

THE LEGEND
of the
THE YELLOW ROSE OF TEXAS

A paper
Presented to the Athenaeum Society
Hopkinsville, Kentucky
by
Dr. Thomas L. Riley

October 5, 1989

From an historical standpoint, what is the one most important day in Kentucky's history? Many come to mind and it would be difficult to pick a single one. Texas, on the other hand, would have no such difficulty. Thursday, April 21, 1836 - a victory at the Battle of San Jacinto and, with it, the beginnings of the Republic of Texas. Texas sprawls over a larger geographical area than any other state in the "lower 48." It has been under the jurisdiction of six separate governments since 1685, those of France, Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy and, of course, the United States.

In 1820, the white settlers of Texas could be counted in four digits. Shortly afterwards, former residents of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky were brought into the section near Galveston under the leadership of Moses Austin and his son, Stephen. Thousands of Tennesseans and Kentuckians who had been caught up in land swindles, deed and ownership controversies, poor or no surveying procedures, moved down the Natchez Trace into Arkansas, across the dangerous so-called Neutral Strip of Louisiana and into Mexico's northern province of Texas. They were land hungry settlers, the younger sons of Virginia and North Carolina families who didn't find the promised land and fortunes in Tennessee and Kentucky, some but a step or two ahead of law officials, adventurers, English German and Scotch-Irish from Ireland, the British Isles and continental Europe. By 1830 more than 20,000 "Norte" Americans were living on Texas soil.

No American settlers since the Revolution of 1776 had faced the same problems encountered by these citizens of the republic who moved into Texas in the period 1820-1835. Even those later settlers who would cross an entire continent to build new homes in California or Oregon would have the reassurance that in moving from one part of the country to another,

they would carry their religion, their language and their customary law with them. But when settlers emigrated to Texas they surrendered such assurances, placing themselves under the constraints of a new state religion-Roman Catholicism, a new language-a Mexican version of Spanish, and a much different system of laws.

Mexico's national government, indeed, her national affairs in total during these years, revolved around one person - General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. Born on the Gulf Coast in the Vera Cruz area in 1794 he had attended the Spanish mission schools and had participated in some elementary military training at the Mexican Academy. Even at the age of 18 and 19 he had shown extraordinary personal bravery in a number of battles. Perhaps, more importantly, he had exhibited the ability to adapt to any military situation that confronted him and his troops. Mexicans at this point in history were placing great hopes in this charismatic--certainly controversial leader.

Santa Anna was equally adept at mastering the political turmoil that had been prevalent in Mexico for years. During his lifetime he would ascend the presidency of Mexico on no less than eleven different occasions. Four times at the height of one crisis or another, Mexico would send him into lifelong exile only to see him storming back at their urgent request three times.

Santa Anna's rise to fame had begun near San Antonio on the Texas border, between Mexico's northern two provinces, in 1813 when as a young Army Lieutenant he had helped put down a rebellion of Mexican dissidents led by American adventurers. Following the military victory, the young Lieutenant carried out the orders of General Arredondo to completely exterminate the city's population. Mexican and American prisoners were

shot at point blank range, 200 were crammed into a makeshift jail where those that didn't suffocate were dragged to the town square the next day and shot, women were stripped naked and turned into the streets where troops had their pick for rape, children were clubbed to death, the entire site was looted and then set afire. Santa Anna had learned his lessons in cruelty--and this trait was to mark his later military victories and their aftermath. Few Mexicans would know the "dark side" of Santa Anna but many would see the leadership qualities in him that could lead the nation during those turbulent times. Without exception, whenever Santa Anna assumed leadership things seemed to be better for a time then he would perform some outrageous blunder and the government would again collapse. For example, during Andrew Jackson's presidency in the United States, Mexico staggered through 16 different leaders. A highly unstable government and one in which its people had little confidence or trust was the inevitable result.

Santa Anna was firmly in the background of a new constitution in Mexico in 1824. He had taken back the presidency on an announced program of reform (announced, it might be added, with much pomp and ceremony), assuring the people and their elected representatives, that he was, indeed, a liberal who would reform the excesses of the state, the church, discipline the army, and grant each of the constituent states a substantial degree of self-government. Mexicans - as the populace was called at this time - rejoiced in this promise of a constructive freedom under which they could settle and improve this frontier region.

