



# The Alamo Keeper

Thomas C. Rife

1823-1894

*Philip Mullins and George Mullins*

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# Introduction

Thomas Rife came to Texas from Mississippi when Texas was a Republic. Beginning in 1842 he was actively engaged in the fight against Texas' enemies whether they were Santa Ana's Mexicans, Native Americans, Union soldiers or citizens who broke the law. As the first "Alamo Keeper," he was charged with protecting the Alamo from vandalism.

He had been a soldier in the War with Mexico, a Texas Ranger, a Confederate Army scout, a San Antonio policeman. He was deemed to be brave and fearless in the face of danger and was for many years a conductor of mail coaches through the unsettled western region, one of the most dangerous jobs in Texas during the 1850's.

Every job he held between 1846 and 1894 required him to carry a gun. He chose the life of a gunman over the secure and safe life of a farmer. At a young age, he fled the agricultural culture of the Mississippi delta, and in later years, passed up several opportunities to be either a farmer or a rancher. Although his closest associates in the San Antonio police force were politicians, Rife was not. As a result he never accumulated wealth nor power and, although he earned an above average income, he never owned his own home.

Unlike his friend and coworker William "Big Foot" Wallace, who had two contemporary biographers, Tom Rife had none. However, his work as a stagecoach conductor, San Antonio City Policeman and Custodian of the Alamo were frequently chronicled in the San Antonio newspapers making Rife a minor celebrity. He and his friends "Big Foot" Wallace, Morgan "Wolf" Merrick and John "RIP" Ford all had city streets named after them.

Rife was wounded twice during the Civil War and suffered from constant pain, yet he was physically fit and accepted demanding work despite his injuries. He was a patriot and his service to his adopted state was above what was expected of him. He was valued by his employers and trusted by his peers. During his tenure as a city policeman he was "one of the most efficient members of our police force".

He was frequently placed in leadership roles and was known as Captain Rife "yet he was modest and reticent in speaking of his own career." Journalists described him as serious minded and not given to sentiment, jocularity or self-promotion. He was appointed to be the Alamo tour guide because he was "courteous to visitors and knows the history of the state by heart." He had a good memory for dates and names and was an effective storyteller. He had a reputation as an honest man who did not hesitate to correct those who exaggerated or lied. He was an amateur historian and was considered to be an expert on the history of the Alamo.

Even though Tejanos suffered discrimination and oppression at the hands of Anglo residents and politicians, Rife's bilingual family lived in the Mexican part of town, attended Mass at the Mexican church and associated with Mexican politicians.

Rife married twice. He abandoned his first wife after only a few weeks of married life. She owned a ranch and may have expected him to take up the life of a rancher. When he was fifty years old he settled in San Antonio with his second wife and raised a dozen children. He and his Chihuahuan-born wife appeared to be happily married but Rife may not have been a good parent; his older sons were repeatedly in trouble with the law.

Rife received several grants of land from the State of Texas but he quickly sold the land claims for small sums. When he died at the age of 71, he left his widow impoverished.

Thomas Rife was a heroic figure who lived during the heroic period of Texas history but he did not attract the attention of historians. Only a handful of the hundreds of studies of the early history of Texas even mention his name and none detail his remarkable life or his influence on the Alamo myth. The authors, his great-great grandsons, hope that this short volume will remedy that.



# **Ancestors of Thomas Rife, 1735-1864**



# South Carolina

## Swiss Protestants immigrated to South Carolina.

King Charles II of England granted the Province of Carolina to the Lords Proprietors in 1663 as a business enterprise. The eight English royalists founded Charles Town in 1680 as their new colony's center of trade and culture and the port of entry. The new colony attracted a number of settlers who farmed on the rich coastal plain in the vicinity of Charles Town. In 1733, the South Carolina General Assembly established eleven townships along major rivers of the coastal plain to encourage immigration to the interior of the province.<sup>1</sup> Among these new townships were Orangeburg and Saxe-Gotha.<sup>2</sup>

The first Swiss Protestants to arrive in South Carolina settled around Orangeburg in 1735. Two years later, Swiss settlers arrived in Saxe-Gotha. Before the Swiss arrived, the region was a wilderness with only four or five English residents.<sup>3</sup> The government of England encouraged immigration of protestants to the Carolinas and provided settlers with 50-acres of free land and a subsidy of twenty Pounds Sterling.<sup>4</sup> A letter written by John Peter Purry in 1735 and cosigned by a dozen German-speaking residents of the Saxe-Gotha Township, was distributed in Switzerland to encourage migration to the township.<sup>5</sup>

Partly as a result of the letter and the inducements offered by the British Crown, large numbers of Palatines (German-speaking Swiss Protestants) settled in Orangeburg, Congaree and Wateree Districts between 1740 and 1755.<sup>6</sup> Between 1732 and 1744 at least eleven ships arrived in the Carolinas carrying Swiss immigrants. As late as 1765, six hundred refugee Protestants from two districts of south Germany and Switzerland (Palatine and Swabia) were sent from London to the townships in South Carolina set aside for them.<sup>7</sup> It is likely that the ancestor of Thomas Rife settled in South Carolina during this period.<sup>8</sup>

## **Saxe-Gotha Township was the frontier of European settlement.**

During the Cherokee War of 1759-1761, many of the settlers in Saxe-Gotha Township fled for safety to the towns of Ebenezer and Savannah in the colony of Georgia and to Charles Town and Purrysburg (a settlement on the coast) in South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> Some of the Swiss settlers never returned to their homes in Saxe-Gotha. Some were killed during the war and others moved north to Pennsylvania where conditions were safer with established schools and churches.<sup>10</sup>

After their defeat, the Cherokee ceded some of their lands east of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the settlers and moved their towns further west.<sup>11</sup> This opened a large area of land in the Piedmont Plateau and the adjacent low country that attracted land speculators and settlers from existing settlements to the north of South Carolina. During the French and Indian Wars, settlers from Virginia began moving south looking for cheap and secure land.<sup>12</sup> A fork on the Great Wagon Road crossed the northern part of Saxe-Gotha Township; Scots-Irish families from Virginia and Pennsylvania settled in the district in the generation just prior to the American Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

## **Conrod Rife and Peter Chambliss fought in the Revolutionary War.**

As a result of conflicts over taxes and governance, a revolutionary government was established in Charles Town in 1775. Although many Carolinians still supported the British Crown, the Royal Governor left the colony and South Carolina declared itself an independent state on July 4, 1776. Events in the Northern colonies soon led to the American Revolution.<sup>14</sup>

In June 1775, Conrod Rife enlisted in Captain Field Farrer's Company of state troops at Ninety-Six Court House.<sup>15</sup> The company became one of ten companies of the 3rd Regiment of the South Carolina Line.<sup>16</sup> The 3rd Regiment consisted of volunteer, mounted riflemen who were not militiamen. The regiment was mustered into the Continental Army (known in those days as the Continental Establishment) in September 1776<sup>17</sup> and fought at the Sieges of Savannah and Charles Town. The entire 3rd Regiment, including Farrer's company, was captured in May of 1780 at Charles Town when the city surrendered to a British invasion force. After its capture, the regiment of 259 men was disbanded in January 1781<sup>18</sup> before Rife's term of enlistment expired.<sup>19</sup>

After the 3rd Regiment surrendered, the enlisted men were paroled and then exchanged. Many subsequently joined other regiments.<sup>20</sup> Conrod Rife appeared on the roll of Captain Philemon Waters' Company, 1st Spartan Regiment of Militia (Light Dragoons) soon after the 3rd Regiment disbanded.<sup>21</sup> Conrad's Compiled Military Service Record states that he served for 46 months and 21 days between August 10, 1777 and July 1, 1781.<sup>22</sup>

In 1780, Peter Chambliss lived in Camden District, South Carolina, upstream of Saxe-Gotha Township. He enlisted in the 5th Regiment, South Carolina Line during the Revolutionary War and served from 1778 until 1781.<sup>23</sup>

The British army and its Tory militia marched towards Virginia where they launched an unsuccessful invasion of the middle Atlantic colonies. Eventually the British army surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia in October 1781 and the last British troops left Charles Town in December 1782.<sup>24</sup>

## Peter Chambliss married the widow Rife.

Conrod Rife was listed in the 1790 Federal Census as living alone with one slave on a farm near Sandy Run in the Orangeburg District.<sup>25</sup> Sandy Run is a stream about eleven miles south of the Fall Line on the Santee/Congaree River in the old Saxe-Gotha Township. The Census does not clearly show the location of Rife's farm but its location was determined by comparing names in the 1790 and 1800 Federal Census. In 1800, the twenty families living along Sandy Run were a German-speaking community of 119 adult men, 101 adult women, 260 children and 107 slaves.<sup>26</sup>

In 1800, Mary Rife was enumerated as living on the farm near Sandy Run in Lexington County, Orangeburg District that Conrod Rife occupied in 1790. She was listed as a widow with four children and two slaves; two boys and a girl less than ten years of age and one girl described as 10-15 years old. Family genealogies list the two boys as William, born in 1795, and Jacob, born in 1798. No record of Conrod Rife exists after 1790, so it is presumed that he died before 1800.

In March 23, 1801, Polly (Mary) Rife claimed 67 acres of land in the Congaree Swamp above Beaver Creek.<sup>27</sup> This may have been a land grant based on her husband's Revolutionary War service.<sup>28</sup>

Peter Chambliss also received a land grant as a Revolutionary War veteran.<sup>29</sup> In the 1800 Federal Census, he was enumerated in Lexington County on the Edisto River not far from the Rife farm on Sandy Run.<sup>30</sup> He was married, had two sons (Peter Corbin, aged 10 and John, aged 8), a girl (Elizabeth, aged 4) and three slaves. His wife was probably Mary Elizabeth Corbin who was born in 1771 and died in 1798.<sup>31</sup> By the date the census was taken, he may have been courting his third wife, the widow Mary Rife.

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13. Culler, *Orangeburg District, 1768-1868: History and Records*, 3
14. Salley, *The History of Orangeburg, South Carolina*, 255, 262
15. Bobby Gilmer Moss, *Roster of South Carolina Patriots in the American Revolution*, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), 815; Conrod Rife's Record, Revolutionary War Rolls 1775-1783, M246, Roll 89, War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, 1709-39, RG 93 NARA
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# Louisiana and Mississippi

## **Peter Chambliss joined the migration from the Carolinas to the Mississippi Territory.**

As more settlers cleared land in the Up Country, (the Piedmont region above the Fall Line) the Santee, Congaree and Wateree Rivers began to flood in the spring and run low in the summer. Poor farming methods and spring floods caused extensive erosion in the Up Country of South Carolina and low water in the Low Country. The fluctuating river level damaged rice plantations on the lower Santee River where there was a large community of French-speaking planters. Typically, the Upland settlers were not producing any crops for export; before 1800, they marketed beef, pork, staves and shingles.<sup>1</sup> After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, most farmers began to export cotton, although rice continued to be planted in the Low Country along the Atlantic coast.<sup>2</sup> The success of cotton profoundly changed the South. Cotton became the dominant crop and its success encouraged many farmers to migrate westward to the Mississippi Territory seeking better land.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Chambliss and his family were first enumerated in the Mississippi Territory in 1805. Eight children were living at home in addition to 10 slaves.<sup>4</sup> Jefferson County Tax Records show that \$11.90 in taxes was paid on 440 acres in 1807.<sup>5</sup> The two Rife girls had already married and left their parent's home. William Rife's half-sister Elizabeth married in 1813 and his half-brother Peter C. married in 1815.<sup>6</sup> These were the oldest of the Chambliss children and they were the first to marry and leave home.

## **The children of Peter Chambliss left Jefferson County.**

When Peter Chambliss moved to southwestern Mississippi, the First Choctaw Session was the only US-held territory west of Georgia that did not belong to one of the Indian Nations. Greenville City was a new American settlement and the county seat of Jefferson County. The nearest established market towns were Natchez to the south and Port Gibson to the north.<sup>7</sup>

Americans continued to arrive in such large numbers that by 1830 many planters came to believe that there was no longer enough available land in southwestern Mississippi to accommodate the next generation. Many left the area in groups of related families seeking new land elsewhere. After Peter Chambliss died in 1828, most of his sons and stepsons moved north up the Mississippi River to the wilderness that became Carroll Parish, Louisiana. The oldest son, Peter Corbin Chambliss, inherited the family farm in Jefferson County and stayed in Mississippi. Another son, Samuel, returned to Jefferson County from Carroll Parish after 1836 and farmed in Jefferson County until at least 1850 when he returned to Carroll Parish.<sup>8</sup> The younger sons of Peter Chambliss all moved to Lake Providence before 1834.

## **William Rife and his wife were the first of the Chambliss family to move to Lake Providence.**

When William Rife was 17-years old he left home briefly to serve with the Territorial Militia during the War of 1812 as a Private in Col. Peter Perkin's 7th Regiment.<sup>9</sup> He returned to his stepfather's farm in Jefferson County after the war ended and appeared as an unmarried head of household with 2 slaves (and no land) on the tax rolls for 1817.<sup>10</sup> On October 28, 1819, when he was 24-years old, William Rife married Martha Jane Collins (who was born about 1805 in Kentucky) in Jefferson County, Mississippi.<sup>11</sup> In 1820 he and his wife were living near Greenville City with two slaves (a man and a woman). He was a farmer as were most of his neighbors.<sup>12</sup>

William Rife did not appear on the tax rolls for 1821 because he had left Jefferson County and moved his family to Lake Providence in northeastern Louisiana. In 1823, William and Martha Jane Rife's first child, Thomas, was born in Ouachita Parish, Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> William Rife lived on this farm on Lake Providence for less than eight years. In the 1830 census, his family was enumerated in the Princeton neighborhood of Washington County, Mississippi, across the river from Ouachita Parish, Louisiana.<sup>14</sup>

The family remained on the farm in Washington County until William passed away. The last of William and Martha's four children, William W. Rife Jr., was born in 1838.<sup>15</sup> In 1840 William Sr. patented land in neighboring Bolivar County but there is no evidence that he lived there.<sup>16</sup>

In January 1842 the older of the two daughters of William and Martha Rife, Mary Jane, married Lawrence Thompson Wade. He was a younger son in a large family that had recently arrived from South Carolina by way of Tennessee. Lacking capital to purchase their own farms, Lawrence Wade and his brothers found employment as slave overseers.<sup>17</sup> Many white men who worked as slave overseers found themselves at the bottom of the social scale of white society<sup>18</sup> but for many others, including Lawrence Wade, it was a temporary job preparing them to own and manage their own plantations. When William Rife died in 1843 or 1844, Lawrence became the surrogate father and guardian of Rife's widow and their children. William Jr. and Martha had an inheritance from their uncle Robert J. Chambliss and Lawrence Wade was appointed to be their "tutor".<sup>19</sup>

When William Rife Sr. passed away, he was buried near the present town of Greenville, Mississippi.<sup>20</sup> His death left no adult white men on the farm. William's

brother, Jacob, had returned to South Carolina prior to 1840<sup>21</sup> and the oldest son, Thomas, left home for Texas prior to 1838.<sup>22</sup> William's widow and her remaining unmarried daughter moved into her son-in-law's home in Carroll Parish.

## **The children of William Rife moved to Issaquena County, Mississippi.**

Martha Jane Rife, William's widow, died in Carroll Parish in 1853, probably in the home of Lawrence Wade, her son-in-law and guardian.<sup>23</sup> In May 1853, her remaining unmarried daughter, Martha Ann, married William Sibley. He was a descendant of Richard Albritton of South Carolina and hailed from the locally famous Sibley family that had moved en masse to far western Louisiana between 1835 and 1837.

Like the Sibley family, William Rife and his siblings left southwestern Mississippi because they believed there was not enough land for them.<sup>24</sup> William W. Rife Jr. returned from school to the village of Providence in 1855<sup>25</sup> and by 1860 was employed as the Deputy Court Recorder at the Carroll Parish Courthouse in the village of Floyd.<sup>26</sup>

## **Nathaniel and Samuel Chambliss grew up in Louisiana and Mississippi.**

In 1823 William Rife's first son, Thomas Collins Rife, was born near the village of Lake Providence in what is today East Carroll Parish, Louisiana.<sup>27</sup> The settlement at Lake Providence was located on the natural levee on the south bank of Lake Providence, an ox-bow lake, about eight miles west of the Mississippi River. When William Rife moved his family there, it was new country and a wilderness but by 1848 there were as many as twenty-five large cotton plantations within three miles of the village.<sup>28</sup> The flat, low-lying and often flooded land was ideally suited to growing cotton.<sup>29</sup>

Although most of the sons of Peter Chambliss eventually followed William Rife to what became Carroll Parish, William did not remain there. Driven again, perhaps by the haunting promise of new country, he moved his family back across the Mississippi River to the wilderness of the Mississippi Delta. The family's new home was about thirty miles upstream of Lake Providence. Fast and easy transportation provided by Mississippi River steamboats enabled the family to maintain close connections with their relatives in Carroll Parish. Nathaniel and Samuel Chambliss had moved to Carroll Parish and they and most of their brothers established plantations there. These two men were half-brothers of Thomas Rife's father.

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23. Goodspeed, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi*, 681

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# **The Republic of Texas**

## **Nathaniel and Samuel Chambliss influenced Thomas Rife to go to Texas.**

The westward movement of planters continued into the next generation when a number of Rife, Chambliss, Wade and Sibley descendants moved to Texas to the agricultural limits of the Cotton Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Two uncles of Thomas Rife (Nathaniel and Samuel Chambliss) and one aunt (Martha Bell) went to Texas. Another died in Texas in 1864 as a refugee during the Civil War. At least four children of Peter Chambliss moved to Texas. With the exception of Nathaniel Chambliss, these families moved to Texas after the Civil War when there was a general movement of impoverished planters from the Old South.<sup>2</sup> Like most settlers of this period, they went to Texas as economic refugees and land speculators.

The fifth child of Peter Chambliss was Nathaniel Chambliss, born in 1802 in South Carolina. Samuel Lee Chambliss was the tenth child in the family. He was a volunteer soldier in the Texas war for independence in 1836. After the Texas war, he lived in Louisiana and Mississippi for a time then returned to Texas in 1867 and died in Navarro County, Texas in 1876. His experience in Texas undoubtedly influenced his older brother Nathaniel and his young nephew, Thomas Rife, as well as other men, to move to Texas.

## **Samuel Chambliss joined the fight for Texas independence.**

After the Texas revolution began in 1836, hundreds of young men from the American states rushed to Texas to join the fight. American volunteers formed the majority of the Texas army<sup>3</sup> and probably only twenty percent of the men of the Texas army that fought at San Jacinto were residents of Texas. The other soldiers were young men who came to Texas to "fight for their country".<sup>4</sup> One of these men was Tom Rife's uncle, Samuel Lee Chambliss.

On November 15, 1835 Samuel Chambliss helped to raise and equip a volunteer militia company in Carroll Parish to fight with Texas Federalists against Mexican Centralists led by General Santa Anna. Samuel and his friends in Carroll Parish raised over \$5,000 to equip the company for the campaign. The company of 124 men traveled overland to Washington-on-the-Brazos; soon to be the seat of government of the new Republic of Texas. After the company arrived at Washington-on-the-Brazos, its original commander returned to Louisiana and the company was reorganized with Samuel Chambliss in command.<sup>5</sup>

In February 1836 Samuel's company, along with that of Capt. Samuel Williams, was sent in pursuit of a band of Indians who were raiding American settlements east of the Trinity River. The Indians were overtaken near a place called Comanche Peak (in present-day Johnson County) and escaped after a running fight over several miles.

During the fight, Samuel was wounded in his right arm. His companions removed the arrowhead or barb but he could not use his arm and could not continue the pursuit.<sup>6</sup> Chambliss' company was disbanded soon afterward for a "want of provisions and let loose in order to scatter and get subsistence".<sup>7</sup> Chambliss stated that, "In April 1836, the grass gave out, the horses became unfit for such service and I disbanded the company".<sup>8</sup> Samuel then went to Gross' (or Groce's) plantation on the Brazos River to offer his services to Sam Houston, commander of the Texas army. Chambliss was assigned to deliver General Houston's mail and dispatches to US General Gaines at Fort Jessup near present-day Many, Louisiana.<sup>9</sup>

While he was at Fort Jessup, a musket ball was removed from Chambliss' thigh. He had been wounded in a fight on the Upper Colorado River a month or two before. He was then ordered by General Houston to go to Vicksburg, Mississippi to deliver messages and to raise a battalion of cavalry. Subsequently, Houston asked Chambliss to encourage men to come to Texas as settlers. Towards that end, in the late summer and fall of 1836, Chambliss delivered speeches before gatherings in Jefferson, Warren and Claiborne Counties in Mississippi to encourage farmers to move to Texas.<sup>10</sup>

## **Samuel Chambliss returned to the United States after the Texas Revolution.**

Samuel was furloughed from the Texas army at Nacogdoches in October 1836<sup>11</sup> along with the majority of the army.<sup>12</sup> He received a discharge paper that he lost in 1862 or 1863 when, according to Chambliss, "our house in Louisiana was broken into by force by the Federal Army and said Discharge and letters with my library were destroyed".<sup>13</sup> In the fall of 1836, Samuel Chambliss returned to Carroll Parish where he recovered from his wounds.<sup>14</sup> He then returned to Jefferson County, Mississippi where he may have inherited land. He and Jane T. Scott had married in 1833. They settled down to raise a family and to operate a plantation, growing cotton with ten slave laborers.<sup>15</sup> By 1860 he owned 116 slaves and was living in Carroll Parish.<sup>16</sup>

Samuel told war stories to friends and family upon his return home. His audience included his older brother, Nathaniel, and his nephew, Tom Rife. Samuel must have extolled the agricultural potential of Washington County, Texas; an area with which he was familiar. The availability of good, cheap land influenced his brother Nathaniel

to move to Texas in 1838. Nathaniel had already outlived two wives and may have been seeking a healthier climate. Like many other farmers, he may have been escaping financial trouble caused by the Panic of 1837. Young Tom, who never wanted to be a farmer, may have been attracted by the prospect of war and Indian fights.

## Farmers from the Old South immigrated to Texas after 1836.

There were three principal routes leading to Texas in 1838. Perhaps the most common was by ship from New Orleans via the Gulf of Mexico to Galveston or a landing on the Gulf coast.<sup>17</sup> The usual overland route was by steamer up the Red River to Natchitoches and then along the Old Spanish or San Antonio Road (*El Camino Real*) through to Nacogdoches in Texas.<sup>18</sup> Settlers traveling this road passed through the largely uninhabited Neutral Ground in western Louisiana, crossed the Sabine River at Gain's Ferry and passed through the villages of San Augustine and Nacogdoches. There they bought corn from already established farmers.<sup>19</sup> The best route for wagons was said to be through San Augustine, Nacogdoches, Washington-on-the-Brazos, and Columbus and then on to the Lavaca River and Spring Hill.<sup>20</sup> Samuel Chambliss was familiar with the Old Spanish Road and he probably recommended that route to Nathaniel as the safest and easiest way to reach Texas. A third, less commonly used route, the Opelousas Road, went overland through southwestern Louisiana.<sup>21</sup>

Large numbers of emigrants traveled overland to Texas after the battle of San Jacinto in ox-carts, in wagons, on foot and on horseback. Many were encouraged to immigrate to Texas between 1837 and 1841 with the promise of a 640-acre head-right. Prior to the American Revolution, some British colonies on the Atlantic coast offered a head-right of either fifty or 100 acres, either to the immigrant himself or the immigrant's sponsor.<sup>22</sup> After the American Revolution all land west of the thirteen original states became the property of the Federal government, which did not continue the practice of giving a head-right to new arrivals to its territories. Most prospective Texas settlers came from states or territories that offered settlers no free land other than soldier's bounties.<sup>23</sup>

A growing number of farmers in the southern states were in search of better, cheaper land<sup>24</sup> and Texas river bottomland was known to be fertile and suitable for cotton.<sup>25</sup> Men such as Samuel Chambliss, who had traveled to Texas during the Texas War for Independence, spoke impressively of the agricultural potential of the Republic. What attracted their attention were the broad river valleys of the Sabine, Neches, Trinity, Brazos and the Colorado Rivers.<sup>26</sup>

The Texas Congress levied few taxes and financed government operations by issuing government paper and land certificates.<sup>27</sup> As a result, land certificates were cheap and plentiful.<sup>28</sup> A land certificate, whether it was soldier's scrip or a head-right, gave the holder the right to claim a given amount of vacant land anywhere in the public domain. Since the high cost of locating, surveying and patenting the land had to be paid by the prospective settler before he could receive title,<sup>29</sup> many new emigrants

found it advantageous to rent or to lease land from speculators rather than making a land claim based a land certificate.<sup>30</sup>

## **Nathaniel Chambliss settled in Washington County in 1838.**

It is unclear when Thomas Rife came to Texas. He may have accompanied his uncle, Nathaniel Chambliss, when Nathaniel moved from Carroll Parish to Washington County, Texas in 1838.<sup>31</sup> There was a great deal of migration to Texas immediately after becoming a republic although the pace of new arrivals slowed following the Panic of 1837.<sup>32</sup> The Panic was followed by a lengthy recession that affected Texas as well as the United States and cotton prices fell by 50%, bankrupting many businesses, including planters.

It was said that the same qualities of daring, bravery, reckless abandon and heavy self-assertiveness that motivated a man to go to Texas also fitted him to conquer the wilderness.<sup>33</sup> According to Noah Smithwick, who lived in San Felipe during this period, many of the men who came to Texas during the Republic were fleeing their past.<sup>34</sup> Some were bankrupts, murderers or adulterers who came to Texas to escape the reach of the law. In the United States bankrupt individuals were sent to jail, while in Texas they were safe from United States criminal and bankruptcy law. Most people in Louisiana and elsewhere assumed that immigrants to Texas during this period were either villains or desperate men.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the young men who came to Texas were simply looking for adventure and excitement.<sup>36</sup> While young Thomas Rife fit this description, Nathaniel Chambliss did not. He was an older man accustomed to owning and managing property. He was married and well established in his community.<sup>37</sup> He was a planter who was drawn to the opportunities presented by the opening of Texas to American settlement. The land in Washington County that bordered the creeks was considered among the best agricultural land in Texas<sup>38</sup> and that is where Nathaniel Chambliss settled.

## **Thomas Rife arrived in east Texas before 1842.**

Before leaving Louisiana, Nathaniel, on May 13, 1838, married his third wife, Caroline Hale, who was twenty years his junior.<sup>39</sup> Between June 1838 and May 23, 1839, Nathaniel and his entourage arrived in Washington County.<sup>40</sup> William Lytle, a blacksmith, arrived in Washington-on-the-Brazos from Tennessee with his wife and son Samuel on December 15, 1838<sup>41</sup> and eleven-year-old Samuel Lytle met Tom Rife in 1842.<sup>42</sup> Their paths crossed many times over the course of their long lives in southwest Texas.

Nathaniel probably rented land for his first two years in Texas. New arrivals to Texas after March 2, 1836 rented land because “original Texans” (those who resided in the Republic on the date of the Declaration of Independence) had preference in the matter of locating their head-rights.<sup>43</sup> On February 11, 1840 Nathaniel bought 840 acres for the sum of \$2,000 from John Lott, an early settler.<sup>44</sup> This land, on New Years Creek in Washington County, was part of the Mexican land grant of Samuel R.

Miller.<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel paid \$2.38 per acre for what must have been a working farm. It was in the Brazos watershed and was considered some of the richest agricultural land in the State.<sup>46</sup> The farm was a mix of undeveloped woodland and prairie with a small cleared field and a cabin.

## Nathaniel Chambliss was a man of means.

Nathaniel and Caroline's new home was two miles from Chappell Hill and six miles from both Washington and Independence.<sup>47</sup> The village of Washington was, at that time, the seat of government of the Republic. His oldest daughter, Mary Rutledge, stated that she often rode behind her father in 1843 into Washington on horseback.<sup>48</sup> Chambliss was a man who shouldered his responsibilities to his neighbors and served wherever he was needed to maintain a civil society in Texas.<sup>49</sup> Mary, in 1919, wrote, "Our home was the rendezvous of many of our great men. Among the number were Houston, Rusk, Burleson, Wharton, Lamar and others well known at that time...".<sup>50</sup> As time would tell, Nathaniel was not a successful land speculator.

A provision of an act of the Congress of the Republic of Texas on January 4, 1839 extended donations of land to Late Emigrants (emigrants who arrived in Texas after the establishment of the Republic). Nathaniel Chambliss was granted, on May 23, 1839, a Class 3 Conditional Certificate for 640-acres of vacant land as the head of a household who arrived in Texas between October 1, 1837 but before January 1, 1840.<sup>51</sup> He received Certificate No. 104.<sup>52</sup>

The tax rolls of 1840 suggest that Nathaniel was a man of means. He owned a carriage, a clock and four slaves, all taxable luxuries at that time.<sup>53</sup> Although the records are incomplete, tax rolls from 1840 show only forty carriages in the Republic with twenty-two owned by individuals in Washington County.<sup>54</sup> Chambliss paid a tax of \$4 for his carriage as well as the tax on four slaves.<sup>55</sup>

## The war with Mexico began again in 1842.

In March of 1842 the Republic of Texas was again at war with Mexico.<sup>56</sup> Texas President Sam Houston, despite the opposition of Congress, sent a military expedition to Santa Fé in Mexican-held New Mexico.<sup>57</sup> Mexican President Antonio López de Santa Anna responded by sending a similar expedition to west Texas.<sup>58</sup> On March 5-7, 700 Mexican soldiers under General Rafael Vásquez occupied San Antonio.<sup>59</sup> In response to this invasion, Nathaniel Chambliss joined Capt. Samuel Bogart's Company of the Southwestern Army of the Republic of Texas, 1st Regiment.<sup>60</sup>

On June 3, 1843, Moses Park was given a Power-of-Attorney to act as Nathaniel's agent at the county seat of Mt. Vernon during Nathaniel's absence from the Republic.<sup>61</sup> Many prudent Texans left the region west of the Colorado River during this period. East Texas, including Washington County, was considered quite safe from any Mexican invasion force.<sup>62</sup> Nathaniel may have returned to the neighborhood of Lake Providence to manage his affairs there since he patented land at the Ouachita Land Office as late as 1846, ten years after he moved to Texas.

Nathaniel Chambliss served as a trustee for his church and road overseer for the precinct where he lived.<sup>63</sup> Nathaniel was a Methodist,<sup>64</sup> and a trustee of the Cedar Creek Methodist Church. He was instrumental in creating the Methodist camp at Cedar Creek.<sup>65</sup> The Second Great Awakening was in full swing in Texas by the 1840's and highly emotional camp meetings were a regular feature of religious life on the frontier.<sup>66</sup> Camp meetings met the social, as well as the religious, needs of the isolated population and were a convenient time for many people to be baptized and to visit distant neighbors.<sup>67</sup> Preachers riding a circuit helped alleviate the shortage of resident pastors. Methodist and Baptist churches grew rapidly and were the focus of community life in the first half of the 19th Century.<sup>68</sup>

A bill enacted in 1841 laid out procedures to swear, with witnesses, to the continued residence of conditional land certificate holders for the purpose of converting conditional certificates to unconditional certificates.<sup>69</sup> Nathaniel's Class 3 Certificate granted on May 23, 1838 required a three-year residence in Texas before it could be deemed unconditional. Nathaniel Chambliss completed the residence requirement and was issued an Unconditional Certificate in Washington County for 640 acres of land on February 26, 1849.<sup>70</sup>

## **Nathaniel Chambliss moved his family to Lavaca County.**

Before 1850 Nathaniel Chambliss sold his farm in Washington County and moved to Lavaca County.<sup>71</sup> He continued to serve in public office and prospered after his move to Lavaca County. In 1851 he received his long delayed pay for military service during the Vásquez campaign of 1842<sup>72</sup> and in the spring of 1853 he registered a cattle brand and purchased a cotton gin.<sup>73</sup> The following year he used his head-right certificate to patent 640 acres in Erath County 250 miles from his home.<sup>74</sup> He probably never visited the land<sup>75</sup> and it was sold at auction after his death.<sup>76</sup>

In August 1852 Nathaniel was elected to the Lavaca County Commissioners Court where first duty was to settle a dispute involving an election to pick the location of the county seat.<sup>77</sup> Such elections were always hard fought and often fraudulent.<sup>78</sup> The presence of a courthouse usually guaranteed that a town would thrive at the expense of other, nearby villages in the same county.<sup>79</sup> Although the town of Hallettsville received the majority of votes cast, the people of Petersburg (a village in the Zumwalt Settlement that no longer exists) contested the election. Eventually an armed posse was sent to Petersburg to secure the county records for the town of Hallettsville.<sup>80</sup>

A June 15, 1858 newspaper story about Lavaca County mentioned that Dr. Chambliss planted a field of twenty-acres in a variety of maize called Peabody Corn. The article asserted that this variety would yield at least 100 bushels of corn to the acre.<sup>81</sup> Nathaniel was apparently an innovative farmer willing to risk planting new crop varieties. This article called him "Doctor Chambliss," a title he used in later life. The title was honorary and there is no evidence that he received formal training in or even practiced medicine.<sup>82</sup>

In the Census of 1860 only Nathaniel, his wife and their 16-year-old son remained at home.<sup>83</sup> His two daughters married in 1856 and 1858.<sup>84</sup> While Nathaniel from all

appearances was a wealthy man, he was in reality deeply in debt. On May 16, 1859 his financial condition worsened. He was forced to mortgage 751 acres, all cotton produced on the land and the fifteen slaves who worked the fields to Tarleton, Whiting and Tullis, a New Orleans firm of cotton buyers or factors.<sup>85</sup> Two years later on March 19, 1861 he took out a second mortgage on one of these tracts (320 acres and 4 slaves) from Josiah Dowling, a local resident and acquaintance of Chambliss, for \$2,218.47.<sup>86</sup> The coming Civil War bankrupted most Southern planters and Nathaniel was unable to pay back the money he had borrowed.

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# The Civil War

## Nathaniel Chambliss supported the Rebellion.

In response to a call for a County Convention, a meeting was called on November 21, 1860 in Hallettsville to vote on the issue of secession from the Union. Abraham Lincoln, a man who many southerners suspected was an abolitionist, had just become President-Elect of the United States. Five hundred people attended the convention and heard speeches by six men including Nathaniel's son-in-law, Benjamin F. Fly, an attorney. A resolution supporting secession was read and unanimously adopted.<sup>1</sup> Delegates were elected to a Secession Convention in Austin and on February 1, 1861 Texas seceded from the Union. Two state military units were organized in Lavaca County on June 6, 1861. Oliver Searcy's company included Samuel. L. Chambliss (Nathaniel's only son) and S. Hudspeth (probably the brother of Nathaniel's son-in-law) as privates.<sup>2</sup>

On February 14, 1862 Nathaniel's seventeen-year-old son enlisted in a company commanded by his brother-in-law Benjamin Fly. This company was attached to the 24th Texas Cavalry Regiment. Samuel L. Chambliss was captured twice and, having violated his parole, was sent to Rock Island Barracks, Illinois where he died as a prisoner-of-war on August 8, 1864.<sup>3</sup> Captain Benjamin Fly (Mary Rutledge Chambliss' husband) was captured on January 11, 1863 and paroled on April 25, 1863 at Fort Delaware, Delaware.

In May 1862 Nathaniel Chambliss was about 60 years old and exempt from military service.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless he did what he could for the war effort. The Lavaca County Commissioners Court appointed three men in each Beat or Precinct to examine the condition of indigent families of absent soldiers. Nathaniel was one of these relief commissioners.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning county aid was extended to 45 families. In September at least 100 families of absent soldiers were in need of clothing. In the January term the county commissioners were authorized to purchase clothe made in the penitentiary at Huntsville to supply these families with clothing. In the May term the Court levied a tax of 35 cents to be assessed on each \$100.00 worth of property for the support of needy families. Nathaniel, his wife and daughters contributed a

total of \$50 to a hospital fund and some of the ladies made socks and caps to be sold to the government and the money put into the hospital fund.<sup>6</sup>

To provide relief to soldier's wives, the Commissioner's Court remitted delinquent taxes on property of Confederate soldiers. Taxes could also be paid with produce at a value of 50 cents a bushel for corn, 12½ cents for a pound of bacon and 10 cents per pound of cotton. The county's cotton was carried to Mexico and sold.<sup>7</sup> By 1865, prices of clothing and foodstuff were so high and the county's credit so low that the county relief program was abandoned. Thereafter, indigent families had to depend on their own gardens for food and on their neighbors for charity.

As the Federal blockade of the Southern ports became more effective, manufactured goods from abroad became scarce. Soldiers in the field depended more and more on those at home for supplies, especially clothing.<sup>8</sup> The women of Lavaca County worked to clean and card wool to make thread, spin yarn, weave cloth and make items of clothing that were then shipped to company headquarters for distribution to the men in the army.<sup>9</sup>

In Carroll Parish, Louisiana, Nathaniel's brother, Samuel Lee Chambliss, was appointed Lieutenant Colonel of the 13th Battalion, Louisiana Partisan Rangers in October 1862.<sup>10</sup> He resigned his commission in April 1863 due to infirmity and "advanced age" although he was only 48 years old. He was examined by a physician and found to be suffering from emaciation and debility due to "exposure during the past winter."<sup>11</sup> Most of the plantations around Lake Providence were abandoned by the spring of 1863. In the spring of 1863 Confederate or Federal troops broke into Samuel's house in Carroll Parish and destroyed his library.<sup>12</sup>

## **After the War many parts of the Old South were in chaos.**

The Civil War completely disrupted life in Carroll Parish. Conflict between the US Army, freedmen and unrepentant ex-Confederates made life increasingly dangerous and troublesome in parts of Louisiana and Texas.<sup>13</sup> The Mississippi River levee was breached and the whole region was flooded.<sup>14</sup> The Parish was overrun by both Federal and Confederate troops<sup>15</sup> and later became a training base for freedmen who enlisted in the US Army.<sup>16</sup> The Army confiscated farms and placed them in the hands of freedmen under the supervision of Federal officials.<sup>17</sup>

Taxes increased<sup>18</sup> and the price of the region's main commodity, cotton, began a slow decline that continued for the next fifty years.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to his uncle Jacob Rife (William Rife's brother in South Carolina), Lawrence Wade stated "I have lost all the money I had at the close of the war experimenting with freedman labor...We are the poorest people you ever saw and getting worse every day".<sup>20</sup> Most white families fled the area either during or after the War<sup>21</sup> and by 1866 the three younger Rife children had all moved from Louisiana to Issaquena County in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>22</sup> William Sibley and his wife and family also moved to Issaquena County where Martha Ann died in 1865.

In 1869 William Rife Jr. moved fifty miles north to Bolivar County and purchased part of the former plantation of General Vick near the village of Bolivar. In 1870 Lawrence

Wade, his wife and four children were still in Issaquena County but by 1873 he had moved to the 500-acre former Vick plantation where he partnered with his brother-in-law, William Rife, Junior.<sup>23</sup>

Lawrence Wade died in 1875 and his widow died in 1888. Both are buried in Bolivar Mississippi on the former Vick plantation, which they called "Wadelawn".<sup>24</sup> Her younger brother, William Rife Jr. never married. He became a wealthy planter and respected businessman who maintained a close relationship with his sister Martha Ann and her husband.<sup>25</sup> He also stayed in contact with his older brother, Thomas, who lived in Texas.<sup>26</sup> William Rife Jr. died on April 14, 1908 and is buried in the Burrus Cemetery in Benoit, Mississippi.<sup>27</sup>

Thirty years after his service in the War of Independence of Texas, now impoverished Samuel Chambliss immigrated to Texas in 1867 and settled in Navarro County. The country was familiar to him although he had last seen it in 1836. He was elected to the Texas State Legislature in 1873 and represented Freestone, Limestone and Navarro Counties in the 14th Texas Legislature.<sup>28</sup>

In early July 1868 Nathaniel Chambliss died and on July 9, 1868 his son-in-law, Leonidas Hudspeth, (Martha's husband) was named administrator of the estate. This was a period of great financial stress and many plantations were idle. The estate remained in the Probate Court of Lavaca County over four years because it was bankrupt.<sup>29</sup> To pay the estate's outstanding debts, all assets were sold except the widow's homestead of 200 acres. The land-grant tract of 640 acres in Erath County was sold for \$192 (30 cents per acre).<sup>30</sup>

In later years, Nathaniel's son-in-law, Leonidas Hudspeth, was the physician in charge of the City Hospital of Houston. He examined his wife's uncle, old Samuel Lee Chambliss, and declared him to be disabled due to his war wounds.<sup>31</sup> On July 2, 1874 Samuel L. Chambliss was granted a state pension for his service in the Texas War of Independence in 1836.<sup>32</sup> A bill passed by the Legislature on July 28, 1876 for relief of Texas veteran pensioners, led Samuel Chambliss to swear that he was, on August 30, 1879, indigent and unable to support himself. He stated that he owned only his horse valued at \$50 and a cow and calf valued at \$20. In lieu of a pension he received a Republic Donation Voucher for 1280 acres for his service in the War for Texas Independence.<sup>33</sup>

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## **Mexican War, 1846–1848**

*"In 1842, when Texas was last invaded, Tom Rife volunteered for her defense and he served two enlistments in the Mexican war, and was in the fray from beginning to the end. One of those enlistments was served under a man dear to Texas, Jack Hayes, the other under Walter P Lane. No one has yet risen to question his courage or service." "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, (San Antonio, Texas), February 23, 1887*



### TEXAN RANGERS BREAKING OPEN THE HOUSES AT THE BATTLE OF MONTEREY.

On September 23, 1846, American troops entered Monterrey, Mexico and moved within one block of Main Plaza in house-to-house fighting. The streets leading to the plaza were raked with cannon fire so the soldiers punched holes in the walls of buildings and, using ladders and pick axes, moved from house to house toward the plaza. Illustration from General Taylor's Rough and Ready Almanac, 1848 by David Young. Courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas

### The Minutemen of Bexar became Hay's Rangers.

In the turmoil during and after the war for Texas independence, many progressive and industrious Mexican inhabitants of San Antonio left for Mexico;<sup>1</sup> much of the Mexican population of Nacogdoches and displaced Native Americans who had gathered in east Texas<sup>2</sup> were forced to leave the Republic by the victorious Anglo-

Americans.<sup>3</sup> The Anglo population itself consisted of a majority of honest farmers but also a large minority of “loafers” who drifted from one opportunity to another.<sup>4</sup>

After Texas became a republic, the Texas Army was disbanded<sup>5</sup> and defense of the frontier was turned over to the militia and county ranging companies.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of a standing army, the ranging companies provided a body of paramilitary troopers who could lead militia and volunteer forces in the continuing faceoff with Mexico.<sup>7</sup> These civilian soldiers were often called minutemen.<sup>8</sup> The primary purpose of the minutemen was to punish Indian and Mexican raiders that were attacking settlers. As early as 1836, the frontier defenses came to rely on independent<sup>9</sup> and short-term<sup>10</sup> but full-time ranging companies paid by the Legislature and commissioned by the Governor.<sup>11</sup>

John Coffee (Jack) Hays, the commander of the minutemen of Bexar County,<sup>12</sup> became the most famous ranger captain.<sup>13</sup> Hays entered the ranger service as a 20-year old in late 1836 soon after arriving in Texas from Mississippi.<sup>14</sup> He served as the commander of a company of rangers around San Antonio almost continually from 1841 until the Mexican War.<sup>15</sup> He and his rangers developed techniques that eventually neutralized and then reversed the advantage that Comanche Indians had previously enjoyed in a fight with the Spanish military and Anglo settlers.<sup>16</sup>

Hays received his first commission as a ranger captain shortly after the battle of Plum Creek in August of 1840<sup>17</sup> and continued in military service until about 1848. The young men who served in Jack Hays’ ranging companies in 1841-1842 formed the nucleus of his Mexican War regiments in 1846.<sup>18</sup> Other young adventure-seeking young men, such as Walter P. Lane, who never formally served in Hays’ ranger companies, joined Hays’ command, on occasion, as amateurs to learn how to pursue and defeat Comanche raiders.<sup>19</sup>

## **Jack Hays built his rangers into a creditable military organization.**

Most men who applied to join Hays’ rangers could not meet the requirements for enlistment set by Hays. His caution in selecting recruits enabled him to create what is considered to be the best set of Indian fighters that Texas ever produced. Hays’ rangers patrolled an area of 40 to 50 miles and in later years lived in a camp on the Medina River. They patrolled continually in groups of three men led by a sergeant. Few of Hays’ rangers were over 22 years old.<sup>20</sup>

Hays initially established a camp at Leon Creek seven miles west of San Antonio.<sup>21</sup> By 1844, he had moved the camp to the Medina River several miles above the site of Castroville.<sup>22</sup> Between June 1 and September 30, 1843, Hays and 25 to 37 men ranged the region south of San Antonio.<sup>23</sup> After 1844 the rangers provided security for the outlying settlements at Castroville, Quihi Lake, Vanderburg and D’Hanis.<sup>24</sup> These settlements were on the Indian frontier and were protected by a squad of rangers stationed at a camp on Seco Creek, two miles from D’Hanis.<sup>25</sup> In 1844, there were 30 rangers stationed in Béxar County, 15 in Travis County and 15 each in Refugio and Goliad.<sup>26</sup> The rangers were charged with patrolling their assigned areas searching for and pursuing raiders who, in the 1840s, were usually Comanche Indians or their allies.<sup>27</sup>

## **The rangers eventually found a way to defeat Horse Indians.**

On March 19, 1840, Texas soldiers killed, at the Council House Fight, a number of Comanche chiefs who had come to San Antonio to negotiate the return of captives.<sup>28</sup> This was the third attempt to sign a treaty with the Comanche.<sup>29</sup> The hope of peaceful relations between the Texans and the Comanche Indians that had been promoted by Sam Houston<sup>30</sup> was extinguished and not revived until 1853.<sup>31</sup>

Most encounters between Anglos, Mexicans and the Comanche Indians were the result of horse-stealing raids.<sup>32</sup> By 1840, stealing livestock from Mexico and Texas during the winter months was a tradition of the Southern Comanche.<sup>33</sup> After each raid, the settlers pursued the Indians and attempted to recover kidnapped women, children and horses. However, Indian raiders mounted on horses usually escaped the pursuing settlers.<sup>34</sup>

Even when the settlers managed to catch an Indian raiding party the outcome was uncertain. Settlers armed with single-shot, muzzle loading long rifles had to dismount to fire and reload. The Indians carried short bows that were accurate at short and medium range. For close fighting, the Comanche carried lances that were sometimes tied to the wrist by a cord. The shields that they carried on their left arm were made of several layers of buffalo hide<sup>35</sup> and could deflect musket balls.<sup>36</sup> Until the Anglos obtained repeating firearms, the two sides were about evenly matched in fire power in close quarter fights.<sup>37</sup>

Jack Hays and his ranging company were the first to employ repeating pistols in a fight with Comanche raiders.<sup>38</sup> During a fight on Walker Creek on June 1844, Jack Hays and 15 men used, for the first time, newly acquired Colt Paterson five-shot revolvers. These guns were bought for the Texas Navy and acquired by the rangers when President Sam Houston disbanded the Texas Navy in 1843.<sup>39</sup> The ability to reload while galloping on horseback revolutionized the ranger's fighting style and finally gave them the upper hand over mounted Comanche Indians.<sup>40</sup> After the introduction of the six-shooters, the settlers gained an even greater advantage and Indian fights became simply chases.<sup>41</sup>

## **The war between Texas and Mexico began again in 1842.**

The United Mexican States did not recognize the independence of the Republic of Texas despite the agreement signed by President López de Santa Anna in 1836.<sup>42</sup> In 1842, Santa Anna was once again President of Mexico and the republics of Texas and Mexico were once again at war.<sup>43</sup> Texas President Mirabeau Lamar sent 270 armed men on a trading mission called the Santa Fé Expedition in June 1841. The expedition was meant to be a joint political, military and commercial enterprise<sup>44</sup> but the Mexican government interpreted it as an armed invasion.<sup>45</sup> The participants in the expedition were captured and imprisoned.<sup>46</sup>

To revenge the invasion of New Mexico by the Santa Fé Expedition, President Santa Anna sent troops to invade Texas.<sup>47</sup> Seven hundred Mexican soldiers under Gen. Rafael Vásquez briefly occupied San Antonio in early March, 1842.<sup>48</sup> In response to the Vásquez invasion, the President of Texas called out the militia.

