

William Sanders Oury

Without a doubt, William Oury is one of the most fascinating pioneers in all of Arizona history. Oury settled in Tucson, Arizona in 1856 and the events of his life before that are equally as fascinating as those that took place afterwards. He was born on August 13, 1817 (not 1816 as on his tombstone) in Abingdon, Virginia and was the oldest of nine children of Augustus Oury. His younger brother, Granville Henderson Oury, was also to figure prominently in Arizona history. Augustus Oury was a lifelong friend of Stephen F Austin and for that reason the family moved to Missouri and then to Texas.

In February 23, 1836 at the age of 19, the young Oury found himself with Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie and all the other heroes inside the Alamo. One week later, William Travis sent him as a courier to find Sam Houston to bring reinforcement for the Alamo. Within days all 183 people that he left behind were killed. He was one of 16 couriers that were sent out over a period of several days and all requests for help were denied. Following the loss at the Alamo, Oury joined up with Sam Houston's army which was in retreat from a powerful Mexican force under General Santa Anna. As they retreated Sam Houston was building and training his forces until they reached the Sabine River. On April 21, 1836, Houston turned his Army and attacked Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto. The battle lasted for about 18 minutes, but the slaughter of Mexicans went on for about an hour. The Mexicans lost about 700 killed, 200 wounded, 700 captured, including Santa Anna, while the Texans had nine killed and 25 wounded, including Sam Houston. Santa Anna was released after agreeing to take all of his troops out of Texas and back to Mexico.

After the battle Oury became a member of the Texas Rangers and in 1839 began a long relationship with one of the most famous Texas Rangers, John "Jack" Coffee Hays. Together they fought Comanche Indians in such famous battles as Plum Creek and Banderas Pass. Santa Anna began to launch invasions into Texas again in 1842 and a large band of Texans, including Oury, decided to invade Mexico. In November, about 750 men started into Mexico. When they met no opposition, and as travel became more difficult, their numbers began to rapidly dwindle. On Christmas Eve they reached the town of Mier and a Mexican force. The Texan's leader was wounded during the ensuing battle and their surgeon was captured. The Mexican leader was prepared to abandon the battle but told the surgeon there were thousands of reinforcements arriving. The surgeon was released and convinced the Texans their only hope was surrender and they did. After a long, forced march that resulted in the death of several Texans and even more of the prisoners killed in attempted escapes, 174

survivors reached the town of Saltillo. Santa Anna issued orders to kill all the prisoners but remanded the order after strong protests from his military generals and some civilians. He decided only ten percent would be killed. To make the decision, 157 white beans and 17 black beans were placed in a pot and the prisoners were forced to draw the beans. Oury drew one of the white beans and was allowed to live. The bones of the 17 men were exhumed by American forces during the Mexican war and placed on mules. The mules were with the Army during the remainder of the war and were transported all over Mexico. At the end of the war they were taken to LaGrange, Texas and given a full military funeral. The survivors were marched to the Santiago prison where they were held until released on November 16, 1844.

Oury returned to San Antonio where he purchased some land and remained until 1846 when he was once again in the Army and in the Mexican War as a member of the First Regiment of Texas Volunteers. He was a participant in the Battles of Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, and Monterey. He was discharged in Monterey in September 29, 1846. After returning to San Antonio he eventually wandered back into Mexico and at Durango he met and married Inez Garcia. He and his new bride sailed for San Francisco.

The Oury's stay in California was not very long, but it did produce the first of their children, a daughter, Lola, in 1852. In 1856, they departed San Francisco and leisurely traveled through the Catholic missions along the California coast. They stopped in San Jose and Los Angeles and from San Diego they headed due east toward Yuma where the second child, Louise, was born. After waiting a few weeks for Inez to recover, they pushed on to Tucson where they would be joined later by Granville Oury whose wife, upon arrival, declared the town as "The most God-forsaken spot on earth." Within a short time of his arrival in Tucson, William Oury acquired a small ranch on the Santa Cruz. But he was also to become involved in politics and other activities. When John Butterfield won the contract to deliver mail between St. Louis and San Francisco, Oury became the agent for Tucson, a job he held until the beginning of the Civil War.