In 1834--ten years later--Santa Anna startled everyone by announcing that he was really a conservative and giving the nation a three-point program (1) a supreme central government with individual states having

few powers and no legislatures, (2) restoration of the traditional role of the Roman Catholic Church in national, state and local affairs and (3) restoration, too, of the ancient privileges by which priests and army officers were excused from the rules of common law. The effect was simply that Mexico was now under a stern conservative dictatorship headed by Santa Anna. There were, however, many throughout Mexico that welcomed and applauded the sudden change in government with ^{the} feeling that now, finally, we have a man who can and will take control of this country. The vast majority of Mexicans, however, were appalled and left wondering about their future.

Some few months following the proclamation, an incident in Zacaticas was to strike terror in Texas. Zacaticas was in a silver mining area of north central Mexico, an old city with a great deal of wealth and pride. Leadership of the city chose not to abide by the new dictatorial policies. It was just the opportunity that Santa Anna wanted! Donning his much bemedaled general's uniform and astride his beautiful white horse he rode at the head of his Army. The city was easily taken by the Army and, again, the old city was then to experience a blood bath. Records indicate that over 2,500 women and children were slaughtered. Foreign families, especially English and Americans were specially targeted, with husbands being bayoneted and their wives stripped naked and made to run through the streets. The rape and pillage was to continue for two days until the once-beautiful old city was a burning, screaming pile of rubble.

The word came quickly to Texas--if the province continued to oppose the central dictatorship and tried to cling to its old ways and to the

old constitution--it could expect similar punishment. Texas did continue to oppose the dictatorship. In December of 1835 Generalissimo Santa Anna with an immense army, trained leadership and good generals, ample artillery and supplies, was on the march north determined to humiliate once and for all these hated norte Americanos--the Texans. All who opposed him would be slain. His destination--San Antonio and the Alamo.

A note might be injected relative to the Generalissimo and his traveling habits. The mount must always be white and the largest horse in the officer corps, his large colorful tent was equipped with all the creature comforts, his shirts were pure linen and his underdrawers were silk, ample hot water and bathing equipment were supplied. While the Generalissimo was married, had several children and a large hacienda on the hill overlooking the Gulf and Vera Cruz, he generally chose to take one or more of his seven mistresses with him. For some reason, he had chosen not to take mistresses with him on this journey North but rather to rely on the supply of women along the route. Santa Anna was now 42 years of age, handsome, rather tall, always immaculately dressed and groomed. Finding willing women to share his tent had never been a problem. Historians would note that two of the last three days before the battle of the Alamo began, the Generalissimo would spend with a most willing young lady of San Antonio rather than in planning and preparation with his Army.

Leadership of the Texans rested with four men: Jim Bowie, commanding volunteers, and David Crockett, William Travis, commanding the regulars, and Jim Bonham. Bowie was from Kentucky, Crockett from Tennessee, Travis and Bonham from South Carolina. The Texan predicament was simple and deadly serious. The old fort, the Alamo, was the only place that could withstand a siege of any duration and it was to this old fort that the Texans had gathered. The odds were roughly 182 Texan men and boys and 18

of their wives against 2,000 Mexicans, with more on the way, under Santa Anna. The unconditional surrender orders were answered with a cannon shot from the Alamo. A scarlet flag indicating "no survivors" was unfurled by Santa Anna. The bombardment began. The date, February 21, 1836. Hopes for reinforcement of the Fort from Goliath some 90 miles away where 360 regular and volunteer troops under Col. James Fannin were slowly being given up. It would be a fight to the death for the Alamo's defenders. For 13 days the Mexicans bombarded the Fort with their cannon--without killing a single Texan. At 3:30 in the morning on Sunday, March 6, Santa Anna began his assault on the Fort. Wave after wave of Mexicans were beaten off or shot by the Texans but the 15:1 odds finally prevailed. The Fort was completely encircled and weak spots were found. By 6:30 in the morning, the Mexicans had overwhelmed the Fort and were searching out all corners for any wounded who were then bayoneted or shot. All of the dead were piled in the center courtyard of the Alamo and burned. From the skeletons of these brave men--burned to ashes, the backbone of a new nation would be formed.