In July 1842, Mexican soldiers under Colonel Antonio Canales approached Corpus Christi. In September 1842, Mexican troops under General Adrian Woll, once again occupied San Antonio.<sup>49</sup> General Woll's army of 1,600 men cut a new road from Presidio de Río Grande to San Antonio that crossed the Leona River at Woll's Crossing, four miles south of Mt. Inge.<sup>50</sup> In this way, the army escaped detection by scouts sent out by Jack Hays and arrived unobserved at San Antonio in the morning of September 11, 1842.<sup>51</sup>

Hays, who had been out on a scout when the city was taken, quickly assembled a body of volunteer soldiers to prevent the Mexican army from proceeding north towards Austin, the Republic's capital.<sup>52</sup> On September 17, 1842, the two forces met near where the city of New Braunfels is today and, after the Battle of Salado Creek, General Woll and his army retreated back to San Antonio.<sup>53</sup> The Mexican army left San Antonio on September 20 and returned to Mexico.<sup>54</sup>

### **President Houston authorized an invasion of Mexico in 1842.**

In October 1842, following the earlier assault on San Antonio, General Alexander Somervell (commander of the western militia brigade) was authorized by Texas President Sam Houston to invade Mexico.<sup>55</sup> On November 18, 1842, Somervell's Texans, led by Jack Hays and his scouts, left San Antonio with 750 men. On December 8, Somervell's forces captured the town of Laredo on the northern bank of the Rio Grande. On December 19, General Somervell ordered his remaining volunteers to return to his base camp at Gonzales.<sup>56</sup> Two hundred men, including Hays' company of rangers, thinking the expedition was over,<sup>57</sup> returned to San Antonio<sup>58</sup> but other men refused to abandon the invasion; instead they reorganized their forces and began what became known as the Mier Expedition. They crossed the Rio Grande and attempted to capture the town of Mier. On December 26, 1842, the Mexican Army captured 260 Texans at Mier after a long battle.<sup>59</sup>

In negotiations that followed,<sup>60</sup> Mexico was willing to give the State of Texas autonomy if it would remain in the Mexican republic.<sup>61</sup> They continued to consider Texas a Mexican state until 1847.<sup>62</sup> Texan and American politicians, however, refused to acknowledge Mexico's claim to Texas and in December of 1844 a bill annexing Texas to the United States passed the US Senate.<sup>63</sup> A Texas Constitutional Convention agreed that the Republic would become part of the United States on July 7, 1845.<sup>64</sup>

### **The United States started the Mexican War after annexation of Texas.**

In June 1845, a large part of the US Army was gathered at Fort Jessup in western Louisiana near the Sabine River in anticipation of a war with Mexico.<sup>65</sup> The US Army commander, General Edmund Gaines, was instructed to move his troops to the disputed Texas border in advance of February 19, 1846, when the state would be formally annexed to the US.<sup>66</sup> By the time the Texas Constitutional Convention accepted the bill annexing Texas to the United States, US General Zachery Taylor was moving his army to New Orleans to take ships to Texas. On July 31, 1845, General

Taylor's army arrived at Corpus Christi Bay on the Texas coast and camped on the Nueces River for the next nine months<sup>67</sup> waiting for the Mexicans to initiate war.<sup>68</sup>

One reason Texas sought annexation to the United States was the expectation that the US Army would assume the expense of defending the frontier.<sup>69</sup> Jack Hays unsuccessfully approached General Taylor in an attempt to integrate his ranging company into the US Army.<sup>70</sup> Although his offer was initially refused, after 1845 Texas ranging companies were usually attached to Federal troops and paid by the US government.

The Rio Grande del Norte was the border claimed by the Republic of Texas;<sup>71</sup> US President Polk had campaigned for election on a promise to occupy the Nueces Strip.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly on March 8, 1846, General Taylor began to move his army from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande. On March 27, the American troops arrived at the north bank of the Rio Grande and constructed Fort Texas (later renamed Fort Brown) opposite the Mexican town of Matamoros.<sup>73</sup> It was this advance from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande that finally provoked the start of the Mexican War.

On April 24, 1846, General Mariano Arista, in command at Matamoros, announced that hostilities had begun.<sup>74</sup> In a letter to Governor Henderson on April 26, 1846, General Taylor stated that "hostilities have actually commenced" and requested that four regiments of Texas volunteers be called into service. Two regiments were to be mounted and two were to be infantry.<sup>75</sup>

In May 1846 Mexican and American troops clashed at Palo Alto Prairie between the US Army's supply base at Port Isabel and Fort Brown. After the Battle of Resaca de la Palma the following day, the Mexican army retreated to Matamoros and Taylor followed them as far as Fort Brown.<sup>76</sup> During this campaign, a company of US Army Dragoons was captured while on a scout and Samuel Walker's company of Texas mounted irregulars proved valuable as scouts and messengers.<sup>77</sup> The combination of events convinced General Taylor to accept Texas Rangers into Federal service. Reporters from American newspapers accompanied the troops and their stories about Walker's company contributed to the growing mythology of the Texas Rangers.<sup>78</sup>

### **Tom Rife enlisted in the First Texas Mounted Rifles.**

On May 4, 1846, even before General Taylor called for volunteers, Jack Hays visited Austin to ask permission to recruit a regiment of volunteers for the war.<sup>79</sup> Texas Governor James Pinckney Henderson approved and Hays, with Samuel Walker, left for Washington-on-the-Brazos to recruit men who had experience as rangers, their preferred recruits. While in Brenham, Washington County, Hays and Walker called for volunteers at a public meeting sponsored by John B. Wilkins, Sr., a local merchant. The gathering concluded with a barbecue and dance. The next day the two men proceeded east to visit other towns.<sup>80</sup> Between May 15 and May 19, 1846, as a result of Hays' visit, sixty-four men in Brenham enrolled in a company headed by Frank S. Early.<sup>81</sup> Among the men who enrolled was 23-year-old Thomas Rife.<sup>82</sup>

Thanks in part to the "Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition" written by George W Kendall of the New Orleans Picayune newspaper,<sup>83</sup> the response to the call for

volunteers was overwhelming.<sup>84</sup> Volunteers from the States as well as Texas responded in large numbers.<sup>85</sup> Colonel George Wood was appointed by the governor to lead a regiment of mounted troops from east Texas.<sup>86</sup> General Albert Sydney Johnston commanded a regiment of infantry and Governor James Henderson with the Legislature's permission,<sup>87</sup> commanded the two other Texas regiments.<sup>88</sup> All of the Texas troops were riflemen.<sup>89</sup>

In June 1846, the headquarters of Colonel Jack Hays' Regiment of First Texas Mounted Rifles was located at Point Isabel (near the mouth of the Rio Grande). This was the rendezvous for the four Texas regiments.<sup>90</sup> Most of these men enlisted for six months.<sup>91</sup> On June 7, 1846 Thomas Rife mustered into Company F as a 2nd Corporal, indicating that he must have had previous military experience. Company F, commanded by Captain Frank S. Early, was assigned to the 1st Regiment, Texas Mounted Rifles, commanded by Colonel Jack Hays.<sup>92</sup>

On June 11, 1846, Rife was still with Frank Early's Company F<sup>93</sup> at Point Isabel but on July 11 he was detached from Company F and assigned to Captain Samuel L. S. Ballowe's Company D.<sup>94</sup> He remained on the roll of Company F as absent on detached service.<sup>95</sup> Both Companies were stationed around Point Isabel. Samuel Ballowe's Company D was recruited in Brazoria and Matagorda counties<sup>96</sup> with only twenty-five men when they arrived at the rendezvous at Point Isabel on June 19. They were finally mustered into service on July 14<sup>97</sup> but only after inducing men, such as Tom Rife, to transfer from other companies.

Some of Hay's former rangers traveled long distances to sign up for service. The Texas captains selected their recruits carefully and rejected those who did not meet their standards.<sup>98</sup> As a result, the regiment spent the entire month of June getting the required ten companies organized and staffed.<sup>99</sup> Regimental officers were elected on June 22.<sup>100</sup> Jack Hays was elected colonel, Samuel Walker was elected lieutenant colonel and Michael H. Chevallie was elected major. The men were issued army wagons and camp equipage but they refused army uniforms.<sup>101</sup> The Texans dressed as they did in civilian life with woolen shirts dyed with hickory nuts, buckskin leather pants, slouch hats, moccasins and knives and pistols in their belts.<sup>102</sup> Many sported full beards and handlebar mustaches.<sup>103</sup>

## The US Army invaded Mexico in 1846.

In July and August 1846, General Taylor marched one brigade of infantry with artillery and cavalry along the south side of the Rio Grande through Reynosa<sup>104</sup> and on to Camargo City in the State of Tamaulipas. The remaining infantry were carried between Point Isabel and Camargo City in chartered steamboats<sup>105</sup> operated by Captain Richard King.<sup>106</sup>

The eight Texas mounted companies were sent out to locate the Mexican army<sup>107</sup> and to occupy towns and villages along the army's intended route.<sup>108</sup> They found the Mexican Army concentrated at Monterrey. A reporter from the New Orleans Picayune accompanied Hay's command and dispatched colorful stories of their exploits.<sup>109</sup>

In preparation for the advance on Monterrey, General Taylor organized his army into 1st Division, 2nd Division and Texas Divisions. Two thousand men were left at

Camargo and the remainder formed into three columns. They left Camargo, marched through Mier and were brought together at Cerralvo, sixty miles from Monterrey.<sup>110</sup> On September 9,<sup>111</sup> On September 13, the army arrived at Papagayo farm<sup>112</sup> where Ballowe's Company D had been camped since August 31.<sup>113</sup>

On September 19, the 4,000 US regular and volunteer troops of Taylor's army reached the outskirts of Monterrey and camped at Santo Domingo where the Americans established a base camp they called Walnut Springs.<sup>114</sup> The Texas volunteers were sent out to forage and rain began to fall during the night.<sup>115</sup>

### **Thomas Rife participated in the Battle of Monterrey.**

On September 20, 1846, the Battle of Monterrey began. The Texans left their bedding and cooking utensils in camp because they thought that they would return to their camp that night but they were not able to return for four days after the city surrendered. They were forced to eat roasted green corn stolen from nearby fields<sup>116</sup> and to sleep on the ground in their shirtsleeves.<sup>117</sup>

Two hundred and fifty men of Hays' Regiment were chosen and assigned to Brigadier General Worth's 2nd Division and were ordered to attack the city from the west. Colonel Hays accompanied these men into battle.<sup>118</sup> The 2nd Division and the men of Hays' Regiment left their camp at Walnut Springs and were close to the Saltillo Road by six o'clock in the evening. Ballowe's Company, to which Rife was attached, was involved in a skirmish at sundown that was stopped by heavy rain. That night the Texans bedded down in the barnyard of the San Jerónimo ranch west of the city.<sup>119</sup>

Early on the morning of September 21, Texas troops moved toward the Saltillo Road<sup>120</sup> where they dismounted and, shortly after daylight, skirmished with a company of Mexican lancers.<sup>121</sup> On this second day of battle, Ballowe's Company helped capture a pair of batteries located across the Arroyo Topa from the city.<sup>122</sup> In the early morning hours of the third day of battle, dismounted cavalry, including Rife's unit,<sup>123</sup> scaled a steep slope and captured a battery on the hill above the old Bishop's Palace.<sup>124</sup> They then captured the Bishop's Palace itself that had been fortified by the Mexican army.<sup>125</sup>

On the following day, September 23, American troops entered Monterrey and moved to within one block of Main Plaza from both the west and east in house-to-house fighting.<sup>126</sup> The American soldiers dared not show themselves in the streets leading to the plaza because of the deadly cannon fire from the Plaza. By punching holes in the walls of the buildings and, using ladders and pick-axes,<sup>127</sup> they moved from house to house towards Main Plaza.<sup>128</sup>

The city surrendered on September 24 and the Mexican troops were allowed to leave for San Luis Potosí, Linares and points south. General Don Pedro Ampudia and his army retreated to San Luis Potosí and that city became the headquarters of the Mexican army in the north.<sup>129</sup>

Following the capture of Monterrey, all Texas volunteer troops were mustered out of Federal service and returned home to Texas.<sup>130</sup> General Taylor began to muster out

the Texas troops on September 30<sup>131</sup> and Tom Rife was mustered out on October 2, as a sergeant.<sup>132</sup> He was paid for his four-months of service, given a clothing allowance<sup>133</sup> and returned to Washington County where his uncle Nathaniel Chambliss lived. It is not known if he traveled overland or by steamer from Camargo. Rife's first company commander, Captain Frank Early, traveled by steamer. He died in the Tremont Hotel in Galveston from an illness that he contracted in Mexico while on his way home.<sup>134</sup>

## Rife reenlisted before the Battle of Buena Vista.

On February 1, 1847, Walter P. Lane (who had served as a lieutenant in Hays' first regiment) and his friend Gouverneur Nelson traveled from San Antonio to Fayette County to recruit a company of rangers for the duration of the war. Few men were willing to make such an indefinite commitment.<sup>135</sup> Rife, on the other hand, did not hesitate. He enrolled in Lane's Company that same day and was enlisted for three months or the duration of the war.<sup>136</sup>

On February 13, 1847, Lane's company gathered at San Antonio, the announced rendezvous. The company included 12 men who had served in Jack Hays's regiment at the battle at Monterrey, four former Mier prisoners and fifteen volunteers from Mississippi. It was grouped with two other companies to form a battalion commanded by Mike Chevallie,<sup>137</sup> a stalwart of Jack Hay's rangers during the 1840s. Rife mustered in as 3rd Sergeant.<sup>138</sup>

In the meantime the war in Mexico continued. On February 15, 1847, General Winfield Scott, with most of General Taylor's regular troops, sailed from Brazos de Santiago for Tampico to begin the Mexico City campaign.<sup>139</sup> On February 23, 1847, General Taylor's remaining force met and defeated a much larger force of Mexicans south of Saltillo in what became known as the Battle of Buena Vista.<sup>140</sup>

The 1st Battalion was assigned to General Taylor's army in northern Mexico. Its ranging district was to be Saltillo to Camargo.<sup>141</sup> The volunteers provided their own mounts and at the time of Rife's enlistment, his horse was an 8-year old sorrel gelding measuring 14½ hands(58"), valued at \$35.<sup>142</sup>

Chevallie's Battalion of 300 men left San Antonio on March 8, 1847, and reached Camargo City on March 23, 1847. The day after Chevallie's battalion left San Antonio, General Winfield Scott's army landed near Vera Cruz and launched the campaign that ended with the capture of Mexico City.<sup>143</sup> Two days after arriving in Camargo, the three companies of Chevallie's battalion officially organized as a battalion and elected Chevallie its commander with the rank of major. The men remained in the vicinity of Camargo for a few weeks and then started for Monterrey to join General Taylor's army.<sup>144</sup>

On April 4, 1847, Chevallie's command left Camargo and arrived at China, Mexico on April 9 and camped on the outskirts of the town for a week. On April 15, 1847 the men with the battalion's best and healthiest horses were selected to continue up the south fork of the San Juan River to Montemorelos, a town in the foothills about 55 miles south of China. The rest of the battalion, led by Lt. G.H. Nelson escorted a regiment of Virginia infantry and its supply train to Monterrey along the main road.

The detachment commanded by Major Chevallie proceeded to Montemorelos through a densely populated valley where forage and food were abundant. Local officials appeared to be friendly towards the Americans and reported that Mexican General Urrea had retreated towards San Luis Potosí.<sup>145</sup> The month of April 1847 was spent guarding foraging trains and scouting the countryside.<sup>146</sup>

### **Rife's unit was stationed at Monterrey in 1847.**

On April 30, 1847, Rife's unit was stationed at Monterrey.<sup>147</sup> The battalion of Major Mike Chevallie (later commanded by Major Walter Lane) did good service fighting the "guerrilleros" who attacked supply wagons traveling the Camargo-Monterrey road. Chief among their opponents was General Canales<sup>148</sup> and a man known to the Texans as Juan Flores from Cerralvo, a town 71 miles north of Monterrey on the road to Mier.<sup>149</sup>

On May 27, 1847 Lane's company was sent to Cerralvo by General Taylor to find Juan Flores whose real name was José Nicolás Garcia. Two Mexican ranchers betrayed Garcia's location and the Texans arrested Garcia at his home while he was in bed. The next day he was tried and sentenced to execution by firing squad. His execution was scheduled for the following day at noon in the plaza of Cerralvo. The Texas soldiers already had a reputation for atrocious behavior toward Mexican civilians and a group of passing American soldiers opposed the execution of Garcia.<sup>150</sup> Colonel Alexander Doniphan's Missouri regiment, recently discharged and on the way home, entered the town just prior to the execution and many of them protested, suspecting that Garcia was a victim of some injustice. The Missourian's protests were ignored.

In June, about two months after Chevallie's battalion arrived in Mexico, General Taylor, from his headquarters in Monterrey, dispatched Chevallie's command to Linares.<sup>151</sup> After three days of travel, Chevallie's battalion and an observer, Lt. George T Shackleford of the US Sixth Infantry, reached Linares, 85 miles south of Monterrey, after nightfall. Believing that Mexican General José Urrea was camped in the city with a large Mexican force, Captain Lane dispatched three squads of ten men each to search the streets leading to the main plaza. The squad under 2nd Lt. Henry Earl encountered a mounted civilian, José María Arsipe, and ordered him to stop. According to the Texans he refused and Private John J. Glanton chased him down, shot and killed him. The Alcalde, Guillermo Morales, protested Arsipe's murder<sup>152</sup> but, as commanded, sent provisions and forage for the 300 Americans who camped at a ranch two miles from the city. The Texans remained at the ranch near Linares three or four days and then returned to Monterrey having found no armed Mexicans there.<sup>153</sup>

### **Rife's unit was transferred to Saltillo in late 1847.**

After Lane's company returned to Monterrey, General Taylor ordered John Glanton arrested for killing the civilian in Linares. Glanton's unit commander, Captain Lane, rather than arresting him, warned Glanton to flee.<sup>154</sup> Later, John Glanton became a notorious murderer and subsequently killed many other Texans, Mexicans and Apaches in west Texas.<sup>155</sup> For this infraction, Lane was placed under arrest for a few days and then released.<sup>156</sup>

As a result of the trouble at Linares, Chevallie's battalion was transferred to General John E. Wool's command in Saltillo. The Texans were placed in a forward position called La Encantada, some fifteen miles south of Saltillo at the southern end of the valley where American and Mexican forces had fought the battle of Buena Vista the previous February.<sup>157</sup> Rife's unit remained at La Encantada (now called Agua Nueva) until February 29, 1848.<sup>158</sup>

While Rife's unit performed garrison duties in northern Mexico, Texas volunteers joined the US expeditionary force to fight in the Mexico City campaign. Colonel Hays raised a new regiment (also called 1st Regiment Texas Mounted Volunteers) that mustered in at San Antonio on July 10, 1847,<sup>159</sup> On August 12, five companies of the regiment marched to Brazos de Santiago (now Point Isabel) where they were transported to Vera Cruz to join General Scott's army.<sup>160</sup> They arrived at the port of Vera Cruz in October, one month after the surrender of Mexico City.<sup>161</sup> They ranged between Veracruz and Mexico City and operated under the personal orders of Brigadier General J. Lane.<sup>162</sup>

While the Texas military organizations along the Mexico City-Veracruz road were guarding the supply line between Mexico City and Vera Cruz and earning fame while fighting off last-ditch efforts by Mexican partisans, Chevallie's battalion continued to depredate on the civilian population around Saltillo. On July 21, 1847, five Texans attempted to rob a Mexican civilian on the road between La Encantada and Buena Vista. On August 16, 1847, General Wool learned that Texans had killed cattle and sheep in a ranch near San Juan de la Vaquería, southwest of Saltillo. General Wool issued General Order Number 405, warning that he would discharge the entire company if the perpetrators could not be identified.<sup>163</sup>

### **Walter P. Lane took command of the battalion.**

On August 31, 1847, Major Chevallie resigned his commission after an altercation with General Wool and relinquished command of the battalion to Walter P. Lane.<sup>164</sup> On September 27, 1847, an election was held by Companies A, B and C to select a new battalion commander to replace Chevallie.<sup>165</sup> Of the 191 men who voted, 186 (including Thomas Rife) voted for Lane who was promoted to Major.<sup>166</sup> On September 1, 1847, while Walter P. Lane was still the company commander, Thomas Rife was promoted to second sergeant of Company A.<sup>167</sup>

Fighting continued after US troops captured Mexico City in September 1847. Jack Hays commanded a regiment at Perote castle near Puebla,<sup>168</sup> When General Santa Anna attacked the US supply line to Veracruz after the fall of Mexico City, Samuel Walker, a former ranger captain, pursued Santa Anna's troops and fought one of the last battles of the war at Huamantla.<sup>169</sup>

Meanwhile, Rife's unit continued its duties as an occupying force. In early September 1847, before Walter P. Lane was elected to command the battalion, Captain Lane's company made a scout to Parras, about ninety miles west of Saltillo in the State of Coahuila.<sup>170</sup> On October 16, Captain Taylor sent Lt. Simeon Nunlee to arrest the Alcalde of Yerba Buena. Unfortunately, the Texans killed four men while arresting the Alcalde. On November 25, 1847, an Irish civilian shot and killed Otto Peltz of Company

A and one of the rangers responded by blowing the man's brains out. Then the Texans "got on a spree and killed a few jackasses and bulldogs, and two Mexicans who had managed to get mixed up in the business."<sup>171</sup>

G. K. Lewis, elected from the ranks on October 19, 1847 to succeed Walter Lane as Captain of Company A,<sup>172</sup> was no better at controlling his men than was Lane. Between April and September 1847, thirteen rangers were dishonorably discharged for stealing, killing or being "worthless" and thirty others deserted including thirteen who left La Encantada. Apparently, the Texans were not well suited to garrison duty.<sup>173</sup>

Finally the advent of the Comanche raiding season gave the bored men something interesting to do. At 8 o'clock on the morning of November 21, 1847, pickets came to the battalion headquarters at La Encantada to report that a body of Comanche Indians had attacked a nearby village (possibly Carneros or Gómez Farias, about 20 miles south of Encantada or Agua Buena).<sup>174</sup> Lane mounted those of his men who had good horses and gave pursuit. During the pursuit many of the Texan's horses gave out and they fell behind the main body. After riding hard for three hours, the remaining 60 to 80 rangers caught the Indians at a place called Los Muchachos, about fifteen miles west of Saltillo. Both groups formed a line of battle. The rangers charged the 120 to 300 Comanche warriors. After a running battle ranging over two miles the Indians dismounted and fled into the mountains.<sup>175</sup> One ranger was killed and 14 wounded with 30 to 40 Indians killed and wounded. The rangers captured 300 mules and horses and six Mexican children kidnapped by the Indians earlier.<sup>176</sup> Lane and his men returned to La Encantada but left the next day with the entire battalion to pursue Indians near Parras.<sup>177</sup> Lane's letter to Captain Nelson in Saltillo was printed in the Monterrey Gazette and widely reprinted in other newspapers.<sup>178</sup> Rife was listed as "Lost in Action" on November 21st<sup>179</sup> but he eventually returned to camp. He later stated that he was in the fight that day at Agua Buena.<sup>180</sup>

On December 15, 1847, a squad of Captain Lewis' Company of sixteen men, including Thomas Rife, were on a scout about 50 miles from Encantada at the Castañuela ranch (now La Rosa). They were eating a lunch of tortillas and coffee when they were alerted to the presence of some Comanche Indians nearby. They quickly emptied their quart-size cups of hot coffee and, accompanied by eight or nine Mexican men armed with lances, went out to meet the Indians. Both groups charged the other. The Indians had a few rifles but the soldier's carbines outshot the arrows of the Indians who fled the field, leaving their dead behind. Captain Lewis was shot through the foot and one Texan was killed in the encounter.<sup>181</sup>

On February 2, 1848, US and Mexican diplomats signed a treaty in a suburb of Mexico City called Guadalupe Hidalgo and agreed to an armistice to begin March 5.<sup>182</sup> Jacks Hay's regiment of Texas volunteers was mustered out at Vera Cruz and were on hand to watch ex-President Santa Anna depart Mexico for exile in Jamaica in April.<sup>183</sup> On June 12, 1848, the last US troops left Mexico City.<sup>184</sup>

## **Rife's unit was detailed to occupy the road to Zacatecas in February 1848.**

The armistice did not require American forces to evacuate Mexico and the occupation of northern Mexico continued. On February 28, 1848, Companies D and E of Lane's battalion and the 2nd Mississippi Regiment were sent to the town of Mazapil some 95 miles south of Saltillo, located in the northern part of the State of Zacatecas in the Chihuahuan Desert.<sup>185</sup> The Americans arrived March 7 and established their headquarters at Cedras, just west of Mazapil on the old Zacatecas-Saltillo road.<sup>186</sup> During March and April 1848, Rife's unit (Company A) was stationed at the market town of Gruñidora about 60 miles south of Mazapil on the road to Zacatecas city.<sup>187</sup> Company B remained at the battalion's old camp near Buena Vista and Company C, commanded by Captain George Adams was stationed at Parras.<sup>188</sup>

On March 12, 1848, Major Lane, Captain John Pope of the US Army Topographical Engineers, and fourteen rangers (Walter Lane remembered 40 rangers<sup>189</sup> departed Mazapil on a reconnaissance across cactus and mesquite country toward Matehuala in the State of San Luis Potosí, some 90 miles to the southeast of Mazapil. The soldiers stopped at the farming village of Salado and entered the small town of Cedral (five miles north of Matehuala) on the morning of March 14. In Cedral they stopped in empty army barracks for a few hours to eat and rest.<sup>190</sup> Hostile Mexican civilians soon surrounded the building but the Americans bluffed their way out of town without having to use their firearms. The scout returned to Mazapil on March 16 having traveled 225 miles in four days.<sup>191</sup>

On May 2, 1848 Lt. William H. Francis, John E. Dusenberry and nine other rangers left their station at Concepción del Oro (five miles east of Mazapil) and returned to the village of Salado to exhume the remains of the seventeen prisoners of the Mier Expedition who were executed there in 1843. This action was undertaken at the initiative of the rangers involved. Dusenberry (and a private in his company) later escorted the remains to La Grange in Fayette County, Texas where local residents buried them on a bluff overlooking the Colorado River.<sup>192</sup> In later years the State of Texas constructed a monument over the remains. A newspaper in San Antonio reported that Rife was one of the men who exhumed the bones but there is no other evidence to support this.<sup>193</sup> The unit commander, Walter P. Lane, made a similar, unsupported claim that he too was personally involved in recovering the bones.<sup>194</sup>

## **Rife's unit disbanded in June 1848.**

On June 12, 1848, General Wool announced to his troops that the war was over; the US Army began preparations to withdraw from northern Mexico.<sup>195</sup> The soldiers stationed in Saltillo and points west returned to Monterrey, General Wool's headquarters. Lane's battalion camped at Walnut Springs, two miles distant from town<sup>196</sup> in the same place that they had camped prior to the Battle of Monterrey in 1846. Most of the soldiers were given leave to visit the city. When the US Army of Occupation left Monterrey for Camargo, Lane's battalion formed the rearguard, considered as a position of honor.<sup>197</sup>

On June 30, 1848, the army was disbanded at Camargo City<sup>198</sup> and the men mustered out of Federal service.<sup>199</sup> Clay Davis, the owner of the growing town of Rio Grande City (across the river from Camargo city), invited Major Lane and his discharged rangers to attend a fourth of July public dinner at the Rio Grande Hotel.<sup>200</sup> Most of the volunteer infantry then went to Matamoros where vessels waited to take them to New Orleans or Galveston while the Texas mounted troops returned to Texas on horseback.<sup>201</sup>

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# **Thomas Rife in West Texas, 1848 - 1851**



Caricature of a Texas Ranger. This Exaggerated, but mostly accurate, portrayal of an early Texas Ranger first appeared in Harper's Weekly on July 6, 1861. Courtesy of The Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas

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# Frontier Defense, 1848

*"At the close of the Mexican war he was honorably discharged, but he did not seek rest, although he had nearly six years of service, for in 1848 he joined Ben Hill's frontier company", "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## Indian raids into Texas and northern Mexico continued during the Mexican War.

The frequency and intensity of Native American raids into Texas and northern Mexico seemed to increase during the Mexican War. Northern Comanche raiders stole an estimated 10,000 horses and mules from the states of Durango and Chihuahua during the winter of 1845-1846.<sup>1</sup> In 1849, when a survey party led by Captain Whiting reached the Pecos River, they were surprised to find a heavily used trail between Buffalo Gap and Comanche Springs. They surmised that it was, "a large Comanche war path which filled us with much astonishment, close together, 25 deep worn and much used trails made a great road, which told us that this was a highway by which each year the Comanche of the North desolate Durango and Chihuahua."<sup>2</sup>

During this turbulent period the line of settlement in south Texas continued to move westward. Prior to February 1843 there were no Anglo settlements west of San Pedro Creek (on San Antonio's west side today) but between 1844 and 1852 fifteen small settlements were established west of the Medina River. All were in constant conflict with hostile Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> Indian incursions south and east of Indian trails between Las Moras Creek and the Leona River were frequent until about 1857.<sup>4</sup> Until 1846 Hays and his company of rangers provided protection for Castro's Colony. However, when the Mexican War began Hays and most other Indian fighters left for the War; their departure left the frontier settlements unprotected.<sup>5</sup>

## **Settlers west of Castroville had troubles with Indians.**

The European settlers at Quihi Lake were not armed and did nothing to threaten the Indians. However, they did occupy land around Quihi Lake that was previously used as an Indian campground.<sup>6</sup> Luckily, the immigrants were extremely poor and had no horses or mules to tempt the Indian raiders.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, a week after the settlers arrived at Quihi Lake, Lipan Apache men killed the Brinkhoff family and kidnapped two boys.<sup>8</sup> Henri Castro, the impresario (land contractor), had an agreement with the Southern Comanche that provided a basis for peaceful relations between his settlers and the Indians. Unfortunately, in 1846, Texan freighters killed several Comanche Indians at Quihi Lake and the Indians retaliated by attacking Castro's settlers. To prevent further incidents, Captain John Conner's ranging company was stationed on the Medina River above Castroville on July 31, 1846.

In September 1846, fifty families settled at Vandenburgh on Verde Creek, about five miles west of Quihi<sup>9</sup> and in February 1847, twenty-nine families settled at D'Hanis, 25 miles west of Castroville.<sup>10</sup> As early as October 1846, the Federal government recognized the need to provide some protection to settlers west of Castroville but nothing was done that year.<sup>11</sup> On August 11, 1847 Lieutenant-Colonel P. H. Bell and two companies<sup>12</sup> were detached from Colonel Hays' regiment of 1st Texas Mounted Volunteers<sup>13</sup> with orders to protect settlers from Indian raids.<sup>14</sup> These units were mustered into service as US volunteers and operated jointly under the supervision of Headquarters, US Army Post of San Antonio and under the personal orders of Governors J. P. Henderson and G. T. Wood.<sup>15</sup>

In March 1848, Lipan and Kickapoo Indians raided the settlement at Quihi. They briefly kidnapped Mrs. Francesca Charobiny and killed her brother, Blas Meyer. That same month, Charles DeMontel's ranging company was sent to the area and established their camp on Seco Creek, two miles from D'Hanis. Captain John Conner's company was returned to the Medina River above Castroville.<sup>16</sup> The Governor authorized the formation of four additional ranging companies in 1848.<sup>17</sup>

## **Rife enlisted in a ranging company operating west of Castroville in the fall of 1848.**

Thomas Rife and the men of Major Lane's battalion serving with the Army of Occupation in northern Mexico were mustered out of Federal service on June 30, 1848,<sup>18</sup> at Ciudad Camargo.<sup>19</sup> Rife probably returned to his uncle's farm in Washington County for a few months. He was now 25 years old and had been a soldier for much of the last six years. However, he apparently decided that he was not yet ready to settle down to life on a farm. Like many other young men in his situation, he was restless.

Rife traveled to San Antonio and on October 27, 1848, was mustered into Benjamin F. Hill's Company of P. Hansbrough Bell's Regiment of Texas Mounted Volunteers.<sup>20</sup> The mission of the company was to protect the frontier. He enlisted as a Sergeant. His horse was valued at 80 dollars and his horse equipment at 15 dollars.<sup>21</sup> The company was composed of men recruited in Bastrop and San Antonio but was

mustered into Federal service at San Antonio<sup>22</sup> and served less than two months. The company was mustered out of Federal service on December 17<sup>23</sup> at San Antonio.<sup>24</sup>

After receiving supplies, the company left San Antonio for the settlements to the west. In November 1848, a squad of probably three rangers<sup>25</sup> led by Sgt. Rife (A.J. Sowell mistakenly gave his rank as Captain) arrived at the settlement of D'Hanis to protect the isolated Anglo settlers living there. The rangers camped on Seco Creek (then called Arroyo Seco) two miles from the settlement at what was already called Ranger's Camp.<sup>26</sup> They provided game for the Alsatian-born settlers in addition to protecting them from Indians.<sup>27</sup>

## Rife's unit killed Delaware Bob.

After their arrival at D'Hanis, the rangers under Sgt. Rife arrested an Indian man for kidnapping Mrs. Charobiny and killing her brother earlier that year.<sup>28</sup> The rangers understood that this man was a Lipan Apache. They took their captive to Mrs. Charobiny, who was fourteen and newlywed, to see if she recognized him as the man who had kidnapped her eight months earlier. She replied that "all Indians looked the same to her" and that she could not identify him.

Instead of returning to their camp, the rangers went to a house in the settlement where whiskey was sold from a barrel. They ended up staying in the settlement all night drinking whiskey and during the night their captive was killed. Some of the settlers said he was Old Delaware Bob, a harmless and friendly Indian. In the morning, the Rangers dragged his body to an empty field near the settlement and left him there for hogs to eat.<sup>29</sup> (The two rangers with Rife may have been named Allen and West.)<sup>30</sup>

Residents of South Texas remarked that, while the Lipan Apaches were friendly prior to 1847, they "went on the war path" after the young chief Flacco was killed and their camping grounds west of San Antonio were occupied by Anglo settlers.<sup>31</sup> Others said that the Lipan Indians "became bitter foes of the white race" after a drunken ranger killed a Lipan.<sup>32</sup> They may have been referring to the murder of Rife's captive at D'Hanis.

## The ranging companies were disbanded in December 1848.

Shortly thereafter, General Twiggs ordered that all ranging companies still in Federal service be disbanded.<sup>33</sup> Before December 9, 1848, a company of US Dragoons replaced Hill's Company on the Medina River. US Army Dragoons also replaced the ranging companies commanded by Captains Ross, Conner and McCulloch.<sup>34</sup> In July 1849, the US Army built Fort Lincoln at the site of the rangers camp on Seco Creek; two companies of US Army troops were stationed there.<sup>35</sup>

On December 17, 1848, Rife was mustered out of Federal service along with the rest of Benjamin Hill's Company.<sup>36</sup> He was due all his pay accrued since enrollment. The ordinance officer deducted \$2.50 from his pay for lost equipment: i.e. one dollar for a

cartridge box, 75 cents for a carbine sling and 75 cents for a sling swivel.<sup>37</sup> Nine days later, on December 26, 1848, Benjamin F. Hill was elected without opposition as Sheriff of Bexar County.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps as a result of his service in the Mexican War, Rife received a bounty from the State of Texas.<sup>39</sup> He promptly sold his bounty land claim for an unknown sum to Vance and Bros., a large San Antonio merchant and banking firm.<sup>40</sup>

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# Topographic Engineers, 1848

*"Some time he was engaged with Colonel Joseph E. Johnson and Lieutenant Bryan in hunting out and opening the El Paso roads." "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## In 1848 the US Army built roads linking San Antonio and California.

When the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the US was given sovereignty over what became the States of New Mexico, Arizona and California. At that time, the only road linking the United States with the newly acquired Territory of New Mexico was the Santa Fé Trail.<sup>1</sup>

Until 1849, there was no direct route between San Antonio and the upper Rio Grande valley. A trail between San Antonio and Santa Fé existed during the Spanish period but it was suitable only for pack animals. This road was dangerous and rarely used. Before the Mexican War the only usable road between San Antonio and El Paso del Norte ran through Saltillo, Hidalgo del Parral and Chihuahua City in order to avoid the Despoblado area of West Texas and northern Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Not only was the Despoblado an unexplored desert<sup>3</sup> without a single Mexican or Anglo resident,<sup>4</sup> it was also the traditional territory of Mescalero Apache Indians.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the menace from Apaches, Comanche trails from what is now Oklahoma and north-central Texas ran through the Despoblado to Mexico.<sup>6</sup> The presence of Comanche raiders prevented settlement in the Despoblado.<sup>7</sup>

The 11th Article of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed that the US would prevent Indians from raiding into Mexico<sup>8</sup> although neither the Spanish nor the Mexicans had ever been able to accomplish this. The treaty required the US to build military posts to block movement of Indians across the border. The border itself had to be surveyed and marked. The merchants of San Antonio hoped also to secure some share of the lucrative trade with northern Mexico that passed through St. Louis

and Santa Fé.<sup>9</sup> For these and other reasons,<sup>10</sup> the US Secretary of War sent Brevet Major General William Worth to Texas. He had instructions to examine the country on the north bank of the Rio Grande from San Antonio to Santa Fé<sup>11</sup> and to construct a road to connect San Antonio with New Mexico and California.<sup>12</sup>

## **Upper and Lower Military Roads were built to El Paso del Norte.**

The first effort after the Mexican War to open a road to the New Mexico Territory was made by Colonel John C. Hays and Ranger Captain Samuel Highsmith leading a thirty-five-man escort of Texas Rangers. This expedition left San Antonio August 27, 1848, and returned on December 20. While unsuccessful in finding a route to El Paso, they did happen upon a good route to Presidio.<sup>13</sup>

Two months after the Hays expedition returned, General Worth and the citizens of San Antonio sent out a second exploring expedition. Major Robert Neighbors and John S. Ford were charged with finding a route for the movement of troops as well as for commercial purposes.<sup>14</sup> This expedition mapped out what became known as the Upper El Paso-San Antonio Road.<sup>15</sup>

On February 12, 1849, another group of 16 men led by US Army engineers Captain William Whiting and Lieutenant William Smith left San Antonio to reconnoiter the entire region between San Antonio and west Texas. Their instructions were to find a suitable road for military and commercial purposes and to select suitable sites for military posts.<sup>16</sup> This group followed the Upper Road between Fredericksburg and the upper Rio Grande valley but returned along the more southern route that was followed by the Hays Expedition.<sup>17</sup> On the return trip to San Antonio they mapped out the southern or Lower El Paso-San Antonio Road.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Lower Military Road was chosen as the preferred route.**

Both John Ford and Captain Whiting recommended the southern route (the Lower road) because they found too few waterholes along the northern route (the Upper road) to support the large number of animals needed to haul freight wagons.<sup>19</sup> The Army engineers agreed that the Lower road was the preferred route.

In June 1849 General Worth dispatched a much larger military party with civilian laborers<sup>20</sup> to test and improve the lower route located by the Whiting-Smith Expedition.<sup>21</sup> Major Jefferson Van Horne commanded six companies of the 3rd Regiment of US Infantry and their support personnel. The men of Company E, 3rd Regiment, 3rd US Infantry and a small group of civilian employees constructed the road to US Government specifications. It was better and wider than most roads of the day.<sup>22</sup>

The fatigue party of soldiers and civilian workers cleared the road of boulders and widened it for use by wagons. "Two weeks were spent at Devil's River cutting down the bank before wagons could get down into the channel" stated John L. Mann in the

February 20, 1898, edition of the Dallas Morning News.<sup>23</sup> They also cleared and enlarged the waterholes located by Captain Whiting.<sup>24</sup>

Over 1,000 oxen, a large number of mules and several emigrant trains, each with large herds of cattle, followed the military's train of 275 wagons.<sup>25</sup> The wagon train also included individuals seeking their fortune in the West.<sup>26</sup> Captain Jack Hays had been appointed Indian Sub-Agent on the Gila River also accompanied the train.<sup>27</sup> The huge wagon trains of civilians trailed along behind, waiting for the army to open each stretch of road before proceeding.<sup>28</sup>

The train left San Antonio in late May of 1849 and traveled from León Springs through the settlements of Castroville, Quihi and Vandenburg. It reached the Leona River (present-day Uvalde) on June 3 and San Felipe Springs (present-day Del Rio) on June 8, 1849.) There the large train was broken up into smaller segments preparatory to entering the desert where both water and forage were scarce.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of following the obvious route up the Rio Grande, the road left the river at Devil's River to its headwaters at Beaver Lake before turning northwest across tableland to Howard's Well and the Pecos River. This detour was necessitated by a plateau cut by deep canyons west of the Pecos River and north of the Rio Grande. The canyons run in a general southeasterly direction and empty into either the Pecos River or the Rio Grande. A traveler heading west or east would have to ascend and descend these ridges making the route too difficult to cross with loaded wagons.<sup>30</sup>

After crossing the Pecos, the road turned west and reached Comanche Springs, present-day Fort Stockton. Beyond Comanche Spring the train crossed the timber-covered Davis Mountains and then another stretch of desert. The train went from waterhole to waterhole until it crossed the Quitman Mountains and came to the Rio Grande, 100 miles south of El Paso del Norte. The train then followed the Rio Grande upstream to San Elizario, Socorro and Ysleta and reached an American-owned ranch across the river from El Paso del Norte<sup>31</sup> on September 8, 1849.<sup>32</sup>

This 600-mile road became the main route to the west from San Antonio<sup>33</sup> until 1883 when the southern transcontinental railroad (now the Southern Pacific RR) opened for service.

## **The route of the Lower Military road was determined by availability of water.**

The route of the road was chosen largely because of the availability of water and grass along the route.<sup>34</sup> The terrain and the location of river crossings ultimately determined the exact route chosen for these wagon roads. The road led from one water source to the next; sometimes it was a river, sometimes a spring. As new sources of water were discovered, the route of the road changed to shorten the distance between waterholes. When the overland mail ran on the Lower Road, stage stations were placed at intervals of about 25 or 30 miles apart where water was found and where forage could be stored.

The availability of forage for mules and horses was of paramount importance. Between San Antonio and the Pecos River, the grass vegetation was either prairie grassland (tall grass) or desert grassland (mesquite grass), both of which were suitable for horses and mules.<sup>35</sup> Between the Pecos River and the Davis Mountains desert vegetation (creosote bush) dominated and both water and forage were scarce. While both were available in the Davis Mountains, to the west another long stretch of dry desert had to be crossed until the road met the Rio Grande River at Quitman Pass.

There were many rivers to cross and finding a suitable crossing was imperative. The Pecos was particularly difficult as it was a rapidly flowing stream for three hundred miles upstream of the Rio Grande. It was 65' to 100' wide, 7' to 10' deep and usually the color of red mud.<sup>36</sup> The river generally ran between steep banks, making it difficult for animals to get close enough to the river to drink and quicksand was common.<sup>37</sup> The crossings at Live Oak Creek and Horsehead were two of the few suitable and both were old Indian raiding trails to Mexico.<sup>38</sup> The El Paso-San Antonio Road utilized these same river crossings.

