question and other related matters, this Fourteenth Amendment marked a major milestone along the road to the centralization of political power in the nation, for it greatly reduced the power of *all* the states. In this sense it confirmed the great change wrought by the Civil War: the growth of a more complex, more closely integrated social and economic structure requiring closer national supervision. Few persons understood this aspect of the amendment at the time.”³

The First Reconstruction Act of 1867 “divided the former Confederacy into five military districts, each controlled by a major general. It gave these officers almost dictatorial power to protect the civil rights of ‘all persons,’ maintain order, and supervise the administration of justice. To rid themselves of military rule, the former states were required to frame and adopt new constitutions guaranteeing Negroes the right to vote and disfranchising the same broad classes of ex-Confederates excluded under the proposed [Fourteenth] amendment. If these new constitutions proved satisfactory to Congress, and if the new governments ratified the [Fourteenth] amendment, their representatives would be admitted to Congress and military rule ended.”⁴

Old Rip fought to make a living for his family despite the malaria, but the malaria finally forced him to stay in bed. He was penniless, without money to pay the rent and too proud to ask for help. “One day the banker called to tell the invalid colonel that a handsome sum of money had been deposited in the bank for him. Ford never found out who the benefactor was, never knew that a rancher of means, Richard King [King Ranch], had not forgotten the kindness his old commander had showed him during the late war.”⁵

Old Rip continued to live with his family in Brownsville trying to make a living and still filling his public duty. Mexico was still in a state of revolution with the danger their fight would spill over into Texas...and, of course, Brownsville and Fort Brown were right across the river from the hotly contested city of Matamoros. "It was the general understanding that the contending parties on the Mexican side took great umbrage at the presence of the American troops [at Fort Brown], and consulted whether they should unite and attack the foreign interlopers, or fight each other. Be that as it may, one evening, when it was almost dark, news was received that General Cortina was making ready to cross the Rio Grande and move upon Brownsville. The mayor of Brownsville, William Neale, was summoned to the quarters of the commanding general [U. S. Army General John Sedgwick]. He was requested to confer upon Colonel Ford and General West authority to raise and organize into companies a force of police, or police assistants, to aid the military in defending the city of Brownsville against the impending attack and pillaging operations of General Cortina."⁶

Cortina did not cross the river this time...he may have heard about the preparations...but, Old Rip was again being asked to organize and command a fighting force. As usual, Old Rip was a lot of things. During the next few years, he was a journalist, a guide for the U. S. Cavalry chasing Mexican outlaws, an interpreter of Spanish legal documents, a cattle and hide inspector for Cameron County, and a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

In 1873, Ford's Democratic Party came alive and fielded a gubernatorial candidate – Richard Coke. "They [the Democrats] must defeat incumbent E. J. Davis or Texas might be doomed to the Republican-military coalition that had governed the state since the end of the war."⁷ Coke won the election by a margin of two to one, but Davis refused to give up the governorship.

"Sensing a fight, Ford,...left for Austin at once. There he found a crisis almost as foreboding as the secession movement of a decade before."⁸

Next Month – Part 22: Inaugurating Governor Coke

Bob Heinonen has been portraying Rip Ford since 1993.

¹ *Lone Star – A History of Texas and the Texans* by T. R. Fehrenbach, American Legacy Press, New York, NY 1983, pp 393

² *Rip Ford's Texas* by John Salmon Ford edited by Stephen B. Oates, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1963, pp xl

³ *The American Nation – A History of the United States* by John A. Garraty, American Heritage Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1966, pp 432-433