What had happened to the detachment of Americans at Goliath? Nothing, their commanding officer, Col. James Fannin, a West Point man, but of dubious military background, had simply procrastinated--to stay and attempt to defend the makeshift fort at Goliath, to rush to assist at the Alamo and into almost sure death, back and forth, until it was too late for any decision. Fannin's and the Goliath defenders' danger now was not from Santa Anna who with his Army was relaxing in San Antonio 90 miles away but from General Jose de Urrea who was sweeping up from the South to join Santa Anna. On Friday, March 18, Fannin ordered a retreat to Victoria. Unfortunately

for Fannin and his 360 men, preparations for ample food and water had not been made and the retreat was further slowed by the weight of the cannon being evacuated. The Mexican Army numbering well over 1,000 overtook Fannin and his troops on the bleak, bare plain but a few miles from the possible protection of trees. Fannin and his hungry and thirsty troops were overwhelmed the next morning on Sunday, March 20. Unlike the Alamo defenders, Fannin surrendered his troops. General Urrea marched the prisoners back to Goliath and, in the meantime, requested instructions from his superior, Santa Anna. The orders came back on Thursday--immediate execution of every man! The prisoners were formed into three companies and marched out of the stockade gates where they were led in three separate directions. When the three columns were out of each others sight (but not out of hearing) they were halted. Mexican soldiers then formed two parallel lines and simply shot the prisoners. Wounded remaining behind at the Fort were dragged out of their cots and bayoneted. Thus ended a second disastrous round in the battle for Texas independence.

Following this second disaster, the state looked to General Sam Houston who seemed to be constantly retreating from contact with the Mexicans. He may well have been, for his orders to both Travis at the Alamo and Fannin at Goliath had been to abandon and burn the forts and to retreat. Houston's hope and plan was to draw the Mexican Army further and further away from what would be an impossibly long line of supplies then to fall on them in one fell swoop. Houston had an Army of about 900 ragtag volunteers with a handful of regulars. Luck appeared to be with him as he evaded Santa Anna again and again. On the morning of Tuesday, April 19, Houston's tactics came to fruition. Santa Anna who had been chasing him wildly had imprudently taken his entire available force onto a swampy peninsula formed

by the San Jacinto River, where he could neither maneuver, retreat nor receive reinforcements except over a narrow bridge. Santa Anna simply assumed that his army was safe because he couldn't believe that Houston would attack. No forward pickets or scouts were sent out for the same reason. Mexican General Cos at this moment arrived with an additional 500 fresh troops giving the Mexicans a clear 2:1 superiority in numbers. Texans, meanwhile, had slipped behind the Mexicans and destroyed the only bridge leading to the peninsula and hopes for additional reinforcements.

About 10 in the morning Houston called his officers together for a council of war. It was decided that Santa Anna would probably allow the 500 troops that General Cos had, after a long march, brought up to have a siesta--in all likelihood, the entire Army would be at siesta about 4:00 in the afternoon preparing for battle the next day. Santa Anna's theory being apparently that if they rest well today they will fight well tomorrow. The sun would also be directly in the eyes of the Mexicans at that hour.

The Battle of San Jacinto cannot be understood in any military terms. Unusual events or acts of individuals do happen that can change the course of battle, or history itself. Such an individual did emerge at San Jacinto--although "emerge" is hardly the word! Her name: Emily Morgan. Legend and song would know her as "The Yellow Rose of Texas." Houston and the Texans, bugles blowing, muskets loaded and ready, cannon blazing away, with shouts of "Remember the Alamo" struck at 4:00 p.m. Houston's men and horses had simply encircled the sleeping Mexicans, crept into their camp before opening fire and proceeded with a veritable orgy of wanton slaughter of the bewildered army. Nearly 500 Mexicans attempting to escape through the

swamp were knifed, clubbed, gunned down or bayoneted until the water of the San Jacinto, indeed, turned red with their blood. What had happened to their vaunted military tactitian and leader, their Generalissimo Santa Anna?

Santa Anna stumbled from his silken tent wearing only red Moracco slippers, a linen shirt with diamond studs and white silk underdrawers, the naked girl, Emily Morgan, cowering behind him, to find his entire Army in complete route and being cut literally to shreds.