## **Americans settled east of the Rio Grande near El Paso del Norte.**

The first settlement encountered after reaching the Rio Grande was San Elizario (San Elceario prior to 1852), the most populous town in the trans-Pecos region and the eastern-most town in the upper Rio Grande valley.<sup>39</sup> Between San Elizario and El Paso, Del Norte Mexicans and Suma and Piro Indian farmers inhabited the river valley.<sup>40</sup> The American settlement was just the three houses comprising Coonz or Coontz Ranch. On September 8, 1849, the US Army built the "Post Opposite El Paso" on Coontz' Ranch and manned it with six companies of US infantry. Two companies of US troops were also quartered in the town of San Elizario.<sup>41</sup>

In 1848 migrants to the California gold rush were already traveling through San Antonio along the Lower Road rather than traveling through Mexico or over the Isthmus of Panama. The older route through Parras and northern Mexico to Mazatlán was still in use and would continue to be used for many years. It was much shorter than the overland route to California and avoided the Arizona desert. The route through Mazatlán also avoided contact with the Apache Indians who, after 1849, no longer considered Americans their allies.<sup>42</sup> Routes through Parras rather than El Paso had an additional advantage; Comanche raiders rarely ventured that far south.<sup>43</sup>

A San Antonio newspaper reported on August 4, 1849, that upwards of 4,000 emigrants with 1,200 to 1,500 wagons were camped on the Rio Grande near Coontz' ranch on their way to California.<sup>44</sup>

## **The Upper Presidio Road went to Eagle Pass.**

During the summer of 1849, Colonel Joseph E. Johnston and Lieutenant Bryan engaged Tom Rife to hunt out and open roads in west Texas.<sup>45</sup> He may have accompanied the Topographic Engineers on the road-building expedition to Coontz'

Ranch from June until October 1849 but there is no evidence of that. However, he did escort Army surveyors laying out the Upper Presidio Road between San Antonio and Eagle Pass.<sup>46</sup> This road began at Uvalde on the Lower San Antonio-El Paso Road and followed the route of Woll's Road to Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande.<sup>47</sup> Rife was among the first anglo men to live in the vicinity of Uvalde and may have served as a guide or a guard for the surveying party. The following year Rife once again joined a ranging company.

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# Wallace's Ranger Company, 1850-1851

*"Two years later he joined Big Foot Wallace's frontier company and one year afterwards he was mustered out..." "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## After the Mexican War, the US Army again took Texas rangers into Federal service.

When the United States Congress annexed the Republic of Texas the expectation was that the US Army would provide for the defense of the frontier and that Texas troops would be called into State service only at the request and expense of Federal authorities.<sup>1</sup> By 1849, it became apparent that the US Army by itself was unable to prevent Indian depredations in Texas. Thomas Rife participated in an experiment that for a year and a half, beginning in 1850, tested whether a mixture of US and State troops could keep Indians from raiding into the settled areas of Texas.

In the 1850s, the line of settlement in Texas advanced 10 miles per year to the west.<sup>2</sup> The Texas frontier was 500 miles long and 125 miles deep by the end of the decade. To prevent Indians from raiding along this frontier and into the settled parts of Texas and Mexico, the US Army built a line of outposts or forts west of the line of settlement. In 1849, the line of seven posts extended from the Red River in the north to the Nueces River in the south. An additional six posts were located along the Rio Grande River.<sup>3</sup> By 1854, six military posts north of Fort Inge were abandoned and eight new posts were constructed further west.

After 1856, the US Army manned two defensive lines on the frontier.<sup>4</sup> Infantry manned the outer line and mounted troops manned the inner line.<sup>5</sup> In theory, the infantry formed a picket line to warn the mounted troops of the approach of Indian raiding parties.<sup>6</sup> The mounted troops then blocked the Indian's advance into the settlements. The mounted troops consisted of dragoons, Mounted Rifles and, after 1856, cavalry.<sup>7</sup>

It was the strategy of the US military to force the Indians to "retire beyond the line of Posts."<sup>8</sup> Only in this way, the government reasoned, could the two people, Anglos and Mexicans on one hand and free Indians on the other, hope to live in peace. Most Indians also believed this. The Comanche chiefs, in their negotiations with Sam Houston, repeatedly asked for a fixed border between themselves and the settlers.<sup>9</sup> However, the steady westward movement of the line of settlement and the Comanche tradition of stealing horses from south Texas and Mexico made this solution impossible.

## **Fort Inge was built to guard the frontier.**

Fort Lincoln (two miles from D'Hanis) and Fort Inge (thirty miles to the west) were important forts in the first chain of military posts built after the Mexican War.<sup>10</sup> On March 13, 1849, Company I commanded by Captain Seth Eastman of the 1st US Infantry, established a camp called Camp Leona (or Post on the Leona) on the east bank of Leona River, four miles north of Woll's Crossing.<sup>11</sup> The site is one mile south of the present town of Uvalde between a 140-foot volcanic plug called Mt. Inge and the Leona River.<sup>12</sup> On March 24, Company D, 1st Infantry, arrived and in December 1849, the encampment on the Leona was renamed Fort Inge.<sup>13</sup>

Fort Inge was typical of the one-company US Army bases of the period.<sup>14</sup> The soldiers built the fort themselves.<sup>15</sup> Most buildings were of jacal (post and mud) construction and were considered to be temporary.<sup>16</sup> A hospital, added later, and a stone wall,<sup>17</sup> built during the Civil War, were the only permanent structures at the fort.<sup>18</sup>

In 1849, when US Army Major General George M. Brooke assumed command of the 8th Military Department (the Department of Texas), it had a total roster of 1,500 infantry, artillery and dragoons.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Comanche raiders continued to cross into Mexico in great numbers. In 1849, Ben McCulloch, who traveled through northern Mexico on his way to California, reported that, "The Indians are breaking up the frontier settlements all along the route we came, being worse than they were ever known."<sup>20</sup> Indians were raiding into Texas as well and in May 1849 the Army took steps to reinforce the Texas line.<sup>21</sup>

## **General Brooke called for Texas volunteers in 1849.**

Realizing that his regular soldiers could not prevent Indian raids into Texas by themselves, the US Army general commanding the Department of Texas determined to employ State troops to assist them.<sup>22</sup> On August 11, 1849, General Brooke, in Orders No. 53, notified his command that, "In consequence of the repeated and continued depredations of the Indians, the commanding general has determined to make a requisition on his Excellency Governor George T. Wood of Texas for three mounted companies of Rangers.<sup>23</sup>

On that same day, General Brooke wrote to the Governor of Texas saying that he had been authorized by the President of the U.S. to request that the Governor authorize three companies of 78 rangers each for Federal Service.<sup>24</sup> The ranging area of the

three companies would be in the vicinity of Goliad, Corpus Christi, Bexar County and other places that the Indians had recently raided.<sup>24</sup>

In Order No. 57, written on August 19, 1849, George Deas, Assistant Adjunct to General Brooke, wrote that, "The Commanding General in thus calling for the services of volunteers, in preference to making a requisition for an additional number of regular troops, pays a just tribute to the favorable consideration in which the Texas Ranger is held, for the performance of the harassing and arduous duties of a frontier soldier. The General feels confident that the well-earned fame of the hardy sons of Texas will, in their coming sphere of action, be well sustained, by a vigorous prosecution of their campaign, and hopes, that long ere their term of service shall have expired, we shall no longer be annoyed by the presence, within our settlements, of the audacious and marauding savage."<sup>25</sup>

The Governor responded quickly to General Brooke's request and commissioned John S. Ford, J.B. McCown, and R.E. Sutton to organize the three companies.<sup>26</sup> At the call of the three captains, prospective rangers each arrived at the appointed rendezvous<sup>27</sup> with their horse, saddle, saddle blanket, bridle, halter and lariat<sup>28</sup> as well as clothing and blankets.<sup>29</sup> The following day, the captains selected 78 men to form a company as specified in General Brooks' Order.<sup>30</sup> After each company was organized, the company elected a Captain, a 1st Lieutenant and a 2nd Lieutenant.<sup>31</sup> The Governor had previously informed the Army when and where the troops would be available;<sup>32</sup> on the appointed day an officer of the Army mustered the company into Federal Service using instructions provided by the War Department.<sup>33</sup>

After being mustered in, the company left the rendezvous site and traveled to their designated Army post. The captain reported to the commanding officer for instructions.<sup>34</sup> The Army ordinance officer issued the men arms consisting of a percussion rifle<sup>35</sup> and a pistol with its holster.<sup>36</sup> The men were also issued ammunition and camp and garrison equipment.<sup>37</sup>

The companies organized by John Ford and J. B. McCown were ready to muster in on August 23, 1849.<sup>38</sup> Each company consisted of one captain, one 1st lieutenant, one 2nd lieutenant, four sergeants, four corporals, two buglers, two farriers and blacksmiths, and 64 privates. After being mustered into service the company proceeded to Corpus Christi to report to the Commanding General for special instructions.<sup>39</sup> John S.(Rip) Ford's company was assigned to the area around Corpus Christi.<sup>40</sup>

## Rife enlisted in Wallace's ranging company in 1850.

On March 06, 1850, General Brooke called on Texas Governor P.H. Bell for a fourth similar company to be placed in Federal Service. General Brooke candidly stated to Governor Bell that, "there is, at present, no money in the Treasury for the payment of volunteers, but from assurances which I have received from the Honorable Secretary of War, I feel confident that an early appropriation to that effect, will be made by Congress."<sup>41</sup>

A few days later, William "Big Foot" Wallace was commissioned to raise a company of rangers in Bexar County for an enlistment of six months.<sup>42</sup> On March 23, 1850, Captain William Steele of the 2nd Dragoons mustered the company into Federal service at 2pm at the Federal Arsenal in Austin.<sup>43</sup> Captain Steele was required to "inspect closely each man and horse, and to reject both, or either, unless they appear sufficiently strong and capable of bearing the arduous duties and fatigues of an Indian campaign." As was the custom, each man furnished his own horse, saddle, saddle blanket, bridle, halter and lariat and the government supplied a percussion rifle, pistol and ammunition.<sup>44</sup> Afterwards, the company reported to the Commanding General in San Antonio for instructions.<sup>45</sup>

This unit was paired with Colonel Hardee's US Infantry stationed at Fort Inge.<sup>46</sup> Wallace's ranging company and Capt. William Hardee's Company C, Second Dragoons both used Camp Leona as their base camp. The rangers camped on the west side of the river<sup>47</sup> and the soldiers occupied two crude barracks on the east side of the river at Fort Inge. Both the US soldiers and the rangers were mounted riflemen. Regular soldiers at Fort Inge from 1849 to 1852 were Dragoons, who were trained to fight on horseback or on foot. Mounted infantry (who fought on foot) occupied the fort from 1852 to 1855. Between 1856 and 1861 the soldiers at Fort Inge were cavalry. Mounted infantry were mounted on horses when these were available but sometime used mules because horses were scarce in Texas. Rangers were always well mounted, entered the service with their own horses and could fight either mounted or on foot.

The area of operation of Wallace's company was between Seco Creek and the Guadalupe River from Bandera Pass to the coast.<sup>48</sup> This area was sometimes called the Nueces Strip.<sup>49</sup> As a result of the addition of Wallace's company, Ford's company took a new position at San Antonio Viejo in the lower Rio Grande valley to protect the vicinity of the Ringgold Barracks at Rio Grande City and Fort McIntosh at Laredo. Capt. McGown's company was moved to an area between Ft. Inge on the Leona River and Fort Duncan on the Rio Grande at Eagle Pass.<sup>50</sup>

A joint military campaign against Indians was launched in 1850. By June 04, 1850, General Brooke felt that he was ready to move against the numerous and bold Comanche and Lipan Indian raiders in south Texas. He issued order No. 27 on June 4 to all available Dragoon and Mounted Infantry at Forts McIntosh, Inge, Merrill, and Lincoln together with the ranging companies of Ford, Grumbles, McCown and Wallace. The troops were ordered to prepare to take the field, "at an early date" against the Indians. The campaign would last at least two months or "until the country is cleared of those hostile Indians." A detachment of Dragoons was left to protect Fort Inge on the Leona River and Fort Lincoln on Seco Creek, both of which were exposed to attacks by Lipan Apache Indians.<sup>51</sup> Apparently, the entire garrisons of Forts McIntosh and Merrill were to take the field in this scout, leaving as few as four men to guard the forts.<sup>52</sup>

Major Babbitt, Chief Assistant Quartermaster, was directed to establish depots of forage at Fort Merrill where the Corpus Christi-San Antonio Road crossed the Nueces River. Major Longstreet, Chief of the Subsistence Department, was directed to place supplies for the troops at Forts Merrill, Inge and Lincoln<sup>53</sup> Colonel Hardee of the 2nd

Dragoons was assigned to lead the scout.<sup>54</sup> Wallace and his company were told to proceed towards Corpus Christi.<sup>55</sup>

## Rife participated in the fight at Black Hills.

Nineteen men were on this scout including Edward Westfall<sup>56</sup> and Tom Rife.<sup>57</sup> On July 18, 1850, the rangers were returning northwest to their camp on the Leona River. As Wallace and his company examined the country from the Nueces to Espantosa Lake they encountered hostile Comanche Indians at Black Hills, a summit sixteen miles from Cotulla in present-day La Salle County.<sup>58</sup> In the ensuing fight three rangers were wounded and seven Indians killed.

As the rangers approached a waterhole on Todos Santos Creek, about eighty mounted Comanche Indians, camped at the waterhole, came out to meet them. The rangers dismounted and prepared for an assault. The Indians stopped just out of gunshot range. Their leader repeatedly charged close to the rangers, encouraging his men to follow. On the third charge Wallace ordered three of his men to shoot the Indian leader's horse while Wallace, with a large caliber rifle, shot the man through both hips. The rest of the Indians then charged forward to rescue their wounded leader. Some of the rangers mounted their horses and fought the Indians at close quarters, using their pistols.

With their leader wounded, the Indians retreated back to the waterhole with the rangers following close behind them. The Indians continued to retreat up the creek and left the rangers in possession of the waterhole. The Indians had been camped for a week or more making lariats and other items from rawhide. They were soaking the rawhide in the pool that was already low due to dry weather. The rangers, who were had been searching for water for some time, were horrified to find that the water was a seething mass of hair, maggots and rotting flesh. Wallace, Westfall and ten of their men rode to the upper waterhole only to find the Indians waiting to give battle.

Wallace returned to the first water hole, gathered his men and left. He waited for the Indians to retreat from the camp that afternoon before moving back in to get water for his horses and men. This fight resulted in three wounded rangers and seven Indians killed including the old chief.<sup>59</sup> The wounded rangers were taken to the hospital at Fort Inge and the other men returned to the ranger camp at Edward Westfall's ranch, twenty-seven miles below Fort Inge<sup>60</sup> on the Leona River.<sup>61</sup> Among the sick and wounded men were Linden Jackson, Rufus Halyard,<sup>62</sup> Ephraim Rose and Louis Oget.<sup>63</sup>

The fight at Black Hills and the story of the Mier Expedition were two of Wallace's most famous stories. Newspaper reporter A. J. Sowell recorded one version of the fight at Black Hills in his book, "Life of "Big Foot" Wallace." The Kerrville Mountain News edition of May 6, 1926, reprinted another long version of the fight "in Wallace's own words."<sup>64</sup>

Two weeks after the fight at Black Hills, on August 5, 1850, Wallace and 23 rangers fought and vanquished 125 Indians on the Laredo road. The fight lasted seven hours and resumed the next day resulting in 20 Indians killed and 65 captured.<sup>65</sup>

## The results of the 1850 campaign were unsatisfactory.

Despite the military's best efforts to control the Indians, on July 26, 1850 the citizens of San Antonio met and passed a resolution declaring that the area between the Guadalupe River and the Rio Grande was infested and overrun with hostile savages.<sup>66</sup> A similar petition was sent to General Brooks from Corpus Christi on August 15. Reports also came in of Indian attacks near Corpus Christi, Laredo and Eagle Pass.<sup>67</sup>

General Brooks found it almost impossible to procure sufficient horses in Texas and he had been able to mount only one-half of the regular infantry. For this reason, he felt compelled to continue the service of the four mounted companies of volunteer rangers despite the problems they caused him. The Adjutant General R. Jones observed that, "great negligence was observed in the volunteers (rangers) in Texas in respect to muster rolls and returns required by the regulations, etc."<sup>68</sup> Only Captain John S. Ford, whose company was assigned to Fort McIntosh, submitted reports of combat actions. While the Texas ranging companies were organized as military units, their outlandish dress, long beards and errant behavior clearly distinguished them from federal soldiers.<sup>69</sup> Despite General Brooks' initial high opinion of the rangers,<sup>70</sup> their refusal to act responsibly ultimately led to their dismissal from Federal Service. His experience with the Texas rangers mirrored that of General Zachary Taylor who ended the Mexican War very disenchanted with them. Their refusal to wear uniforms and salute officers and their tendency to prey upon Mexican civilians had been very upsetting to General Taylor.<sup>71</sup>

Despite General Brooks' increasingly dim view of the rangers, on approximately August 23, 1850, Wallace's company was mustered into service for a second term. In total, this company served for almost 1½ years in three consecutive 6-months terms. The enlistment term of Ford's, Grumble's and McCown's companies also expired between August 23 and September 23, 1850. All four companies were mustered in for another term.<sup>72</sup> Captain Grumble's company mustered in on September with a new captain, James D. Bagby, after Captain Grumble died.<sup>73</sup> Not all the men re-enlisted, some were killed or wounded and new men were constantly being recruited to keep the companies fully manned.<sup>74</sup> When the Federal population census was taken on October 14, 1850, Thomas Rife was at Fort Inge in Bexar County on the Leona River with Wallace's ranging company. He, or someone representing him, wrongly listed his age as 25 and stated that he was born in Mississippi.<sup>75</sup>

Late in 1850, General Brooke added one more ranging company to his command for a total of five companies. On November 4, 1850, Henry McCulloch organized a company to be mustered into federal service to serve for 12 months. An article in a newspaper on October 26, 1850, announced the details. All desiring to join were to meet at Austin on November 4th with his own horse; saddle, bridle, blanket and clothing.<sup>76</sup> Lieutenant Thomas J. Wood of the US Army then mustered the company into Federal service. Henry McCulloch was elected Captain with John R. King as his First Lieutenant and Calvin S. Turner, Second Lieutenant. The company was stationed in Refugio County on the Gulf coast in the neighborhood of the port town of Lamar on Aransas Bay.<sup>77</sup>

On March 23, 1851, the second six-month term of enlistment of Wallace's company expired. General Brooke requested, on February 7, 1851, that the Governor allow him

to muster this company into Federal service for another six-month term if the men were agreeable to doing so. He made the same request of the companies commanded by Bagby, Ford, McCown, and McCullough, all of whose enlistments were to expire between March 5 and May 5, 1851.<sup>78</sup>

## General Brooke dismissed the ranging companies in 1851.

In the fall of 1851, General Brooke decided to end the experiment with State troops. He may have felt that he had achieved his goal of pushing the Indians west of the line of forts or he may have realized the impossibility of doing so. Two other factors may have prompted General Brooke to change his strategy. After Congress voted to pay Texas to settle its land claims in New Mexico Territory in 1850, every appropriation involving Texas came under intense scrutiny. Congress would have denied further funding for the employment of State troops if Congress believed Federal infantry troops could do the same job at half the cost.<sup>79</sup> Another factor involved the often erratic and unprofessional behavior of the rangers.<sup>80</sup> The ranging company stationed near Rio Grande City (opposite Camargo) became involved as mercenaries in the so-called Merchant War. Their actions angered the Governor<sup>81</sup> and General Brooke dismissed all five companies of Texas rangers in federal service after that incident. On September 23, 1851, after the third six-month term of service expired, the experiment ended and Wallace's Company was mustered out after a year and a half of service.<sup>82</sup>

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# **Skillman's Mail Service, 1851–1854**

## *Mail Route.*

### SAN ANTONIO AND SANTA FE.

 A MAIL, IN FOUR-HORSE COACHES, leaves each of the above place, on the 15th of every month; commencing January, 1853.

Passengers allowed 40 pounds of baggage.

Fare—San Antonio to Santa Fe, \$125 00

El Paso, 100 00

— Santa Fe to El Paso, 30 00

*HENRY SKILLMAN, Contractor.*

Agent at Santa Fe, PRESTON BECK; agents at  
San Antonio, [15 sf] J. R. SWEET & CO.

Skillman's mail and passenger service commenced with the first westbound coach's departure from San Antonio to Santa Fe, New Mexico on November 1, 1851. Before January 1853 a coach left both San Antonio and Santa Fe every other month; after that date, service was changed to every month. The one-way trip took about three weeks to complete. San Antonio Western Texas, April 1, 1853

# Rife began a career as a stage conductor

*"...he was mustered out to form captain of one of the parties carrying the first mail from San Antonio to Santa Fe. Big Foot Wallace was captain of the other party, and for nearly three years he was so engaged. In those days there was no house nor settlement between Joe Ney's ranch (70 miles west of San Antonio, editor) and San Elizario, a distance of 800 miles, and the party was an armed force on a road that was beset by Indians, and much could be written of the dangers and vicissitudes of his position." "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## **Henry Skillman was a legendary figure in West Texas.**

Henry Skillman was born in New Jersey in 1814, spent his youth in Kentucky, and came to Texas before 1839. He worked as a courier on the Santa Fé Trail and as a wagon master. He was a scout for Colonel Alexander Doniphan when the United States was at war with Mexico in 1846 and accompanied Colonel Doniphan's expedition to Chihuahua as it followed the Santa Fé Trail south from El Paso del Norte. Skillman was at the February 28, 1847 battle at Sacramento, Chihuahua as captain of a company of wagon masters and teamsters.<sup>1</sup> A year later he was again serving as a scout and fought at the Battle of Santa Cruz de Rosales on March 16, 1848. After the Mexican War he settled in Franklin, one of the villages that became El Paso, Texas, and operated a freight line between there and San Antonio.

Henry Skillman was described as "a great blond giant with flowing beard and hair - — the Kit Carson of Big Bend."<sup>2</sup> A reporter for the San Antonio Ledger wrote in October 1853, "Prominent in uncouthness was the Captain himself, with his beard descending some foot and a half below his countenance."<sup>3</sup> Skillman was dangerous when drunk. On rare occasions while under the influence of "strong drink" he would "shoot up the town." After he was sober, he would "return to the scene of his exuberance, pay the damages, and apologize to everyone for his actions."<sup>4</sup> This behavior cost Skillman \$25 and court costs in San Antonio in February 1853. He was fined in the

Mayor's Court for "Assault and Battery, Furious Riding, Riding on the Sidewalk and Obstructing an Officer."<sup>5</sup>

## **Skillman helped layout the San Antonio to El Paso Road.**

After the war with Mexico ended, the U.S. Army began locating and mapping roads to the newly acquired territories in the Southwest. Lieutenant William Whiting led an expedition that left San Antonio in February 1849 and reached the American settlements across from El Paso del Norte two months later. In April 1849 Lt. Whiting hired Henry Skillman at San Elizario to purchase supplies for the expedition's return trip to San Antonio. Skillman located and purchased the necessary supplies in the village of Doña Ana, then in Texas, and in the small Mexican town of Presidio del Norte (now Ojinaga, Chihuahua). Skillman then caught up with the Whiting party near what became the Lancaster Crossing of the Pecos River and accompanied the soldiers and their guides back to San Antonio.<sup>6</sup>

Stage service to south Texas from San Antonio had begun the year before;<sup>7</sup> There were, however, no stages running west of San Antonio. The Comanche and Mescalero Apache Indians and the lack of an established route made travel west of San Antonio extremely dangerous.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, by the time California was admitted as the thirty-first state on July 9, 1850, US Army surveyors had located and improved the best routes for roads through the Trans-Pecos region of west Texas.<sup>9</sup> The road investigated in 1849 by Lieutenants S.G. French and William Whiting became known as the Military or Lower San Antonio to El Paso road. The route was an all season road, over a natural surface, rough in places but free of snow in the winter.<sup>10</sup> For the most part, this was the route used by the first mail service to west Texas.

## **Skillman's first contract for mail service was from 1851 to December 1852.**

Prior to 1851, mail to points west of San Antonio was carried by either US Army express riders or by private couriers such as Henry Skillman.<sup>11</sup> US citizens living in the cluster of settlements on the east bank of the Rio Grande across from El Paso del Norte signed a petition dated September 10, 1850, urging the establishment of postal service between there and San Antonio, possibly following a route through Fort Inge and Presidio del Norte. The newspaper editor who published the petition notice somewhat optimistically predicted that the trip could be made in 16 days without relay stations. He calculated that with "some few posts upon the road, so as to furnish relays of horses" the trip could be made in half that time.<sup>12</sup> While the far-sighted editor was correct in some respects, it would be three years before any relay stations existed on this road.<sup>13</sup> He also underestimated the length of the journey; even after relay stations were built, the trip by stagecoach took 16 days.<sup>14</sup>

Congress passed a bill that made mail service more practicable on March 3, 1851. On that date, Congress authorized the US Mint to produce a 3-cent coin for the express purpose of purchasing postage stamps.<sup>15</sup> Congress also lowered postage fees dramatically<sup>16</sup> and by the summer of 1851 the prerequisites for mail service to west

Texas were in place. The Topographical Engineers had made a suitable road west of San Antonio and also Congress had made postage affordable. The California gold rush increased the volume of trade between the eastern states and the Pacific coast and created a demand for passenger and mail service to California.<sup>17</sup> In response to the growing public need, the Post Office Department placed notices in newspapers seeking bids for mail service on Route #6336. This semi-monthly route was to run from San Antonio through Eagle Pass, Presidio del Norte and El Paso County, Texas to Doña Ana in New Mexico Territory.<sup>18</sup>

## Prior to receiving the mail contract, Skillman ran a courier service.

Before September 1851, Henry Skillman, along with William "Big Foot" Wallace and his friend Edward Westfall, was operating a private courier service based in San Antonio. It was an irregular service for private subscribers.<sup>19</sup> Wallace and a partner submitted a bid for the new mail route but their bid was rejected as too costly.<sup>20</sup> Henry Skillman saw the mail service as an opportunity to continue his courier service on a sounder basis and with a guaranteed income large enough to buy coaches and to hire help. He was determined to get the contract that had been denied to Wallace and Howard earlier in the year. In September 1851, Skillman traveled by steamship from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. where he negotiated directly with the Postmaster General.

Skillman successfully negotiated the stagecoach contract; on September 20, 1851 he signed Contract #6401 with Postmaster General Nathan K. Hall to carry mail between San Antonio and Santa Fé via Franklin in El Paso County, Texas. The contract was to begin on November 1, 1851 and to expire on June 30, 1854. Skillman was to be paid \$12,500 per year for carrying the mail in his own coaches.<sup>21</sup>

Notice of the contract appeared in *The National Intelligencer*, a Washington, D.C. newspaper. The reporter prophesized that the contractor would lose money on the route. He stated that, "the transportation of mails through a vast unsettled wilderness, infested by roaming bands of rude and often hostile Indians, must, to afford them (the mail carriers) the proper protection, be attended with an expense far beyond any possible receipts."<sup>22</sup> A decade of mail service would prove the reporter to be correct. It was always a dangerous undertaking to travel across the Texas wilderness but it was especially dangerous for a lone courier or a small party even if they were heavily armed and riding fresh horses. The problem was that every traveler, whether Anglo, Mexican or Indian, had to stop at the same watering places and therefore encounters with Native Americans were inevitable.<sup>23</sup>

## The first mail to Santa Fé left San Antonio in November 1851.

After Skillman returned to San Antonio from Washington, D. C., the first westbound mail coach left San Antonio on either the first or the third of November 1851. The trip took three weeks and the mail arrived in Santa Fé on November 24.<sup>24</sup>

The first southbound coach left Santa Fé on January 2, 1852, and arrived safely in San Antonio. The same coach was dispatched on the second westbound trip to Santa Fé but failed to reach its destination. A search party discovered the charred remains of the mail coach in the mountains downriver of El Paso. The driver was assumed to be dead since nothing was found of him but his hat.<sup>25</sup> This would be the first of many similar attacks on Skillman's coaches.

Skillman ordered some "good comfortable spring carriages for the accommodation of passengers" while in Santa Fé<sup>26</sup> and in December 6, 1851, a newspaper advertisement announced the start of passenger service. According to Skillman's advertisement, "The mail will leave Santa Fé on the second of each month... and arrive in San Antonio on the last day of the same month." The westbound coach will "leave San Antonio on the first of each month ... and arrive in Santa Fé on the last day of the same month." Skillman stated that the greatest distance between watering places was forty miles and that, "he will also have on the line a small train of light wagons." The passenger fare for the full trip between Santa Fé and San Antonio was \$125.<sup>27</sup> In addition to mail and passengers, the coaches brought newspapers and gossip between the civilized world and the west.<sup>28</sup> In September 1853, the train led by Captain Wallace brought "some fine specimens of the El Paso grape, upon which those of our citizens, who were favored with 'bunches', were luxuriating with infinite satisfaction."<sup>29</sup>

Skillman built at least two relay stations along the mail route. One was at San Elizario and the other at the Leona River, near present-day Uvalde.<sup>30</sup> On the night of January 25, 1852, Indians stole mules and horses (numbering between 30 and 40) from the corral at the Leona Station, the first relay station west of San Antonio. The mules belonged to San Antonio merchant George Giddings (who was camped there) and Henry Skillman's mail service.<sup>31</sup> Some of the horses escaped from the Indians during the night and returned to the corral.

Thomas Rife and Edward Westfall, both employees of the mail service, and a few other men who lived in the area started on the trail of the Indians the next morning.<sup>32</sup> They caught up with the raiders, killed one and let the others flee. All the stolen horses and mules were recovered.<sup>33</sup> On that same day, Apaches attacked the coach running between Santa Fé and El Paso and killed three men. The coach was being escorted by soldiers from the US Army Second Dragoons and was abandoned and later destroyed by the Indians.<sup>34</sup>

## **Thomas Rife was an employee of the mail service.**

On September 23, 1851 the 100 or so men remaining in Wallace's ranger company were mustered out of Federal Service. Rife had left the service sometime prior to September 1851. He and several men from Wallace's company continued living along the Leona River in the vicinity of the ranger camp where they had lived while in Federal service.

In the first few months after having been awarded the mail contract in the spring of 1852, Skillman hired William "Big Foot" Wallace, Edward Westfall, Thomas Rife, Louis Oge, Bradford Daily, Benjamin Sanford, Adolph Fry and others to carry the mail.<sup>35</sup>

Rife continued in this service for eighteen months. Initially there was only one coach making the two month-long round trips between San Antonio and Santa Fé. Big Foot Wallace and Rife worked together manning the coach until January 1853, when the frequency of the trips was increased and Rife and Wallace each led a team going in opposite directions.<sup>36</sup>

The Texas State Gazette reported that on September 9, Comanche Indians attacked Big Foot Wallace, Thomas Rife, Adolph Fry and three other men carrying the mail to El Paso. The three wagons, outfitted to carry passengers and referred to as "ambulances" were attacked at Big Bluff, between California Springs and Painted Caves. This area is located between the first and second crossing of the Devils River. The coachmen had just finished their mid-day siesta and were harnessing the mules for the afternoon march when the Indians attacked. Twenty-seven Comanche shot at the wagons from a nearby bluff. The fight continued all afternoon. The guards used long-range rifles to kill five of the attacking Indians but fearing that the Indians would attack again, the mail party returned to Fort Clark to obtain a military escort. After failing to get an escort, Wallace hired three extra men at Leona Station and continued the effort to get the mail through.<sup>37</sup>

## **The second contract for mail service ran from 1853 to June 1854.**

For the first year of the two and a half year contract, the mail was to be transported each way every other month. Soon the volume of mail was great enough to require monthly service. On October 2, 1852, Skillman left El Paso County for Washington, D. C. to upgrade his contract, arriving in Washington City by December 2; a few days later a new contract was signed. It specified that a mail train was to leave both San Antonio and Santa Fé on the middle of each month.<sup>38</sup>

While on the trip to see the Postmaster General, Skillman visited the Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company in Hartford, Connecticut. When the American Boundary Survey Commission passed through the El Paso area in 1850, Skillman saw and admired the 1849 model of the Sharps Beech-loading Rifle.<sup>39</sup> A new model (most likely the model 1852 carbine) was now available and Skillman bought a case of ten rifles.<sup>40</sup> Often, this new weapon gave the mail carriers the upper hand over Indian raiders.<sup>41</sup> The Sharps Rifle helped to speed the advance of the white men into land that had once been the Indian's domain.

## **Monthly service began in 1853.**

On January 20, 1853, Skillman announced mail service with monthly passenger service. Four-horse coaches would leave both Santa Fé and San Antonio on the fifteenth of every month. Bigfoot Wallace was placed in command of one of the mail trains and Rife was in charge of the other. For the remainder of 1853, the two men maintained this schedule with each man making the round trip every two months.

January and February 1853 were quiet months and the mail carriers frequently set new time records.<sup>42</sup> In short order, the speed record was broken again on April 14,

1853, when Thomas Rife arrived in San Antonio from San Elizario in 13½ days.<sup>43</sup> The distance between San Elizario and San Antonio was about 628 miles so the coach averaged 46½ miles per day.

In those days there were no relay stations between Fort Clark and San Elizario, a distance of about 500 miles. A large remuda (herd) of relief mules was driven along and teams were changed frequently. The mules traveled the entire distance with only short stops for rest and feeding. The team pulling the wagon was also changed frequently to give the mules some relief. However the men driving them worked straight through, traveling day and night to meet the schedule. The day was divided up into three equal parts. The mail train would "travel fifteen or more miles in each division, thus averaging about fifty miles a day."<sup>44</sup> The San Antonio Light edition of August 2, 1902, described a typical trip. "Along this weary stretch of country the party camped where night overtook them." It "usually took twenty to twenty-four days. Indian fights were common and the passengers had to take their turn on guard and in doing camp chores."<sup>45</sup> The Indian raiding parties were looking for horses and mules, so the large numbers of relief mules being herded behind the mail trains were an enormous temptation to them.

Rife's mail train left San Antonio on April 15, 1853, and camped at Van Horn's Well on April 28. He passed Wallace's coach making the eastbound trip to San Antonio a little while before arriving at the Well. Wallace's train was ambushed twelve miles south of Van Horn's Well; the mules stampeded and Benjamin Sanford was shot in the side by an arrow. His comrades broke off the shaft of the arrow, rounded up all but four of the mules and returned to Van Horn's Well to deliver the wounded man to Rife who took him to El Paso. Sanford "succeeded in reaching the settlements at San Elizario before he breathed his last. He died among friends and comrades."<sup>46</sup>

Wallace arrived in San Antonio on May 9, 1853 in less than 14 days and reported a second night attack at the Pecos River.<sup>47</sup> A war-chief known as Yellow Wolf was "in the neighborhood," so it was supposed that a portion of his band had attacked the mail train.

## **Working in the mail service was extremely dangerous.**

John G. Walker, captain of a company of US Mounted Rifles stationed along the mail route, testified in later years that, "Predatory bands of Indians were constantly making incursions into the country, crossing these roads, and taking occasion to kill and scalp and to plunder either the mails or anybody else that might be within their reach." He also said that he "always wondered that anybody would undertake to carry the mail, considering the danger of the employment. It was always a mystery to me that he (Giddings) could employ men who would take their lives in their hands to carry out that contract."<sup>48</sup>

William W. Mills, a prominent citizen of El Paso, described the typical stage driver after Mills had made a trip from El Paso to San Antonio. According to Mills, the stage driver "possessed the courage of the soldier and something more. The soldier goes where he is told to go, and fights when he is told to fight, but he has little anxiety or responsibility. The stage driver, on the other hand, had to be as alert and thoughtful

as a general. There was not only his duty to his employers, but his responsibility for the mails (he was a sworn officer of the Government); and the lives of passengers often depended upon his knowledge of the country and the Indian character, as well as his quick and correct judgment as to what to do in emergencies. Like the sailor, he was something of a fatalist; but he believed in using all possible means to protect himself and those under his charge.”<sup>49</sup>

Rife arrived at San Antonio on June 9, 1853, leading a train consisting of “two ambulances, twenty-two mules and eight men, the latter of which are all noted for their valor and frontier exploits.” He left for Santa Fé on the fifteenth of June.<sup>50</sup> The San Antonio Ledger published a letter from a regular contributor in El Paso that included a glowing and verbose testimonial to Tom Rife’s work as a coach conductor. It read, “Tom Rife arrived here with the last mail from your place (San Antonio) on the evening of June 29th, being six days ahead of his time. I know of no one in whose character is combined to so full an extent all those elements necessary to ensure a successful prosecution of this hazardous and tedious business than Tom; his speed on this route is as yet unexcelled, and his care and vigilance while on the road unquestioned.”<sup>51</sup> Rife’s return trip to San Antonio was made in twelve days and nine hours, “fast time, you will acknowledge” in the words of the New Orleans Picayune correspondent.<sup>52</sup>

Rife returned to San Antonio on August 7 and then had seven days off. The faster the trip, the more time in San Antonio the stage crew was allowed. This may have been what motivated the mail carriers to shorten the time on the trail.<sup>53</sup>

By August 1853, Skillman was back in Washington City to get his contract extended through June 30, 1854.<sup>54</sup> Apparently, he successfully renegotiated the contract as the mail trains kept running.

## **Thomas Rife married Mary Ann Arnold in 1853.**

Rife carried the mail from El Paso to San Antonio on October 11, 1853, after a trip of 16 days.<sup>55</sup> Three days after Tom’s arrival, on October 14, Tom Rife and Mrs. Mary Ann Arnold Brothers were married. The mail, scheduled to leave San Antonio on the 15th, was delayed due to the late arrival of the mail from the coast.<sup>56</sup> This delay allowed Tom and Mary a two-day honeymoon before he left with the mail train for El Paso.

Tom Rife brought the mail and eight passengers into San Antonio from Santa Fe on December 10, 1853. He required 15 days to make the trip reported to be “a very pleasant one for this season of the year.”<sup>57</sup> This is the last mention of Rife as a mail conductor until December 8, 1858; a span of almost five years.<sup>58</sup> Mary Ann Arnold said in her petition for a divorce dated February 4, 1860, that he left for California on December 27, 1853 and was gone for more than three years.<sup>59</sup>

Skillman was having trouble making up for constant financial losses due to Indian depredations. On February 4, 1854, he mortgaged “100 mules and four coaches which are now being used in the conveying of the mail...” to James “Don Santiago” Magoffin, a merchant with a store at Magoffinsville (now El Paso). Skillman sold his house and lot in Concordia (now part of El Paso) and consigned a draft due from the

Post Office worth \$7,000.<sup>60</sup> As the reporter had predicted two years earlier, the mail route was a losing proposition for the contractor.

Skillman's losses continued on February 27, 1854 when Indians stole mules belonging to Skillman from the corral at Leona Station at Uvalde. Three days later, the party sent to recover the mules returned to Uvalde, having recovered ten mules from the Indians.<sup>61</sup> Horses were also taken from the stable-yard at the army post at nearby Ft. Inge.<sup>62</sup>

In 1854, US Army General Persifor Smith, commander of the Department of Texas, selected sites for a string of forts as recommended by the Army inspector the previous year.<sup>63</sup> The new forts were intended to provide escorts for the mail haulers and protection for freighters and travelers on the San Antonio to El Paso Road. These forts, including Fort Davis and Fort Lancaster, were staffed with infantry mounted on mules. In October 1854, troops of the 8th Infantry arrived from Ringgold Barracks on the lower Rio Grande to build the post at Fort Davis.<sup>64</sup> While these forts came too late to benefit Henry Skillman, the mail contractor at that time, they would be of great importance to the next mail contractor.

William Wallace and Bradford Daily (who replaced Tom Rife) were conductors for Skillman during the final months of his contract.<sup>65</sup> Wallace brought the mail into San Antonio during March, 1854, and Daily did the same during April.<sup>66</sup>

June 30, 1854, was the last day of Henry Skillman's contract. In an effort to continue the service, he bid on a new contract for route #12900 for either two-horse or four-horse service to begin on July 1st and run monthly each way between Santa Fé and San Antonio. His bid of \$24,900 was rejected. Other bidders were Jacob Hall, McGraw and Reeside and David Wasson from Lewistown, Pennsylvania. The Postmaster General accepted Wasson's bid for two-horse service on April 22, 1854. His bid of \$16,750<sup>67</sup> would prove to be too low for the service expected<sup>68</sup> and would lead to much grief for George H. Giddings over the next three years as eventual mail contractor.

James Magoffin, who had loaned Skillman money, shared in Skillman's losses. As early as November 1854, Isaac Lightner, a merchant in El Paso County, had urged Magoffin to seize Skillman's mules<sup>69</sup> in payment of the debt but Magoffin, perhaps realizing how important the mail service was to El Paso or perhaps out of fear of Skillman,<sup>70</sup> delayed any action. In 1858, Magoffin finally agreed to sue Skillman but was advised that it was too late and besides, "I can't even get \$32...out of him (Skillman)."<sup>71</sup> As George Giddings said and as the Washington, D. C. newspaper reporter had predicted, Henry Skillman was financially ruined by the mail service.

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# Mary Ann Arnold

On October 14, 1853, when Thomas Rife married Mary Ann Brothers, a San Antonio-born widow, he was 30 years old and she was 20. They were a mixed race couple; Mary Ann's father was an American man of color and her mother was a Mexicana from New Mexico. Rife was an Anglo American and the son and grandson of slave owners.

The couple was mismatched in many ways. Rife was employed as the conductor of a mail train, an extremely dangerous occupation. He was on the road most of the time, usually for weeks at a time. (The round trip between San Antonio and El Paso County took a month). Many of his friends were coachmen, hard-bitten bachelors, some of whom never married at all or did so only in their old age. Many of Rife's friends were gunmen who died with their boots on. Mary Ann had inherited a ranch and she probably expected her husband to run it.

## Mary Ann's father was Hendrick Arnold.

Mary Ann's father, Hendrick Arnold, immigrated to Texas with his parents in March of 1826 from Mississippi. Hendrick's father was Daniel Arnold and his mother, Rachel, was apparently a woman of mixed race. Daniel and Rachel Arnold may have been forced by peer pressure to leave Mississippi for Texas where they must have hoped to find a more tolerant and diverse population. Hendrick was referred to as a Negro but his brother or half-brother, Holly, was not. There is no evidence that the children were legally freed by their father, as required by law, but they "acted in all capacities as free persons."<sup>1</sup> The family settled in Stephen F. Austin's colony on the Brazos River.<sup>2</sup>

When Hendrick first came to Texas, he impregnated one of his father's slaves, a girl named Dolly, and produced a daughter named Harriet whom he held as a slave.<sup>3</sup> So began a series of events that would end in a trial in the Texas Supreme Court and an act of the Legislature. The issue that interested the Court was that on August 9, 1846, Hendrick indentured Harriet for five years to James Newcomb of San Antonio for the

sum of \$750. At the end of the period, she was to be freed but both Hendrick and Newcomb died in the cholera epidemic of 1849. Several members of Hendrick's family attempted to gain possession of Harriet from the administrator of Newcomb's estate and finally filed a lawsuit to that end. The Supreme Court found that the Mexican Constitution in effect when Harriet was born in 1827 outlawed placing children born in Texas into slavery. The effect was to "declare free all children born of slave parents after May 29, 1827 and previous to the adoption of the constitution of the Republic" of Texas in 1836. Although this decision must have affected many people, Anglo Texans were in no mood to free any slave and Harriet may have been the only person to benefit from the ruling.<sup>4</sup>

By the fall of 1835 Hendrick had married María Ygnacia Durán (who was Erastus "Deaf" Smith's step-daughter) and settled in Béxar.<sup>5</sup> María Durán was born in New Mexico. The couple's first child, Mary Ann, was born in the village of Béxar on May 07, 1833, before her parents married, not unusual at that time.<sup>6</sup>

When Mexican forces under General Martin de Cos occupied Béxar, Hendrick and his father-in-law Erastus "Deaf" Smith were out hunting buffalo. They encountered Stephen F. Austin's camp of Texas volunteers headed to Béxar and volunteered to act as guides. Hendrick participated in the fight at Mission Concepción in December, 1835, and was the guide for Ben Milam's division during the capture of Béxar.<sup>7</sup> He later served in Deaf Smith's spy company at the battle of San Jacinto.<sup>8</sup> Mary Ann Arnold may have lived on her father's ranch, although, like many Bexar County ranchers, the family also had a house in San Antonio.<sup>9</sup>

## **Mary Ann's first marriage was to John Brothers.**

On June 25, 1848, Mary Ann married an Anglo-American, John Brothers, in Bexar County. By October 1850, she and her husband were living on a farm near Castroville in Medina County.<sup>10</sup> Theirs was one of 41 families enumerated in and around Castroville that year. When Mary Ann married John Brothers she was 15 years old. In 1848, it was common for girls to marry at the age of 12 or 13 and for 12-year-old boys to leave home.<sup>11</sup>

John Brothers was born about 1824 in Virginia and came to Texas on September 22, 1837, qualifying for a Second Class Head-right Certificate for 640-acres.<sup>12</sup> He appeared on the muster rolls of David C. Cady's ranging company and on July 5, 1846, he was elected lieutenant of Cady's Company in San Antonio for a six-month term.<sup>13</sup> After his discharge from the ranging service in early 1847, he married Mary Ann Arnold in 1848 and settled on the farm near Castroville.

Within a few months after their marriage, (in April or May of 1849) Mary Ann's father, Hendrick Arnold, died in the cholera epidemic that swept through San Antonio.<sup>14</sup> The epidemic lasted six weeks and killed more than 500 people<sup>15</sup> out of a population of 3,480.<sup>16</sup> John Brothers was called upon to act as administrator of Hendrick Arnold's estate.<sup>17</sup> He did not finish the task before he himself died before September 1851.<sup>18</sup>

Since there were no surviving adult males in the family, Mary Ann became the administrator of her deceased husband's estate. Mary Ann paid off the remaining

debt on 369 acres and immediately sold 150 acres to two different persons.<sup>19</sup> She apparently retained title to her parent's farm and ranch. She and John Brothers had no known children.

## **Mary Ann's second marriage was to Tom Rife.**

While Mary Ann and John Brothers were farming in Castroville, Thomas Rife was stationed about fifty miles away on the Leona River near Fort Inge.<sup>20</sup> While in the ranging service, Thomas Rife occasionally visited San Antonio and received his mail there<sup>21</sup> but no evidence has been found showing that he was acquainted with either John Brothers or his wife.

When US Army General Brooke dismissed all Texas rangers in Federal service in the fall of 1851,<sup>22</sup> Rife had already left the ranging service after his year of fighting Indians. He and several other men from Wallace's ranger company remained around Fort Inge in a settlement they called Inge, close to present-day Uvalde. These men included William W. Arnett,<sup>23</sup> Ed Westfall, Sam Everett, Clem Howard, Cave Nelson, Howard/Henry Levering,<sup>24</sup> Louis Oge, William Smith and George Ware.

