

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN
Composed and dramatized by BOB HEINONEN

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF STEPHEN F. AUSTIN

Part 16: Prison Changes Things

by Bob Heinonen

While in Mexico City lobbying for statehood for Texas, Stephen F. Austin contracted cholera in August, 1833, during an epidemic that he estimated killed 18,000 people in the city. The Mexican Congress adjourned because of the epidemic. Reports reached Austin that the epidemic had spread to Texas and had killed his sister Emily's daughter. In spite of his illness, Austin pushed himself but somehow survived.

Austin lobbied and petitioned the government officials for statehood for five months but could not get anyone to make a decision. Stephen F. Austin was known to be a very patient man, but even he lost hope and patience...and then he made a mistake. On October 2, 1833, he wrote a letter to his friends in San Antonio de Bexar saying they should form a government that was independent of Coahuila; Texas had always been a part of the state of Coahuila which was hundreds of miles to the west of the Texas settlements. He ended the letter, "Dios y Tejas" – God and Texas.

On December 10, Austin gave up his campaign for statehood and left Mexico City to return home by an overland route. During his journey, he noticed that "Mexico was poorer and more backward" then during his trip ten years earlier; he blamed this on the Catholic Church. "His party toured many of the churches and convents along the route, and he was amazed at their number, size, and opulence in the midst of so much poverty. 'One is astonished at seeing these monuments of the barbarity & ignorance of the tenth and twelfth centuries, preserved with so much care in the 19th century, & in the Republic.'"

On January 2, 1834, Austin arrived in Saltillo after a leisurely trip. The next day, he met with the new Commandant General, Pedro Lemus, and, to his surprise was arrested. The letter Austin had sent to his friends saying they should form a government had fallen into the hands of his enemies; he was called a traitor for suggesting the formation of an unauthorized government. Stephen F. Austin was taken prisoner by the Mexican Army and put in the Inquisition Prison in Mexico City where he was placed in solitary confinement for three long months.

He would never forget Cell 15. It was a dark rock cell with no windows. The only light came from a small skylight high above where, on the brightest of days, he could barely discern the drawings left on the walls by a prisoner some sixty years before. And there was the mouse that he fed crumbs from his food. After a few weeks, the mouse became so tame that Austin could pet it. During this time, he was able to keep a journal of his thoughts with a pen and pencil he had hidden in his clothes when he was imprisoned.

After three months in solitary confinement, he was placed with the regular prisoners where he was kept for another seven months. The Mexican legal system allowed a prisoner to be held in prison indefinitely while the government gathered evidence; the wheels of government turned very slowly forward, and sometimes backward, in Mexico when they turned at all. Finally, Austin was paroled into the city where he was detained for another six months although he did

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live in comfort. And then, after over two years in Mexico City, he was allowed to come home to Texas.

When he arrived home, his attitude about Texas being a Mexican state had changed.

Next Month – Part 17: There Will Be War

*All quotes come from Gregg Cantrell's book **Stephen F. Austin – Empresario of Texas***

*Bob Heinonen is the founder of **Texas Heroes** and has been portraying Stephen F. Austin since 1993. See www.TexasHeroes.net/StephenFAustin.html . Copyright© by Bob Heinonen 2009.*