The battle lasted only 18 minutes. The Texans marching against prepared positions had lost two men killed, the Mexicans more than 600. There were many wounded on each side, including General Houston.

Santa Anna somehow escaped the carnage as did Emily. Emily who knew the terrain probably better than anyone else simply made her way back to the farmhouse at Morgan's Point. Making his way through shoulder high weeds and cattails, Santa Anna hid during the night hoping to make his escape the next day. He was discovered almost by accident the next day, however, and brought before General Sam Houston who refused the demand to hang him. Santa Anna was jailed and, miracle upon miracle, would eventually be sent under guard to Washington for conferences with American high officials including the President. The other four Mexican generals now in Texas, despite Santa Anna's being held prisoner, would not attack without Santa Anna's approval which, of course, never came. Their forces simply retreated across the Rio Grande and out of Texas. Returning to Emily Morgan, the beautiful mulatto slave girl who occupied the complete attention of the commanding Generalissimo during the Battle and the annihilation of his army.

Described at the time as exceptionally intelligent, as well as beautiful, Emily was an indentured servant and member of the household of Colonel James Morgan, who had brought her from New York to Texas in 1835. When Santa Anna captured the girl at Morgan's Point, at the mouth of the San Jacinto River, her master was stationed at Galveston guarding Texas refugees and the fugitive government officials. Colonel Morgan, who served as commandant of Galveston from March 30, 1836, to April 1, 1837, had erected the fortification on the island at his own expense. A staunch patriot, the wealthy Morgan had also contributed the use of his ships to the Texas cause and supplied the government with provisions.

As early as 1830, Morgan, a native of Philadelphia, had visited Texas. Impressed with the country's potential, he decided to establish a mercantile business in the Mexican province as the nucleus for a colony. Accordingly he moved his wife, their son, and two daughters to Texas and, to circumvent the law prohibiting slavery in the province, converted his sixteen slaves into indentured servants for ninety-nine years. Morgan became the agent for several New York financiers who planned to develop land in Texas. In the company's interest he invested in an immense quantity of real estate in the Mexican territory including the point that later bore his name. After laying out the town, Morgan named it New Washington. In 1835, to increase the colony's population, the colonizer brought in a number of Scotch highlanders, free blacks from Bermuda, and other indentured servants from New York. Emily Morgan was said to have been among the latter. Although the girl's name was Emily D. West, she adopted the name of her master and benefactor in conformity with nineteenth-century custom.

At forty-two Santa Anna prided himself on his connoisseurship of women and his reputation as a ladies' man. His arrogance, lust for power, and handsome looks made him exceedingly attractive to women. A man of fastidious tastes with a penchant for expensive uniforms and clothing, Santa Anna was likewise addicted to such luxuries as silk sheets, exquisite crystal stemware, silver serving dishes, and a mounted sterling chamberpot. When Santa Anna invaded Texas at the head of his Mexican troops, he brought with him an octagonal-shaped three-room, carpeted silk marquee to serve as headquarters. Furthermore, the Mexican general shared his love of luxury with his mistresses. It was said that he had settled lavish estates upon some of them.

Near the town of Harrisburg on April 15, 1836, the main body of the Mexican army had tarried to wait for stragglers. Santa Anna, accompanied by an adjutant and fifteen dragoons, had walked a mile into the town. There they captured two Americans from whom they extracted the information that the Texas government officials had left the morning before for Galveston Island. At three o'clock on April 17, after instructing his men to put Harrisburg to the torch, Santa Anna began the march toward New Washington. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the bayou the Mexicans had discovered some houses containing women's apparel, fine furniture, a magnificent piano, jars of preserves, chocolates, and fruits, all of which they "appropriated for the benefit of his Excellency and his attendants."

Santa Anna, with his contingent of 1,000 infantrymen and equipment, arrived at New Washington at noon on April 18. The settlement was deserted except for the soldiers looting it and Morgan's remaining indentured servants. Legend asserts that the Mexican general first observed

the graceful movements of the mulatto beauty at the wharf as she was assisting others in loading a flatboat with supplies. As a virtuoso of feminine pulchritude, it did not take the commander long to decide that Emily would be an integral part of the loot.