In the spring of 1852, Tom Rife and many of his friends were hired by Henry Skillman to drive or guard coaches for the new mail route.<sup>25</sup> For the next eighteen months, Rife was almost constantly on the road and was only briefly in Bexar between trips. Despite this hectic schedule, he successfully courted Mary Ann Arnold who also lived in Uvalde. The circumstances of their courtship and marriage are not known. The Chief Justice of Medina County (John Hoffman) performed the marriage ceremony on October 14, 1853. The license was issued by Bexar County and the ceremony witnessed by two brothers, Charley D. Lytle and Samuel Lytle, William Smith and Gideon Scallions.<sup>26</sup>

## **Rife left his wife after two and a half months of marriage.**

Three days after his marriage, Rife again left San Antonio with the mail train. He returned to San Antonio on December 10.<sup>27</sup> According to Mary Ann, he then abandoned her after these short few months of marriage. When Rife left for the last time in December 1853 he may have felt that Mary Ann was trying to "fence him in." Rife earned his living as a wagon master and a gunman and never seemed interested in either farming or ranching. Now he had to choose whether to settle down with his new wife to life as a rancher or to continue his life on the road. While many men would not have hesitated to settle down to a more stable life, this was the third chance for Rife to choose a career as a rancher or farmer. He had already rejected such a life twice before. Rife found a life-style he liked and he may have decided to stick with it, even though it meant leaving his wife.

Mary Ann later said that Rife left her on December 27, just 73 days after their wedding, and never returned. She swore in her petition for divorce in 1860 that Rife abandoned her "voluntarily, without any cause or provocation, with the intention of wholly abandoning" her and "continued to abandon her for more than three years."<sup>28</sup> Rife's side of the story is not known but apparently he made no attempt at

reconciliation with his wife. Mary Ann did not want to divorce Tom Rife; she did so only a few months before she married her third and last husband in 1860.<sup>29</sup> She and Tom had no children together.

Rife did not stay with the mail service very long after leaving his wife. The mail from Santa Fé that arrived in San Antonio on February 11, 1854, was, at first, attributed to Tom Rife but was, in the same edition, corrected and Capt. Bradford Daily was identified as the conductor.<sup>30</sup>

In 1853, everyone who could afford the trip was heading to California to look for gold.<sup>31</sup> There were many men from Texas in California in the 1850's.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Rife conducted the mail coach to El Paso in late December of 1853 and proceeded from there to California. We know from Rife's Application for a Pension for his Mexican War Service, that he had "resided in Arizona, California, Nevada and Texas."<sup>33</sup> The San Antonio Daily Light edition of March 17, 1893, stated that Rife "celebrated St. Patrick's day in 1854 in San Francisco."<sup>34</sup> The only other evidence of Rife's residence in California is an "Information Wanted" advertisement placed in the Sacramento Union in August, 1857. It stated that Rife "came to California in 1853." A letter addressed to R.F. Johnson, Campo Seco, Calaveras County, asked him to relieve the anxiety of his family and friends.<sup>35</sup> Campo Seco was a promising mining community in 1856.

Perhaps Mary Arnold Rife was preparing to begin divorce proceedings.

Mary Ann owned real property in her own right and did not look to Rife for help. The Marital Rights Act of 1840 allowed a woman to sell property to support herself if her husband failed to do so.<sup>36</sup> She sold 50 acres for \$150 on March 2, 1855.<sup>37</sup> She also applied to sell a building lot in San Antonio that she had inherited. She told the Court that Tom Rife had been in California for 12 months and left her with no means of support. The Court allowed her to keep the proceeds.<sup>38</sup> Mary Ann continued to live in Uvalde County and was teaching school on the Sabinal River in the fall of 1857.<sup>39</sup>

By 1860, Rife had been absent for more than six years and Mary Ann had given up hope that he would return. In a notice in the February 4, 1860 newspaper, a Sheriff's writ ordered Thomas Rife to appear before the District Court of Bexar County on the first Monday in March to answer Mary Ann Rife's suit for a decree of divorce and for costs and relief generally. The notice was published in the San Antonio Ledger and Texan for four consecutive weeks as required by law but Rife failed to appear for the divorce proceeding.<sup>40</sup>

## **Mary Ann's third marriage was to William C. Adams.**

Less than seven months after the divorce, on April 7, 1861, Mary Ann Rife married her third and last husband, William Carroll Adams, in Uvalde County.<sup>41</sup> In the 1860 census Adams was enumerated as a stock raiser who lived at the former military post at Fort Inge. His parents moved from England to Corpus Christi in 1852 and entered the stock business. William Adams' brother, Robert, served as a ranger in Wallace's Company in 1850 and Mary Ann's husband probably knew Rife, at least by reputation, before their marriage. In 1860 life as a single woman was difficult and, although she had inherited her father's ranch on the Medina River she would not have wanted to be dependent on her few remaining relatives for help and support.

Mary Ann's husband left for West Texas soon after their marriage to participate in the Confederate invasion of New Mexico.<sup>[^133]</sup> He returned the following year and enlisted in the Confederate army. After the Civil War, William Adams entered into a partnership with his brother Robert to raise sheep, continuing in that business until 1890. Adams became "one of the wealthiest and most prominent citizens of this (Uvalde County)." <sup>42</sup>

In 1870 Mary Ann and William were stock raisers in San Felipe, Kinney County<sup>43</sup> but by 1880, like the families of most wealthy ranchers in the region, Mary Ann and her two daughters and two sons were living in San Antonio.<sup>44</sup>

William apparently died before 1900; Mary Ann was living in San Antonio with two of her children at the time of the 1900 Census. In 1920, she was still living in San Antonio with her daughters, one of whom was widowed and the other single.<sup>45</sup> She died at age 92 in San Antonio on August 3, 1925, and is buried in Adartis Family Cemetery near Macdona, Texas.<sup>46</sup>

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# **Giddings' Mail Service, 1854–1861**

**“W**hen his service was over he took a trip to California for business and pleasure..."Custodian of the Alamo, San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.

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Howard's Well. This spring, now filled with gravel, was the only water source for 73 miles on the Lower Road. Consequently, there were many conflicts between Indians and travelers at this well. In dry years it was necessary to go down twelve feet with buckets to get water. George Giddings built a stage station here in June 1858. Photo by George Mullins

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# **George Giddings' first contract, June 1854–June 1857**

Between 1854 and 1858 Thomas Rife traveled to California, according to him, "for business and pleasure,"<sup>1</sup> perhaps as an employee of the Giddings stage line or perhaps as a gold miner. Thomas Rife does not appear in any records indicating that he worked for Henry Giddings during Giddings' first mail contract that ran from July 1, 1854 to June 30, 1857. He reappears in the records once again as a conductor on Giddings' stages in 1858 and continued until the beginning of the Civil War.

## **George Giddings took over the San Antonio - Santa Fé route.**

On June 30, 1854, Skillman's earlier contract expired. Skillman's bid to win a new contract was rejected by Postmaster James General Campbell who awarded the contract to David Wasson, a fellow Pennsylvanian who probably had never been to Texas. "The gentleman who underbid the Captain [Skillman] must have been wholly ignorant of the character of the service and the country over which it has to be performed."<sup>2</sup> When no representative of Wasson's company arrived to pick up the first delivery, the Santa Fé postmaster contracted two local businessmen, Elias Brevort and Joab Houghton, to carry the mail.<sup>3</sup> Henry Skillman became their agent and carrier.<sup>4</sup> In San Antonio, a similar scheme was devised and it seemed that Skillman might be awarded the contract after all. Finally, in August, in time for the next mail to be sent west, Wasson's agents arrived in San Antonio and presented their credentials to the Postmaster.<sup>5</sup>

What followed was five months of confusion. Wasson borrowed large sums of money from George H. Giddings, a San Antonio merchant, probably in the form of store credit. In October, Wasson informed Giddings that he couldn't repay the loan. The only way Giddings could avoid losing the money he had advanced Wasson was to

have the contract transferred to him.<sup>6</sup> In this accidental way, George Giddings became the new mail contractor.

Henry Skillman already had extensive experience running the mail route; it appears that George Giddings and Skillman formed some kind of partnership. At any rate, Skillman continued to work for the mail line.<sup>7</sup> With Giddings' financial backing and Skillman's experience they may have hoped that they could make the mail line profitable.

George Giddings was an experienced freighter as well as storekeeper. After working as a surveyor, Giddings clerked for a San Antonio merchant and "spent a lot of time on the trail with the freighters, learning the vagaries of mules, Indians, Mexican customs officials and the land itself."<sup>8</sup> He eventually bought out his employers and set up retail stores of his own in San Antonio, Fort Clark and El Paso.<sup>9</sup> Giddings' stores supplied everything a California-bound emigrant could want. He believed correctly that "more gold would probably be spent by people en-route to California than was ever likely to be panned" in the gold fields.<sup>10</sup>

In the summer of 1854, Fredrick Law Ohmstead, a famous landscape architect and traveler from New York, left a description of the mail train as it prepared to leave San Antonio. He wrote that the mail train bound for El Paso and Santa Fé "consists of two heavy wagons and an ambulance for passengers..." Six men armed with Sharp's rifles and Colt's repeating pistols escorted the train.<sup>11</sup> Giddings employed from 20 to 30 men to drive and guard the coaches. They were highly paid and all were armed with rifles and revolvers.<sup>12</sup> The leader of the escort, the conductor, was paid \$100 per month and the other men each received \$40 per month.<sup>13</sup>

By 1854, Giddings and his men had established a routine. "The train camps from ten o'clock at night till four in the morning. At eight o'clock a stop of an hour is made to graze the mules and for breakfast. Another halt is made between three o'clock and sunset. The average distance accomplished in a day is over fifty miles..."<sup>14</sup> According to Giddings, "Between San Antonio and Fort Clark two men were used after the first year or so. From Fort Clark to Fort Quitman four men or more were in each mail. From Fort Quitman to El Paso there were two men. I did not consider that there was much danger there. From Tucson to Mesilla there were generally from four to eight men. From Tucson west we had two men."<sup>15</sup> By March 1856, between 125 and 175 mules are kept at manned relay stations along the route.<sup>16</sup>

## **Indians continued to create problems for the mail contractor.**

The Native Americans were unaware of, and unconcerned about, the mail line's new contractors. They were primarily interested in stealing the horses and mules used by travelers and haulers. Assaults on the mail carriers continued.<sup>17</sup> By 1854, travelers were stopping to rest at Howard's Well and consequently there was almost always someone camped there.<sup>18</sup> Indian raiders knew this and routinely visited the spring.<sup>19</sup> The mail trains were twice attacked while camped there in the fall of 1854.<sup>20</sup>

On December 18, 1854, the mail run to El Paso was the occasion for another battle with Apache raiders involving two mail parties and 15 men. The mail party circled their wagons and made a stand. Skillman again had an opportunity to put his "medicine gun" to good use. The Mescalero Apache Indians retired to a hilltop to lob heavy-caliber rifle bullets at the barricaded men below. Eventually, the mail coaches were hitched up and moved out of range and Skillman, using his Sharps Rifle, shot at least three braves "that he got and others that were doubtless killed but not known to be killed". He fired only a dozen rounds but the rifle was so effective that "the awed Apaches soon sought cover in the brush."<sup>21</sup>

## **Relations between the mail contractor and the post office remained unsettled.**

Prior to 1856, Giddings realized that the cost of carrying the mail was four times as much as the value of the contract.<sup>22</sup> Giddings, and others writing on his behalf, wrote many letters to the Postmaster General and to Congress imploring them to correct the inequities in Giddings' contract.

In January through February 1855 Giddings wrote to the US Senate and House of Representatives asking for compensation for his expenses not covered by the contract. He cited the loss of one horse, a large number of mules and a wagon totalling \$2,140. He claimed to have spent \$19,830 to move the mail and had received only \$2,679.89 in compensation up to that time.<sup>23</sup>

On January 31, 1855, a letter to Postmaster General Campbell from US Representative P. Hansbrough Bell and US Senators Rusk and Sam Houston asked for either weekly or semi-weekly mail service. They also pointed to the need for the Post Office Department to make changes in the Giddings contract.<sup>24</sup> In January 1855, letters from Major Belges (Assistant Quarter-master, U.S. Army in San Antonio)<sup>25</sup> and John Bowen (Postmaster at San Antonio)<sup>26</sup> attested to the necessity of using four-horse coaches for the mail service rather than two-horses as specified in the contract. Two horses could not pull the heavier wagons used by Giddings over the worst sections of the post road.<sup>27</sup>

Finally on March 13, 1855, Giddings became, by order of the Post Office Department, the official contractor to carry the mail between San Antonio and the Trans-Pecos region of Texas.<sup>28</sup> The following month Giddings was fined for leaving three mail sacks containing books at Castroville. The postmaster and Giddings' agent in Castroville had made the decision that the coach was overloaded for the long haul to El Paso. The sacks of books were left behind and delivered later.<sup>29</sup> Affidavits from John Vance (the Postmaster at Castroville)<sup>30</sup> and Thomas Rogers (Giddings' mail agent at Castroville)<sup>31</sup> explained the reasons for this incident and asked that the service be upgraded to twice a month due to the increasing volume of mail and the Army's need for faster service.<sup>32</sup>

## **The spring and summer of 1855 were trying times for Giddings' mail service.**

Heavy rains turned the roads to mud and the creeks to torrents, slowing the mail carriers and resulting in fines of \$650 from the Post Office department. In June, two of Giddings' employees were killed on the stretch of road in New Mexico known as Jornada del Muerto and the mail was lost. A band of Indians, in a night raid in June 1855, stole all the mules from the corral behind Giddings' store in El Paso.<sup>33</sup> Adding insult to injury, Giddings was asleep in the store when the mules were stolen.<sup>34</sup>

In July 1855, over one hundred residents of Bexar County (including Bigfoot Wallace and George Giddings) signed a petition to Governor Elisha M. Pease of Texas seeking relief from Indian attacks. They wanted the Governor to authorize companies of rangers to patrol the northern and western parts of Bexar and Medina Counties to intercept raiding parties.<sup>35</sup> The US Army left its base at Fort Inge and moved troops further west.<sup>36</sup> The temporary army camp on Live Oak Creek near the Pecos River then became a permanent post; the men of the First Infantry built Fort Lancaster on a site between the creek and the mesa to the east.<sup>37</sup>

## **The winter of 1855 was difficult for travelers.**

During the winter of 1855-56 record snowfalls created misery and delay for all travelers on the Southern Plains. Giddings was fined \$200 for late mail deliveries.<sup>38</sup> The cold didn't seem to deter Indian raiders. Stages were ambushed at Jornada del Muerto and Eagle Springs. A wagon train camped near Barilla Springs was also attacked. By Christmas 1855 Giddings had suffered losses of \$3,890 each month since he started operations in October 1854. He got some relief when Congress increased his contract to \$33,500 from \$25,000 per year beginning on August 18, 1854.<sup>39</sup> In the next few months, he would see \$5,607.37 taken back by the postal department to settle suits brought by Wasson and others arising out of broken contracts.<sup>40</sup> In December 1855, Giddings lost 208 mules and the bell mare from Barilla Springs Station, west of Fort Davis<sup>41</sup> when Indians successfully stole the mules belonging to a supply train of sixteen twelve-mule wagons.<sup>42</sup>

March 1856 was the one-year anniversary of Giddings' amended mail contract. Giddings wrote to the US Congress asking to be either released from the contract or have it modified and "placed upon such a footing as to secure him a fair compensation for his service."<sup>43</sup> To back-up his demand, George and his brother Frank left the business in the hands of John Giddings and set out for the East Coast. Frank went to New York City to meet with the firm's bankers and George went to Washington City to lobby Texas Congressman Peter H. Bell and Senator Thomas Rusk.<sup>44</sup>

When the Giddings' brothers returned to San Antonio they received reports from the field regarding the extreme winter weather. One of their men froze to death north of El Paso. The eastbound coach endured fifteen days of bitter cold. The men had driven through a "hurricane" at Escondido "which took off the top of their ambulance." On

the trip west the same conductor, James Dusenberry, drove through rain, sleet and cold severe enough to cause the death of four mules from exposure.<sup>45</sup>

## **The arrival of warmer weather brought out more Indians.**

Albert J. Myers, while a soldier in the mid 1850's, described the Indian's amazing horsemanship. He wrote, "They are the best horsemen in the world. In battle they gallop around you, throwing themselves out of the saddle and hanging over the horse's side keeping the body of the horse between their enemy and themselves, while only a foot is seen clinging to the saddle. It requires skill to do this alone, but in addition, these warriors manage to keep arrows flying from under their horses necks with a degree of certainty and rapidity that is disagreeable to contemplate."<sup>46</sup>

The station at Eagle Springs, newly built, was destroyed in July 1856 along with 20 tons of hay and 100 bushels of corn. Eighteen mules were stolen and the three men manning the station were killed in the attack. The Eagle Springs station was later destroyed three times before 1861, usually with the loss of life.<sup>47</sup> Each time, the station was rebuilt at a cost to Giddings of at least \$1,500.<sup>48</sup>

In September 1856, Comanche Indians near Escondido Springs west of the Pecos River attacked Big Foot Wallace's mail train. Nineteen mules were stolen and the coach was destroyed.<sup>49</sup> Wallace testified later that this was the only time he was attacked by Indians while working for Giddings as the mail contractor.<sup>50</sup> In October, "twenty-four mules were stolen from Fort Davis Station and the herder killed. U.S. Troops under the command of Lt. Zenas R. Bliss had been sent out after the Indians but had failed to recover the mules."<sup>51</sup> The following December, Indians attacked a train under the command of James Cook at Eighteen-Mile Hole. All the mules were taken and two coaches burned. George Giddings was on the coach and helped fight off the attack.

Shortly afterward, in January 1857, the mail party on a branch line between Fort Davis and Presidio was attacked near Cienega, Texas. The Indians destroyed two coaches, two sets of six-horse harness and the mail. Twenty-eight mules were stolen.<sup>52</sup> In February 1857, a howling blizzard east of El Paso resulted in more fines from the Postmaster General because of delays in delivering the mail.

## **In 1856 Giddings began to build more relay stations.**

By April 1856, there were two more relay stations between San Elizario and Fort Clarke. One was the Limpia Station near Fort Davis and the other was at Live Oak Creek just north of Fort Lancaster.<sup>53</sup> Soon there were stations at Comanche Springs (later Fort Stockton) and Eagle Springs.

Giddings must have used his earnings as a freighter and a merchant to subsidize the mail route. Somehow he was able to afford to build these new relay stations. In early 1857, a station was completed at Van Horn's Well. The new station was a welcome sight to travelers but it also attracted the attention of passing Comanche Indians who

promptly, in March, ran off the herd of 18 mules grazing a short distance from the station.<sup>54</sup>

In Washington, D.C., James Buchanan was sworn in as President of the United States on March 4, 1857. With the new administration came a new cabinet and a new Postmaster General. At last Giddings would be rid of Postmaster Campbell. He hoped for a more evenhanded treatment for his mail route in the future.

Petitions arrived in Washington, D.C. from California containing 75,000 signatures calling for a wagon road and "overland mail service from the eastern states."<sup>55</sup> In response, Congress appropriated funds for two such roads, one from Fort Kearney, Nebraska and one from El Paso to Fort Yuma on the eastern boundary of southern California. Congress could not agree on which route was more appropriate for the proposed overland mail service and so, funded both. Finally, in the Appropriations bill of 1857-58, the Postmaster General was authorized to contract for mail service from some point on the Mississippi River to San Francisco, California. The contractor who won the bid would choose the starting point at the eastern terminus. The contract would pay \$300,000 for semi-monthly service, \$450,000 for weekly service or \$600,000 for semi-weekly service at the option of the Postmaster General.<sup>56</sup> The term of the contract would be for six years.

On April 20, 1857, the new Postmaster General, Aaron V. Brown, advertised for bids for the new route that was to begin service on July 1, 1857.[^57] George Giddings, who already had a stage coach line operating to within 450 miles of Fort Yuma, saw this as the long dreamed of opportunity to open up regular commerce between San Antonio and the Pacific Coast. A new chapter opened for George H. Giddings and his mail service.

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4. Wayne R. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules: The San Antonio-El Paso Mail, 1851-1881*, (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1985), 53
5. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 55
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7. James M. Day "Big Foot Wallace in the Trans-Pecos Texas," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook* 55 (1979), 74
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9. Memorial to the Postmaster General, George H. Giddings vs. the United States
10. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 65-6

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15. Deposition of George H. Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States
16. Memorial to the Senate and House of Representatives, Giddings vs. The United States
17. Deposition of William A. Wallace, Giddings vs. The United States; Deposition of William M. Ford, Giddings vs. The United States; Deposition of Archibald C. Hyde, Giddings vs. The United States; Deposition of George H. Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States; Petition from Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States
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20. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 56-8
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22. Statement from Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States.
23. Memorial of George Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States
24. Letter to Postmaster General, Giddings vs. The United States
25. Letter from Assist. QM, USA, Giddings vs. The United States
26. Letter from PM Gen. Of San Antonio, Giddings vs. The United States
27. Letter from General P. Smith, Giddings vs. The United States
28. Letter to Senator, Giddings vs. The United States
29. Memorial to the Postmaster General, George H. Giddings vs. the United States
30. Affidavit of Castroville Postmaster, Giddings vs. The United States
31. Affidavit, Giddings vs. The United States
32. Memorial to the Postmaster General, George H. Giddings vs. the United States
33. Petition from Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States; (M-23) Deposition of William M. Ford, Giddings vs. The United States
34. Deposition of George H. Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States.
35. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 71-2
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# **George Giddings' second mail contract, July 1857–February 1862**

*"It was always a mystery to me that he could employ men who would take their lives in their hands to carry out that contract" Captain G. Walker.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Mail service between San Antonio and San Diego was set to begin in 1857.**

On June 30, 1857, Giddings' contract to carry the mail between San Antonio and Santa Fé ended. On the next day, a new contract to carry the mail on through to San Diego, California was scheduled to begin. There were nine contractors competing for the new route, designated as route number 8076. One of them was James E. Birch, from Swansea, Massachusetts. He had been in the stage business for eleven years and had owned and managed the California Stage Company.

James Birch was ready for a new venture and was prepared to act quickly when he learned that bids were taken for a new transcontinental stage line. His only serious competitor was the Butterfield Company, a creation of the Adams, American, National and Wells Fargo express companies. Birch bid \$600,000 a year for semiweekly service on the route favored by the Postmaster General. Except for one potential obstacle, Birch was confident of winning the contract. The problem was that the Butterfield firm was headed by John Butterfield, a personal friend of President Buchanan.

In the end, the Postmaster General hedged by awarding contracts on two transcontinental routes as allowed by the 1856 appropriations bill. Birch received the contract for route number 8076 for \$149,800 to provide semimonthly service to San Diego with connections to the Lower Road from San Antonio.<sup>2</sup> Butterfield received a

contract for \$600,000 for semiweekly service from St. Louis, Missouri to San Francisco; both routes to begin service on July 1, 1857. To avoid winter snow, the Butterfield route started at St. Louis and then turned southwest toward Texas where it crossed Colbert's Ferry on the Red River. The route then ran 282 miles to Fort Chadbourne on the Colorado River. From Fort Chadbourne it ran in a westerly direction to Franklin (now El Paso, Texas), a distance of 458 miles.<sup>3</sup>

The mail service provided by Birch and Butterfield was the first regularly scheduled mail connecting California and the eastern States. It was not, however, the first overland mail service to California. The US military had carried mail to California since 1847. US Army express couriers carried mostly military dispatches but they did carry some civilian mail as well. Birch's contract provided for a true trans-continental postal service. The mail from the eastern States would be collected at New Orleans and then sent to Indianola, Texas, by steamer. Then it was hauled 130 miles by wagon to San Antonio and prepared for the trip to San Diego, California.<sup>4</sup>

James Birch selected Isaiah Churchill Woods to manage the enterprise. Isaiah Woods in turn appointed his brother-in-law Robert E. Doyle as the San Francisco agent and James E. Mason as the San Antonio agent. Woods set out from New York for San Antonio where he intended to ride the mail stage to San Diego and meet James Birch. Unfortunately the steamship to Indianola arrived late and he missed the connecting stage to San Antonio.

## **The first mail to California left San Antonio on July 9, 1857.**

Mason presented his credentials to the San Antonio Postmaster on July 9 and collected the mail bound for California. With a crew of guards and station keepers and a herd of mules to stock relay stations along the way, the men left amidst a cheering crowd gathered in the plaza.<sup>5</sup>

According to the San Francisco Bulletin, "On the 31st of August, at noon, James E. Mason and party arrived at San Diego in charge of the U.S. overland mail. The parties left San Antonio on the 9th and 24th of July; consequently those who left on the 24th had made the trip in thirty-eight days." It continued, "Mr. Mason left San Antonio on the morning of the 9th of July, in company with four men. The time afforded for preparation was exceedingly short, so that no relays of mules could be sent ahead, and even the animals ridden by the party had to be picked up as they could; at a few hours notice. This caused material delay, which was still further augmented by the sickness of the conductor. At El Paso however, they took an ambulance, and had proceeded as far as Cienega de Sauz, where they were overtaken by the party that left San Antonio with the mail of the 24th, in charge of Capt. James [Henry] Skillman. He had come in an ambulance the entire distance from San Antonio, without encountering any difficulty on the road. The two parties then proceeded together as far as the Pima Villages, when Mr. Mason took both mails, and with one companion, pushed on with pack-mules, making the trip to San Diego, in the unequalled time of nine days, across the worst part of the entire route, including the great Colorado Desert."<sup>6</sup>

The article continued, "The immigration across the Southern route is reported by the mail riders to be quite large, upwards of one hundred wagons having been passed, with considerable quantities of stock. As the mail riders, however, traveled mostly in the night, they had not much opportunity to elicit information from the immigrants."<sup>7</sup>

## **The second mail to California left San Antonio on July 24, 1857.**

Isaiah Woods hired William "Bigfoot" Wallace to manage a supply train that stocked the relay stations and Henry Skillman to conduct the mail coach. Skillman left with the second westbound mail on July 24, 1857, with a Celerity wagon for the guards and the mail sack and also a canvas-covered spring wagon with water, provisions and mule feed.<sup>8</sup> The amount of actual mail was small.<sup>9</sup> Another supply train had been sent out earlier on July 1 consisting of three wagons, 38 mules, 17 men and two tons of supplies for the relay stations.

The next day, Woods followed on the El Paso bound stagecoach. Giddings intended to travel from San Antonio to El Paso on the mail coach that was scheduled to leave on August 9.<sup>10</sup> Woods met Wallace on the road beyond Castroville and heard first-hand the first of the many reports of bad news. When Woods met Wallace, he and his men were mounted on mules borrowed from the Army.

Wallace told Woods that Comanche raiders sprang out of the brush fifteen miles above Camp Hudson and surprised Wallace and his party. The mules pulling the wagon panicked and ran into the brush, breaking the wagon pole. Wallace and a companion named William Clifford (of New Orleans) jumped off and ran for the mule herd. Wallace reached a mule, jumped on and ran for his life. Clifford was not so lucky; he was lanced in the back and fell. "The mail party fought the Comanche for about two hours but the Indians were too numerous for them; they took all the mules, coach, saddles, and in fact, all that the mail party had."<sup>11</sup> After the fight, Wallace led a patrol of US cavalry back to bury Clifford's body and salvage the wrecked wagon. Fifty-four mules were stolen; only the six that the men were riding were saved.<sup>12</sup> Wallace and his men turned back toward San Antonio and met Woods' coach on the way. The 2d Cavalry, under the command of Captain Whiting, pursued the Indians and recaptured the stolen mules but they were no longer suitable for mail service.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Doyle made a late start from San Diego because of a shortage of mules there. His small party finally got underway on August 9th with pack mules carrying the mail. What followed was a month of confusion, breakdowns, missed rendezvous and late deliveries as the freight men got organized. Eventually, order was restored and over the next year the average time to make the 1,476-mile trip was 27 days.

## **George Giddings and the Birch line merged.**

On August 4, 1857, the Army discontinued its semi-weekly express service due to, "the recent increases of mail facilities between this city (San Antonio) and the posts

along the road to New Mexico.”<sup>14</sup> To ensure the safety of the mail, Major General Twiggs, commander of the Department of Texas, issued Special Order number 91. It instructed the post commanders at Forts Clark, Lancaster, and Davis to furnish from four to eight men on the application of Isaiah Woods “to proceed from post to post as far as Fort Bliss with the semi-monthly mails in charge of himself or his agents, the transportation to be supplied by Mr. Woods. They [the US Army] will also give protection to any horses or mules he may leave at their posts, and permit an employee of his to remain with them.”<sup>15</sup> After this policy was in place, infantry soldiers accompanied the mailmen. The soldiers traveled in a wagon provided by the mail company.

On September 2, 1857, Woods proposed to Giddings that they merge their operations. Giddings, after thinking the matter over for a few days, accepted. Giddings’ men would take the mail to Santa Fé and he would receive a salary. It made sense to cooperate with Woods since the two contractors were running wagons along the same roads and Giddings owned the relay stations between San Antonio and El Paso.

## **Transcontinental passenger service commenced October 1857.**

The fifth mail party arrived in San Diego on October 5 just 26 days and 12 hours after leaving San Antonio. This was a new speed record.<sup>16</sup> In less than three months, the time to make the trip had been cut from 53 days to 26 ½ days. On the basis of this success, Woods placed an ad in the San Diego Herald announcing passenger service to the east from San Francisco to New Orleans. Re-enforcing that announcement, on October 18, the coach from San Antonio brought four paying passengers, each paying a fare of \$200. Happily, the coach was on schedule!

On October 23, 1857, Woods left San Diego on the eastbound stage for El Paso. Upon arriving at Fort Yuma he received news that threatened to undo all of his efforts. James Birch had drowned in the Atlantic Ocean on September 13 when the steamer “Central America” sank in a storm.<sup>17</sup> Woods’ suppliers, who knew that the mail line operated on Birch’s credit, demanded payment when they received news of Birch’s death. Without the backing of Birch, Woods knew that he would be hard put to get the credit he needed to continue operating.<sup>18</sup> In another ominous turn of events, the Butterfield Company, with its deep pockets, signed a contract to begin mail service on September 15, 1857. Woods had no choice but to continue on his way to San Antonio as scheduled.<sup>19</sup>

Woods and Giddings left San Elizario on Christmas day 1857 for San Antonio knowing that the only way to straighten out the tangled finances was to talk to the man who had assumed control of the firm from Mr. Birch’s widow. The two men spent New Year’s Day on the road and arrived at Fort Lancaster only to learn that the coach conducted by Silas St. John, who had left El Paso a few days before them, arrived at Fort Lancaster to find the relief mules there had been stolen. Both parties continued on to Fort Clark with worn-out mules but were delayed by flooded rivers and a standoff with forty Comanche Indians. The trip was stressful for all involved. The

passengers riding in the first coach arrived in San Antonio on December 31. They cheered when the tower of San Fernando church came into sight, grateful that their once-in-a-lifetime adventure was over.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the coach that Woods and Giddings were riding in became mired in a snowstorm and lagged behind. Two mounted men were sent ahead with the mail and the coach proceeded slowly, arriving at San Antonio on January 17, 1858.

That winter Indians mounted a series of attacks on the mailmen and their property. Mescalero Apaches emptied the corrals at the relay stations at La Limpia and Dead Man's Hole. The contents of the stations were destroyed and 26 mules stolen.<sup>21</sup> The mail party was attacked. The conductor and his guards fought the Indians for some time and then put the mail on the fore-wheels of the coach, and with two mules and a horse, escaped with the mail. They left behind two coaches and sets of harness that were destroyed by the Indians.<sup>22</sup> The relay station at Van Horn's Well and its contents were also destroyed. The losses included between 25 and 75 tons of hay valued at \$50 per ton<sup>23</sup> that the hay contractor, George Lyle, had brought in just the day before.<sup>24</sup> Twenty-six mules were also taken.<sup>25</sup>

## **Giddings went to Washington, D.C. to make his case before Postmaster General Brown.**

The postmaster met with Mrs. Julia Birch's attorney who admitted that Giddings had a claim to the mail contract. The firm's new owner, who had received ownership from Mrs. Birch, then ceded the San Antonio to San Diego mail contract to Giddings. Giddings received a new contract for Route number 8076 for twice a month (semi-monthly) service paying \$149,800 per year beginning on January 1, 1858. The contract ran for three and a half years.<sup>26</sup>

At this time, Giddings was working with the California Steam Navigation Company "so as to make the trip between San Francisco and San Diego in two days, connecting with the overland mail. This, with a proper connection at Indianola, it is expected will give a certain and reliable communication overland in thirty days—to be reduced, after awhile to perhaps twenty-five days."<sup>27</sup>

However, not all the news was good. Congress had not yet passed an appropriations bill for the Post Office so Giddings received certificates of indebtedness instead of bank drafts. He could only hope that the San Antonio banks would honor the notes without heavily discounting them.<sup>28</sup> There was also a clause in that contract that would later hurt Giddings, i.e. the Postmaster General had the authority to curtail or discontinue any part of the route at his discretion.<sup>29</sup>

## **The Butterfield Company prepared to begin service in October 1858.**

The Butterfield Company was preparing to begin carrying mail in the fall. The Butterfield Company employed 800 men to build the post road, dig wells and build 141 relay stations along the 2,800-mile route. The company bought 250 coaches and

1500 horses and mules. The Butterfield route started in St. Louis and Memphis, converged at Little Rock then joined Giddings' route at El Paso. Since the Butterfield route did not cross the populated parts of Texas it was of little commercial value to Texas except for the connection at El Paso.<sup>30</sup> Giddings first heard from Isaiah Woods of a rumor that portions of the Giddings' route west of El Paso would be cancelled since his route and that of the Butterfield Company followed the same road.

In October 1857, in what was to be the first of several curtailments to Giddings' mail contract, the Postmaster General terminated Giddings contract between El Paso and Santa Fé and gave it to Thomas F. Bowler for a contract price of \$16,250 per year. Bowler apparently could not perform this service satisfactorily and Simon Hart, an El Paso merchant, bought the contract for \$11,800 in June of 1859.<sup>31</sup> In short order, the Postmaster General curtailed another part of Giddings' route. The section of the mail route between El Paso and Fort Yuma was granted exclusively to the Butterfield Company and Giddings was left with two disconnected mail routes, i.e. San Antonio to El Paso and Fort Yuma to San Diego. He was allowed an increase from \$149,800 to \$196,448 because service was also increased from twice a month to weekly deliveries. There was no allowance for the expense of dismantling his stations in the discontinued section.<sup>32</sup> The Postmaster General cited duplication of service between El Paso to Fort Yuma as the reason for the curtailment.<sup>33</sup>

## Giddings offers passenger service to San Diego.

In a newspaper advertisement dated July 10, 1858, proprietors of the stage line, George H. Giddings and Robert E. Doyle, offered passenger service to San Diego and to all stops between in new coaches with six-mule teams. They guaranteed that the passengers would ride the entire way in these new coaches except for 100 miles across a sand desert west of Tucson.<sup>34</sup>

The new coaches were undoubtedly Concord Coaches built by Abbot-Downing Company of Concord, NH. They supplied stagecoaches to all the important lines in the West. Each coach accommodated nine passengers inside and one or more outside, in addition to the driver and guard. The front seat faced backwards while the middle seat was removable and had little or no back support. The back seat faced forward and was considered the most desirable and the first to be reserved. The body of the coach was made of white oak braced with iron. Built without springs, the body was swung on stout three-inch thick leather bands that permitted it to swing back and forth and side to side. The coach could also carry as much as 600 pounds of mail.<sup>35</sup>

During this period, the volume of mail grew rapidly. In October 1858, the Giddings line carried 2,509 letters. In October 1859, it carried 64,000 letters; by March 1860, Giddings was carrying 112,645 letters per month. In 1859, the company employed 59 drivers and 50 coaches pulled by over 400 mules<sup>36</sup> in addition to support personnel who manned the relay stations and guarded the mail trains. Freight and passenger traffic increased proportionally. On October 21, 1858, the coach arriving in San Antonio under Captain Holliday brought the mail and four passengers. The passengers reported, "...the trail was crowded with cattle drovers bound for the west."<sup>37</sup>

In the spring and summer of 1858, Giddings began rebuilding ruined relay stations and started construction of new ones. The mail company's relay stations were spaced about 25 miles apart and were kept stocked with items, such as corn, that were most often required by travelers. It was estimated that at least two thousand westward bound emigrants used the Lower Military Road each year. The Sacramento Union newspaper praised both Butterfield and Giddings when it wrote, "The weary emigrant will no longer be left to protect himself against the incursion of the Indians night after night, and with nothing to subsist his teams on...He will camp under the roof of the mail station, or in the vicinity, feed his teams with grain and hay, rest safely..."<sup>38</sup> Stage stations were constructed in the form of a quadrangle with a single entrance. The two rooms inside the station had no exterior doors. The stations were designed to be impregnable against Indian attacks unless provisions of the besieged defenders ran out before help arrived.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to providing protection and supplies to travelers, the mail contractor's employees at the relay station were sometimes the only representative of Government (other than the Army) that many people saw on a regular basis. Sometime the stations became "embryonic courthouses, with their residents serving as magistrates and jurors."<sup>40</sup> Lt. Zenas Bliss wrote in his memoirs of a man who shot and killed another in a saloon about midnight. The Brackettville station agent, Tom Rogers, who was also a Justice of the Peace, was awakened and, "organized his court, tried the murderer, acquitted him, and the man was back dealing Monte...in an hour or two from the time he shot the victim."<sup>41</sup>

## **The US military provided protection for the mail service.**

On June 4, 1858, Major General Twiggs issued a second order, Special Order number 50, to the commanding officers of posts along the road used by mail contractors. The order stated that the commanders "will permit the mail Company to erect sheds and corrals sufficiently near to receive the protection of their posts."<sup>42</sup>

In the fall of 1858, the Army established a new fort a few miles north of the Birchville mail station on the Rio Grande. Birchville was the name given to a mail station located where the San Antonio-El Paso Road left Quitman Canyon at the Rio Grande. Two to three men manned the station.<sup>43</sup> For some reason Fort Quitman, was built six miles above the Birchville station<sup>44</sup> although the original intention was to locate the post where the road joined the river.<sup>45</sup> The mail station was moved to be near Fort Quitman and the name was changed to Quitman Station. Fort Quitman offered protection to the stage station and established a US Army presence on a lonely stretch of the border with Mexico.

## **Travel by stagecoach in 1858 was dangerous and unpleasant.**

While the Texas newspapers generally supported Giddings' efforts to provide mail and passenger service,<sup>4647</sup> California papers found reasons to complain about the service. For the benefit of greenhorn travelers, one paper published a list of supplies

that a traveler on the stage should take along. The list included, "One Sharp's rifle and a hundred cartridges; a Colt's Navy revolver and two pounds of balls; a knife and sheath; a pair of thick boots and woolen pants; a half-dozen pair of thick woolen socks; six undershirts; three woolen over-shirts; a wide-awake hat; a cheap sack coat; a soldier's overcoat; one pair of blankets in summer and two in winter; a piece of India rubber cloth for blankets; a pair of gauntlets; a small bag of needle and pins, a sponge, hair brush, comb, soap, etc. in an oil-silk bag; two pairs of thick drawers, and three or four towels."<sup>47</sup> While the first thirty pounds of luggage was included in the fare, excess baggage cost one dollar per pound so these extra items, which might save the passenger's life, increased the cost of travel.

A young man named Phocion R. Way left Ohio for the silver mines of Arizona in May, 1858. He arrived in San Antonio and booked passage on the stagecoach. This was his first sight of the frontier. He kept a diary of his journey and left an illuminating account of travel on the frontier. He characterized his traveling companions as "citizens with the bark on." He learned the hard way why most passengers preferred to sleep on the ground rather than with the fleas in the station beds. He survived a gunfight, a hailstorm, threat of Indian attacks, the steep road down to Fort Lancaster, heat, dust, the chill of a "norther," a prairie fire and wretched roads. He learned to eat, relax and sleep with a rifle close by. He didn't blame the stage employees for his travel experiences and called them "fine fellows."<sup>48</sup>

Sometimes, as happened on May 20, 1859, there were too many passengers for the regular mail coach and an additional coach was added to accommodate all. George F. Pierce a minister, rode such a coach and recorded his impressions. He described the ritual of mealtimes away from a station or other shelter: "On stopping, all the employees of the stage line spread themselves in quest of fuel. A few dry sticks were soon gathered - the fire kindled, the kettle put on, and water heated; an old bag is brought from its resting place in the stage boot. Its open mouth laid upon the ground, the other end is seized and suddenly lifted, and out comes tin-cups and plates, iron-spoons, knives and forks, helter-skelter; another bag rolls slowly out, containing the bread; presently another cloth is unrolled, and a piece of beef appears. Now a box is brought forth, the lid is raised, and we behold coffee, tea, sugar, salt, pepper, and pickles - a goodly supply." Then "the ground coffee is put in, water poured on, and all well shaken - the coals are ready and the pot boils. By this time the frying-pan is hot, the lard melted, the meat sliced, and soon our senses are regaled by the hissing urn and the simmering flesh..." He followed with the observation that, "The table-cloth of many colors, all inclined to dark, as innocent of water as the loom that made it, is spread upon the ground. Plates, tin-cups, knives and forks are arranged in order, and Ramon announces: 'Supper ready, gentlemen.' All hands gather about 'the cloth', oblivious of dirt, careless of dainties, and the necessaries of life disappear very rapidly. The fragments are left for the prairie wolf and the birds of the air; the cloth is shaken, and on its dingy surface a few more spots appear, of the same sort, however, only a little more lively from being fresh; the unwashed instruments are boxed and bagged, and we are ready to travel."<sup>49</sup>

## **Tom Rife encounters runaway slaves and more Indian attacks.**

In December 1858, a slave catcher named Solomon C. Childers, arrived on the stage to San Antonio bringing with him “a valuable negro” that Childers had recaptured in Chihuahua.<sup>50</sup> The reward for the slave’s return was the usual \$200, which was a large sum, considering that slaves were rarely armed. Childers praised the stage employees calling the conductors “a capital set, especially our friends, Frank and Thomas.” This is one of the first mentions of Rife after he returned to the mail service since he left for California in 1853.

In the same month, on December 8, Thomas Rife brought the stage into the Eagle Springs station on a cold December night only to find the station burning. Two dead and scalped bodies of white men lay nearby. (One was the stationmaster named Chips). Rife heard an account of the attack from a Mexican man who was employed to tend the stable and harness the relief mules. (In the terminology of the day, this man was known as a hostler). The hostler had fled into the brush during the attack and witnessed the looting of the station and the theft of all twelve mules.<sup>51</sup> This was the second time the Eagle Springs station was destroyed.<sup>52</sup>

In July 1860, the mail party with Rife as conductor, Free Thomas as driver, and Jack Hodge and C. W. “Clown” Garner as guards, captured two escaped slaves near Devil’s River. The slaves, a man and a woman, were the survivors of a group of three slaves who had escaped from their owners on the Colorado River and came close to starving as they made their way to Mexico. One man became desperate enough to kill the other and cook and eat him. The mail party partook of the meat thinking it was bear meat. When they realized what they were eating, Jack Hodge recounts, “You should have seen our faces, some long, some broad, and of changeable colors. I think I was green. Well, that bear meat didn’t stay with us long. My innards felt like the government of Mexico, rather unsettled, that is the way we all felt excepting Clown, who was wearing one of his comical grins peculiar to Clown only”. Hodge went on to say; “We carried them to San Antonio and got the reward all right.”<sup>53</sup> The reward for escaped slaves found west of the Colorado River was \$200, which amounted to five months pay for a stage guard and a year’s pay for most laborers.

## **The Butterfield Company began service in October 1858.**

The first delivery of mail by Giddings’ competitor, The Butterfield Company, arrived in San Francisco on November 10, 1858. The Butterfield Company was well financed and could pay higher wages than could Giddings and other stage operators. Some of Giddings men, including Bradford Daily, Silas St. John and Henry Skillman, left Giddings’ employ to work for the Butterfield line.

Skillman was given charge of the section of the road between Horsehead Crossing and El Paso. After building a new station on the west bank of the Pecos, Skillman drove a Butterfield stage. In September 1857, he became famous for driving the first westbound Butterfield stage from Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos all the way to El Paso without relief, a distance of some 250 miles.<sup>54</sup> Bradford Daily, who replaced Tom

Rife as Conductor on Skillman's line in 1853, signed on as a driver. He was murdered while helping to build a Butterfield mail station on the Pecos.<sup>55</sup> Another of Giddings' conductors, Silas St. John, also signed on with the Butterfield line as a stationmaster.

On January 28, 1859, the New Orleans Postmaster was ordered to make up a weekly mail pouch for San Francisco to be forwarded over Giddings' route. Previously the San Francisco mail had been forwarded to St. Louis. No provision was made to fund this extra service. For the next three months, until April 1859, Giddings had the mail picked up at the Indianola post office and brought to San Antonio without receiving compensation from the Post Office Department.<sup>56</sup>

Postmaster General Brown died unexpectedly in February 1859 and was succeeded by Joseph Holt. On June 1, 1859, Holt ordered Giddings to reduce his weekly service to 24 trips per year at a contract price of \$120,000. Giddings offered to continue the weekly trips and to rely on Congress for payment but orders were sent to the local postmasters to "refuse delivery of the mails to the agents" of Giddings.<sup>57</sup>

## **Giddings' California mail service was discontinued in April 1860.**

A hint of fresh trouble appeared in January 1859, when Congressmen from northern States began to voice opposition to Giddings' mail service because of its location in a slave state;<sup>58</sup> Isaiah Woods, who was still employed by the coach line, went to Washington to monitor the situation.<sup>59</sup>

On February 1, 1860, the US House of Representatives finally elected a Speaker after months of rancorous debate. There still was no postal appropriation bill. It was an election year and Congress was engrossed in struggling with an ever-growing list of issues that threatened to lead the country into civil war. The Alabama legislature had already called for a secession convention if the nation elected a Republican for president in November 1860.<sup>60</sup>

Giddings was in Washington, D.C., when he learned that Postmaster General Holt had ordered that the Pacific end of Giddings route (San Diego to Fort Yuma) to be discontinued in April, 1860, and the Giddings contract reduced to \$91,305 per year. This meant that the large number of mules and a large amount of stage property in California would have to be either sold or taken seven hundred miles back to Texas.<sup>61</sup> The men would have to be laid off or brought back to Texas unless they could hire on with the new carrier. The Postmaster General continued to cut Giddings' contract. On May 1st, he announced that the Butterfield Company would move their route south to cross the Pecos River at Horsehead Crossing and then continue on to Comanche Springs.<sup>62</sup> After this change, Giddings' route would end at Fort Stockton. The contract amount would accordingly be reduced to \$53,726 per year.<sup>63</sup> However, Giddings continued to run coaches to El Paso at a loss and his men continued to man the relay stations between Comanche Springs and El Paso.<sup>64</sup>

The Butterfield stagecoach drivers took the mail forwarded from San Antonio only when they had room and by October 1860, a very large amount of mail had accumulated at both El Paso and Comanche Springs.<sup>65</sup> Apparently the Post Office

Department had neglected this detail and did not modify the mail contract to compensate the Butterfield line for the additional mail. Despite problems with the Post Office Department, Giddings' mail stages continued to provide good service. On March 7, 1860, the mail reached San Antonio from El Paso in just four days and seventeen hours.

In May of 1860, the news from Washington, D.C. was not auspicious. The Republican Party was running Abraham Lincoln for President. The Democrats, having split into two factions, lost any chance of winning the Presidential election. Congress adjourned without passing a postal appropriation bill. Giddings was in Washington along with representatives of many other mail carriers, all of who were anxious to be paid. The Postmaster General issued promissory notes to the mail carriers. Giddings used his certificates as collateral for loans. He also heard that the Butterfield Company was lobbying to have their route moved farther north in anticipation of a war. Giddings was hopeful that the change would benefit his company.<sup>66</sup>

On July 5, 1860, gold was discovered on the Membres River in what is now Arizona. The news sparked a rush of men from the Mesilla Valley and the town of Mesilla.<sup>67</sup> The Mesilla newspaper closed for lack of printers and employees of the mail company deserted the stage stands to become gold miners.<sup>68</sup> The El Paso and San Diego mail arrived at San Antonio on October 6, 1860, with the news that two men had been killed in an attack on Dempsey's train near the Pecos Station. The Indians also drove off or slaughtered a herd of 250 goats found near the station. Thirty soldiers were dispatched from Fort Lancaster by its commanding officer, Captain Carpenter, to give chase.<sup>69</sup> Tom Rife mentioned this incident later in a deposition taken in 1892.<sup>70</sup>

## **Abraham Lincoln's election led to secession.**

In the national elections of November 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. His election energized the Southern secessionists. By the time South Carolina seceded, in December 1860, Indians had struck La Limpia, Van Horn's Well and Beaver Lake stations. The stations at Leon Holes and El Muerto were attacked shortly afterward. By then news of Indian depredations was overshadowed by more important events taking place elsewhere. Many Union men, including Giddings, still held out hope that a conflict between the States would be averted. These hopes dimmed when Mississippi seceded on January 9, 1861, followed by Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana, all in seventeen days. On January 28, 1861, the secession convention met in Austin and voted in favor of submitting the question to the electorate. A majority of the State's voters, some 46,000, voted in favor of secession.<sup>71</sup>

The new Postmaster General offered Giddings a new four year mail contract. It was for a route to run from San Antonio to Los Angeles beginning on April 1, 1861.<sup>72</sup> At that time, most Americans thought that the conflict between the Federal government and the Southern States would be settled peacefully and that the mail service would be allowed to continue as before until the Union and the Confederacy could agree to a treaty.<sup>73</sup>

Indian raids on the mail service continued as before. In January 1861, a supply train camped at Pecos Station was attacked. The station was damaged and 109 mules were stolen.<sup>74</sup> Captain Albert Bracket, the army commander at Camp Hudson, sent troops after the Indians. He "had the loaded wagons hauled into his post and kept them guarded until the claimant (Giddings) sent up mules from San Antonio to take the wagons to El Paso."<sup>75</sup>

Also in the month of January 1861, Quitman Station, (located about 250 yards from Fort Quitman) was robbed of 12 horses and 32 mules. About 60 Apaches attacked the station that was defended by 16 or 17 men.<sup>76</sup> One man, described as a Yankee named Billy Fink, was killed. The Howard Wells station was also destroyed in January 1861, and was never rebuilt. Rife witnessed the theft of 18 good mules from the station at Barilla Springs in March 1861.<sup>77</sup> On February 25, 1861, Dan Murphy wrote from Fort Davis describing an Indian attack on mail coaches and freighters along the Lower San Antonio-El Paso Road. He told of the loss of about 100 mules laden with copper. The next overland mail coach, conducted by T. Davis, and driven by J. Steward was charged by 25 Indians.<sup>78</sup> The protection provided by the US Army, insufficient as it was, was lost when, in mid-February, General Twiggs surrendered all Federal Forces in Texas to State and Confederates authorities. In early spring 1861, the US Army began to withdraw from the Texas frontier.<sup>79</sup>

## **The Butterfield Company shifted its route north to avoid Texas in 1861.**

The Butterfield Company re-routed its stages north of Texas. The last eastbound coach from El Paso arrived in St. Louis on March 21, 1861.<sup>80</sup> In April 1861, Noah Smithwick and a party of California emigrants reported that the stage stations on the Butterfield line between Fort Chadbourne and the Pecos River were dismantled and deserted and the ferry at the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos was destroyed.<sup>81</sup> Only four men occupied Fort Quitman when Smithwick's party passed by.<sup>82</sup> These men were either the vanguard of Baylor's force from San Antonio or, more likely, James Magoffin's caretakers from El Paso who were charged with protecting Federal property abandoned by the US Army.

On April 1, 1861 George Giddings and his brother James were on board the westbound stage when it left San Antonio. George was on his way to meet with Butterfield representatives at Fort Stockton with the intention of buying their remaining stock and equipment.<sup>83</sup> James Giddings was headed to California to organize men and material for the resumption of the mail contract to Los Angeles. George completed the transaction, buying all the equipment from Fort Stockton to California belonging to the Butterfield Company. He also purchased the site of the army post and the mail station at Comanche Springs from John D. Holloway.<sup>84</sup> Giddings then set out for El Paso on a trip during which he saw his closest brush ever with death.

With Parker Burnham in the driver's box and the coach three miles west of the station at Barilla Springs, a band of Mescalero Apaches sprang from the brush and unleashed a hail of arrows. The driver Burnham was wounded in the hip and the

neck. The guard, Jim Spears, took the reins and urged the mules toward the station's gate at a dead run. Three of the mules had arrows in their flanks. The passengers shot four Indian warriors out of their saddles before reaching the safety of the station. While the battle continued from inside the station, the three mules died of their wounds. Finally Chief Nicolas's braves gave up and left. Burnham survived the operation that removed the arrows and once healed, joined a Confederate cavalry unit.<sup>85</sup> Burnham was among the lucky men who survived their wounds. Between 1857 and 1861 the Giddings mail line running between San Antonio and San Diego suffered the death of 111 Americans and 57 Mexicans. Indians raiders caused most of the fatalities.

## **Apache's attacked the mail trains in response to the Bascom Affair.**

With the army gone, Indian raids escalated. When Giddings reached El Paso he learned that his brother, James, had died on April 28<sup>86</sup> in an attack in New Mexico.<sup>87</sup> The massacre of the mail party was the response to what is known as the "Bascom Affair."<sup>88</sup> In February 1861, US Army Lt. George N. Bascom hung the brother and nephews of the Chiricahua Apache leader, Cochise, at Fort Buchanan in what became the State of Arizona. This led to the 25-year war with the Western Apache and was the chief cause of the destruction of Giddings' mail stations in Arizona in June 1861.

The Eagle Springs station was destroyed for the third time in June and 12 mules were stolen.<sup>89</sup> Giddings was returning to San Antonio to learn what the Confederate Government would do about mail service to the West when he saw the graves of those who were killed. The station was not rebuilt.<sup>90</sup>

On May 17, 1861, a mail party of two six-mule coaches led by Free Thomas left Mesilla bound for California. Following the mail train were 100 men and the remaining Butterfield stock that Giddings had not purchased.<sup>91</sup> George Giddings and Henry Skillman followed with 25 men and livestock to replenish the mule herds at Giddings' western stations. The mail party got ahead of the larger group and was attacked by Apache Indians led by Cochise and Mangas Coloradas. The twelve men in the mail party were chased to Cook's Spring station and killed along with the station's crew.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to the Cook's Spring station, seven other stations between Mesilla and Tucson were destroyed.<sup>93</sup> More than thirty men were killed, at least six coaches were destroyed and over 100 horses and mules were stolen. George Giddings testified that the Indians destroyed "the route between Mesilla and Tucson, over 300 miles, stealing all my stock on that part of the route, over 180 head, destroyed all my stations except one, and much other valuable property and killed some 40 of my men."<sup>94</sup> Scores of Sharps Rifles and Colts Revolvers fell into the hands of the Indians as a result of the attacks. These weapons would make the Apaches even more formidable in the future.

Giddings and Henry Skillman, with a 25-man party, stopped at each burned out station and buried the dead. Giddings returned to El Paso numbed and even more in debt. Henry Skillman took over as superintendent of the line west of Mesilla and a newspaper notice optimistically announced resumption of service to California.<sup>95</sup>

The stage route east of El Paso was somewhat less affected by Indian attacks. An article in The "Daily Ledger and Texan" newspaper of San Antonio reported on June 4, 1861 that Giddings had 24 station houses built of stone or adobe between San Antonio and El Paso, each manned by three to five armed men, and that he had stocked the road with 300 mules and horses. The mail was running regularly twice a week to El Paso in 6½ days. The newspaper reported that there were more than 100 men employed on the line.<sup>96</sup>

## **The first Confederate troops arrived in West Texas in July 1861.**

Rife's mail party met a group of Confederate troops on July 9, 1861, between Dead Man's Hole and Van Horn's Well. The mail party, which was heading west to El Paso, met the group of Confederate volunteers from San Antonio as they were burying one of their men who had been struck by lightning. On July 10, 1861, Rife was seen leading the mail party near El Muerto (Dead Man's Hole) west of Van Horn's Well. The mail coach was headed to El Paso.<sup>97</sup> Three days later, Rife and his party were seen 30 miles west of San Elizário headed east toward San Antonio.<sup>98</sup> On this trip Rife and the mail coach passed Waller's and Baylor's Confederate regiments on their march from San Antonio to El Paso.

The month before, in June 1861, George Giddings rode on the San Antonio stage driven by David Koney. When the coach arrived at the destroyed station at Eagle Springs, the passengers and crew paused to bury the two dead men and then proceeded east, passing the deserted army post at Fort Davis and the mail station at La Limpia. Once back home, Giddings, like many Northern-born men, faced the question of where his loyalties lay. Would he throw his support to the Union or the Confederacy? Giddings ultimately decided to remain in Texas and support the new government.

In June, Giddings received a letter from the Confederate Government informing him that his Federal contract would not be recognized beyond June 30, 1861.<sup>99</sup> Instead, he would need to bid for a mail route from the Confederate Post Office Department when the San Antonio Postmaster advertised for bids on new contracts.<sup>100</sup> If he did not win that contract, Giddings would have to sell out or lose his investment in the stagecoach line.

The new CSA Postmaster was Stephen H. Reagan, a former US Congressman from Texas. Reagan retained those post office employees who wished to work for the Confederacy and secretly hired key people from the U.S. Postal Service. He ordered all contractors already operating to continue until new contracts could be awarded. Giddings was, as always, hopeful that he would eventually be paid for his services. According to the Mesilla Times of December 12, 1861, Henry Skillman had "taken the contract to carry the mail from Mesilla to El Paso, Texas, on horseback, once a week, and has already commenced the service."<sup>101</sup> He was paid \$250 by the Confederate government for "three trips to Fort Thorn and ...one trip to Alamosa,"<sup>102</sup>

On February 17, 1862, the US Postmaster General discontinued service on the route between El Paso and San Antonio. Either in defiance of the Postmaster General or in

ignorance of his order, Giddings' employees tried to maintain service to California. A week before Confederate troops captured Fort Fillmore, the final U.S. mail from San Diego arrived in Mesilla. The last southbound mail from Santa Fé was intercepted by Federal troops near Mesilla on its way to El Paso.<sup>103</sup> By then, the upper Rio Grande valley was a war zone.

## The Confederate invasion of New Mexico was a failure.

In May 1862, Rebel forces under Confederate General Henry Sibley retreated from Glorieta Pass, north of Santa Fé in New Mexico Territory, and began a long retreat back to San Antonio. Mail service from El Paso was still running although many stations were destroyed and the water wells polluted by Indian raiders.<sup>104</sup> The mail continued to run until August 16, 1862, when the last stage from El Paso arrived in San Antonio. Four days later, the First California Volunteer Cavalry under Lt. Col. E.E. Eyre of the US Army took possession of Fort Bliss and occupied the settlement that later became El Paso, Texas.<sup>105</sup>

Nevertheless, on August 28, 1862, Giddings signed contract number 8075 with the Confederate Post Office for twice weekly service between Mesilla and San Antonio and from Mesilla to San Diego every two weeks for \$60,000. Giddings' anticipated that the route west of Mesilla would likely not be serviceable because Federal troops and Indian raiders prevented wagons from Texas going beyond El Paso.<sup>106</sup> The contract ran until June 30, 1865.<sup>107</sup>

## Fort Clark became the western terminus of the mail service.

In practice, the mail was forced to stop operations west of Fort Clark by August 1862, due to the almost total destruction of the relay stations.<sup>108</sup> In September, a band of paroled Confederate troops under Lieutenant Edward L. Robb walked from El Paso to San Antonio and attested to the destruction of the mail stations.

Giddings summed up almost ten years of his life when he said, "I made repeated efforts to carry the mail but I was compelled to abandon the route..."<sup>109</sup> William "Big Foot" Wallace was asked, "Did you ever recover, or did Col. Giddings ever recover, any of the property that was taken, and that was under your charge?" He answered, "I never did, and he never did."<sup>110</sup>

Giddings activities as a mail contractor were confined entirely to Texas after 1862. In December 1862, he and a new partner, B.R. Sappington, signed a contract for a branch route from Uvalde to Eagle Pass. This was a profitable route because postage and passage from Mexico was paid in silver.<sup>111</sup> There is no evidence that Giddings attempted to serve as a mail contractor after the war. Even if he wished to do so as an ex-Confederate officer, he would have been barred from bidding on Federal contracts.<sup>112</sup>

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7. *San Francisco Bulletin*, September 9, 12, 1857
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10. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 94
11. *The Weekly Independent* (Belton, Tex.), August 15, 1857
12. Deposition of William A. Wallace, Giddings vs. The United States; Petition from Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States; Deposition of George H. Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States
13. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 96; *Civilian and Gazette* (Galveston), September 1, 1857
14. Records of the War Department, Giddings vs. The United States
15. Special order #91 ordering Post commanders to supply escorts to mail parties, Giddings vs. The United States
16. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 106
17. Statement to the Senate and the House of Representatives, Giddings vs. The United States; Anonymous, *The Texas Almanac for 1859*, 139
18. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 112; Anonymous, *The Texas Almanac for 1859*, 139
19. Anonymous, *The Texas Almanac for 1859*, 139
20. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 115; *San Antonio Daily Herald*, December 31, 1857
21. Petition from Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States.
22. Deposition of William M. Ford, Giddings vs. The United States
23. Petition from Giddings, Giddings vs. The United States
24. Deposition of Tom Rife, Giddings vs. The United States

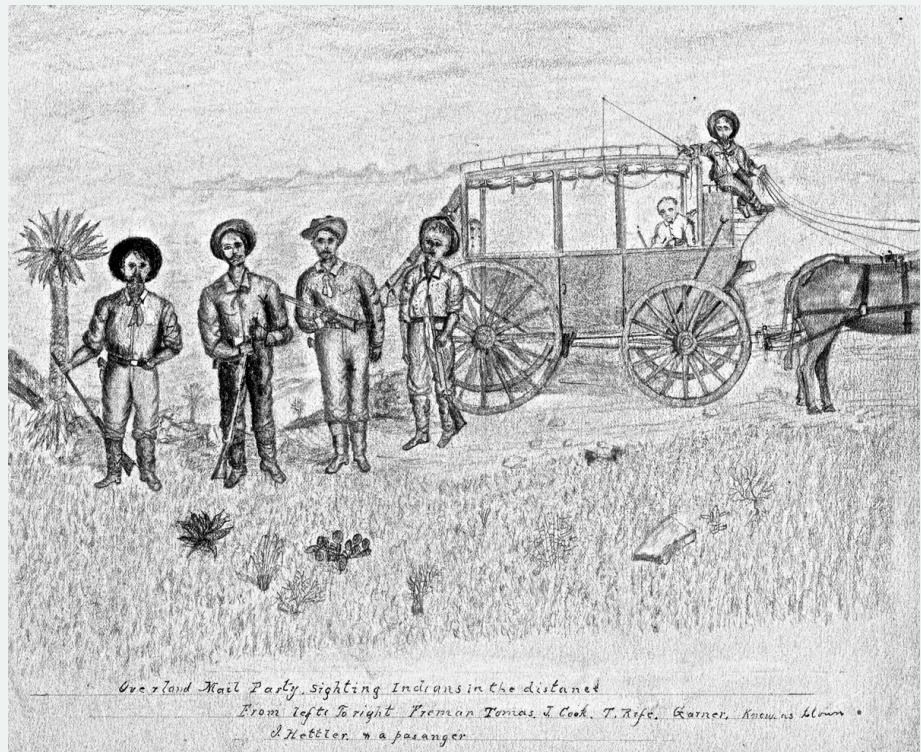
25. Deposition of Tom Rife, Giddings vs. The United States; Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 117-9
26. Statement to the Senate and the House of Representatives, Giddings vs. The United States
27. *Civilian and Gazette* (Columbus, TX), March 30, 1858
28. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 121
29. Statement to the Senate and the House of Representatives, Giddings vs. The United States.
30. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 133
31. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 143
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33. Statement to the Senate and the House of Representatives, Giddings vs. The United States.
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36. *San Antonio Sunday Light*, July 16, 1939
37. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 142
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# **The Civil War, 1861–1865**



"Overland Mail Party Sighting Indians in the Distance." A confederate soldier, Morgan Wolfe Merrick, sketched Thomas Rife and the mail party on their way to El Paso on July 10, 1861. By that time Fort Bliss and El Paso were in the hands of the Confederacy. Rife played a role in securing the fort after Federal troops abandoned it. Shown are: Freeman Thomas, J. Cook, Thomas Rife, George (Clown) Garner, J. Hettler and a passenger. Sketch from Notes and Sketches of Campaigns in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas by a Participant by Morgan Wolfe Merrick. Courtesy of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library, San Antonio, Texas

# Custodian of Fort Bliss, 1861

*"...but when the civil war broke out, Rife was serving the south, and was at the surrender of Fort Bliss and, by command of General McGuffen, took charge of the garrison, and held it for the confederates", "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## **After Abraham Lincoln was elected, the South seceded.**

Less than a month after the national elections of November 1860, citizens of San Antonio held a public meeting at 10 o'clock on Saturday morning, December 1, in Military Plaza. The assembly drew up a petition calling for a secession convention.<sup>1</sup>

On January 28, 1861, the Secession Convention met in Austin and approved an ordinance of secession to be submitted to the State's voters for their approval.<sup>2</sup> The voters approved the ordinance a month later; 46,129 voted for secession and 14,697 voted against it.<sup>3</sup> Texas seceded from the Union despite the opposition of Governor Houston and other leading men.<sup>4</sup>

The Secession Convention passed Ordinance Number One relating to the removal of Federal troops from Texas; transports and vessels necessary to facilitate the removal of troops from the state could not be seized or interfered with by citizens or state authorities.<sup>5</sup> The Convention appointed a 15-man Committee of Public Safety to oversee the removal of Federal troops and to manage frontier defense. The committee in turn, sent a delegation to 8th Military District in San Antonio to make arrangements for the removal of Federal troops and the transfer of Federal property to the State.<sup>6</sup>

Expecting resistance from the US Army, Ben McCullough and John Baylor raised a company of 250 volunteers to occupy the rooftops of buildings used by the US Army in San Antonio.<sup>7</sup> After ten days of negotiation with Commissioners from the Committee of Public Safety, US General David M. Twiggs, commander of the 8th US Military District, ordered the 8th Infantry to abandon Fort Davis and all 19 U.S. army posts in Texas.<sup>8</sup> General Twiggs agreed that all US troops would leave Texas and turn over surplus supplies and equipment to State officials.<sup>9</sup>

Texas affiliated itself with the Confederate States on March 16, 1861.<sup>10</sup> The governor and secretary of state refused to swear an oath to the Confederate Constitution; the Legislature declared their offices to be vacant.<sup>11</sup> Two days later, District Judge Devine led the citizens of San Antonio as they took the Oath of Allegiance to the Confederacy.<sup>12</sup> Delegates to the Succession Convention then passed an ordinance to ratify the Constitution of the Confederate States of America.<sup>13</sup>

## All Federal troops left the State or were captured.

By mid-April, all the military posts in West Texas had been evacuated by Federal troops.<sup>14</sup> After the attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, Confederate Colonel Earl Van Dorn was instructed "to intercept and prevent the movement of the US troops from the State of Texas" because hostilities had begun.<sup>15</sup> Texas military commanders also called for the surrender of Federal troops who had reached the Gulf Coast. The Federal troops garrisoned at Fort McIntosh in Laredo, first went to Fort Brown in Brownsville and then to the port at Indianola, expecting to board ships for the North. On April 25, 1861, after some confusion, they surrendered to Texas officers.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, Federal troops abandoned Fort Bliss and Fort Quitman and marched to Fort Davis.<sup>17</sup> The combined battalion proceeded to Fort Stockton and then marched towards the Gulf coast to be transported to the North as per the agreement between General Twiggs and the State commissioners.<sup>18</sup>

On May 6, the combined garrisons of the frontier forts, all under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Isaac V.D. Reeves,[^19] arrived at San Lucas Spring, 15 miles west of San Antonio, and camped on Allen's Hill.<sup>19</sup> The 270 Federal troops were surrounded by an overwhelming force of 1,370 Confederate, state and volunteer troops led by Colonel Earl Van Dorn.<sup>20</sup> The Confederates threatened to attack; on May 9, Colonel Reeve surrendered to the Confederates. The Union troops were permitted to march to San Antonio where they were held as prisoners of war.<sup>21</sup> The Union officers were paroled. Some of the enlisted men were kept at San Pedro Park near San Antonio for 22 months as prisoners of war before being exchanged.<sup>22</sup>

## Commissioners were appointed to safeguard government property.

The Texas Committee of Public Safety appointed Confederate commissioners to take custody of and to safeguard all Union property in the state.<sup>23</sup> The Committee appointed James Magoffin as commissioner for Forts Bliss and Quitman. Before Federal troops left Forts Bliss and Quitman, James and his son, Samuel Magoffin, accepted custody of the supplies and equipment at the posts.<sup>24</sup> Colonel Reeve then abandoned the fort.<sup>25</sup> On April 4, 1861, Samuel Magoffin and his brother-in-law, Gabriel Valdez, received the Federal property at Fort Quitman from First Lieutenant Zenas Bliss.<sup>26</sup> The contents of both forts were inventoried for transfer to the state.<sup>27</sup>

On April 25, 1861, a volunteer company of Confederate partisans from San Antonio (members of a secret society called the Knights of the Golden Circle) occupied Fort Davis.[^29] Noah Smithwick wrote that in April, when he passed by Fort Quitman on

his way to California, four men were guarding the fort. They were waiting for the arrival of John Baylor's Texas troops.<sup>28</sup> Fort Stockton, in a partially dismantled state, was also occupied by state troops.<sup>29</sup> California-bound emigrants seeking firewood damaged both Fort Stockton and the relay stations belonging to the Overland Mail. They were ignorant of the fact that the ground was "full of mesquite grubs" (roots) that could be used for firewood.<sup>30</sup>

## **Thomas Rife and other men took custody of Fort Bliss.**

By order of Confederate Commissioner General James Magoffin, a prominent El Paso merchant and political figure, Thomas Rife and a few other men, including S. W. Merchant, took custody of Fort Bliss.<sup>31</sup> During this time, Rife was employed by Giddings' stagecoach line, perhaps as a station agent near El Paso. Thirty-two years later, Tom Rife, in telling a story, claimed to have been at Fort Bliss on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1861.<sup>32</sup>

In a letter to the Texas Governor in May 1861, Josiah F. Crosby urged the Governor to raise a company or more of militia to protect the property at Fort Bliss. He recommended that Captain H. Clay Cook be authorized to raise this company. James Magoffin agreed to take the responsibility of rationing and arming the company.<sup>33</sup> In a report, Colonel Earl Van Dorn, the senior Confederate officer in Texas, stated that he "has mustered into service a company of foot artillery, composed of old soldiers, under a good officer, and put them at Fort Bliss with instructions to throw up a small field-work, and to defend it with the six pieces of artillery now there."<sup>34</sup> Rife must have passed his responsibility as the fort's custodian to this force because soon afterward he was seen driving the mail coach.<sup>35</sup>

The mail service continued to run on a semi-weekly basis<sup>36</sup> and mail stations continued to be manned.<sup>37</sup> On July 10, 1861, Rife led a mail party near El Muerto (Dead Man's Hole) west of Van Horn's Well. The mail coach was headed to El Paso, Texas.<sup>38</sup> Three days later, Rife and his party were reported 30 miles west of San Elizario and headed in the direction of San Antonio.<sup>39</sup> The final mail coach from San Diego arrived in Mesilla on July 20.<sup>40</sup>

## **Confederate troops occupied the abandoned forts.**

On May 7, 1861, Lt. Colonel John R. Baylor arrived in San Antonio to organize a regiment of mounted volunteers for frontier defense.<sup>41</sup> This regiment, the 2nd Regiment, Texas Mounted Rifles, was detailed to occupy the vacated US military forts from Fort Brown to Fort Bliss along the Rio Grande frontier.<sup>42</sup> The following month, units of Baylor's regiment began to move west from San Antonio to occupy the forts along the San Antonio-El Paso Road. Colonel Baylor arrived at Fort Bliss in the stagecoach on July 13,<sup>43</sup> and by the end of the month, Confederate troops occupied most of the abandoned military posts in West Texas.

Fort Bliss, located three miles east of Franklin (or Coontz') ranch, was the western-most military post in Texas. Franklin's ranch was on the east bank of the Rio Grande River opposite El Paso del Norte, Mexico.<sup>44</sup> In 1858, Franklin had a population of

about 300 persons, three-fourths of whom were Mexicans. Irrigation ditches provided water for vineyards, fruit trees, wheat, corn and vegetable gardens. There was a saloon and a US post office (both in the same room), an outdoor market and a ferry that crossed the river to El Paso del Norte. The town was described as picturesque with ash and cottonwood trees lining the river.<sup>45</sup>

However, Baylor had not traveled to Franklin merely to garrison Fort Bliss; he had a larger mission.<sup>46</sup> On July 23, 1861, Baylor left his base at Fort Bliss and invaded New Mexico Territory, still under the control of the United States Army. Companies A and E, the San Elizario Spy Company and part of Teel's Artillery Company left Fort Bliss and traveled upstream for 44 miles to attack the US force at Fort Fillmore, New Mexico. The Confederate troops by-passed the fort and occupied Mesilla, a large town just north of Fort Fillmore.<sup>47</sup> The US Army garrison of Fort Fillmore marshaled in front of the town but then retreated back to the fort after a brief skirmish. On July 27, the Union garrison of Fort Fillmore abandoned the fort and began to march to Fort Stanton, 140 miles to the northeast. Baylor's command, with some civilians from Mesilla, pursued and overtook the US troops.<sup>48</sup> The Federal soldiers surrendered at San Augustine Springs without a fight. This was the first victory for the Confederates in the New Mexico campaign.<sup>49</sup>

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# The New Mexico Campaign, 1861-1862

*"When he had discharged that duty, he accompanied Sibley's Brigade through New Mexico, sharing in the pains and vicissitudes of that campaign", "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## Gen. Henry Sibley organized a brigade to invade New Mexico.

Lieutenant Colonel Baylor issued a proclamation forming the Confederate Territory of Arizona on the first day of August, 1861. A meeting of the pro-Confederate citizens of Mesilla in May 1861 commissioned George M. Frazer to form the Arizona Rangers. This company saw action at the battles at Valverde, Glorieta, Apache Canyon and Peralta.<sup>1</sup> The Arizona Rangers and the Arizona Guards were mustered into Confederate service for a term of 12-months.<sup>2</sup>

In July 1861, Henry H. Sibley, an officer who had resigned in May from the US Army at Fort Fillmore, New Mexico, received a commission as a brigadier general. Confederate President Jefferson Davis authorized General Sibley to raise a brigade of volunteers to invade New Mexico.<sup>3</sup> He returned to San Antonio and gathered volunteers.<sup>4</sup>

General Sibley's brigade, consisting of the 4th, 5th and 7th Texas Mounted Rifles, left San Antonio in October for El Paso on the Lower or Military road.<sup>5</sup> The intent of the expedition was to join with the men of the 2nd Regiment of Texas Mounted Rifles already in west Texas, expel Federal troops from the New Mexico Territory and possibly annex New Mexico and the Mexican state of Chihuahua to the Confederacy.<sup>6</sup> The ultimate goal was to secure an overland route from Texas to the Pacific coast.<sup>6</sup>

Stage coaches continued to carry the mail. Rife later claimed that he accompanied Sibley's command into New Mexico. Between October 1861 and May 1862, the

3,200-man brigade left Fort Bliss and traveled up the Rio Grande.<sup>7</sup> Rife apparently continued to work as a conductor on the mail stage during this period.<sup>8</sup>

The US Postmaster General discontinued mail service between El Paso and San Antonio on February 17, 1862, but George Giddings, the mail contractor, obtained a Confederate government contract to provide mail services between San Antonio and California.<sup>9</sup> He realized that Federal troops and Indian troubles might prevent his men from going beyond El Paso<sup>10</sup> but he kept the stages running between San Antonio and El Paso until August 1862.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Confederates invaded New Mexico Territory.**

In December 1861, General Sibley arrived at Fort Bliss.<sup>12</sup> Colonel John Baylor already had 630 men of the 2nd Regiment in seven cavalry companies and two artillery companies in the area. To avoid a probable conflict, General Sibley sent Baylor on a diplomatic mission to Mexico and gave Baylor's command to Major Charles Pyron.<sup>13</sup> General Sibley then claimed all of the New Mexico Territory for the Confederacy in a proclamation issued on December 20.<sup>14</sup>

In the spring of 1862, the Confederates began the invasion of New Mexico. Sibley's brigade won the first major battle, the Battle of Valverde, on February 20.<sup>15</sup> The Confederates then advanced up the Rio Grande valley. The Federal commander knew that the Texans were critically short of supplies and on March 4, Federal troops removed 120 wagonloads of supplies from Albuquerque and sent them to Fort Union, northeast of Albuquerque. Retreating Federal troops destroyed the remaining supplies.<sup>16</sup> The Confederate expeditionary force entered Albuquerque and then on March 10, it occupied Santa Fé, the territorial capital.<sup>17</sup>

The Federal commander waited for reinforcements.<sup>18</sup> The 1st Colorado Volunteers from Denver City, Colorado, reached Fort Union after traveling 400 miles in 14 days. Union troops and the Colorado volunteers left Fort Union and headed south along the Santa Fé Trail to Bernal Springs to meet the Texans. On March 26, 418 Federal troops encountered and captured thirty-two Confederate scouts on the western slope of Glorieta Pass and clashed with 300 Confederates under Major Pyron in the Battle of Apache Canyon.<sup>19</sup>

The Federal troops retreated to Pigeon's Ranch (a stage station on the Santa Fé Trail) and the Confederates camped at Johnson's Ranch. Twelve inches of snow fell during the night.<sup>20</sup> In the second battle at Glorieta Pass on March 28 both armies were advancing when they encountered each other in a thick pine and cedar forest. By the end of the day, the Texans had captured Pigeon's Ranch.

The fight at Glorieta Pass ended in a draw but during the fight the Confederate supply wagon train at Johnson's Ranch was destroyed.<sup>21</sup> This loss was a decisive blow to the Texans.<sup>22</sup> The Federal troops escaped to Kozlowski's Ranch and the Texans returned to Santa Fé.<sup>23</sup>

## **After the fight at Glorieta Pass the Confederates retreated.**

On April 7, 1862, the Confederates returned to Albuquerque where their remaining supplies were stored.<sup>24</sup> A few days later, the Texans left Albuquerque heading south down the Rio Grande valley. They were attacked at Peralta on April 15 and then allowed to escape downriver.<sup>25</sup>

The Confederates fared no better in Arizona Territory than they did in northern New Mexico. Confederate troops penetrated to the west of Tucson but then abandoned the city prior to the arrival of the California Column.<sup>26</sup> The California Column of 2,350 men was formed in San Francisco to guard the overland mail from Salt Lake City but was diverted to New Mexico when the Texans launched their invasion. The California Column reached Tucson on May 20 and Fort Thorn on July 4, 1862.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Confederates evacuated West Texas in 1862.**

The remaining Confederate troops began to return from West Texas.<sup>28</sup> In July and August the half-starved and ragged men began arriving in San Antonio.<sup>29</sup> The rearguard of the Confederate Army of New Mexico left Fort Fillmore and abandoned and burned Fort Bliss.<sup>30</sup> Many families from Franklin (present day El Paso) left for San Antonio with the Confederate troops, leaving the town almost deserted.<sup>31</sup> After the last Confederate troops departed Fort Davis, the Apache Indians looted and burned buildings. The last stage coach from El Paso arrived in San Antonio on August 16, 1862. The coachmen found many of the mail stations along the route deserted or destroyed.<sup>32</sup>

Four days after the Confederates left Fort Davis, Union troops occupied Franklin. On August 20, men of the First California Volunteer Cavalry took possession of Fort Bliss; the stage line operated by George Giddings then suspended all service west of Fort Clark. Fort Clark was the western-most fort garrisoned by Confederate troops.<sup>33</sup>

The Texans of Sibley's Battalion won every engagement; they captured Albuquerque and Santa Fé before retreating back to El Paso.<sup>34</sup> However, it was apparent that Sibley's force was inadequate to hold northern New Mexico for the Confederacy. Sibley's Battalion returned to San Antonio in small groups and efforts were made to enroll new recruits from different Texas counties.<sup>35</sup> When Confederate Brigadier General J. Bankhead Magruder took command of Texas in November 1862, he used Sibley's troops from the New Mexico expedition to recapture Galveston Island from the Federal army.<sup>36</sup> In the spring of 1863, the various units of Sibley's brigade were reorganized at East Bernard (a station on the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad in Wharton County) for service outside Texas.<sup>37</sup>

## **West Texas remained a no-man's land until 1866.**

Although Fort Clark was the western-most fort garrisoned by Confederate troops, the 1st California Cavalry patrolled as far as Fort Davis in August 1862.<sup>38</sup> In December, a Federal patrol went east as far as the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos to check on

rumors that Henry Skillman and 6,000 troops were planning to attack Franklin and Fort Bliss.<sup>39</sup> The patrol located no Confederates but found that the road was being watched by Apaches.<sup>40</sup> Kiowa and Comanche raiders also continued their raids on Texans. During the Civil War, the line of established settlements moved east by about three counties as the women and children fled for safety.<sup>41</sup>

After the failure of the Confederate invasion of New Mexico, the Federal commander, US Lieutenant Colonel Edward Canby asked to be reassigned to the Eastern front.<sup>42</sup> Brigadier General James H. Carleton of the California Column assumed command of Federal troops in New Mexico. General Carleton launched a war against the Navajo, Kiowa and Apache Indians that impoverished them and eventually drove them to reservations.<sup>43</sup> When Carleton learned that the Confederates were preparing another invasion force, he promised a scorched earth campaign and ordered his commanders to prepare to destroy anything of value at San Elizario, Ysleta, Socorro, Fort Bliss, Franklin and Hart's Mill, should the Confederates invade.<sup>44</sup>

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# Vicksburg Campaign, 1862-1863

*"...thence he passed to Mississippi and was wounded at Deer Creek near Vicksburg".,,  
"Custodian of the Alamo", San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## **Vicksburg was the key to control of the Mississippi River.**

Control of the Mississippi River was of great strategic importance to the governments of both the United and the Confederate States.<sup>1</sup> It was believed that the side that controlled the Mississippi River would likely emerge as the victor in the War Between the States. Early in the war, the city of Vicksburg was identified as the key to control of the Mississippi; in January 1863 the US military began a campaign to wrest control of the city, and the river, from the Confederacy.<sup>2</sup> The Mississippi Delta was a swamp except for the natural levees along the waterways. Numerous plantations were located on narrow strips of dry land bordering the levees<sup>3</sup> The Delta was one of the richest agricultural areas of Mississippi. It was home to a large population of slaves and their white overseers.<sup>4</sup>

In the early months of the Civil War, Confederate authorities discouraged enlistment of troops in Texas, thinking that the war would be over quickly and that Texans would not be needed. Nevertheless, a number of companies formed and were integrated into various southern regiments.<sup>5</sup> Several units went to Mississippi and helped in the defense of Vicksburg.<sup>6</sup>

Rife was last observed in the upper Rio Grande Valley in July 1861; he stated that he accompanied the Confederate troops that invaded the Territory of New Mexico.<sup>7</sup> These troops did not leave the region until August 1862.<sup>8</sup> Rife also stated that he was wounded at Deer Creek in the Mississippi Delta but he did not say when. Because we lack definite information about how Rife came to be wounded at Deer Creek, we will describe the activities of military units that were active in the area between August 1862, when the Confederate campaign in New Mexico ended, and October 1863, when Rife returned to Texas.

## **Thomas Rife accompanied Waul's Texas Legion to Mississippi in October 1862.**

Waul's Texas Legion was one of the Texas units that participated in the Vicksburg campaign. The Legion was formed in Brenham, Texas on May 13, 1862, three months after Texas seceded from the Union. There were about 2,000 men on the rolls of Waul's Legion when it was organized. While the known roster contains 1,350 names, the identities of about 650 men are as yet unknown.<sup>9</sup>

Waul's Legion trained at Camp Waul, at Gay Hill in Washington County, a few miles north of Brenham. The unit camped there throughout the summer and left for Mississippi in August 1862.

When the Civil War began in 1861, mail service between Texas and points west was curtailed. The mail contractor was left with a fleet of wagons and mules that he disposed off as best he could. Rife apparently purchased or received at least one wagon from George Giddings and returned to Brenham where he had first lived when he came to Texas in 1842. In the summer of 1862, Rife hired his services as a freighter or wagon master at Camp Waul where he received \$11.00 for 10 rolls of rope and two mule harnesses on September 30.<sup>10</sup>

Rife accompanied the Legion to Holly Springs, Mississippi, probably driving a wagon. There, on October 2, he sold a wagon, four sets of harness and three mules to the army for the sum of one thousand dollars.<sup>11</sup>

The Legion was dispatched to Grenada, Mississippi, arriving there in January 1863, where the Cavalry Battalion was detached and sent to Vicksburg. The infantry and artillery were sent to Fort Pemberton, in the Mississippi Delta, arriving there in February 1863.<sup>12</sup> Rife may have accompanied the army to Fort Pemberton.

## **The Lake Providence Expedition, January to March 1863.**

During 1863, Federal troops searched for a route to bypass the Confederate batteries at Port Hudson, Port Gibson and Vicksburg that were blocking the passage of Federal shipping on the Mississippi River.<sup>13</sup> Compared to the Confederate government, the Federal government seemed to have unlimited manpower and resources; General Ulysses S. Grant, the Federal commander of the Vicksburg campaign, adopted any suggestion that had even the slightest chance of silencing the Confederate guns at Vicksburg.<sup>14</sup>

One suggestion led to what was known as the Lake Providence Expedition. The plan was to make a canal through Lake Providence to the Ouachita River that in turn flowed to the Red River. The Red River emptied into the Mississippi River at Port Hudson, 100 miles south of Vicksburg.<sup>15</sup> The canal would allow Grant's army to move troops south of Vicksburg where they could affect a landing on the east bank of the Mississippi River.

Beginning in January 1863, 1,000 Federal soldiers dug a canal upstream of Vicksburg on the Louisiana side to connect the Mississippi River with Lake Providence.<sup>16</sup> When

the canal was completed and opened, the bayous connecting Lake Providence to the Red River flooded.<sup>17</sup> A steamboat then attempted, without success, to find a route between Lake Providence and the Red River in order to bypass Shreveport as well as Vicksburg.<sup>18</sup> Trees growing in Baxter Bayou blocked the passage of Grant's transports and the attempt was abandoned by the end of March.

## **The Yazoo Pass Expedition of February to April 1863 failed.**

East of the Mississippi River are a number of streams, running roughly parallel to the Mississippi River, that drain the Mississippi Delta. These rivers and creeks all discharge into the Yazoo River. The Yazoo River then joins the Mississippi River just north of Vicksburg. Between January and April 1863, the US Navy and Army cooperated in various unsuccessful attempts to use these waterways to outflank Confederate defenses at Vicksburg.<sup>19</sup>

An effort was made to land an invasion force on the Mississippi side of the river north of Vicksburg in February 1863. The Mississippi River levee at Yazoo Pass was breeched to prepare for the Yazoo Pass Expedition.<sup>20</sup> The breach flooded the entire region to a depth of 8½ feet.[^116] Federal gunboats entered Coldwater River and on March 10, ten US Navy gunboats and troop transports reached a Confederate battery that blocked further passage. The battery, called Fort Pemberton, was still under construction.[^117] Fort Pemberton was built of cotton bales covered in sand and earth. A steamboat (the "Star of the West") was sunk near the fort to block the river; Waul's Texas Legion and three other infantry regiments were placed there to defend it.[^118]

On March 11 and 13, Federal gunboats twice attacked Fort Pemberton but were driven off by the Confederates.[^119] The narrowness of the channel in front of the fort did not allow the Federal gunboats to turn sideways so their guns could not be used effectively[^120] and the US Army could not land troops because of the swampy terrain.

Fort Pemberton blocked the progress of the Federal gunboats for three weeks and prevented them from reaching Snyder's Bluff[^121] where their troops could be landed. Reluctantly, General Grant abandoned the Yazoo Pass campaign and focused his attention elsewhere.[^122]

## **The Steele's Bayou Expedition of March 1863 also failed.**

Beginning on March 14, 1863, another Union attempt was made to attack Vicksburg from the north. The Steele's Bayou Expedition left the Mississippi River with the intention of travelling up the Yazoo River, Steele's Bayou, Black Bayou, Deer Creek, Rolling Fork and Big Sunflower River so federal troops could be landed upstream of Hayne's and Snyder's bluffs overlooking the Yazoo River and downstream of Fort Pemberton.

The Expedition began when five ironclads (referred to as “turtles”), four tugs and two mortar boats left the Mississippi River at Young’s Point and traveled up the Yazoo River to Steele’s Bayou.<sup>[^123]</sup> At Deer Creek, they turned north toward the Little Sunflower River.

The Expedition traveled through a heavily populated area with many plantations located on the natural levees that lined Deer Creek.<sup>[^124]</sup> The white inhabitants of the plantations fled at the approach of the ironclads, going east across the Tallahatchie River, while hundreds of black slaves lined the banks to see the huge ships traveling the narrow waterways.<sup>[^125]</sup> Residents along the route hid their livestock and burned stores of cotton as the ironclads passed by, crashing into and destroying bridges and uprooting trees as they went. The ironclads used in the Steele’s Bayou Expedition were each 175 feet long and 51 feet wide and carried a crew of 251 men.<sup>[^126]</sup>

By March 18, the ironclads were within seven miles of Rolling Fork on the Little Sunflower River.<sup>[^127]</sup> Willow trees growing in Deer Creek slowed the gunboats leading the flotilla to a crawl.

Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ferguson’s brigade of Confederates were camped at Fall’s Plantation when they learned of the approaching Federal flotilla. Captain George Barnes started overland with the cavalry for Rolling Fork and the infantry and artillery embarked on a steamboat to be transported there. On March 19 at 4pm, Ferguson’s Confederate troops arrived at the junction of Rolling Fork and Little Sunflower River only to find the road flooded.<sup>[^128]</sup>

## **The Federal gunboats became stalled on Deer Creek.**

Upon arriving at the junction of Rolling Fork and Deer Creek, Colonel Ferguson impressed slaves to cut trees to block the channel in front of the Woodfork plantation. White overseers from nearby plantations led the gangs of slaves to cut trees growing on the banks of the flooded waterway.<sup>[^129]</sup> After traversing most of Deer Creek, the gunboats found that willow trees growing in and along the streambed near the L. C. Watson plantation blocked their passage forward.<sup>[^130]</sup> Rear Admiral David D. Porter, the commander of the US Navy’s Mississippi River Squadron, directed three hundred sailors to leave the gunboats to prevent Confederates from approaching the stalled ships.<sup>[^131]</sup> These men mounted a battery on a nearby Indian mound.<sup>[^132]</sup>

That same day, Colonel Ferguson sent the Arkansas regiment and his artillery to attack Federal patrols guarding the gunboats. The Confederates dislodged the battery on the Indian mound but were driven off by fire from the gunboats.<sup>[^133]</sup> Admiral Porter, aware of his danger, paid a slave from a nearby plantation to carry a message through Confederate lines to General Sherman asking for reinforcements.<sup>[^134]</sup>

The next day, March 21, 1863, Ferguson’s Confederate cavalry, led by Captain Barnes, moved down the creek and began felling trees across the stream, effectively trapping the gun boats. The Federal gunboats tried to escape by drifting backwards, bouncing

from bank to bank since they could not steer backwards and could not turn around in the narrow waterway.<sup>[^135]</sup> Admiral Porter prepared to abandon and scuttle the ships if necessary. However, the Confederates were slow in mounting their attack and instead spent the time sniping at Union work parties trying to clear the channel.<sup>[^136]</sup> They were unaware that Federal reinforcements were rapidly approaching from the south.