Not until they had exhausted Morgan's well-stocked warehouses of such desirable commodities as flour, soap, tobacco, sugar and liquor--and rounded up several beeves--did the Mexicans burn the town and prepare to depart.

On April 19, after sacking and burning New Washington, Santa Anna took the slave girl and a mulatto boy named Turner captive. Turner escaped Mexican surveillance the next day and from details supplied by Emily, warned Houston and gave current information about Santa Anna and his army. Thus, Emily Morgan, loyal to the Texans, conveyed her warning indirectly to Houston before she reached the battlesite herself.

When Santa Anna discovered Emily at New Washington he had been deprived of feminine companionship for two weeks. Emily was a replacement for the mistress he had left behind in San Antonio the lovely seventeen-year-old Melchora Barrera. Santa Anna and his lady had left San Antonio on March 31 in his royal coach drawn by six resplendent white mules and escorted by fifty elegantly uniformed dragoons. His tent and carpeting, huge supply of champagne, his opium cabinet, and crates of fighting cocks--destined for the gambling hobby in which he indulged on expeditions--were transported by a train of pack mules. When the royal contingent reached the Guadalupe River at Gonzales, on April 2, it was impossible to ford the flooded stream with the heavy carriage. As the commander expected to rejoin Melchora in a short time, he sent her the next day in the heavy vehicle with a trunk full of silver under escort to Mexico City. Rumor has it that the girl later bore the dictator a child.

If Santa Anna chose the general campsite for his soldiers injudiciously, he selected the spot for himself and Emily to occupy with care. Like a man on his honeymoon, he had the gaudy marquee set up on a rise with a romantic view overlooking San Jacinto Bay.

And what became of Emily? The slave girl survived the Battle of San Jacinto and lived to relate the details of her role in it to her master and benefactor, Colonel Morgan. Since there is no record of anyone having seen Emily at the battlesite after the attack, it is logical to believe that she returned to New Washington--a distance of only seven or eight miles--soon after the assault. The woman was not a product of plantation life in the Deep South. She was an eastern import with extraordinary intelligence and sophistication. It is also entirely feasible that a Texan gave her safe escort back to Morgan's Point.

Later, Emily was issued a passport and permitted to return to her home in New York. Apparently Emily's role at San Jacinto influenced Colonel Morgan to grant her her freedom. Later Morgan purchased the gaudy candy-striped marquee reminiscent of his indentured servant and presented it to the city of New York. Naturally Morgan passed Emily's story on to others.

Many persons wonder whether the lovely gold-skinned girl was not infatuated with, or at least flattered by, the attentions of the Emperor of Mexico. Probably. However, as a member of the Morgan household and an indentured servant who came to the Mexican province from New York by choice, Emily was apparently loyal to the Morgan family and to Texas. Morgan himself had a reputation for being generous and kind and was said to have treated his indentured servants well. It is logical, then, to think that the slave girl found her home at New Washington comfortable and pleasant.

Regardless of motives, the results of the slave girl's performance at San Jacinto are without precedent. Not only did Emily's dalliance with Santa Anna at San Jacinto keep him occupied and cemented the victory, it helped create a new nation--the Republic of Texas--that flourished for a decade. Moreover, the victory at San Jacinto not only brought Texas into the United States but also added the future states of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas and Oklahoma--a million square miles of territory that more than doubled the size of the American nation at the time. Even for a most generous ladies' man, this real estate, in terms of intrinsic nineteenth-century values, had to be an all-time record as a fee for the companionship of Emily for a period of less than two days and nights. As payment by the hour for that brief time, the fee approximated a world-shattering record. The fortunes paid by the crowned heads of Europe for the favors of Madame de Pompadour and her successor, the Comtesse DuBarry, become paltry sums by comparison.

An old legend insists that on each recurring April 21, the anniversary of the Battle of San Jacinto, the specter of a golden-skinned girl resembling a Latin goddess returns to Texas from the East to preside at the famous battlesite. The ghost is that of the long-haired, twenty-year-old mulatto slave girl, Emily Morgan--"The Yellow Rose of Texas"--whose role in the quarters of General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna at San Jacinto remains a legend and, along with the song, has earned a place in history as the heroine of the Texas Revolution.