## **Union infantry rescued the trapped gunboats on Deer Creek.**

At 3pm, the 8th Missouri regiment of US infantry (Giles Smith's) reached Dr. Moore's plantation, drove the snipers away and rescued the trapped boats.<sup>[^137]</sup> General Smith rounded up all black males that he encountered to keep the Confederates from using them to cut more trees to block the waterway.<sup>[^138]</sup> By midnight, work parties from the trapped boats had cleared the channel and the boats backed away with Smith's men moving along both sides of the bank to keep the Confederate snipers at bay.<sup>[^139]</sup>

Meanwhile, General William T. Sherman led the remaining US infantry on a march by candlelight through the night of March 21.<sup>[^140]</sup> Sherman's force reached the ironclads just as the Confederates mounted an assault.<sup>[^141]</sup> As a result, the Confederates were driven back before they could mount a decisive attack on the gunboats. The Confederates withdrew to Rolling Fork and the Union gunboats continued to back down Deer Creek, reaching the Mississippi River a week later.<sup>[^142]</sup>

No Texas units participated in the action at Deer Creek. During this campaign, Waul's Texas Legion and the 2nd Texas Regiment remained at Fort Pemberton. If Rife was wounded at Deer Creek as he said he was, he may have been engaged as a partisan operating outside of military control or as a volunteer with the home guard or one of the Mississippi units that participated in the campaign. He had good reason to be in the area. His sister, Mary Jane, and brother-in-law, Lawrence Wade, owned a 350-acre plantation, called Wade Lawn on the Mississippi side of the river only a dozen or so miles from Deer Creek and Rolling Fork. The plantation backed up to a swamp that drained into Steele's Bayou.<sup>[^143]</sup>

## **Waul's Legion was captured at Vicksburg.**

In April 1863, Waul's infantry and artillery were moved six miles from Fort Pemberton to Point Leflore at the junction of three rivers, (Tallahatchie, Yalobusha and Yazoo) two miles northwest of the town of Greenwood, Missississipi.<sup>[^144]</sup> In May 1863, two companies of Waul's Legion infantry were sent to Yazoo City, the location of a large Confederate navy yard. They were captured in July and sent to a prison camp in Indiana. The rest of Waul's Legion retreated to Vicksburg; they were forced to surrender in July along with the rest of Confederate General Pemberton's besieged army. The men of Waul's Legion were paroled in August and September 1863 and reorganized again at Houston in October and November.<sup>[^145]</sup>

A year after the surrender of Vicksburg, the Confederate prisoners were exchanged and allowed to return to active service. After crops were harvested in the late summer of 1864, and news of the prisoner exchange circulated among the paroled soldiers, soldiers began to straggle back to their regiments. However, most units never returned to their full strength. Disease and enemy fire had killed up to one-third of the men involved in the Vicksburg campaign. Some men joined other units and a few never reported back. Many had joined local militia units to support Confederate troops near their homes. If captured, they falsely identified their regiment to avoid being interned for breaking parole.<sup>[^146]</sup>

## **Confederate soldiers were cared for in hospitals.**

If Thomas Rife was wounded at Deer Creek in 1863 while in military service, he would have been sent to a regimental or field hospital nearby. Confederate army military hospitals kept extensive records of wounded and sick soldiers.<sup>[^147]</sup> However, most Confederate military hospital records were lost. By the time the collection, purchase and compilation of Confederate records began in 1878 many documents were already destroyed. A few were taken home and retained by the officer in charge of the hospital but this was the exception rather than the rule<sup>[^148]</sup> and few such records are known to exist today.

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# **36th Regiment, Texas Cavalry, 1863-1865**

*"After the latter place had fallen before federal arms, Rife joined Captain Lytle's company in Wood's regiment where he served some time", "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## **Many Texans expected a short war.**

After the ordinance of secession was ratified in a statewide plebiscite in February 1861,[<sup>149</sup>] many Texans, not wishing to miss what was expected to be a short war,[<sup>150</sup>] formed companies and to join regiments in other states.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, the Texas Legislature, realizing that the war would not be over as quickly as some had initially hoped, passed a law conscripting men for military service.<sup>2</sup> In April 1862, the Confederate Congress also passed a conscription law that drafted most southern men 18 to 35 years old for three-years of service.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Rife was born in 1823 and was over 35 years of age in 1861.<sup>4</sup> Although he was exempt from the Confederate draft, he was still liable for military service. In Texas, all men 18 to 50 years old were required to enroll in the state militia.<sup>5</sup> However, Rife left Texas in late 1862, apparently as a wagoner for Waul's Legion,<sup>6</sup> and was subsequently wounded at Deer Creek near Vicksburg in March or April 1863.

There is no evidence that Rife enrolled in a military unit that served in Mississippi. If he did serve in a Confederate unit in Mississippi, he did not go to Vicksburg after being wounded at Deer Creek. His name does not appear on the roll of men captured and paroled at Vicksburg. There is, of course, the possibility that he escaped capture at Vicksburg by fleeing across the Mississippi River. Another possibility is that he was attached to a unit that was not captured at Vicksburg. This seems unlikely because most such units continued in service until the War's end. After he was wounded, he may have been taken to a hospital, treated and subsequently furloughed. He may have recovered from his injury at his sister's house nearby. Details of what Rife

actually did in Mississippi in late 1862 and early 1863 are lacking. But there is no doubt that by October of 1863 he had returned to Texas.

## Thomas Rife enlisted in Colonel Peter Wood's Regiment.

In October 1863, Rife enlisted in Captain Samuel Lytle's Company (Company H), 36th Regiment (Colonel Peter Wood's), Texas Cavalry at San Antonio. He enlisted for the duration of the war.<sup>7</sup> Samuel Lytle and Rife were longtime friends, having met in 1842 at Washington-on-the-Brazos as young men<sup>8</sup> and had lived as neighbors west of Castroville.

The 36th Regiment, Texas Cavalry, was organized in March 1862 and then assigned to patrol Fredericksburg. German settlers living northwest of San Antonio were not slaveholders and supported the Union throughout the Civil War. For that reason, Fredericksburg was considered a Unionist stronghold that needed to be watched by the Confederate military. At a later date, Wood's regiment was stationed along the Texas Gulf coast and then along the lower Rio Grande.<sup>9</sup> In June 1863, the regiment moved to Indianola where it remained until it was sent to Louisiana for the Red River Campaign in the spring of 1864.<sup>10</sup>

Although he continued to be listed on the regiment muster rolls,<sup>11</sup> Rife was detached for service in West Texas in November 1863<sup>12</sup> and did not return for two years.<sup>13</sup>

[149]: Wharton, *Texas Under Many Flags*, 85 [150]: Sweet and Knox, *On a Mexican Mustang through Texas from the Gulf to the Rio Grande*, 590; James Farber, *Texas, C.S.A.: A Spotlight on Disaster*, (New York and Texas: The Jackson Co., 1947), 30

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# **Capt. Skillman's Spy Company, 1863-1865**

*"...when by special request of Capt. Henry Skillman who knew his knowledge and worth, he was detailed by Gen. McGruder for scout service on Skillman's border scouts. He was with the party when it was surprised by thirty-five federals of the California column at midnight. All was asleep, the sentinels were taken, and the party fired on in their beds. Skillman was then killed, and nearly all the party exterminated. Rife was seriously wounded then, two ribs were broken, and one of them has not re-united to this day thereby incapacitating him from heavy work. He was left for dead on the field, but recovered. Then the citizens of Presidio del Norte knowing him and appreciating his services, recommended him to succeed Skillman", "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## **Henry Skillman was an employee of George Giddings.**

When George Giddings was awarded a contract to deliver the mail to California in 1854, he hired Henry Skillman who had previously carried the mail. Skillman continued in the employ of Giddings until 1861. It was Skillman who carried the last southbound mail from Santa Fé to Mesilla before the Civil War closed the route.[^164]

When the Civil War began, Skillman, a native of New Jersey but a long-time resident of the upper Rio Grande Valley, cast his lot with the Confederacy even though he was not a secessionist. Confederates under Colonel John R. Baylor had recently captured Fort Fillmore and Skillman became the sutler there. (A sutler was a civilian who had the concession to operate a retail store on or near a military base).

In October 1861, George Giddings obtained a contract from the Confederate Government to carry the mail between Mesilla in New Mexico Territory and San Antonio. By then the southern part of New Mexico Territory had been reorganized as the Confederate Territory of Arizona.<sup>1</sup> Henry Skillman became one of Giddings' conductors and carried the mail between Mesilla and El Paso.<sup>2</sup>

## **Henry Skillman stayed in West Texas.**

Skillman stayed behind in West Texas after Sibley's army returned to San Antonio.<sup>3</sup> Upon the arrival of Union troops in August 1862, a group of 100 or so Confederate sympathizers fled across the Rio Grande and took refuge in the Mexican town of El Paso del Norte.<sup>4</sup> There they continued to hold out hope that the Confederacy would reoccupy West Texas. Before 1851, when he became involved in carrying the mails, Skillman had operated a private courier service. With the mail service disrupted, Skillman once again operated a courier service between the upper Rio Grande Valley and San Antonio and California. He had no official contract to carry mail and had no hope of compensation from the Confederate Government.<sup>5</sup>

Skillman's reputation as a leader of men sparked rumors about the role he intended to play in Confederate Arizona. The first of many rumors that circulated about Skillman's intentions appeared in the Mesilla Times newspaper on October 12, 1861 when it was reported that he was raising a company to attack "Abe's men, Apaches, or what not." The men apparently didn't want pay, but "only the property they can take from the Indians."<sup>6</sup>

Later Skillman and his "handpicked men" were incorporated into a military organization of scouts and spies along the western border of Texas. The Southern sympathizers in El Paso del Norte, across the river from Union-held Fort Bliss, were a valuable source of information on activities of the Union Army and Skillman became the conduit of this information to military authorities in San Antonio.<sup>7</sup> Documents later found in Skillman's possession indicated that he was part of a covert network of spies and couriers linking Confederate sympathizers in California to Confederate military authorities in Texas.<sup>8</sup>

Skillman played a role in a campaign of misinformation designed to keep Federal authorities off balance. Skillman appears to have helped spread rumors that Confederate troops were returning to West Texas. On August 23, 1861, three days after arriving at Fort Bliss, a detachment of the 1st California Cavalry scouted eastward to Fort Davis and found that the West Texas forts were not occupied.<sup>9</sup> The Rebels had, at least for the moment, abandoned the area. Yet the Federal troops in New Mexico and El Paso couldn't be sure that they would not return in force. On November 18, 1862, the US Army Headquarters Department of New Mexico received a report of rumors that 6,000 Confederate troops were on the way to attack the upper Rio Grande Valley once again.<sup>10</sup>

In November, Skillman established a camp near the Mexican town of Presidio del Norte (now Ojinaga, Chihuahua) and kept Federal commanders agitated by fear of an imminent invasion. In response, the US Army dispatched scouts down the Pecos River from Fort Stanton, New Mexico to as far as Horsehead Crossing to investigate. A party was sent from Ft. Bliss along the Butterfield Road north to Huerco Tanks and Pope's Crossing on the Pecos River. A third party traveled along the Lower Military Road through Quitman Canyon and Eagle Springs to as far as Fort Davis.<sup>11</sup> According to a rumor reported to the Federal commander, Henry Skillman and John Stevenson were said to be in Franklin on November 25, 1862 and had a company of men at Presidio del Norte that would attack El Paso, Texas in six days.<sup>12</sup>

## **Federal commanders in New Mexico feared a second invasion.**

In preparation for the expected Confederate invasion, US General Joseph Rodman West ordered Companies D and K of the California Column under Major William McMullen to the Rio Grande in December 1862.<sup>13</sup> West expected Skillman to establish a base below El Paso for the purpose of opening communications with Chihuahua in order to procure supplies for a large force of Confederates advancing up the Pecos River.<sup>14</sup>

In March 1863, Federal authorities received word from Reuben W. Creel, a merchant in Chihuahua City who was also acting as a Union agent, that Skillman had a company of rangers in Presidio del Norte and that an officer named Woods and his troops were at Comanche Springs.<sup>15</sup> It was reported that Skillman's party of 25 men and one wagon left Presidio del Norte in March for Arizona, having hired Pueblo Indians as guides. Afterwards, it was reported that he was at Cibolo Ranch, ten leagues upstream of Presidio del Norte.<sup>16</sup>

Creel reported that he suspected that Skillman's activities were an attempt to secure the road from San Antonio to Chihuahua.<sup>17</sup> While it was clear that none of the Federal commanders knew where the spy company was or what they were doing,<sup>18</sup> Creel who had lived in Chihuahua for many years, may have correctly guessed the intentions of Confederate authorities.<sup>19</sup>

## **The Federal army invaded the Texas Gulf Coast in 1863.**

The civil war in the east was going well for the Confederacy. Confederate General Robert E. Lee defeated a Union army at Chancellorsville, Virginia in early May, 1863, and then launched an invasion of Pennsylvania with an army of 75,000 men.

Union authorities in New Mexico watched apprehensively as French troops drove Mexican President Benito Juarez from Mexico City in 1863 and then pursued him and his forces into Chihuahua.<sup>20</sup> French imperial forces, who were natural allies of the Confederacy, appeared to be gaining strength in Mexico. In 1864, French military officers took control of Mexican towns along the lower Rio Grande.<sup>21</sup> With the French military in control of the lower Rio Grande valley, the way would be open to flood the Confederacy with the military supplies it desperately needed.<sup>22</sup> General McGruder of Texas organized a force to be ready, if peace should appear imminent, to "take possession of New Mexico and Arizona...so that at the termination of the war they may be ours."<sup>23</sup>

In the early months of 1863, the outcome of the war was uncertain and many in the South believed that victory was possible. Then in July 1863, news reached Texas of the surrender of the Confederate redoubt at Vicksburg and General Robert E. Lee's defeat at Gettysburg. Even after those decisive defeats, the French threat remained and Union commanders moved to occupy the Rio Grande Valley to prevent the French from shipping much needed war supplies to Texas.

In September 1863, a small Confederate battery at Sabine Pass on the Louisiana state line famously fought off a Federal invasion of East Texas.<sup>24</sup> A few months later, Confederate military authorities learned that another Federal invasion force had appeared off the Gulf Coast at Corpus Christi.<sup>25</sup> Federal troops were put ashore and captured Corpus Christi, Aransas Pass, Indianola and Brownsville. The US troops that landed near Brownsville soon controlled a large part of the lower Rio Grande Valley as far upstream as Rio Grande City.

The Union Army withdrew many of their troops in the Valley to pursue the Red River campaign.<sup>26</sup> However, about 3,500 Federal soldiers were left at Fort Brown, Ringgold Barracks and other places to obstruct commerce with Mexico and prevent the French from shipping war material to Texas.<sup>27</sup> Federal commanders had orders to intercept the Texas cotton trade with Mexico<sup>28</sup> and to prevent an alliance between the French army in Mexico and the Confederates in Texas.<sup>29</sup>

The landing of US troops in Texas in November 1863 was proof that the State's favorable geographic position would not protect it from an invasion. Confederate authorities had supposed that the western frontier and Indian Territory could not support an invading army and that sandbars along the Gulf Coast would prevent the entry of large vessels or gunboats.<sup>30</sup> Not fearing invasion from the west, Confederate troops had abandoned all forts in west Texas. Only Fort Clark was garrisoned to block Federal troops from invading along the San Antonio-El Paso Road<sup>31</sup> and forts were built along the Gulf Coast to block entry into the few landing points that could be used by an invading force.<sup>32</sup>

Now, with two Federal armies on the Rio Grande, the Confederates assumed a more defensive posture<sup>33</sup> and the services of Skillman's spy company were needed even more than before. After the Federal invasion of the Gulf Coast, Confederate authorities strengthened their surveillance of the western approaches to San Antonio. They feared that the US Army could send a land force from New Mexico Territory to cooperate with an invasion along the Gulf Coast.<sup>34</sup>

In response to the Federal occupation of the lower Rio Grande Valley, the Texans shifted the large cross-border trade in cotton upriver above Laredo.<sup>35</sup> Supplies purchased in Matamoros were freighted to San Antonio via Eagle Pass to avoid Federal troops.<sup>36</sup> Confederate authorities in San Antonio must have been preparing for the complete loss of their trade routes between San Antonio and Mexico through the lower Rio Grande Valley when they instructed Skillman to reconnoiter the road to Presidio del Norte.

When word of the Federal invasion of the Texas Gulf Coast reached San Antonio on November 23, 1863, Rife was not with his company but was on sick leave in San Antonio.<sup>37</sup> During the emergency caused by the Federal invasion, Colonel Dickinson, the Confederate commander in San Antonio, assigned Rife to scout the Lower El Paso Road between Fort Clark and Comanche Springs (Fort Stockton) and report on the movement of Union Troops. Rife led a detachment of six men, all of who were exempts (meaning that they were not eligible for the draft, probably because they were overage). Rife was directed to maintain communications with Henry Skillman who was watching the Upper Road to prevent either party from being cut off. In his report to headquarters in San Antonio, Major Andrew Dickinson referred to Rife as an

"old frontiersman."<sup>38</sup> While Rife was 40 years old, Dickenson was referring to Rife's many years of experience in West Texas rather than to his actual age. Colonel Dickinson knew that many of Rife's peers had not lived for 25 years, as he had, on the edge of civilization.

## **Henry Skillman commanded a spy company.**

On November 17, 1863, Roy Bean, a Confederate sympathizer from California, recruited twenty mounted men in San Antonio who were willing to serve in "a spy company to range upon this frontier." These men were probably part of a large group of exiled Confederates from New Mexico and Arizona who had taken up residence in San Antonio.<sup>39</sup> He applied to Colonel A. D. Dickinson, the Confederate commander at San Antonio, for a commission to enter into this service.<sup>40</sup>

Roy Bean may not have known that a company of scouts or spies had already been operating on the western frontier for some time.<sup>41</sup> Skillman's company was strengthened and reorganized. In official communications between Confederate authorities such as Colonel John Ford, Skillman was now referred to as "Captain"<sup>42</sup> perhaps reflecting the fact that his courier service had, in fact, evolved into a military organization. Even if he had not done so before, by February 1864, Skillman was reporting to Colonel John S. Ford who commanded the 2nd Regiment, Texas Mounted Rifles.<sup>43</sup>

## **Thomas Rife was assigned to Captain Skillman's company of scouts.**

On February 4, 1864, Colonel Ford, commanding Confederate expeditionary forces on the lower Rio Grande, received a letter from Henry Skillman requesting that Tom Rife be assigned to his Spy Company. Skillman said, "Before I can start for the upper country I must recruit men suited for the kind of duty I will have to perform...I must have not only good men but good frontiersmen."<sup>44</sup> The request was forwarded to General Wood, Rife's regimental commander, and then to Captain Sam Lytle, Rife's company commander.

The 2nd Lieutenant of Company H, John K. Minder, also offered his recommendation in regards to Rife's qualifications in a letter to Brigadier General P. C. Wood on February 12, 1864. Lieutenant Minder thought that Rife was "qualified in every way for that kind of service from his perfect knowledge of the upper country (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California) and possessing the qualities of a true soldier." Rife had been detached from the 36th Regiment since November 1863 and was now formally assigned to the spy company. In March, records indicate that his pay was still due from the date of his enlistment, his horse was valued at \$150 and his equipment was valued at \$40.<sup>45</sup>

It is not clear what Skillman's actual orders were, but his men helped the Confederate military map the best route for the movement of troops from San Antonio to El Paso.<sup>46</sup> Skillman and his men rode from San Antonio heading west. On March 9, 1864, Colonel John Ford reported that Captain Skillman had "gone above," i.e. up river.

Other units under Ford's command were deployed to oppose the Federal force advancing up the Rio Grande from Brownsville.<sup>47</sup>

## Federal troops attacked Skillman's company.

Although the threat of an invasion of New Mexico by the Confederates had evaporated, the Federal commander in New Mexico was determined to be rid of Skillman. On April 3, 1864, Captain Albert H. French, a man familiar with West Texas and New Mexico, set out from San Elizário with 25 men of Company A of the California Column with pack mules carrying twenty days of supplies. He had orders to capture or kill Skillman and his company of spies. The party passed abandoned Fort Quitman and proceeded to Eagle Springs, Van Horn's Well, Dead Man's Hole, Barrell Springs, Fort Davis and then down to the Rio Grande along the old Salt Road. On April 14 at Cottonwood Springs, the men, by chance and good fortune, found an inscription carved on a tree indicating that Skillman had arrived there on the 3rd. Realizing that Skillman was probably still in the vicinity, Captain French sent scouts ahead to find Skillman's camp. They chanced upon the camp six miles away at Spenser's Ranch, one mile downstream of the present town of Presidio, Texas on the old Fortin Road near the river crossing.<sup>48</sup> Skillman was unaware of the presence of the Federal soldiers.

Captain French planned to attack the camp after the Confederates were asleep and waited until after midnight to begin his approach. After walking and crawling for an hour the attack party reached Skillman's camp at 1:30 am on April 15, 1864. After the order to surrender was given, a few moments of fighting ensued. According to Captain French's report,<sup>49</sup> two men, including Skillman, were killed outright; two (including Rife) were mortally wounded; four prisoners were taken and two men escaped across the river. Captain French and his captives arrived back at Fort Quitman on April 22, 1864.<sup>50</sup>

In his report, Captain French listed the other members of Skillman's unit. They were (Jarvis) Hubble, (George) Clown (Garner), (Tom) Rife, McMullen, (William) Ford, Thimble, Coburn, Hoover, and Allan. The men who escaped were William Ford (who was guarding the horses) and Thimble (who crawled away into the brush).<sup>51</sup>

Rife somehow survived and was taken to Presidio del Norte and cared for by Confederate sympathizers. He had been shot in the chest and suffered two broken ribs. According to Rife, the Confederates in Presidio del Norte later nominated him to take Skillman's place, perhaps as a courier between them and San Antonio or as a spy.<sup>52</sup> Rife apparently remained in Presidio del Norte while his wounds healed. He never fully recovered and was unable to do physical work thereafter.<sup>53</sup> Almost a year later, on March 1865, Rife was still on the rolls of Company H, 32th Regiment, Texas Cavalry and listed as on detached service with Major Skillman's scout company. It is not known whether or not the spy company was rebuilt after Skillman's death and what role, if any, Rife played in it.

Over 100 years later gravediggers at the Catholic Church in Presidio, found "a huge skeleton...with blond hair and a long blond beard." Many believe that these were the remains of Henry Skillman.<sup>54</sup>

## **Confederate soldiers in Texas were paroled after the surrender.**

Word of the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and other Confederate units east of the Mississippi reached Confederate troops in Texas. The soldiers began to leave their camps for home in late May, 1865. Confederate military commanders traveled to Galveston to sign a paper providing "for acts of war on the part of the troops to cease."<sup>55</sup> Most of the men of the Confederate army in Texas did not wait for surrender papers to be signed and were no longer with their units at the time of surrender. Consequently they were not paroled. To remedy this deficiency, places were appointed where Confederate soldiers could be paroled, superintended by Federal Officers.<sup>56</sup>

Rife remained on the rolls of Company H on detached service until at least until March 1865, shortly before the unit disbanded. Most men of Company H were from San Antonio and were paroled there in August 1865. Captain Samuel Lytle, who commanded Company H, was paroled in San Antonio on August 18, 1865.<sup>57</sup> A few days later, on August 22, 1865, Rife surrendered to Federal authorities in San Antonio and was paroled.<sup>58</sup>

Paroled Confederates were required to sign an oath, called the Amnesty Oath, before receiving their parole. A few individuals, such as men who had been Federal postmasters and mail contractors before the War, were not eligible for the amnesty and could not take the oath.<sup>59</sup> Rife took the oath as was required.<sup>60</sup> The Amnesty Oath required ex-Confederates to swear allegiance to the US Constitution and its laws and to accept the fact that the slaves were free.<sup>61</sup> The oath that Rife and his compatriots signed read as follows: *"I do solemnly swear (or affirm), in the presence of Almighty God, that I will henceforth faithfully support, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the Union of the States there under; and that I will, in like manner, abide by and faithfully support all laws and proclamations which have been made during the existing rebellion with reference to the emancipation of slaves, So help me God."*<sup>62</sup>

Hundreds of men who could not or would not sign the oath fled to Mexico and points south.<sup>63</sup> The Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph edition of June 30, 1865, stated "Our city, for the last week or more, has been full of persons on their way to Mexico, to escape arrest by the United States authorities. Among the number are Governor Murrah, Ex-Governors Moore and Allen, of Louisiana, Generals Kirby Smith, Price, Magruder and Shelby. The last is accompanied with about 300 men of his former command."<sup>64</sup> Others, including George Giddings, applied for and were granted pardons in 1866.<sup>65</sup>

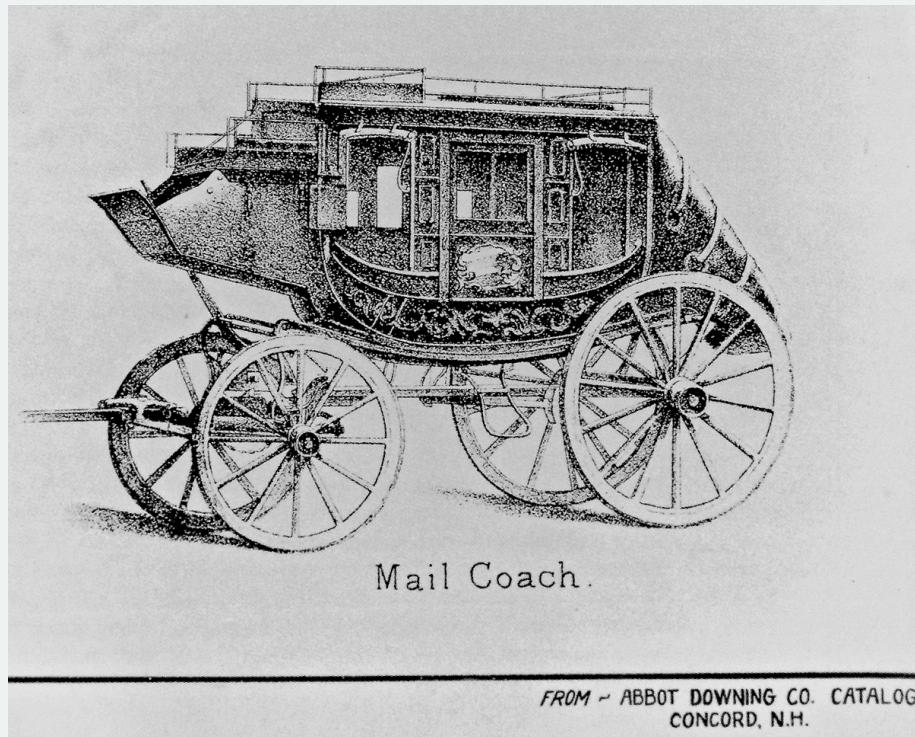
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# **West Texas after the War, 1866–1872**



Concord Mail Coach. Made in Concord, New Hampshire by the Abbot-Downing Company, they were considered to be the best available passenger vehicle for severe service. They weighed 3,000 pounds and had a carrying capacity of two tons and costs about \$1,500 each. Nine passengers could ride inside the coach on three seats and several more could be accommodated on top with the driver. There was ample room for baggage. Concords were constructed of New England's best oak, ash, elm and basswood and featured heavy, wide-tired wheels set far apart for lateral stability. Photo from Abbot-Downing catalog.

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# Ficklin Mail Service, 1866-1872

*"After the war closed, he was again on the west Texas mail service and did good service, remaining in it until 1873, when western Texas had become so well organized and settled that there was no need for further armed service in that direction", "Custodian of the Alamo," San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## Civil government struggled to function after the Civil War.

After the surrender of the last Confederate army on May 26, 1865,<sup>1</sup> up to 2,000 Confederate officers and soldiers, including Texas Governor Pendleton Murrah, fled to Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Law and order in Texas started to break down without these leaders.<sup>3</sup>

During summer and fall of 1865, the postal service became very unreliable.<sup>4</sup> Some private express operations were carrying mail but there was no scheduled mail service between San Antonio and the upper Rio Grande Valley. Indian attacks along the frontier continued unabated;<sup>5</sup> there were no troops in place to protect travelers on the West Texas roads.<sup>6</sup>

## Mail service resumed in 1866.

Bethel Coopwood was the first contractor to reopen mail service between San Antonio and El Paso after the Civil War.<sup>7</sup> Bethel Coopwood began his enterprise as a freight hauler between San Antonio and El Paso and Chihuahua. The San Antonio Ledger, in July, 1866, called the mail company the "Southern Overland Stage and Express Company."<sup>8</sup> The first mail train left San Antonio on April 24, accompanied by forty mounted men. After crossing the Pecos River near the deserted Fort Lancaster, the party was attacked by Chief Espejo and José Cigarito and a large war party of Native American warriors. Many of the stage escorts were armed with repeating rifles. The Indians were not familiar with these weapons and were easily driven off. This delivery was the first mail to arrive in El Paso from San Antonio in nearly four years.<sup>9</sup>

In November 1866, Coopwood transferred the stage coach property to Frederick A. Sawyer.<sup>10</sup> James Holliday supervised the transition and became an agent of the new company.<sup>11</sup> Sawyer's contract called for three mail trains per week between San Antonio and El Paso.<sup>12</sup>

In December 1866, Federal troops occupied Fort Clark and Fort Mason.<sup>13</sup> Fort Clark was occupied by the Confederacy during the war but Fort Mason was not. It was not until July 1867, that Federal troops arrived at Fork Stockton.<sup>14</sup> Prior to that, Coopwood's men never managed to get more than two mail trains a week past Mescalero Indian Chief Espejo and his band.<sup>15</sup> The newspapers in San Antonio complained that, from November 1866 through May 1867, a period of twenty-eight weeks, only twelve mail trains had successfully completed the trip.

The post Civil War Indian raids began in July 1866 when 125 Apache warriors attacked the eastbound stage at Varela Spring and also the westbound stage at Lancaster Hill. According to one observer, Comanche Indians "roamed over an immense region, eating the raw flesh of the buffalo, drinking its warm blood, and plundering Mexicans, Indians and white with judicial impartiality."<sup>16</sup> Attacks were expected and, while disruptive, did not stop the mail contractor. By November and December 1866, contractors were repairing stage stands and purchasing livestock prior to beginning mail runs between San Antonio and El Paso.<sup>17</sup> Traffic along the San Antonio-El Paso Upper and Lower roads increased despite continuing Native American depredations.<sup>18</sup> By 1867, the Lower Road was so heavily used by freighters that it was said to be "seldom that a person could cross the road without seeing" wagons.<sup>19</sup>

## **The US Army returned to Fort Davis in 1867.**

In June 1867, troops of the Ninth Cavalry and Forty-first Infantry Regiments occupied Fort Davis. They began to build a new post adjacent to the ruins of the old one. Fort Stockton was re-occupied on July 12, 1867, by four companies of the Ninth Cavalry composed of black troops recruited from the area around New Orleans.<sup>20</sup>

Sawyer's new mail contract started on July 1, 1867 but the first mail, which was accompanied by the line's new manager, Benjamin Franklin Ficklin, left San Antonio on the Lower Road three months later. The mail stations on the new route (the Upper Road) were not yet ready. The mail train found that Indians had filled Howard's Well and Eagle Springs with earth but the train reached El Paso safely.<sup>21</sup> The second west-bound mail train was lost a few miles north of Howard's Well when Kickapoo Indians captured the pack mules and killed two troopers from the Ninth Cavalry.<sup>22</sup>

Fort Quitman, on the Rio Grande, was reoccupied on January 1, 1868 by one company of the Ninth Cavalry<sup>23</sup> and "fought a dozen skirmishes with Mescalero Indians in only a few weeks."<sup>24</sup> Starting in March, tri-weekly mail service began to go through Fredericksburg and Fort Mason along the Upper San Antonio-El Paso Road. After crossing the Pecos River at Horsehead Crossing, the mail train continued to Fort Stockton and then followed the Lower Road to Forts Davis and Quitman and on to El Paso.<sup>25</sup> The new route passed through more settled areas than did the Lower Road and was therefore easier to protect and maintain. However, there were still long stretches of road without settlements. West of Fort Concho there were no

settlements until Fort Stockton, a distance of 150 miles through Indian country.<sup>26</sup> The stage traveled, "all day upon the silent desert, stopping only to change mules at lonely little stations."<sup>27</sup>

On June 3, 1868, T. G. Williams, the agent in San Antonio, announced express mail service through to El Paso in 6½ days. The stage left San Antonio on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 8 o'clock in the morning. There were connections at Fort Stockton to Presidio del Norte. Another coach left San Antonio on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at seven o'clock in the morning for Eagle Pass and Fort Clark via Castroville, New Fountain, D'Hanis and Uvalde.<sup>28</sup>

## **The stage company expanded its operations in West Texas in 1869.**

In January 1869 Ben Ficklin purchased 640 acres on the south bank of the Middle Concho River and expanded his existing headquarters there. He built wagon shops and sheds for harness makers, wheelwrights and blacksmiths as well as a warehouse and corrals for stock. In January 1870, Ficklin's weekly stage schedule was increased to semiweekly service and coaches replaced the buckboard wagons that had been used between Fort Concho and Fort Stockton.<sup>29</sup>

In the early 1870's, US Major Zenas R. Bliss returned to duty in west Texas. As was his custom throughout his military career, he kept a diary of his trip. He said of the coach drivers that, "Each driver drove about a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five miles, day and night, stopping at stations only long enough to swallow a hasty meal. While the driver and escort were eating, the station keeper and his helper hitched up a fresh team of mules, and held them till all were aboard, and then turned them loose, and they would go upon the run for a mile or more, and then they would settle down to a trot and go along peaceably. The mules were trained not to stand still in the road." "If a passenger needed to get out of the coach between stations it was not necessary to stop the coach, the passenger would jump out and the coach would go on again on a run and the driver would run the mules in a circle, and after a while bring them back" to where the passenger was standing. The passenger would jump in and off they went again.<sup>30</sup>

## **Thomas Rife worked for the stage line until 1872.**

There is evidence that Thomas Rife continued to work for the mail line during this period. George Baylor, who was for many years a Ranger captain in the upper Rio Grande Valley, implied that at some time before 1873, Thomas Rife was in charge of a mail station on the Rio Grande between Fort Quitman and Ysleta<sup>31</sup> near where Camp Rice and later Fort Hancock were located.<sup>32</sup>

Stagecoaches in west Texas did a brisk business in both express packages and passengers until the railroads were built and placed in service. The stagecoach line prospered as the country filled up with settlers. In January 1882, the Texas and Pacific Railroad reached El Paso from the east.<sup>33</sup> After the railroad was built and given the

contract to carry the mail, stage coach conductors and guards were put out of business.<sup>34</sup>

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26. Austerman, *Sharps Rifles and Spanish Mules*, 213
27. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi*, 228
28. Thonhoff, San Antonio Stage Lines 1847-1881, fig. 30
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# **Pecos County, 1870-1873**

## **Captain Rife remained in West Texas until 1872.**

By 1870 Tom Rife was 47 years old and had worked for 18 years in the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas. He was known as Captain Rife because of his work as a conductor of stagecoaches.<sup>1</sup> In that capacity, he was responsible for the stagecoach and its passengers, the mail it carried and the men who drove and protected it. Shortly after the War he returned to San Antonio but by 1870 was again west of the Pecos River in what later became Pecos County.

By July 1866, mail coaches resumed operations between San Antonio and El Paso.<sup>2</sup> Despite frequent attacks by Indians, the mail stations were repaired and stocked with livestock<sup>3</sup> and by the following spring three mail wagons were stopping at Fort Stockton every week.<sup>4</sup>

The road between San Antonio and El Paso, already a well-marked highway, was improved.<sup>5</sup> In 1868 a bridge was constructed over the Pecos River<sup>6</sup> in a location that previously was crossed on a skiff when the water was high.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, the bridge was replaced by a new pontoon bridge that quickly became the main crossing.<sup>8</sup> Also, once a week, the mail coach travelled from Fort Stockton and Fort Davis to Presidio del Norte on the Rio Grande.<sup>9</sup>

## **Thomas Rife was qualified to hold public office.**

Rife surrendered to Federal authorities in San Antonio in 1865, as was required of those who served in the Civil War as Confederates.<sup>10</sup> He took a loyalty oath before he was paroled.<sup>11</sup> The general amnesty required only a simple oath of loyalty to the US Constitution and its laws.<sup>12</sup> Two years later a stricter oath, called the "ironclad oath" was introduced.<sup>13</sup> Anyone who could or would not take this second oath was prevented from serving as a juror or acting as a state or local official. The oath stated that he had not given "aid, countenance, counsel or encouragement" to the Confederacy.

In the election of 1869 all candidates who had won their election but who could not take the ironclad oath were disqualified from taking office.<sup>14</sup> The requirement to swear the ironclad oath would have prevented Rife from standing for election in a county election if as a mail carrier he had previously taken an oath to the US Constitution.<sup>15</sup> In practice, prior to the Civil War, only postmasters and mail contractors were required to take an oath to the US Constitution.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Rife was qualified to hold public office after the Civil War.<sup>17</sup>

Local boards were appointed to administer the loyalty oath and to register voters.<sup>18</sup> In 1869, the Texas voter registration boards were mostly partisans of the radical Republican candidate for governor, E. J. Davis.<sup>19</sup> However, the restrictions placed on former Confederates may have been relaxed in the Trans-Pecos region because the Republican Party considered Texas west of the Colorado River to have been loyal to the Union.<sup>20</sup>

Stagecoach drivers and guards, and especially those of the mail service, were seen by the federal government as trustworthy.<sup>21</sup> Rife was well known in West Texas and law-abiding citizens of the region welcomed him<sup>22</sup> when he resumed his work as a mail carrier after the war.<sup>23</sup> Rife was acquainted with many of the influential men in West Texas and these contacts and old friends would have been important to Rife and surely influenced his decision to return there.

A generation later in 1891, affidavits by Rife and George Giddings described the exact location of San Martin Springs, of vital importance in determining the boundary line between El Paso, Jeff Davis and Reeves Counties.<sup>24</sup> In Rife's mail service days it was known as Barrilla Spring.

## **West Texas forts were re-occupied by the US Army beginning in 1867.**

Immediately after the war, the U.S. military was preoccupied with establishing an occupying force in the settled regions of Texas and along the Rio Grande and did not begin to return to the Trans-Pecos until after the French had left Mexico in June 1867. After this time, the Army responded to Indian depredations by gradually increasing its presence in the Trans-Pecos region.<sup>25</sup>

The US Government renounced the Quaker Peace policy that previously governed its relationship with indigenous peoples and became more aggressive in its treatment of Indians. Many Indians were forcibly confined to reservations.<sup>26</sup> The Texas Legislature abolished the widely distrusted State Police<sup>27</sup> and reinstated the ranger service<sup>28</sup> to reduce tensions between ex-Confederates and state authorities.<sup>29</sup>

Buffalo soldiers were African American soldiers who mainly served on the Western frontier following the American Civil War. In 1866, six all-black cavalry and infantry regiments were created after Congress passed the Army Organization Act. Their main tasks were to help control the Native Americans of the Plains, capture cattle rustlers and thieves and protect settlers, stagecoaches, wagon trains and railroad crews along the Western front. Beginning in January 1869, Forts Stockton, Davis, Quitman, Clark,

McKavett, Concho and Duncan were garrisoned by black infantry and cavalry companies, known as the Buffalo soldiers.

Fort Bliss had been occupied by black troops since June 1865.<sup>30</sup> The transition from garrisons of Anglo-European soldiers to black troops apparently went smoothly in West Texas. State and military officials in east Texas, where the white population would not accept black troops, took notice of this. In February 1869, some Republican lawmakers wanted to divide the state of Texas into two or three states<sup>31</sup> in order to separate unrepentant Confederates in the east from those in West Texas whom they considered to be loyal to the Union. The area to the west of the Colorado River was considered to be safe for freedmen and the black soldiers and could be granted self-government without fear of adverse consequences.<sup>32</sup>

## **The Legislature created Pecos County in 1870.**

The Republican-led Texas Legislature appointed three commissioners to hold an election to form Presidio County in the Big Bend area of the Rio Grande.<sup>33</sup> In 1871, Pecos County was created. A board to organize the new county was to be appointed on the first Monday in May of that year but the members of the board were not appointed until May 12. This may have been why the attempt to organize of the county failed.<sup>34</sup>

Peter Gallagher, a merchant in both Fort Stockton<sup>35</sup> and San Antonio, was instrumental in forming at least two county governments in the Trans-Pecos region. He served on the Board of Commissioners for Presidio County in 1870.<sup>36</sup> Choosing the county seat was of paramount importance to landowners and merchants. They often owned real estate and had mercantile businesses to protect.

## **Thomas Rife was elected Justice of the Peace in 1872.**

On January 13, 1872, Tom Rife was elected a Justice of a Peace in Pecos County at Fort Stockton.<sup>37</sup> Rife won the election for Precinct No. 3 with 14 votes to 11 and 1 in a three-way race and was commissioned on February 29.<sup>38</sup> The third precinct was in far eastern Pecos County on the Pecos River. Perhaps Rife was working there as a mail station manager.<sup>39</sup> 1872 was also a national election year. During the November election (which ran for four days) Horace Greeley, the Democratic and Liberal Republican candidate, received 25 votes for President and U.S. Grant, the Radical Republican candidate, received 18 votes. There were only 45 registered voters in the new county, described as "26 whites, 10 Mexicans and 9 colored men."<sup>39</sup>"

There is no evidence that the elected county officials ever met and this election did not result in the seating of a county court of commissioners. Ballot stuffing and vote buying was the order of the day in most county elections of this kind and the election in Presidio County proved to be no exception.<sup>40</sup> In November 1872, the returns of El Paso and Presidio counties were thrown out "on account of mob violence, intimidation and undue influence"<sup>41</sup> The Secretary of State may also have decided that the Pecos County vote was not valid because the county did not have a sufficient number of registered voters to entitle them to organize a county government.<sup>42</sup>

Rife might not have served as a Justice of the Peace after his election as the records are unclear. Three years later, in March 1875, a special election was held in Pecos County to fill vacancies that included District Clerk, Sheriff, Treasurer, County Surveyor, Hide Inspector, and all five Justices of the Peace.<sup>[^78]</sup> Another general election was held the next year and elected a new set of officials. In January 1876, precinct boundaries were again delineated.<sup>43</sup> The earliest records in the Pecos County Courthouse in Fort Stockton date from 1875.

## Thomas Rife and his wife left Pecos County in 1873.

It is unclear what Rife was doing in Pecos County in January 1872 and why he stood for election as a Justice of the Peace. At that time, he and his wife lived in or near Fort Stockton.<sup>44</sup> He was eligible to serve as a county official and was accepted as eligible by the voter registrars who also supervised the elections.<sup>45</sup> With only 45 registered voters in the proposed county, the list of possible candidates would have been short. In 1870, US military authorities stipulated that each county had to have five Justices of the Peace so as to constitute the police court. Each Justice of the Peace had to post a bond of \$500 to the county police court.<sup>46</sup> The requirement to post a bond of such a large amount further narrowed the field of perspective candidates.

Soon after the election, Rife left Pecos County. He may have known that the era of cross-country stagecoaches was over; the heroic period of Texas history, and his role in it, was fast drawing to a close. The Southern Pacific Railroad from San Diego, California reached El Paso in May 1881. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fé Railroad reached El Paso from the east in June 1881. The Texas & Pacific Railroad followed in January 1883. The railroads led to a large shift in the population; many workers of all races suffered from downward mobility after the closing of the frontier (i.e. after the coming of the railroads).<sup>47</sup>

Freighters who hauled merchandise between San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley disappeared when the Southern Pacific Railroad reached Eagle Pass in 1878 and the Great Northern Railroad reached Laredo in 1883.<sup>48</sup> In 1877, the first train of the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio route entered San Antonio and its bell, reaching the ears of the men who drove stages and who freighted goods, tolled the demise of long-distance mail coaches and freight trains. A second railroad, the International and Great Northern railroad reached San Antonio from Houston in 1880. In 1883 and 1885 routes were opened to Corpus Christi and Kerrville, respectively.<sup>49</sup> In 1886, Pap Howard reportedly drove the last stage out of San Antonio to San Angelo. According to a newspaper reporter, "it was with tears in their eyes that many of the city's intrepid pioneers watched him disappear into the distance."<sup>50</sup> They realized that the days of the cross-country stagecoaches and freight trains pulled by mules had come to an end.

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# **Thomas and Francisca's Life in San Antonio, 1872–1894**



# San Antonio Police, 1874–1885

*"From 1874 to 1885 Tom Rife was on the city police force and won the record of a wise and valiant officer," "Custodian of the Alamo", San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887.*

## Thomas and Francisca Rife moved to San Antonio.

A Justice of the Peace of El Paso County married Thomas Rife and Francisca Eduarda Saenz at Fort Stockton, Texas on June 13, 1871.<sup>1</sup> The groom was 48 and his bride 17-years old.<sup>2</sup> It is unknown where or how Francisca Saenz and Tom Rife met but they likely met in El Paso, Texas. She told a census enumerator in 1900 that she emigrated from Mexico in the year of her marriage; alternatively, she may have met her husband in Mexico.

Tom and Francisca traveled to San Antonio, perhaps to visit and to look for work in 1871, where they visited Mrs. Lizzie Stevens, wife of Deputy Sheriff, Edward Stevens. Later, in an affidavit, she swore that she saw Thomas and Francisca's marriage certificate in 1871 and that it bore the signature of a Justice of the Peace from Fort Stockton.<sup>3</sup> Tom and Francisca moved to San Antonio in 1872; their first child was born in April 1873.

In the 1870s, San Antonio was an unusually cosmopolitan town with a mixed population of Anglos, Germans and Slavs, Mexicans and French in about equal numbers.<sup>4</sup> Rife's bilingual family lived in the Mexican part of town, attended Mass at the Mexican church and associated with Mexican politicians but Rife and his children were comfortable in and accepted by the Anglo and German communities as well.

A traveler in observed in 1855, "Many houses were roughcast on the outside; some were made of stone, some of adobe. Others were built of tree trunks-some of which were irregular and crooked-set in the ground and bound together at the top with transverse pieces of lumber, outside and inside, tied with thongs of rawhide, the interstices between the tree trunks filled with lime mortar, the roof thatched."<sup>5</sup> He was describing Jackal construction.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1866 and about 1877, San Antonio City government was short of funds. Taxes tied to property values financed City government.<sup>7</sup> As other taxes rose during Reconstruction, real estate values and City revenue both fell. For the first ten years after the Civil War the City struggled financially. The gas works, built in 1859, was idle because there was not enough US currency in circulation to run it.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, the City was growing rapidly.<sup>9</sup>

## Rife found work with the City of San Antonio.

In 1874 Rife began a 20-year career as a municipal employee in San Antonio. Perhaps his experience in the election in Fort Stockton redirected his energies toward public service. His earliest contacts when he moved to San Antonio were lawmen such as Ed Stevens, Juan Cardenas,<sup>10</sup> and Alejo Perez Jr. who were also politicians.<sup>11</sup> Rife is referred to in the City Council minutes of October 3, 1876 as "Policeman Rife."<sup>12</sup> In a letter to the editor, a disgruntled citizen described Rife as a former "cattle impounder."<sup>13</sup>

In 1879, Perez was the 2nd Assistant Marshal of San Antonio<sup>14</sup> and a well-respected citizen.<sup>15</sup> He may have known Rife from the New Mexico Campaign when Perez was a Fourth Corporal in Company B of Baylor's Command.<sup>16</sup> Perez's mother, Mrs. Juana Navarro Perez Alsbury, and his aunt, Gertrudis Navarro, were in the Alamo when it fell to the Mexican army in 1836.<sup>17</sup> Perez was an infant then but his mother clearly remembered what she herself lived through. Alejo's family may have been one source of Rife's extensive knowledge of the siege of the Alamo.

## Rife's oldest child was born in San Antonio in 1873.

Rife's first-born son, William Wallace Rife, was born on April 6, 1873. Although Thomas Rife's father and brother were both named William W.<sup>18</sup> the child was also named after Thomas' former ranger captain and co-worker, William (Big Foot) Wallace. Father Guillet baptized the infant (as "Guillermo") in San Fernando Church on May 22, 1873. The boy's godparents were Juan Cardenas and his wife Josefa Valdez.<sup>19</sup>

All the Rife children were baptized at San Fernando Church, in the Spanish-language parish of San Antonio. All had Spanish given names except for the daughters, Mary Jane and Anna. As adults, the children used the English version of their given names on surviving documents. This family was bilingual and about half the children married Anglo partners and the other half married people with Hispanic surnames. Half of the given names of the grandchildren of Thomas and Francisca Rife can be identified as Hispanic while the other half are clearly of Anglo origin. The Rife family seemed to move easily between two of the three dominant cultures in San Antonio.

When Rife chose to align himself with Ed Stevens and when he chose Juan Cardenas<sup>20</sup> as his son's godfather, he located himself within the minority of Anglo Texans who were not contemptuous of or afraid of the native-born Tejanos or Mexican-Americans. Captain Cardenas was an outspoken advocate for the Mexican community<sup>21</sup> and it is unlikely that Rife, who also had strong ties to the Mexican

community, would have advocated for or approved of the segregation, expulsion or disenfranchisement of San Antonio's Mexican-American citizens.

## A second child was born in 1874.

The Rife's second child, Thomas C. Rife Junior, was born on July 16, 1874. Father Neraz<sup>22</sup> baptized him as "Tomas" at San Fernando Church on September 13, 1874. The child's Godparents were Pedro and Rosa Caballos.<sup>23</sup>

Two daughters followed in 1875 and in 1877. On December 26, 1875 the Rife's third child and first daughter was born. She was named Mary Jane,<sup>24</sup> after Rife's younger sister, Mary Jane Wade. The Rife's fourth child and second daughter, Francisca Eduarda, was born on May 03, 1877. Father Louis Genolin at San Fernando Cathedral baptized her more than two years later on May 29, 1879 when it was apparent that the baby would not survive.<sup>25</sup> She died of small pox<sup>26</sup> six days after being baptized and was buried by Father Neraz.<sup>27</sup> This child was the only one of the twelve Rife children to die as an infant. Her Godmother was Dolores Cloud.<sup>28</sup>

## Rife was appointed as Pound Master of the City's dogcatchers.

The dogcatchers operated as an office of the police department. By the spring of 1877, the City Council agreed to do something about the "vagrant dog nuisance"<sup>29</sup> and on June 30 newspapers reported that a dog ordinance was to be enforced. Dog owners were to buy a dog tag in order to avoid having the dog caught and impounded. There was also to be "a pound erected and a pound-master appointed, whose duty it shall be to seize and impound all dogs not provided the check or plate."<sup>30</sup> Much criticism of the program was aired in the newspapers in the next two months. Some writers stated that the effort was a failure. One writer explained it this way, "...any city dog had sense enough to escape being caught. Only pet dogs and country curs would allow the dogcatcher to approach near enough to throw his rope over their heads."<sup>31</sup> An article in the newspaper reported that even though Rife's best roper was in jail for disturbing the peace, his department still had a good month.<sup>32</sup>

## A fifth child was born in 1878.

Anna Rife, the fifth child and the third daughter of Tom and Francisca Rife, was born on June 3, 1878 when her mother already had five children under the age of five. Father Genolin baptized Anna six months after her birth on December 10, 1878 in the San Fernando church. The Godparents were Andres Garza and his wife Serafina Marquez.<sup>33</sup> He, his wife and two girls lived at 712 North Frio Street in the same block as Dolores Cloud.<sup>34</sup>

## **Rife served the police department as a jailer.**

The combined city and county jail was located in the building known as the Bat Cave on Military Plaza. Rife's job title was Vice City Jailer and he was also the night clerk of the Recorder's Court. He managed the jail during the night shift. His job was to register persons arrested by policemen working during the night and keep them until their case could be heard by the Recorder's Court the next morning. Rife worked in this job until March 1, 1879 when Officer Henry Miller resigned and Rife took his place as a regular policeman.<sup>35</sup>

In 1873, the City of San Antonio appointed John Dobbin as the San Antonio City Marshal and he began to reorganize and modernize the police force. Beginning in 1875, San Antonio police officers were required to wear standard uniforms and a badge and to conceal their firearms under their uniform coats.<sup>36</sup> Guards at the City jail, including Rife, wore a similar uniform. By January 1879, Phil Shardein replaced John Dobbin as City Marshal<sup>37</sup> and kept the position throughout most of Rife's career on the police force.

## **The sixth child was born in 1879.**

Lawrence Wade Rife was the Rife's sixth child, born on November 19, 1879. Although the baptismal record has a birthdate in 1878, the June 1880 census listed him as 7 months old, which meant that he was born in 1879. He was almost certainly named after Lawrence Thompson Wade, the husband of Rife's sister, Mary Jane Wade, who lived in Mississippi. Father Genolin baptized the child in San Fernando church as Lorenzo on January 6, 1882. His Godparents were Alejo E. Perez and his wife Antonia Rodrigues.<sup>38</sup>

Alejo E. Perez came from an old San Antonio family and worked with Rife on the police force. Like Juan Cardenas, Perez later served as President of the Sociedad Mutualista Mexicana, a Mexican benevolent association formed in 1883. This society had 160 members in 1887-1888 and met every Saturday at the City Recorder's Office on Military Plaza. Captain Juan Cardenas was godfather to sons of both Rife and Alejo Perez.<sup>39</sup>

## **Thomas Rife worked at the Bat Cave.**

Until 1892 the police worked out of the combined City Hall, police station and City and County jail at the northwest corner of Military Plaza.<sup>40</sup> The building dated from 1850<sup>41</sup> and was known as the Bat Cave<sup>42</sup> because of the large number of bats that roosted in the building's eaves.<sup>43</sup> The two-story stone building was surrounded by a 15-foot high wall. The jail was located on the second floor while the police station and a courtroom occupied the ground floor.

## **Rife became Grantee of Confederate Scrip.**

In April, the Texas Legislature approved a bill giving land to disabled Civil War veterans from Texas. Rife's certificate<sup>44</sup> was for 1,280 acres of vacant, unreserved and non-appropriated public land. He was one of 2,068 men who received Confederate Scrip.<sup>45</sup> To be eligible, the veteran could not own property valued at more than one thousand dollars.<sup>46</sup> Just two months after receiving the grant, Rife signed a notarized bill of sale his scrip for the price of \$80 to a land speculator named Jacob Kuechler of Travis County.<sup>47</sup> Most grantees sold their certificates rather than bear the prohibitive costs of surveying and patenting the land. Kuechler, a civil engineer and surveyor, used the scrip to patent 1,120 acres in Zavala County.

In November 1881, Rife was a member of the Bexar County Association of Mexican War Veterans. He was the group's treasurer in 1887.<sup>48</sup> Like most of the Association's members, Rife was an amateur historian.<sup>49</sup> In January 1884, when John (Rip) Ford, a Texas military veteran and historian, moved to San Antonio from Brownsville, he joined the Alamo Association<sup>50</sup> as well as the Bexar Association of Mexican War Veterans.<sup>51</sup> In 1891 he and Rife collaborated on a book about the Mexican War.<sup>52</sup>

## **The seventh and eighth children were born.**

On February 28, 1881 Morris Wade, the Rife's seventh child and fourth boy, was born. Morris was named Mauricio after his maternal grandfather. Father Genolin baptized the baby on January 29, 1883 in San Fernando church.<sup>53</sup> Fred, baptized as Federico, was born in June 1882.<sup>54</sup> Nothing is known of Fred except that he died at age 28 of Tuberculosis.<sup>55</sup>

Rife moved his growing family to a different rental house in San Antonio every two or three years. In 1881-1882 the Rife family lived on the east side of Presa Street.<sup>56</sup> In 1883 they lived at 428 North Laredo and in 1885 at 430 North Laredo<sup>57</sup> west of San Pedro Creek in the Mexican area of town.

## **Rife earned a reputation as a valiant police officer.**

Beginning in 1883, Rife's name appeared regularly in crime reports in the city newspapers. He responded to domestic disputes<sup>58</sup> and arrested drunkards for raising a disturbance or cussing and throwing rocks.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes he had to disarm violent or angry citizens.<sup>60</sup> In March 1884, Rife and his partner arrested two men who were heard conspiring to assassinate San Antonio Police officer Jacob Coy.<sup>61</sup> Earlier Coy had killed Ben Thompson and King Fisher, two men widely known for bloody and desperate acts including the killing of Jack Harris, the popular owner of the Vaudeville Theater. A gunfight erupted in the theater involving some friends of Harris and both men were killed.<sup>62</sup>

In those days there were no police wagons and so it was necessary to walk the arrested person to the jail in the Bat Cave.<sup>63</sup> Drunks, often visitors from out of town, occasionally fought the police.<sup>64</sup> Cowboys were often arrested for riding through the streets, shooting at dogs<sup>65</sup> and disturbing the peace.

Rife stayed with the San Antonio police force until he was permanently suspended on June 5, 1885 having allowed, as one of two jailers on duty, a convicted notorious highwayman named James McDaniel to escape.<sup>66</sup> McDaniel and his partner had been sentenced to imprisonment for life. He loosened a stone in the bathroom wall, slipped through and climbed over the outer wall. Deputy Sheriff Ed Stevens killed McDaniel while he was resisting arrest on June 30. In Rife's defense, one of the deputies reported, "...the cement can be picked away with fingers."<sup>67</sup>

After Rife became custodian of the Alamo, he was not expected to perform police work and his responsibility did not extend outside of the Alamo building. He was not kept on the rolls of the police force after he became the Custodian of the Alamo although he continued to carry his pistol and had the power of arrest.<sup>68</sup> Alamo Plaza was a busy place; in 1893 a police station was located in a shed attached to the south wall of the Alamo church<sup>69</sup> and four mounted officers were assigned to the station.<sup>70</sup>

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# Keeper of the Alamo, 1885–1894

*When the state became the owner of the historic Alamo fort, Captain Rife was appointed custodian of the building by the city and he held this position continuously until his death.*  
"Death of Capt. Rife", - San Antonio Daily Light, December 27, 1894.

## Rife was appointed as the Keeper of the Alamo.

Rife was unemployed for only a few weeks, when on July 27, 1885, the Mayor appointed him Custodian of the Alamo<sup>1</sup> at a salary of \$50 per month.<sup>2</sup> This was \$20 per month less than he had been receiving as a policeman. However he no longer had to work at night and as the keeper of the Alamo building, he also received tips from visitors.<sup>3</sup> As the number of tourists to the famous old building increased, tips may have become a significant source of his income.

## The Rife's 9th Child Was Born.

On November 30, 1886, Peter Gay Rife was born. He was the Rife's ninth child and fifth boy. Father Darche baptized him as Pedro on June 09, 1887. The child was named after his Godparents Peter and Mary Gaye.<sup>4</sup> Peter Gaye was from France. He lived at the corner of Chavez and North East streets, where he and his wife ran a retail grocery store.<sup>5</sup> His large tombstone in Fernando Cemetery Number 1 indicates that he died a wealthy man.

In 1888 Rife was 65 years old and had eight children; the oldest was a teenager and the youngest an infant. Rife's financial situation improved when he began receiving a Mexican War Pension of \$8.00 per month.<sup>6</sup> On February 6, 1888 Rife purchased a building lot, measuring approximately four acres, on the east side of Pleasonton Road for a recorded price of \$1 from Morgan W. and Sarah J. Newcomb Merrick.<sup>7</sup> The Merrick's were old friends.<sup>8</sup>

At this time, the Rife's oldest son was fifteen years old and apparently had left home. The boy, Will, was arrested for vagrancy. This was apparently his first arrest. The

Recorder's Court fined him \$5 on April 9, 1888.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper reported on August 16, 1888 that Rife and his wife had recovered from an illness and that Rife was back at work at the Alamo.<sup>10</sup>

## Rife's tenth child, Jack was born on April 21, 1889.

The newest child was baptized as Jacinto, a name that he used on the 1910 census report when he was living in Von Ormy, Texas.<sup>11</sup>

Electric streetcars replaced the mule-driven trolley cars previously used in San Antonio before 1890.<sup>12</sup> Rife rode the streetcar to and from his job at the Alamo. In October 1889, Rife had the misfortune to be badly shocked while getting off one of the new electric streetcars. He was carried home and remained there until he recovered.<sup>13</sup> Rife, who was 66, was working at the Alamo seven days a week, from 8am to 5pm Monday through Saturday and 8am to 9am and 4pm to 5pm on Sunday.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the Rife children visited their father at the Alamo. Occasionally, they signed the big book near the door set up for visitors to sign after being escorted through the ruins by Captain Rife. A reporter noted that Mary Jane Rife, age 15, and Anne Rife, age 12, visited their father at work at the Alamo on Sunday, August 24, 1890, and signed the visitor's book.<sup>15</sup> Again, three weeks later, Mary Rife was listed in the newspaper as a visitor to the Alamo on Friday, September 19.<sup>16</sup> The children's mother may have sent them to the Alamo with a message or lunch for their father or maybe they just wanted a chance to see and talk to him.

At that time the Rife family was living at 430 North Laredo Street,<sup>17</sup> having been at that address for six years.<sup>18</sup> This house was a few blocks west of Military Plaza near Milam Plaza and about a mile from the Alamo. On occasion, Rife opened the building at night to accommodate special requests and sometimes he brought his oldest son with him.<sup>19</sup> The children could read and write and were among the narrow majority of school age children who regularly attended school.<sup>20</sup> The next spring Rife was again reappointed custodian of the Alamo by the San Antonio City Council.<sup>21</sup>

## Thomas Rife and Francisca renewed their wedding vows.

A priest at San Fernando Cathedral married Tom and Francisca Rife on March 17, 1891 "because the Church does not recognize civil marriages."<sup>22</sup> The couple had married in a civil ceremony in 1871 but, apparently, the record of their marriage was lost. Francisca looked for it again in 1895 but the original records of the civil marriage, which should have been in the archives of El Paso County, could not be found.<sup>23</sup> Probably for this reason, the couple celebrated their twentieth wedding anniversary by getting married, this time in the Catholic Church.<sup>24</sup> David Morrill Poor, an old friend of Tom's, certified that Rife's marriage to Francisca was his second marriage.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Rife's 11th child, Ruth, was born on May 18, 1891.**

Francisca was pregnant when the couple married for the second time. Ruth was almost six years old, and ready for First Communion, before she was baptized at San Fernando church on January 17, 1897.<sup>26</sup> Her Godmother was Miss Josephine M. Flores.<sup>27</sup>

Rife's oldest sons were now teenagers and Rife was losing control of them. On July 20, 1891, Rife's 12-year-old son, Lawrence, was arrested for breaking into two grocery stores.<sup>28</sup> By August 4, Lawrence was out of jail on \$200 bond. His accomplice, 9-1/2-year-old Jesús Lopez, and his mother were sent back to Mexico from whence they had recently come.<sup>29</sup> On July 23, three days after Lawrence's arrest, his older brother, Willie Rife, was arrested for refusing to pay for drinks he had ordered at a saloon. To make matters worse, Willie "also threw rocks" at the house of the Italian who owned the saloon.<sup>30</sup> In November 1891, William, age 18 and his sister, Mary, age 16, were arrested for throwing stones at some neighbors. They were charged with disorderly conduct but the charges were later dismissed.<sup>31</sup>

## **Sometime in 1892 the Rife's 12th and last child, Lucy,<sup>32</sup> was born.**

The family had moved again, this time to 307 Delgado Street,<sup>33</sup> perhaps as a result of the rock-throwing incident. Delgado Street was a few blocks west of Colorado Street in the heart of the Mexican Westside. Rife's commute to the Alamo was much longer now. The family had previously lived less than a mile from the Alamo and his children could visit him at his work. Now he had to travel over two miles to and from the Alamo. Rife was approaching 70-years-old and his health was failing. On March 3, 1893, Thomas Rife was reappointed by the City Council as Keeper of the Alamo. He was being paid despite the fact that it was reported that he was paralyzed.<sup>34</sup> But by March 22 he was back at work at the Alamo.<sup>35</sup>

On May 12, 1893, Will Rife was sent to jail for assaulting a man named José Navarro. He "was committed to jail in default of \$1,000 bond."<sup>36</sup> Eight months later Will was fined \$25 and released.

Rife was sick on October 3, 1893, but received his normal pay on a motion offered by Alderman Elmendorf.<sup>37</sup> On February 20, 1894, by a motion of Alderman Smith, the San Antonio City Council adopted a motion to allow Tom Rife to assume his position as custodian of the Alamo "as he has recovered."<sup>38</sup> He had been reported as paralyzed.<sup>39</sup> The eleven San Antonio aldermen each donated \$5 to pay Rife back wages of \$50 for one month's work as the custodian.<sup>40</sup> Now the Rife family was living on Warren Street, between San Pedro Creek and San Pedro Avenue, a short walk from the streetcar line.<sup>41</sup> On March 4, 1894, Rife was re-elected to his position by the City Council by a vote of 11 to 1.<sup>42</sup> Most City employees held their job by virtue of a system of patronage and after municipal elections city employees had to be reappointed.

In addition to his salary of \$50 per month from his job at the Alamo, Rife received tips from grateful visitors and a pension of \$8 per month for his service during the Mexican War.<sup>43</sup> For this time and place Rife had an above average income.<sup>44</sup>

However, he seemed to struggle with his financial condition; he had ten or eleven children at home, the family moved frequently from one rented house to another, and his delinquent sons were a financial burden.<sup>45</sup>

In 1893 or 1894 Rife's family moved again to a house at 1224 Cameron Street, a block west of Flores and only a few blocks east of where they had lived the year before. The San Antonio Daily Light reported that on December 3, 1894, Thomas was "very ill" and that William McMaster, a San Jacinto veteran, was acting as Alamo custodian in his absence.<sup>46</sup>

Rife did not recover and died<sup>47</sup> at his home on Cameron Street on December 27, 1894.<sup>48</sup> He had been ill for two months and died of "general debility."<sup>49</sup> The funeral was held on the following day at 10 o'clock am, as was customary.<sup>50</sup> The funeral Mass was held at the San Fernando Cathedral and Rife was buried in San Antonio,<sup>51</sup> almost certainly at the cemetery now called San Fernando, Number 1.<sup>52</sup> "Father had such a poor funeral we had no money," wrote daughter Annie to her sister Mary three days later.<sup>53</sup> This must explain why there is no headstone today. Iron headstones were popular in the late 19th century but many were sold during the period when scrap iron was being collected for the war effort during World War II.

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50. David McDonald, *Jose Antonio Navarro, In Search of the American Dream in Nineteenth Century Texas*, (Denton, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 2010), 270; Letter from Annie Rife to OAV Burr, January 1, 1895, original owned by Susan Majewski
51. *Daily Light (San Antonio)*, December 28, 1894
52. Death Record, 1875-1879, Municipal Archives and Records, San Antonio
53. Letter from Anna Rife to OAV Burr, January 1, 1895

# Preserving the Alamo, 1885–1905

*"From 1885 to 1894 Rife was custodian of the Alamo", "Custodian of the Alamo", San Antonio Light, February 23, 1887*



The Alamo as it appeared on September 3, 1894. Less than three months after this photo was taken, Tomas Rife died on December 28, 1894, after nine and one half years as the first custodian. A wood stove was set up for the comfort of the custodian and the stove pipe can be seen protruding out of the window on the lower right window. Photo courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas

## The Alamo was established in 1718.

Fray Antonio de Olivares, a Franciscan missionary established Mission San Antonio de Valero (now called the Alamo) for the Payaya Indians. The mission was a school where the Native Americans were taught Spanish culture and the Catholic religion.<sup>1</sup> The mission enclosure was built in the form of a rectangle with living quarters for the Indians on the opposite side of a plaza from the residence of the priests and the church.<sup>2</sup> Construction of the church was begun in 1744 and was finished in 1757. The church's two towers, its arched roof and the dome collapsed in 1762 because of faulty construction.<sup>3</sup> Because of a shortage of labor caused by disease epidemics and a decline in the number of Indians living at the mission, the church was never rebuilt and remained a ruin.<sup>4</sup> Epidemics killed so many Indian converts at the mission that by 1778 there were not enough laborers to work the mission's fields.<sup>5</sup>

From 1690 until September 10, 1772, the Spanish Crown paid the expenses of the San Antonio missions.<sup>6</sup> Mission San Antonio de Valero was secularized<sup>7</sup> in August 1793. The mission and its few remaining residents were transferred from the care of missionary fathers to that of the local parish.<sup>8</sup> Because of a shortage of diocesan priests, the Franciscan missionaries agreed to stay on as parish priests and the mission was administered as part of the parish of Béxar.<sup>9</sup>

Ten years later, a cavalry company from El Alamo de las Parras (now Viesca, Coahuila) occupied the former priests' residence<sup>10</sup> until 1813 and the priests' residence became known as the Long Barracks.<sup>11</sup> By 1807 the Alamo was no longer referred to as a mission but as a Spanish fort. In August 1825 the chaplain of the company of Alamo de Parras transferred the company's sacramental records to the church at Béxar.<sup>12</sup> Between 1807 and 1812 the upper floor of the Long Barracks was used as a hospital.<sup>13</sup>

By 1807, of the five missions along the San Antonio River, only Mission San José still had Indians residing on the mission grounds. In 1823, that mission closed and the land and irrigation rights of Mission San José were distributed to private individuals.<sup>14</sup> In 1821 the village government of Béxar (now called San Antonio) asked that the remaining unassigned land of the Mission Valero (the Alamo) be assigned to it.<sup>15</sup> In September 1825 title to all the remaining mission buildings passed to the Bishop of Monterrey, whose diocese included the village of Béxar. The Church subsequently repurchased some property that had fallen into private hands.<sup>16</sup>

The Spanish government closed its presidios (forts) in east Texas in 1793 and moved the settlers to Béxar. In February of that year, people from the Presidio of Adaes (west of Natchitoches in what is now Louisiana) were assigned land at the Valero mission. After the Alamo mission was closed in August, the village of La Villita was built south of the Alamo enclosure on land that had once belonged to the San Antonio de Valero mission.<sup>17</sup> Because it was on higher ground, a number of families moved west of the river after a flood in 1819. After annexation in 1845, La Villita became a German neighborhood.<sup>18</sup>

## The Alamo was besieged in 1836.

In 1830 the military facilities at the Alamo were expanded onto expropriated private property.<sup>19</sup> General Martin Perfecto de Cos rebuilt the fortifications at the Alamo<sup>20</sup> just before surrendering to the Texans in December 1835.<sup>21</sup> There were also fortifications on Military Plaza that were staffed by a second company of troops.<sup>22</sup> After the Texans captured the town, the military officers abandoned the fortifications on Military Plaza in the village of Béxar because of a shortage of men and moved all their guns to the Alamo fort. The doors of the Long Barracks facing the mission plaza were blocked with rammed earth and loop-holed.<sup>23</sup> A loophole is an opening in a wall just large enough for a standing man to use as a firing port. A cedar post stockade, ditch and earthworks were erected at gaps in the exterior walls.<sup>24</sup>

When General Santa Anna's army arrived on the morning of February 23, 1836, the fort and the mainly American force inside was besieged.<sup>25</sup> General Santa Anna made it clear that if his army had to storm the fort its defenders would be executed.

Mexican troops were at times withdrawn from the eastern side of the fort in the hope that the defenders would take the opportunity to flee.<sup>26</sup> During the siege most of the Tejano men of Béxar who had entered the fort with the Texas Federalists and their American allies were induced to leave.<sup>27</sup> The remaining men, mostly Americans who had only recently arrived in Texas, were prepared to die to defend the Alamo.<sup>28</sup>

In the early morning of Sunday, March 6, the fort was stormed and captured by the Mexican Centrist army.<sup>29</sup> There were less than two hundred men and about a dozen women and children in the fort when it was attacked.<sup>30</sup> Most of the women and children were sheltered in rooms on the north side of the church; they were away from the main fight at the Long Barracks and were not injured.<sup>31</sup> When Colonel Travis refused to surrender the fort, General Santa Anna placed a red flag on the tower of San Fernando Church, signifying "No Quarter"<sup>32</sup> and everyone understood that all armed men found inside the Alamo would be killed.<sup>33</sup> During the assault the Mexican army's band played an ancient melody called "de querella," signaling that no prisoners were to be taken. Most of the approximately 182 defenders were killed when the fort fell on that infamous day.<sup>34</sup>

After the battle, Mexican General Andrade first began to fortify the Alamo and then had his troops dismantle the fortifications before moving to join the main Mexican army at Goliad. Before surrendering to the Americans in December 1835, General Cos had torn down the remaining arches of the church and built a ramp from debris that extended from the main door of the church to its rear. There he installed a wooden platform upon which he mounted an 18-pound cannon.<sup>35</sup> General Andrade's troops set the wooden platform on fire before they left for Goliad. The high walls surrounding the mission plaza were leveled, the moat filled up and the cedar pickets were torn up and burnt.<sup>36</sup> The Long Barracks and the ruins of the church were left intact.<sup>37</sup> The outer walls on the west and south sides of the plaza were actually stone or adobe soldiers' quarters that faced the plaza. The rear of these houses formed the outer wall of the mission enclosure. These walls were also left intact.<sup>38</sup>

A visitor to the Alamo in 1842 described the Alamo as having 12 to 15 apartments, separated by stonewalls several feet thick. He understood that the defenders of the

Alamo were pursued into the convent or Long Barracks and killed there.<sup>39</sup> He made no mention of the church that stood to one side and behind the Alamo fort. The old fort remained a ruin and a place where children played until about 1850.<sup>40</sup> In 1845 the 2nd Illinois Regiment of the US Army built a carpentry shop inside the old walls before the regiment departed for Mexico.<sup>41</sup> For many years the only other buildings in the neighborhood were flat-roofed adobe houses just south of the Alamo in the old Barrio of Valero.<sup>42</sup>

## **The US Army occupied the Alamo from 1846 to 1878.**

On January 13 and 18, 1841, the Congress of the Republic of Texas passed an act granting the mission churches and surrounding improvements to the Catholic Church.<sup>43</sup> The images of Saints Dominic and Francis were removed from the niches on the front of the Alamo church shortly afterward.<sup>44</sup> The crucifix and other sacred objects had been removed to San Fernando Church long before.<sup>45</sup>

Towards the end of 1846, the United States Army took possession of the Alamo property and began paying rent to Mr. Bryan Callaghan as agent of the Bishop in April 1847.<sup>46</sup> The Army attempted to get possession of the fort by pre-emption but Samuel Maverick, a local resident and land speculator, convinced them that the Alamo was a mission, not a fort and therefore not public property.<sup>47</sup> He then had the site surveyed and built a house on the northwest corner of the property on land he purchased from a local resident.<sup>48</sup>

By 1847 only the Long Barracks, the ruined church and portions of the west and south walls (specifically the Low Barracks) remained. The US Army, under Major Babbitt, removed much of the debris from the church, built a peaked, shingled roof over the shell of the building and raised the parapet of the church to hide the peaked roof.<sup>49</sup> San Antonio architect John Fries, who designed the parapet extension, added two upper windows on the west face of the building.<sup>50</sup> A peaked roof was added to the Long Barracks and it was renovated as offices.<sup>51</sup> The old fort was used as the Quartermaster's Depot<sup>52</sup> for the 8th Infantry for the next thirty years.<sup>53</sup>

The Army built a barracks at the corner of Houston and St. Mary's Street in San Antonio and rented the Vance Building (the Brick Building) as the Army's Headquarters.<sup>54</sup> In 1860, the US Quartermaster, 8th Infantry had his office in the Brick Block that the Army rented from Vance Brothers.<sup>55</sup> A subordinate branch of the Quartermaster Department under Captain A. W. Reynolds, Assistant Quartermaster, occupied the Alamo.

The building fronting the common (i.e. the Long Barracks) was described as a two-story building used for offices, storerooms, packing rooms, saddler's shop, harness room and a wagon shed.<sup>56</sup> In a corral behind the Long Barracks were mule sheds. On the east side of the street behind the Long Barracks was the corral for wagons, a carpenter's shop, a smith's shop and hay yard.<sup>57</sup> The first floor of the old church building was used as a granary. The architect added a second floor to the church and R. M. Potter, a military storekeeper, occupied it. Mr. Potter had charge of the camp, garrison and clothing stores.<sup>58</sup> The Quartermaster employed over 129 persons, 820 mules, 1 horse and 198 wagons, many of them in and around the Alamo.<sup>59</sup>

A flood destroyed parts of San Antonio along the San Antonio River<sup>60</sup> in March 1865; the Bishop asked the US Army to vacate the Alamo church so the German Catholic congregation of San Antonio could use it. Major General Merritt replied that the building was being used by the Quarter Master Department for receiving grains and losing its use would be a “great inconvenience and serious loss.”<sup>61</sup> St. Joseph’s Church was subsequently built nearby for German-speaking Catholics.<sup>62</sup>

The Diocese no longer needed the Alamo church after the new church was built.<sup>63</sup> According to local legend, the statue of Saint Anthony of Padua was then removed from the lower right-hand niche on the Alamo’s façade. This signified that the angels guarding the church had withdrawn their protection and that the building was no longer to be considered as holy ground.<sup>64</sup>

On May 19, 1868, a hailstorm caused much damage in San Antonio and destroyed the shingle roofs of the Alamo buildings.<sup>65</sup> US Army headquarters were moved to Austin the next year but then returned to San Antonio in 1875. During this time the church was still being used by the Army to store grain. The City donated 93 acres for Post San Antonio (now called Fort Sam Houston) and in May work began on the new post.<sup>66</sup> The first building completed at Fort Sam Houston was the Quadrangle occupied by the Quartermaster in January 1878. Shortly afterward the Army left the Alamo property.<sup>67</sup>

### **The Alamo was sold for commercial use in 1879.**

In 1879 Honoré Grenet purchased the Long Barracks from the Catholic Church for \$19,000 for use as a retail store.<sup>68</sup> He refaced the exterior with wood made to resemble a military fortress.<sup>69</sup> Mr. Grenet built wooden galleries around the two-story building (which had been only slightly damaged in 1836) to replicate the missing stone arcades, added towers with wooden cannons and painted the words, “The Alamo Building” on the west and south sides.<sup>70</sup>

Honoré Grenet died unexpectedly in 1882 and two years later the estate was sold at auction to the firm of Hugo-Schmeltzer, a wholesale distributor of groceries and liquors, for \$28,000.<sup>71</sup> The firm moved their offices to Houston Street after a few years and thereafter used the Long Barracks as a warehouse.<sup>72</sup> Apparently Hugh & Schmeltzer continued to lease the old church as well.<sup>73</sup>

### **The Alamo church was purchased by the State.**

In April 1881, the 18th Texas Legislature passed an act authorizing the Governor to purchase the Alamo church building from the Bishop of San Antonio.<sup>74</sup> The City Council of San Antonio adopted a resolution proposing to take charge of the Alamo church “to preserve it as a monument and prevent its desecration” on provision that the State buy the building.<sup>75</sup>

## **Thomas Rife was Custodian of the Alamo, 1885-1894.**

In March 1883, the 19th Texas Legislature passed a bill allowing the Governor to transfer the Alamo building to the City of San Antonio.<sup>76</sup> The San Antonio City Council then authorized the mayor “to appoint some suitable person as custodian of the Alamo.” The same resolution set the hours of operation of the building and the duties of the custodian and his wages. The Custodian of the Alamo had the power and authority of a regular policeman.<sup>77</sup>

On September 30, 1885 the Alamo church building was formally turned over to the City by the State. On July 27, 1885 Mayor Callaghan appointed Thomas C. Rife, a Mexican War veteran, as custodian of the building,<sup>78</sup> perhaps because Rife had recently left the police force. The custodian’s salary was set at \$50 per month. The position, officially the “Keeper of the Alamo” was more commonly called Custodian of the Alamo.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Alamo was opened to visitors.**

On August 1, 1885 the Alamo church building was opened to visitors with Rife as the custodian and tour guide.<sup>80</sup> According to a newspaper reporter, Rife was selected for the job because he was known to be courteous to strangers and had extensive knowledge of Texas history which he “knows by heart and delights in recounting the history of the past that magnifies the deeds of the patriots, yet withal he is modest and reticent in speaking of his own career.”<sup>81</sup>

Rife was the only employee at the Alamo. He had no staff and, while the doors and windows could be locked, the property was not fenced.<sup>82</sup> On at least two occasions, Rife arrived to find that thieves had broken into the Alamo building, forced open the monument contribution box kept there and stole the money in the box.<sup>83</sup> There was no night watchman.<sup>84</sup>

Up to twenty out-of-town travelers visited the shrine each day.<sup>85</sup> Occasionally Rife was forced to expel people who were intent on defacing the building.<sup>86</sup> To prevent vandalism, Rife guided tourists through the site in groups<sup>87</sup> while telling the story of the Alamo “in a manner and a tone so impressive that the mind (of the newspaper reporter) unconsciously (went) back to the story of the Iliad.”<sup>88</sup> In an attempt to discourage vandalism of the stone building, Rife kept a supply of broken stone on hand that he had soaked in dirty water until appropriately “antiqued.” He used these stones to accommodate the demand for souvenirs.<sup>89</sup>

### **The Custodian was the Tour Guide.**

The text of Rife’s tour hasn’t been found nor is it known whether Rife wrote the script of the tour himself or whether others provided it. He had a reputation for veracity<sup>90</sup> but, as an “old veteran” who had arrived in Texas from Louisiana shortly after the Texas Revolution, his opinions were colored by his generation’s prejudice against Mexicans and Indians.<sup>91</sup> Miss Leonora Bennett, who was the Keeper of the Alamo for five years after 1900, published her version of the tour in 1904.<sup>92</sup> Earlier versions of the script were paraphrased by newspaper reporters<sup>93</sup> and visitors<sup>94</sup> and satirized by

writers.<sup>95</sup> None of the accounts from that time questioned the basic elements of the Alamo myth. In that myth the Mexicans were generally portrayed as the enemy<sup>96</sup> and the Alamo became a nationalistic symbol.<sup>97</sup>

While no written script of Rife's tour is known to exist, visitors occasionally wrote down what they heard. A New York Herald reporter took the tour when he visited the Alamo in 1893. In his account the tour began with: "Want to see the Alamo?" Rife asked him. When he said that he did, Rife called to a small Mexican boy, "Chico, stand in the door and look out for thieves." He began; "In this hall, the Spanish monks met in devotion. Here is where Travis, Dave Crockett and the rest of them made their last stand, and there is where the bodies of the Texans were piled ten feet high." In a side room, he pointed and said, "In that corner, died Colonel James Bowie. When Santa Anna's troops broke through he was on a pile of straw in that corner sick with Typhoid fever. There was a woman in here with him - a nurse. She tried to protect him but it was no use. They shot and bayoneted him to pieces. Under my feet are the bodies of the monks and priests who served their God in the Alamo. They did not call it the Alamo then. Their name for it was the Church of the Mission of San Antonio de Valera." He continued, "I had a party in here last week. One of the ladies was very fat. I think she must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. I said to her, 'You're standing on the graves of the Spanish priests.' Just then the ground began to give way with her, and if I hadn't pulled her away I think she would have gone plumb down in the vaults among them bones. Some folks have an idea that Davy Crockett and Bowie and Captain Travis are buried under here somewhere, but there ain't no danger of that. They were all buried - 172 of them - right out in the plaza there, and there's an old woman living in this town today that seen the whole thing." The reporter's opinion was that Rife, "... is a student of Alamo history; but, unlike the average guide, he is full of truth."<sup>98</sup>

In May 1894, another reporter said that Rife "pointed out to us the place where Col. Crockett lay to the left of the front entrance, nearly covered with dead Mexicans, also the room where Mrs. Dickenson and child, the only survivors, remained during the siege."<sup>99</sup>

While it is unknown how Rife learned the details about what occurred at the Alamo on March 6, 1836, pieces of the narrative were beginning to appear in print as early as 1851. Some stories were based on eyewitness accounts.<sup>100</sup> Most accounts were based upon archival material and interviews with individuals who had some hearsay knowledge about the events.<sup>101</sup> The first comprehensive retelling of events was Yoakum's *History of Texas* that appeared in 1855.<sup>102</sup> Yoakum's history was followed by other Texas histories in 1888,<sup>103</sup> 1892,<sup>104</sup> and 1894.<sup>105</sup> Each of these texts contained details about what happened before, during and after the fall of the Alamo.

Whether or not Rife had access to these accounts is not known. Even if he did not, he heard stories told by many men and women who visited the Alamo and who had some knowledge about the fall of the Alamo that may never have appeared in print. His contacts in the Mexican community should have given him access to eyewitness accounts that were largely ignored by Anglo writers until Miss De Zavala began to publish them after 1894.

## **The Alamo attracted growing numbers of tourists.**

Rife's tour was free of charge although visitors were encouraged to tip the tour guide. After 1881 visitors were also encouraged to put donations in a tin box placed near the exit by the Alamo Monument Association for the purpose of financing the construction of a monument to be built on Alamo Plaza.<sup>106</sup>

Rife, on occasion, conducted tours for celebrities. In February 1887, Edwin Booth, the "great tragedian" actor, made his stage debut in San Antonio and received a tour of the Alamo shortly after his arrival.<sup>107</sup> Many visitors to the building signed a registry<sup>108</sup> but none of the registration books used during Rife's tenure are known to exist. It is also not known how many people visited the Alamo in the twenty years between 1885 when the tours began and 1905 when the Daughters of the Republic of Texas took possession of the building. Based on newspaper accounts, the authors estimate that more than 100,000 people visited the Alamo during that twenty-year period.<sup>109</sup> By the late 1920s that many people visited the Alamo every year.<sup>110</sup>

In March 1891, Rife was reappointed Custodian of the Alamo by the San Antonio City Council during the bi-annual review of city employees following civic elections.<sup>111</sup>

## **Thomas Rife was an amateur historian.**

There was no museum to house historical artifacts related to the Alamo. It seems that Rife was trusted by many to hold artifacts for safekeeping. It is not known if they were displayed at the Alamo. San Antonio newspapers reported on September 16 and 17, 1885 that Rife "has a collection of pictures of noted men" which he invited the public to see.<sup>112</sup> The collection included photographs of Walter P. Lane, Colonel Jack Hayes, Colonel Tom Green, Henry McCulloch, Colonel Neally and Colonel Frank W. Johnson.<sup>113</sup> In August 1886, Rife exhibited to a newspaper reporter a document signed by David Crockett in 1818 while he was Justice of the Peace in Lawrence County, Tennessee.<sup>114</sup> In March 1887, a visitor to the Alamo presented Rife with a cannon ball that he had recovered from the site of the Battle of the Salado against Mexican General Woll in 1843.<sup>115</sup>

Relics were found on the Alamo grounds on January 22, 1889. Workmen installing mesquite pavers in Alamo Plaza found a number of six-pound copper cannon balls believed to have been used in the siege of the Alamo in 1836. Rife "managed to get two of the relics, which he is saving as public property at the Alamo..." but the contractor disputed ownership of the others.<sup>116</sup> Six months later, seven smoothbore cannons were discovered about 18 inches deep during excavations at the site of the Maverick building "not a stone's throw from the Alamo. They are of ancient pattern, bear the stamp of Spanish handiwork, are smooth-bores and bell-mouthed. One of them will chamber an eighteen-pound ball." Samuel Maverick and Tom Rife both believed them to have been used in the siege of the Alamo.<sup>117</sup> The cannons were donated to the Alamo Monument Association.<sup>118</sup> Samuel Maverick revealed in a newspaper account that when he was a little boy "we dug a trench right out there (pointing to the spot) to build a fence and found eleven of the old guns. One was an enormous brass piece about 12 feet long. General Harney, of the United States Army, was here then and took it and sent it north to some foundry where he had three

smaller cannon made of it. One of these he sent back to my father, and my brother Albert still has it up at his house. We used to fire it off on the 4th of July when we were boys. Those they have just found were left in the ground and have been there ever since." It was believed by some that after Santa Anna was defeated at San Jacinto, the garrison that remained at the Alamo buried the cannon there.<sup>119</sup>

On March 13, 1888, Judge James Lynch presented a copy of the poem, "The Siege of the Alamo" to Rife, San Antonio Mayor Bryan Callaghan and former Governor of Texas, John Ireland, at a ceremony at the Alamo.<sup>120</sup> The poem, which compares the Alamo to Thermopylae (in Greece) and W. B. Travis to Leonidas (a Spartan leader) with "Mexia demons" led by Santa Anna taking the role of the Persians, was included in a souvenir book sold by the custodian in 1904.<sup>121</sup> The authors have no information as to the fate of these relics. Rife and his family were renters who moved often so the documents may have been lost.

Rife kept in contact with fellow soldiers of both wars that he participated in. He was an officer of the Bexar County Association of Mexican War Veterans. He was elected treasurer at a meeting to re-organize the association on November 4, 1887.<sup>122</sup>

The Colonel of the Thirty-second Texas Calvary, CSA, Peter C. Wood, invited surviving officers and soldiers of the unit to a reunion to be held in San Marcos on July 30, 1886. It was estimated that 5,000 persons attended the reunion. "They came in by north and southbound trains, in wagons, on horseback and every conceivable means of conveyance," reported the San Antonio Daily Express. After being photographed by detachments, they marched to McGhehee's grove on the river to a barbecue feast followed by speeches by Governor Ireland, Colonel Wood and General Bee. "Politics was left entirely out of the programme."<sup>123</sup>

On August 15, 1888, the San Antonio Reunion Committee organized a two-day reunion of war veterans attended by an estimated 10,000 persons. The veterans camped with their old military comrades at a campground by the San Pedro springs<sup>124</sup> and some 800 people visited the Alamo building during the first day. "They came in crowds of ten and twenty, swarming about the mission building like bees and keeping janitor Rife and his assistants busy all day long..."<sup>125</sup> This is the only mention found of Rife having assistants. He may have paid some young men or veterans out of his own pocket. According to the San Antonio Light, "Capt. Tom Rife was here, there and everywhere." He was able to "prompt the failing memory of the various narrators as they would hesitate at dates and names, while he was ever ready to prove a veritable stumbling block for any who might try to win cheap glory by drawing on their imagination for their facts."<sup>126</sup>

### **Rife's position at the Alamo was not without controversy.**

In February 1887 William "Big Foot" Wallace visited San Antonio and defended Rife's military service record against that of other men. He said that Rife "is the right man in the right place."<sup>127</sup> The Star-Vindicator of Blanco claimed that Captain C. H. (Rufe) Perry was more suitable for the job of Custodian of the Alamo building.<sup>128</sup> Wallace was a celebrity and his endorsement was important.<sup>129</sup> Another endorsement for Rife

came from the Floresville Chronicle. "The Chronicle has known him many years and a better, braver, more modest and deserving man does not live in Texas."<sup>130</sup>

In May 1887, Rife arrested E.I. Coyle, the editor of the Southwestern Chronicle, for smashing to pieces a statue with Masonic symbolism that was stored in the Alamo. Rife heard a commotion in the chapel, and "when I got there I found Coyle breaking the statue, which is stored on the ground floor, in pieces. As I advanced he raised the sledge-hammer he was using. I drew my pistol and commanded him to drop the hammer, telling him ... if he did not I would kill him . . . he dropped the hammer, and I arrested him."<sup>131</sup> Coyle's arrest resulted in a lawsuit against the City<sup>132</sup> and received wide coverage in newspapers.

Rife was not afraid to take controversial stands on issues relating to the Alamo. On March 25, 1889, he, John Ford and a number of San Antonio elders and officials signed a petition urging the State to grant a pension to Andea Castañon de Villanueva, known as Madam Candelaria.<sup>133</sup> Madam Candelaria was an alleged Alamo survivor and a local celebrity.<sup>134</sup> The signers included Hamilton P. Bee, Sam and Mary Maverick, W. Morgan Merrick, William Menger and Sheriff McCall.<sup>135</sup> Rife, however, publicly doubted that either Madam Candelaria or Mr. Rose was telling the truth about their activities at the Alamo.<sup>136</sup>

Rife also expressed his public disbelief in the "Line in the Sand" story. A man named Moses or Louis Rose purportedly told friends that he was in the Alamo in March 1836 but left a day before the final assault.<sup>137</sup> In some versions of his story, he said that he witnessed William Travis draw a line in the sand with his sword and ask those men who were willing to stay and defend the Alamo to step across the line. Rose also claimed that James Bowie, being too ill to stand, asked to have his cot carried across the line.<sup>138</sup> The story was, and is, firmly entrenched in the public's mind, yet Rife doubted it.<sup>139</sup>

In July 1889, Rife told reporters that a biography of Dave Crockett was fraudulent. "A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee" was published in 1834 and claimed David Crockett as the author.<sup>140</sup> A play based upon the book (or its sequel) was presented at the Grand Opera House in San Antonio and ignited a controversy.<sup>141</sup> In an attempt to clear up some of the confusion about Crockett's history, Rife wrote to Crockett's son, Robert Patton Crockett, who was living in Hood County, Texas. In reply, Rife received a short biography of Crockett's life that probably clarified details of Crockett's history, which are today well known. On this basis Rife publicly questioned the earlier Crockett biography.<sup>142</sup>

### **Rife did not believe that the Alamo was haunted.**

A belief in spiritualism was high in late nineteenth century America and the Alamo was believed by many to be haunted. It was sometimes used as the setting for séances during Tom Rife's tenure as the Alamo keeper.<sup>142</sup> "There is a legend among the Mexicans that when it rains and the wind howls widely around the old Alamo building ... the ghosts of the departed heroes, or some of them, notably those of Davy Crockett, Bowie and Travis, arise and stalk about the old building with the measured tread of heavily armed and booted men on guard."<sup>143</sup>

In 1893, a small shed attached to the Alamo was made into a police station. It was attached to the south wall and included a window with double iron bars cut through the five-foot thick wall. "This opens directly from the room where the two mounted officers who are detailed at the station sit. Adjoining this room is a small cell room, which had been used for a long time. Since the police station has been opened, stories have been told that some prisoners who were confined there at various times had complained of strange noises in the main building, and always on dark, rainy nights. They heard walking and the trailing of muskets and chains. The two policemen ... also insist that they have heard very strange sounds in the mail building, and always on dark, rainy night." If the reader "reads faithfully, as every good Texan has, the story of the Alamo, he will remember that at the time of the capture by the Mexican Butchers it was stormy weather."<sup>144</sup>

In October 1895, Rife unlocked the door at midnight to allow a group of spiritualists to hold a séance. Upon entering a disused room the wooden floor collapsed and the woman and Rife fell into the pit. Rife's son, Tom brought help and they were extracted; Rife left and the séance commenced.<sup>145</sup> "The custodian, when asked, stated that he didn't know anything about ghosts in the place."<sup>146</sup>

### **Memorial events were held at the Alamo.**

Before 1889 the anniversary of the fall of the Alamo went largely unnoticed although the anniversaries of Texas independence were celebrated there.<sup>147</sup> On March 23, 1889, noting that the flag at the Alamo had been flying at half-mast for several days, a San Antonio Express reporter asked Rife about it. Rife explained that it was to commemorate the fall of the Alamo. The reporter wrote, "It is a pity more of us are not as well acquainted with the trials, tribulations and victorious achievements of the early Texans as is Tom Rife." 150(237)

In April 1891, two years after Rife began marking the anniversary of the fall of the Alamo, the first Battle of the Flowers, which celebrated the Battle of San Jacinto, was held to coincide with the visit of US President Benjamin Harrison to San Antonio. The finale of the Battle of the Flowers centered on the Alamo with a parade to Alamo Plaza and a mock battle between floats using flowers as missiles. In its early years, the festival ended with flowers being thrown at the Alamo church.<sup>148</sup>

### **Rife was involved in writing the history of the Alamo.**

In August 1891, Rife was helping Colonel John S. Ford, a historian and newspaper editor, write a book about the Mexican War.<sup>149</sup> During this period John (Rip) Ford was living in San Antonio and spent hours in San Antonio coffee shops talking with other history buffs and writing historical pieces for newspapers.<sup>150</sup> On the day that Rife died, the newspaper announced that Colonel John S. Ford's book on the Alamo was ready for print.<sup>151</sup>

The first edition of Ford's book was called, "History, Battles and Fall of the Alamo: with Points of Interest, Etc, of San Antonio". It consisted of 34 pages and included a list of those killed in the Alamo.<sup>152</sup> Ford wrote the short book in response to a call by the Alamo Monument Association for a synopsis of the fall of the Alamo. Ford was the

first to make a submission and his book was accepted for publication.<sup>153</sup> Mary Maverick, the wife of Samuel Maverick, a long time resident of San Antonio and President of the Alamo Monument Association, also wrote an account of the events in Béxar in 1835 and 1836 based upon conversations with participants but she decided not to submit her work when she learned that Ford had already submitted.<sup>154</sup> It is impossible to know how much of Ford's book and Mrs. Maverick's manuscript were based upon Thomas Rife's understanding of what happened at the Alamo in March 1836 but he almost certainly was a contributor.

## **The De Zavala Daughters were formed to preserve historic buildings.**

In 1889 Miss Adina Emilia De Zavala, a schoolteacher and resident of San Antonio, formed an association of women that became the De Zavala Daughters.<sup>155</sup> The purpose of the association was to foster patriotism by keeping alive the memory of the "founders and pioneers of Texas." Miss De Zavala began to gather historical data about San Antonio including paintings, manuscripts, old and rare books and relics. She was particularly interested in the Spanish and Republic of Texas periods. The association repaired Mission San José and hired a custodian to guard it. They placed plaques on historic buildings such as the Veramendi House, the Alamo fort and on the site of Ben Milam's grave. The De Zavala Daughters affiliated with the Daughters of the Republic of Texas when it was created in 1891 and became the De Zavala Chapter of the DRT.<sup>156</sup>

Miss De Zavala would have been acquainted with Tom Rife in his role as the Custodian of the Alamo.<sup>157</sup> He also collected material relating to the history of San Antonio and gathered relics that he stored in the Alamo.<sup>158</sup> Many people considered Rife to be an expert on the history of the Alamo<sup>159</sup> although we now realize that much of what he knew about the Alamo was not factual. There is no evidence that he and Miss De Zavala worked together although they shared similar interests.

While Miss De Zavala examined archival material and collaborated with archivists as far away as Mexico City, Tom Rife probably learned what he knew of the Alamo's history from the recollections of veterans and survivors who visited the Alamo.

Rife had little accurate knowledge of events that occurred beyond living memory. As a historian he had numerous critics.<sup>160</sup> On the same day that Rife died, a letter to the editor of a San Antonio newspaper criticized him in his role as Alamo tour guide for his recital of oral history "which is likely to be inaccurate."<sup>161</sup> This letter was signed "Bowie", perhaps the son of James Bowie who may have nurtured a grudge against Rife for publicly doubting the story wherein David Bowie asked to have his cot carried over Travis' line in the sand because he was too sick to get up and walk.<sup>162</sup>

Little information is available about Rife's views on whether or not the Hugo-Schmeltzer building was a historic structure. He seemed to believe that the Long Barracks had been demolished.<sup>163</sup> He would have known Mr. Schmeltzer, who knew that the building played a role in the siege of the Alamo.<sup>164</sup> By 1890 the question of whether or not the Long Barracks dated to the mission period had become embroiled in politics and Rife may have chosen just to avoid the topic.<sup>165</sup>

## **The Alamo Monument Association was formed to build a memorial at the Alamo.**

The Alamo Monument Association was organized in 1879 for the purpose of building a monument to the men killed at the Alamo after a previous monument disappeared.<sup>166</sup> The group hoped to use the Alamo building as a library or museum<sup>167</sup> but by 1893 they favored the idea of restoring the building to its pre-1836 condition.<sup>168</sup> Mrs. Mary A. Maverick was the Association's President from 1881 until at least 1896 and the officers met monthly in her husband's office in the Maverick Bank.<sup>169</sup> The Association's twenty-five or so Directors included many of the town's most influential men and women.<sup>170</sup> The association began collecting money in 1879.<sup>171</sup>

While the primary purpose of the association was to erect a monument, they were also interested in restoring the old Alamo church. In the last week of January 1893, the association presented to the Legislature a memorial request to the State to restore the Alamo. The request was referred to the appropriate legislative committee. The committee then requested an estimate of expenses to complete the work. An architect, "along with H. P. (Hamilton) Bee and Captain Rife, the custodian of the building, made an intelligent and thorough examination of its present condition and forwarded a report, together with the estimate of the probable cost" to the Legislature.<sup>172</sup>

While Rife was ill in the spring of 1893 a group of New England investors announced plans to demolish the main building of the Alamo fort (the Hugo-Schmeltzer building or Long Barracks) and build a hotel on the site.<sup>173</sup> This prompted Miss Adina De Zavala to approach Mr. Gustav Schmeltzer, one of the three owners of the firm of Hugo, Schmeltzer and Co., with the request that, should the property be offered for sale, the De Zavala Daughters be given the first option to purchase it.<sup>174</sup> Miss De Zavala's request was the first salvo in a controversy over the building's future that eventually split the State and City governments and destroyed the De Zavala Daughters. The extent of the involvement of Rife and the Alamo Monument Association in all this is uncertain.

Rife was distracted from the controversy by troubles of his own. A few weeks before Rife returned to his job at the Alamo, his oldest son Willie was found guilty of aggravated assault and fined \$25.<sup>175</sup> By November 1894, Rife was again unable to work. Captain William McMaster was appointed acting custodian of the Alamo during Rife's illness.<sup>167</sup> Rife was sick and unable to work for two months<sup>176</sup> and on December 27, 1894, he died at his home.<sup>177</sup>

## **Keepers of the Alamo, 1885-1905**

**Thomas Rife, 1885-1894** Thomas Rife was the first Keeper of the Alamo to be appointed by the City of San Antonio. He held the position from its inception in 1885 until his death in 1894. He was a long-time city employee who may have been given the position because he was disabled and newly retired from the police force. Tom Rife was not a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto but served under Col. Jack Hays

during the Mexican War, as a ranger under Captain William Wallace, was a soldier in the 32nd regiment of Texas volunteer cavalry during the Civil War and a scout in West Texas with Captain Henry Skillman. He was wounded at Deer Creek, Mississippi and near Presidio, Texas during the Civil War.<sup>178</sup>

After a long career as a stage conductor in West Texas Rife served for six years with the San Antonio police as a patrolman. He was allied with prominent leaders of the San Antonio Mexican community, some of who were also law enforcement officers. He was an outspoken amateur historian who took an active part in efforts to preserve the Alamo church. During his term of office he was paid \$50 per month by the City of San Antonio as the Keeper of the Alamo. He was well known and news of his death was widely reported in Texas and beyond.<sup>179</sup> Two streets were named for Rife in San Antonio, one is now known as Golondrina Avenue. It is near Rip Ford and Big Foot Streets in the Highland Park neighborhood.<sup>180</sup>

**William McMaster, 1894-1897** William McMaster was the second custodian of the Alamo to be appointed by the City of San Antonio. He was born in New Orleans in 1819 and immigrated to Brazoria County in 1835 at age 16.<sup>181</sup> He was granted 640 acres of Donation Land for his part in the Battle of San Jacinto. He served in Capt. Peyton R. Splane's Company as a private and was assigned to the rear guard in Harrisburg to guard baggage. In March 1842, when Mexican General Rafael Vásquez occupied San Antonio, McMaster enlisted in Capt. Gill's company, Col. C. L. Owen's command. In 1851 he received \$31.50 for his service during the Vasquez campaign.<sup>182</sup> In 1860, he and his wife Mary were living in Columbia, Brazoria County, where he was a merchant.<sup>183</sup> During the Civil War he was a captain in the Quartermaster's staff of the 13th Regiment Texas Volunteer Infantry<sup>184</sup> in Colonel Joseph Bate's Brazoria Coast Regiment. Between 1880 and 1893 McMaster was a US Deputy Marshal.<sup>185</sup>

McMaster applied for the position of Keeper of the Alamo when the position was first created in 1885.<sup>186</sup> He became the acting custodian in December 1894 while Rife was ill.<sup>187</sup> Under the heading "Shameful neglect" the San Antonio Light of October 15, 1896, he stated, "The keeper of the Alamo is badly in need of a heating stove for the cold days of the winter. The big building is not only very large and airy, but the windows are unprovided with glass panes and the front door must be kept open." By November he was "keeping himself warm today by the aid of a small stove put up by the city."<sup>188</sup> He was reappointed in January 1897 and kept the position until the spring of 1897. William McMaster died May 09, 1907.<sup>189</sup>

**Samuel C. Bennett, 1897-1899** Sam C. Bennett was born in 1827 in Missouri and was a wholesale grocer in Chicago from 1861 until 1865 and later ran a wholesale grocery business in Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>190</sup> He arrived in San Antonio before 1876; bringing all of his surviving children with him.<sup>191</sup>

There were three men named Samuel Bennett in San Antonio during this period. Two were prominent businessmen and were often confused with each other. Sam C. Bennett was a sheep rancher and merchant.<sup>192</sup> It was he who worked as the Alamo tour guide between April 1897 and his death in 1900.<sup>193</sup>

According to an article in the newspaper dated May 13, 1897, The Alamo Monument Association kept a box on the wall of the Alamo for contributions to the fund. In connection with this box, a reporter mentioned that the custodian had a small book explaining the history of the Alamo that he had printed at his own expense. The custodian sold the book to visitors upon request.<sup>194</sup> In late 1893, while Thomas Rife was still alive, a reporter for the New York Herald noted that there was a guidebook available<sup>195</sup> but 1897 was the first mention of a printed text of the Alamo tour. Sam Bennett's daughter, who later served as the Alamo tour guide, greatly expanded this text.

It was part of the custodian's job to set straight some peoples understanding of the place of the Alamo in history. In May of 1897, a visitor wanted to see "the exact spot on which King Alamo fell in the battle with the French, and it took a considerable length of time to convince the man that there never lived such a personage as King Alamo and that it was the fort that fell in a battle with the Mexican troops instead of the French."<sup>196</sup>

Under the headline "Alamo Needs A Register," the San Antonio Daily Light reported that a new register was needed in the Alamo and that Custodian Bennett "has a man working on it." This rare mention of the Alamo register includes this detail; "The new one will be secured as was the one just completed, by soliciting advertisements for the blotters between the pages, the receipts there from paying for the book."<sup>197</sup>

Bennett supervised a thorough cleaning of the Alamo building. During the cleaning, he reported that he found traces of blood under the whitewash of the interior walls.<sup>198</sup> Notwithstanding earlier efforts to remove debris from the Alamo church, Bennett had twenty-one cartloads of dirt and rubbish removed in 1897.<sup>199</sup> He also removed what was left of the wooden floors installed by the US Army fifty years before.<sup>200</sup>

He died on January 15, 1900, aged 72 years, apparently while he was still employed as the Alamo Custodian. The flags at the Alamo and City Hall were flown at half-mast during his funeral service.<sup>201</sup>

**Leonora (Lea) Bennett, 1900-1905** Lea Bennett was the daughter of Sam C. Bennett. After her father's death, she was appointed temporary custodian on January 18, 1900, when she was 38 years old<sup>202</sup> and held the position until June 8, 1905. She was paid \$50 a month, the same as the men who held the position.<sup>203</sup> Leonora Bennett was born in Missouri in 1862<sup>204</sup> and moved with her parents to San Antonio.

Leonora's father (and her predecessor as the Keeper of the Alamo) printed at his own expense a slim volume that he sold on his own account to visitors to the Alamo for fifteen cents.<sup>205</sup> Leonora Bennett enlarged this historical sketch and in 1904 published a book called "Historical Sketch and Guide to the Alamo." The first 81 pages of the 131-page book is a history of Texas from the appearance of Sieur de la Salle in 1685, through the careers of Philip Nolan, Augustus Magee and Moses Austin and ending with the battle of San Jacinto. Pages 83 to 107 contain four "historical sketches" which are probably the text of the tour given to visitors during the period between 1897 and 1905 when she or her father were the tour guides. This part of the book may have been based upon the booklet that Sam Bennett printed and sold to

visitors. Following the text of the tour there is a short history of the other San Antonio missions including the San Fernando church. Parts 4 and 5 of Miss Bennett's book are three poems about the Alamo and a list of the Alamo martyrs.<sup>206</sup> In 1905, after Miss Bennett's time as the Keeper of the Alamo ended, she continued to live with her sister at the family home on Dwyer Avenue.<sup>207</sup>

**Samuel Lytle, 1893, 1905** Samuel Lytle was the last Keeper of the Alamo to be appointed by the San Antonio City Council under the agreement reached with the State of Texas in 1883. The last city-employed Keeper of the Alamo was an old friend of Thomas Rife, the first man who held that position. William Lytle, a blacksmith, arrived in Washington-on-the-Brazos from Tennessee with his wife and his son Samuel Lytle on December 15, 1838.<sup>208</sup> Eleven-year-old Samuel Lytle met Tom Rife in Washington-on-the-Brazos in 1842 and they became lifelong friends.

Like Rife, Sam soon found himself in Bexar County. William Lytle established a stock ranch on the Medina River in 1846<sup>209</sup> and Samuel and his older brother were witnesses to the marriage of Thomas Rife to his first wife, Mary Ann Brothers in 1853.<sup>210</sup> He was a neighbor of William "Big Foot" Wallace<sup>211</sup> and was with him during a fight with hostile Indians in Medina County in September 1855.<sup>212</sup>

In April 1860, Samuel Lytle enlisted in a company of minutemen.<sup>213</sup> On May 10, 1862, he mustered into Company H, 32nd Regiment Texas Cavalry where he was elected 2nd Lieutenant. He remained with this unit throughout the War<sup>214</sup> and was promoted to Captain.<sup>215</sup> By March 1863, he was on detached service at Eagle Pass in pursuit of deserters. When Thomas Rife returned from Mississippi in the fall of 1863, he enlisted in Samuel Lytle's company but was soon detached for service with Henry Skillman's scouts in West Texas. Lytle was a Director of the Alamo Monument Association in 1891<sup>216</sup> and again in 1894.<sup>217</sup>

In March 1893, Captain Samuel Lytle sought appointment as Custodian of the Alamo after the municipal elections when all city positions were renegotiated. His old friend, Tom Rife, successfully retained the appointment.<sup>218</sup> However, by September 1893, Rife became ill and Captain Lytle was appointed acting custodian.<sup>219</sup> In February 1894, by a motion of Alderman Smith, the San Antonio City Council voted to allow Tom Rife to assume his position as custodian "as he has recovered."<sup>220</sup>

In 1903, Miss De Zavala had requested that a member of the De Zavala Chapter be placed on the committee to select the Alamo custodian but the choice was left in the hands of the Mayor.<sup>221</sup>

Lytle became the Alamo keeper again in June 1905 and was paid \$38.35 for a partial month (23 days) in July. On July 31, 1905 Lytle was paid \$50 for a full month as the custodian<sup>222</sup> and he was finally appointed the permanent keeper on September 17, 1905. The next month, on October 4, 1905, the Daughters (DRT) officially received custody of the building from the State of Texas and his position at the Alamo was terminated. Sam Lytle died in San Antonio on June 24, 1918.<sup>223</sup>

## The Daughters of the Republic of Texas, 1905-2015

In April 1905, the DRT named the De Zavala Chapter caretakers of the Alamo for one year.<sup>224</sup> In August 1905, the title to the Hugo-Schmeltzer Building was transferred to the State and in October the DRT was given custody of both the Hugo-Schmeltzer building and the Alamo chapel. Adina De Zavala was the President of the DRT chapter in San Antonio and San Antonio Mayor Callaghan gave her the keys to the chapel on October 11, 1905.<sup>225</sup> Only a month earlier, Miss Driscoll had appointed her friend Miss Florence Eagar to serve as Custodian of the Alamo.<sup>226</sup> Miss Eagar was a member of the De Zavala Chapter.<sup>227</sup> She was initially paid \$45 per month.<sup>228</sup>

After the Daughters were given custody of the buildings, a long struggle commenced between two factions in the DRT that eventually ended with the partial destruction of one of the buildings the DRT was sworn to protect. In November 1905, the two factions struggled over which would control the keys to the chapel. Miss De Zavala refused to give the keys to Miss Eagar and on November 3, 1905, the Driscoll faction filed suit against Miss De Zavala for possession of the keys.<sup>229</sup> The following April a new DRT chapter, the Alamo Mission Chapter, seceded from the De Zavala Chapter and was recognized as the only San Antonio chapter of the DRT. The De Zavala Chapter was expelled from the DRT and the struggle between the two groups continued until 1913 when the City demolished the upper story of the convent at the insistence of the executive committee of the DRT.<sup>230</sup>

When the Daughters of the Republic of Texas received custody of the two remaining buildings of the old Alamo mission in 1905, they appointed one of their members, Miss Florence Eagar, to act as the Custodian of the Alamo. Florence Eagar was the inspiration for Miss Clara Driscoll's 1906 short story, "In the Shadow of the Alamo."<sup>231</sup> In that book, Miss Driscoll spelled out the Alamo myth that the DRT promoted until recent times. Miss Eagar drew the illustrations used in the book.

In 1845, the original Alamo bell was found in front of the mission in the river by Anton Lockmar. It was made of brass and weighed fifty pounds. It was passed down many times and used for several purposes, including as a call bell in the Magnolia Hotel in Seguin until it was returned to San Antonio and Miss Eagar requested that it be hung in the Alamo "where it will remain until Mr. Johnson asks that it be returned."<sup>232</sup>

In 1907, Miss Eagar married US Army Major Harris L. Roberts and left San Antonio<sup>233</sup> just as did the heroine in Miss Driscoll's story. Mrs. Robert's mother, Mrs. Sarah Eagar, replaced Florence as the Custodian.<sup>234</sup> Mrs. Eagar was 65 years old when she took on the role and was still custodian and tour guide in 1913.<sup>235</sup> Although they had misgiving about its veracity, the tour given by Florence and her mother was similar to that of the city custodians who had preceded them.<sup>236</sup>

In 1915, Mrs. Fannie Applewhite became President of the Alamo Mission Chapter of the DRT. By then the Alamo Mission Chapter had assumed day-to-day control of the Alamo and Mrs. Applewhite was appointed Custodian of the Alamo. The budget for the Custodians was \$900 per year.<sup>237</sup> The Alamo Mission chapter held its meetings in the Alamo chapel so Mrs. Applewhite could attend to visitors during the chapter meetings. In 1916, Judge Webb, who was the husband of a past president of the chapter, agreed to pay the wages of a gardener to care for the extensive gardens

surrounding the chapel. The gardener was the second employee of the DRT at the Alamo.<sup>238</sup>

Mrs. Applewhite served as custodian until 1921 when she retired for reasons of age. Her daughter, Mrs. Leita Small, followed her as custodian and kept the position until 1946.<sup>239</sup> Mrs. Small died August 30, 1946 at age 65, apparently while still Custodian.<sup>240</sup> She was the last individual to be known as the "Custodian of the Alamo."

By the time Mrs. Small died, the Alamo had a maintenance and library staff that included a full-time Grounds Superintendent, Mr. Herbert R. Newcomer.<sup>241</sup> The number of visitors and the size of the Alamo staff continued to grow decade by decade. When Mr. Newcomer retired in 1961<sup>242</sup> the person in charge of buildings of the Alamo was known as the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds.<sup>243</sup> The term "Custodian" or "Keeper" as it was used around the turn of the 19th Century had become an anachronism.

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# **Appendix**



# **The Widow Rife and her Children, 1895–1900**

## **Francisca Eduarda Saenz y Cobos was from an old Chihuahua family.**

Francisca was born October 18, 1854, in Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico. Her parents were Mauricio Saenz and Andre Cobos.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to 1660, Francisca's ancestors settled in the Valley of San Bartolomé where they were farmers and artisans. They raised wheat and cattle that were sold to gold and silver mines in the region. Indians worked the ranches as either slaves or paid employees. In 1770, a thirty-year war began between the Apaches and the settlers but the farmers of San Bartolomé were largely sheltered from the wars. There were seventeen Saenz families living in the village of San Bartolomé by 1779.

The region prospered during a time of peace from 1810 until 1831. Chihuahua was unaffected by the Mexican war of independence and paid no attention to the insurrection of Miguel Hidalgo. However, the expulsion of the Spanish mine owners in 1827 and 1829 closed many mines. The new government announced a commercial blockade of North Americans and their merchandise. Cross-border trade came to a halt. The Indian missions were leaderless, provincial troops had no resources and taxes were uncollectable.

After 1822, the Comanche Indians and the Spanish settlers began a war of extermination in 1831 and the Apaches rebelled again. The war with the Indians lasted fifty years. Mines in the nearby towns of Parral and Santa Bárbara were closed or curtailed. All men were placed under arms and required to attend weekly drills. Deserters were killed and men who did not answer roll call were sentenced to ten years service on the frontier.

In 1845, the same year that Francisca's parents were married, civil war broke out in Chihuahua between liberals and conservatives. United States troops from Missouri

invaded Chihuahua the next year. The residents of Chihuahua were fighting against two sets of invaders, troops from North America and Apache raiders.

After the Mexican War, commerce with El Paso declined. High tariffs raised the cost of trade goods and impoverished the region's inhabitants. Indians continued to cross the international border to raid into Chihuahua and small towns were militarized to protect themselves. Many farm workers migrated to Durango where it was safer or to the United States where the economy was better. In 1854, when Francisca was baptized in San José Church in Parral, thousands of Mexican citizens crossed the Rio Grande to live on the American side.

The decline in cross-border trade weakened the economy of Chihuahua. Many mines closed and by 1861, the Francisca's parents had left the Valley of San Bartolomé and moved north to Camargo City. They continued to move north and apparently were living near El Paso prior to 1871. They were not in San Bartolomé when the town was burned by French troops in April 1866 or when the Apache War ended in 1880. In 1871, Francisca met and married Thomas Rife in El Paso County, Texas. Her mother may have died in El Paso, Texas in 1914.<sup>2</sup>

## **Thomas Rife's widow qualified for a Widow's Pension.**

On January 30, 1895 Francisca applied for Thomas Rife's accrued pension as his widow.<sup>3</sup> At a San Antonio City Council meeting on January 7, 1895, less than two weeks after her husband's death, Francisca Rife appealed to the City Council to give her husband's job to her oldest son, William.<sup>4</sup> Although Will Rife undoubtedly knew as much as anyone else about the history of the old Alamo church, it was, considering Will's history with the courts, a futile appeal.

On January 31, 1895, with the help of Rife's friends and his old employer, George Giddings, Francisca Rife applied for a Mexican War Widow's pension.<sup>5</sup> She stated that she was 40 years old, suffered from asthma and general debility and was unable to earn her living from her own labor and owned no property as evidenced by her absence on tax rolls. On April 1, 1895, she was awarded a Federal pension (Widow's Certificate Number 9578) as a Mexican War widow based upon her husband's service in Walter P. Lane's Company, Texas Mounted Volunteers.<sup>6</sup>

## **Thomas Rife's older sons became lawbreakers.**

For a year and a half after their father's death, William and Thomas stayed out of the newspaper crime reports. But beginning in May, 1896, Will was involved in a series of petty crimes. He was arrested for stealing money left on the counter at a saloon on Laredo Street<sup>7</sup> In the following year, he appeared three times in the newspapers. In February he was arrested for smoking opium at Quong Lee's opium den.<sup>8</sup> Then in June, he and Tom were badly cut in a bar fight that sent Tom to the hospital for two days.<sup>9</sup> In December, Will was arrested for causing a disturbance in a barroom 10(210) and finally on April 7, 1898 he was arrested, with Dan Peñalosa, for defrauding Ida (Waco) Douglas.<sup>10</sup> This last episode resulted in his banishment from the City of San Antonio.<sup>11</sup>

In May 1898, Rife's second son, Tom Jr., was charged with petty larceny and released on bond.<sup>12</sup> On March of the following year, a grand jury indicted Lawrence Rife, Leandro Esqueriño and Jesús Hernandez for burglary with intent to commit theft.<sup>13</sup> Lawrence pled guilty and was sentenced by the 37th District Court to two years in the penitentiary.<sup>14</sup> His name did not appear in the newspapers after his release from prison and he spent the remainder of his life working at the Ursuline Academy in San Antonio.<sup>15</sup>

In April 1900, Mrs. Rife was living on San Saba Street and did not pay for furniture she purchased on installment. The owner's agent, W. T. Neely, attempted to remove it from her house. Not knowing the Rife family, he was unprepared for the resistance they offered. In the resulting disturbance, Mr. Neely was arrested and later convicted of disturbing the peace and fined \$10.<sup>16</sup>

In the Federal Census of June 4, 1900, Francisca was living at 816 South San Saba Street near S. Laredo Street with seven children ranging in ages from 8 to 25.<sup>17</sup> William was 27-years-old at that time and was not enumerated at this address. Mary Jane (age 25) and Anna (age 22) were already married and Ruth (age 9) was probably with her Godmother and future adopted mother, Josephine M. Flores. The San Antonio City Directory for 1899-1900 listed the widow and three sons, Will, Thomas Jr. and Morris, living at 116 El Paso Street.<sup>18</sup>

## **Francisca Rife died in 1900.**

On August 10, 1900, Francisca Rife signed an Adoption Deed for the purpose of placing 9-year-old Ruth Rife under the protection of her Godmother, Josephine M. Flores.<sup>19</sup> In 1900, Miss Flores was a single woman, aged 36, who earned her living as a dressmaker and lived with her brother, a 27-year-old mail carrier.<sup>20</sup> Francisca, who was ill, was trying to provide for her children before she died. On August 4, 1900, Francisca received her last Mexican War Widow's pension of \$8. The next check would have been paid on November 4, 1900. She didn't live long enough to get that quarterly check. Francisca died on August 13, 1900 of Tuberculosis<sup>21</sup> on San Saba Street and was buried the next day.<sup>22</sup>

Neither Thomas nor Francisca had any known relatives in San Antonio. It is not known who cared for Fred/Federico, age 15; Peter, age 14; Jack/Jacinto, age 11 and Lucy, age 8 until they were old enough to provide for themselves. They probably lived at the house on 116 El Paso Street as long as their older brothers lived there, although the publisher of the San Antonio city directories did not list children until they were 18 years old.<sup>23</sup>

None of the Rife's grandchildren were named after their grandparents (Thomas Collins Rife and Francisca Eduarda Saenz Cobos). Jack Rife named his second daughter Josephine but he probably chose that name because his older brother Morris wife was named Josephine. With the exception of Miss Josephine Flores' adoption of Ruth, there is no evidence that any of the many godparents of Rife's children took any of the children into their homes after their parent's deaths.

## **Little is known of some Thomas Rife's children after Francisca's death in 1900.**

Most of the Rife children eventually left San Antonio to marry or for employment opportunities. As far as is known, only one of the eleven children left the State of Texas to live. The older boys, Will and Tom, may have gone to Mexico but evidence to support this has not been found.

**William/Guillermo Wallace Rife** Will was born April 6, 1873 and baptized as Guillermo on May 22, 1973.<sup>24</sup> He appeared in the San Antonio newspapers for petty criminal activity many times from the time he was fifteen years old.<sup>25</sup> Ten days after his father's death, Francisca appeared before the city council asking for Will to be appointed custodian of the Alamo. He may have been knowledgeable on the subject but his history of petty crimes would have been held against him.<sup>26</sup> He registered to vote on January 10, 1895, probably for the first time and received a certificate of citizenship.<sup>27</sup> He was last mentioned in the press on April 7, 1898, when he was arrested for fraud and ordered by the recorder to leave town by the following Monday.<sup>28</sup>

Three months later, Will enrolled in Company F, 1st Texas Volunteer Infantry Regiment for the Spanish-American War. He was mustered in at Miami on June 28, 1998. His unit spent three months in Cuba. He spent March 15-22, 1899 in a hospital before being discharged in Galveston, Texas in April. He was a corporal on the date of his discharge.<sup>29</sup> The railroad gave the discharged soldiers "a half rate to all points in the State."<sup>30</sup> He did not appear on the June 1900 Census in his mother's household.<sup>31</sup> The San Antonio City Directory for 1901-1902 lists him sharing a house at 116 El Paso Street with his brother Tom.<sup>32</sup> Nothing else is known of him.

**Thomas/Tomas C. Rife, Jr.** Thomas was born July 16, 1874, and baptized as Tomas on September 13, 1874.<sup>33</sup> The 1900 U.S. census shows him living with his mother and six siblings at 816 South San Saba Street when he was almost 26 years old. There are no known records of Thomas after the San Antonio City Directory for 1901-1902 lists him sharing a house at 116 El Paso Street with his brother Will. In a letter to her sister Mary, Anna wrote shortly after her father's death that Thomas "hasn't got his right mind. He can not work."<sup>34</sup>

**Mary Jane Rife** Mary Jane was born December 26, 1875.<sup>35</sup> When she was 18, Mary Jane married Orrin A.V. Burr Jr. at Trinity M.E. Church in Bexar County on December 4. The family moved to El Paso, Texas. She had four children: Orrin, Wade Hampton, Ida Belle and Olive. She died in El Paso on February 16, 1935 at age 59 of a ruptured aorta. She is buried at Concordia Cemetery in El Paso.<sup>36</sup>

On July 21 through August 18, 1906, an advertisement appeared in the Dallas and Austin newspapers seeking the whereabouts of Mary Jane and her sister, Anna. The executor in Bolivar, Mississippi implied that they had inherited some property there,<sup>37</sup> from Thomas' brother, William W. Rife, who died in 1905. Although deaf and partially paralyzed, "he had accumulated a considerable estate."<sup>38</sup> Mary Jane responded to Mr. Burrus on February 10, 1909, and received a letter in return inviting her and Anna to visit in Benoit, Mississippi.<sup>39</sup> William Rife's will left them one-third of one-quarter of the proceeds of his estate equaling eight and one-third percent. It's

not known if they visited or if they received the inheritance. They were living in El Paso and Del Rio respectively.

**Francisca Eduarda Rife** Francisca was born March 3, 1877,<sup>40</sup> baptized on May 29, 1879 by Father Louis Genolin and died at two years old on June 3, 1879 of small pox.<sup>41</sup>

**Anna Rife** Anna was born June 3, 1878 and baptized on December 10, 1878. Her godparents were Andres Garza and Serafina Marquez.<sup>42</sup> She worked as a chambermaid at the Menger Hotel in 1897 and 1898 before and as a servant in the household of John W. Newton in Rock Springs, Texas in June 1900.<sup>43</sup> The following year she married the eldest son, George E. Newton, and moved to Del Rio. In 1910 she was living in Del Rio, Val Verde County with two children, Winnie and Bessie. She died there on March 2, 1968, and is buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery.<sup>44</sup>

**Lawrence/Lorenzo Wade Rife** Lawrence Wade was born November 19, 1879 and baptized on January 6, 1882.<sup>45</sup> He was in the penitentiary at Huntsville when Francisca died. He had been charged with burglary and sentenced to two years in prison on April 5, 1899.<sup>46</sup> He was released on February 11, 1901, after serving one year and 10 months.<sup>47</sup> He may have been visiting his brother Morris when he was arrested on January 5, 1906 and fined \$5 for riding on a train in Beaumont. "In one car alone the officer found thirty-one tramps and hoboes. But most of them succeeded in getting away."<sup>48</sup> On September 12, 1918, he was employed as a laborer at the Ursuline Academy on Augusta Street, San Antonio. He lived on the grounds of the Academy in 1920 and 1930. In 1938 he was living at 1104 Navarro Street. He worked as a yardman at the Academy his entire adult life. On April 27, 1942, at age 63, Lawrence was 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 108 pounds with brown hair and eyes and dark complexion.<sup>49</sup> He died on January 12, 1962 at 82 years old, having never married. He is buried in the convent's plot in San Fernando Number 1 Cemetery.<sup>50</sup>

**Morris/Mauricio Wade Rife** Morris was born February 28, 1881, and baptized as Mauricio on January 29, 1883.<sup>51</sup> In 1900, Morris, at 14 years old, was a driver for T. Bruni, a grocery/hardware store owned by a San Antonio merchant, rancher and city politician<sup>52</sup> two days a week. In 1900, nineteen-year old Morris lived with his mother at 816 S. San Saba Street, a mere block away from where Josephine Tafolla was living with the Maldonado family.<sup>53</sup> Morris was working in Port Arthur as early as May 31, 1902, when mail was held for him in the Beaumont Post Office.<sup>54</sup> He married Josephine Tafolla in Port Arthur on July 20, 1903 when he was 22 years old.<sup>55</sup>

Morris was in communication in 1909 with his uncle William's lawyer, Mr. Burrus in Benoit, Mississippi, concerning a possible inheritance.<sup>56</sup> It's not known what the outcome of this possibility was. Morris and his family lived in rented houses in Port Arthur. He died on the job while working as a stillman at an oil cake plant at the Gulf Refinery.<sup>57</sup> In 1918, he was of medium height, a slender build with brown eyes and black hair. His family lived nearby at several addresses on W. 18th Street.<sup>58</sup> He had six children of whom five survived to be adults. The children were Mary, Angeline, Morris Gilbert, Eva Francis and Ruth Evelyn. Morris died on July 13, 1921, at age 40, of a pulmonary hemorrhage; perhaps an occupational hazard.<sup>59</sup> Morris was a member of the "Woodmen of the World" whose members served as pallbearers at his funeral.<sup>60</sup> He is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Beaumont. The children grew up and lived in either Port Arthur or Galveston, Texas.

**Fred/Federico Rife** Fred was born in 1885. Nothing is known of Fred Rife except that he died at age 28 years of pulmonary tuberculosis on March 31, 1913 in San Antonio. His last occupation was said to be that of a janitor. He was buried in the City Cemetery Number 7, San Antonio's pauper's cemetery.<sup>61</sup> In 1944, the city removed the remains to San Jose Burial Park.

**Peter/Pedro Gaye Rife** Peter was born November 30, 1886, and baptized on June 9, 1887.<sup>62</sup> He lived for a time in 1917 in Weld County, Colorado, as a laborer. During WWII, he lived in San Antonio. He was described as being 5'8" tall, weighed 130 pounds had gray eyes and black hair with a light brown complexion.<sup>63</sup> He died on August 20, 1972, in Lutheran General Hospital of natural causes and is buried in San Fernando Number 1 Cemetery in San Antonio. When he died he was 86 years old and had never married.<sup>64</sup> According to the Catholic Archives of San Antonio, he was living near Pipe Creek in Bexar County when he died.

**Jack/Jacinto Rife** Jack was born April 21, 1889, and baptized as Jacinto almost ten years later on January 21, 1897 by Father Juan Munos. His Godparents were brother and sister, Antonio and Josefina Flores.<sup>65</sup> He died on March 21, 1978. Sometime before 1910 Jack moved to the community of Von Ormy in Bexar County where Medio Creek joins the Medina River at Quintana Road. In June of 1917, he was working at the Gulf Refinery and living near his brother Morris in Port Arthur.<sup>66</sup> He remained in Von Ormy for the remainder of his life; at some point he was a taxidermist. In the 1910 census he was listed as a railroad worker.<sup>67</sup> He married Beronica Benetiz<sup>68</sup> and had six children: Carolina, Josephine Melissa, Jack Stephen Jr., Roy Rubin, Alice Grace, and Eloisa A. On May 28, 1915, Jack and his wife, Beronica, inherited her parent's (Modesto Benitez) land. The inheritance was divided between Beronica and her sister, Juanita. Each heir got ½ acre on the Medina River.<sup>69</sup> At age 53, Jack was described as 5'5" tall, weighing 170 lbs. with hazel eyes, brown hair and ruddy complexion.<sup>70</sup> He died in Von Ormy on March 21, 1978, at 89 years old and is buried at San Jose Burial Park, San Antonio.<sup>71</sup>

**Ruth Rife** Ruth was born May 18, 1891, and baptized on January 17, 1897. Her godparents were brother and sister, Antonio and Josephina Flores.<sup>72</sup> She was nine years old on August 10, 1900, when her godmother, Josephine M. Flores, adopted her.<sup>73</sup> On May 5, 1908 Ruth Rife's adopted mother, Josephine M. Flores, revoked the adoption deed because Ruth "on or about the 17th day of December, 1906" abandoned Miss Flores and "has failed and refused to return". Ruth was 15 years old at the time she left Miss Flores.<sup>74</sup> She gave birth to Gwendolyn when she and Walter Beavers were living in Oakland, California. On November 25, 1911, she married Walter Beavers in San Antonio.<sup>75</sup> She and Walter separated while he was in France during World War 1 and Walter brought home a war bride, Adele Dancley.

After several years in New Jersey, Ruth married H.L. Campbell and returned to San Antonio. She lived and worked as a masseuse in her own home in San Antonio for thirty years. She died on July 4, 1975, and is buried in Roselawn Park in San Antonio.<sup>76</sup>

**Lucy Rife** Lucy was born in 1892.<sup>77</sup> She was eight years old when her mother died in 1900.<sup>78</sup> Nothing is known of her after that date. On September 22, 1936, a seamstress named Lucy Rife died in Houston. This may or may not be "our" Lucy. In 1982, Morris Rife Jr. of Groves, Texas, told the authors that his aunt Lucy married and moved to

California but he may have been confusing her with her sister Ruth. It is also possible that Lucy Rife did not exist and was named as a result of an error by the census taker.

## **Five of the eleven children of Thomas and Francisca Rife produced grandchildren.**

Descendants of five of the eleven Rife children are known to the authors. The known children of Mary Jane, Anna, Morris Wade, Jack and Ruth are as follows:

**Children of Mary Jane Rife** Mary Jane was born December 26, 1875, Married Orrin A.V. Burr, Jr. on December 4, 1893 and died on February 12, 1935. She is buried in Concordia Cemetery in El Paso. Orrin A.V. Burr Jr. was born on August 5, 1863 and died on December 22, 1954. He is buried in El Paso.<sup>79</sup>

- ◆ Orrin A.V.Burr III was born February 22, 1896, married Mildred Betz and died in May 12, 1970. He is buried in Laredo City Cemetery, Laredo.
- ◆ Wade Hampton Burr was born February 17, 1895, married Susan Marie O'Sullivan on April 6, 1923 and died in January 1977.
- ◆ Hazel Burr born October 1902 and died on April 29, 1906. She is buried in Concordia Cemetery in El Paso.
- ◆ Olive Burr was born March 11, 1910 in El Paso and died on August 21, 1998.

**Children of Anna Rife** Anna was born June 3, 1878, married George E. Newton in 1901 and died on March 2, 1968. She is buried In Sacred Heart Cemetery in Del Rio, Texas. George Edgar Newton was born September 1, 1895 and died March 1, 1950. He is buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery, in Del Rio, Texas.<sup>80</sup>

- ◆ Winnie Mae Newton was born February 26, 1901, married Willard Lane and died April 28, 2002. She is buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery in Del Rio, Texas.
- ◆ Bessie Newton was born in 1907, married J.A. Turner on August 26, 1916

**Children of Morris Wade Rife** Morris was born February 28, 1881 in San Antonio. He married Josephine Tafolla on July 20, 1903 and died on July 13, 1921. He is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Beaumont, Texas. Josephine Tafolla was born in October 1886 and died on July 19, 1935. She is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Galveston.<sup>81</sup>

- ◆ Mary Rife, who was born March 4, 1904, married 1) George N. Mullins and 2) Manuel Arthur and died on July 11, 1967, She had two children (George and Robert Mullins, both deceased). She is buried in Galveston Memorial Park in Hitchcock, Texas.
- ◆ Angeline (Angela) Rife was born April 6, 1906, married Miguel (Mike) Ferrino on August 26, 1922 and died on November 29, 1958. She is buried in Cavalry Cemetery in Galveston.



Morris Gilbert Rife was born October 1, 1910, married Beulah Randall and died on November 24, 1987. He is buried in Oak Bluff Memorial Park in Port Neches, Texas.

- ◆ An un-named female child was born September 22, 1912. She did not survive to adulthood.
- ◆ Eva Frances Rife was born September 9, 1914, married Andrew Gomez Castro August 26, 1922 and died May 20, 1997 in Port Arthur, TX. She is buried in Forest Park East Cemetery in Webster, Texas.
- ◆ Ruth Evelyn Rife was born on March 19, 1916, married 1) Victor Flores and 2) Jessie Mejia and died on March 06, 1986 and is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Galveston.
- ◆ Paul Apolinar Rife was born in September 13, 1922, 14 months after Morris' death. The father was Paul Apolinar, 13 years younger than Josephine. He is buried in Lakeview Cemetery in Galveston.

**Children of Jack Rife** Jack was born April 21, 1889, married Beronica Benitez on February 10, 1911 and died on March 21, 1978. He is buried in San Jose Burial Park in San Antonio. Beronica Benitez was born November 25, 1890 and died November 1, 1982.<sup>82</sup> She is buried in San Jose Burial Park in San Antonio.

- ◆ Carolina Rife was born April 7, 1912, married Alex Treviño and died on October 19, 2000.
- ◆ Josephine Melissa Rife was born June 02, 1916, married Alfred Ruiz and died in Pasadena, Texas in 1997.
- ◆ Jack Stephen Rife Jr. was born on January 1, 1919, married Dorothy Mann on November 1, 1944 and died on May 27, 1989.
- ◆ Roy Rubin Rife was born March 11, 1922, married Antonia Ruiz and died on May 9, 1944 of a gunshot wound. He was buried at San Fernando Number 2, in San Antonio.
- ◆ Alice Grace Rife was born November 26, 1924, married Joseph W. Schuhardt and died on May 22, 2007.
- ◆ Eloisa A. Rife was born in 1928, married William Garnett and died in San Antonio on November 28, 2016.

**Children of Ruth Rife** Ruth was born May 18, 1891, married first, Walter Beavers on November 25, 1911 and second, H.L. Campbell about 1942. She died July 4, 1975 in San Antonio. Walter Beavers was born in Olney, Illinois on November 5, 1877. He died in Phoenix, Arizona on March 31, 1951 and is buried in Greenwood Memorial Park.<sup>83</sup>

- ◆ Gwendolyn Beavers, born October 5, 1910 in Oakland, California. She married Unknown De Wolfe, George S. Peele and in 1950, Russell J. West. She died on January 25, 1969 and is buried in Laurel Land Cemetery in Fort Worth.

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35. Mary Jane Burr, Certificate of Death, Texas State Department of Health-Bureau of Vital Statistics, February 12, 1935
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# Contributors

## George Mullins

Picture of George Mullins

George Mullins

Denis Diderot (5 October 1713 – 31 July 1784) was a French philosopher, art critic, and writer. He was a prominent figure during the Enlightenment and is best known for serving as co-founder, chief editor, and contributor to the *Encyclopédie* along with Jean le Rond d'Alembert.

## Philip Mullins

Picture of Philip Mullins

Philip Mullins

Rose Antonia Maria Valland (1 November 1898 – 18 September 1980) was a French art historian, member of the French Resistance, captain in the French military, and one of the most decorated women in French history. She secretly recorded details of the Nazi plundering of National French and private Jewish-owned art from France; and, working with the French Resistance, she saved thousands of works of art.