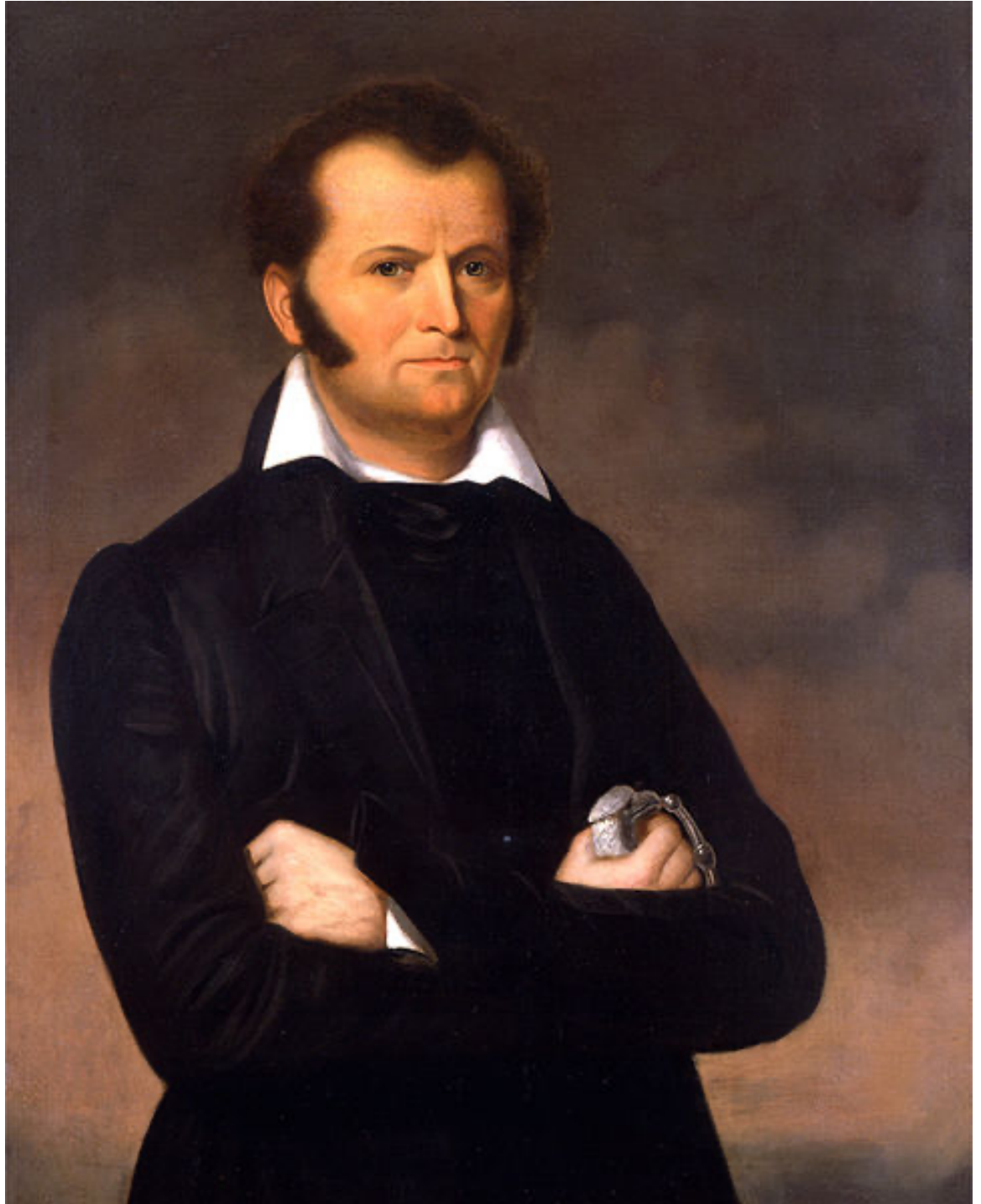
Oury also believed in the old custom of dueling and participated in two such affairs. In the first duel, against a former California legislator, Oury was the challenged party and chose rifles at 30 paces. He shot the gentleman through the neck and the man promptly died. His second duel was with muzzle-loading muskets at fifty paces. The two men stood facing each other and both refused to take the first shot. Finally, a coin was tossed and the other fellow shot first and grazed Oury's cheek and neck. Oury might have shot in the air and been satisfied, but the rules were that each would alternate shots until one was dead. Oury took aim and fired. The seconds ran to prepare

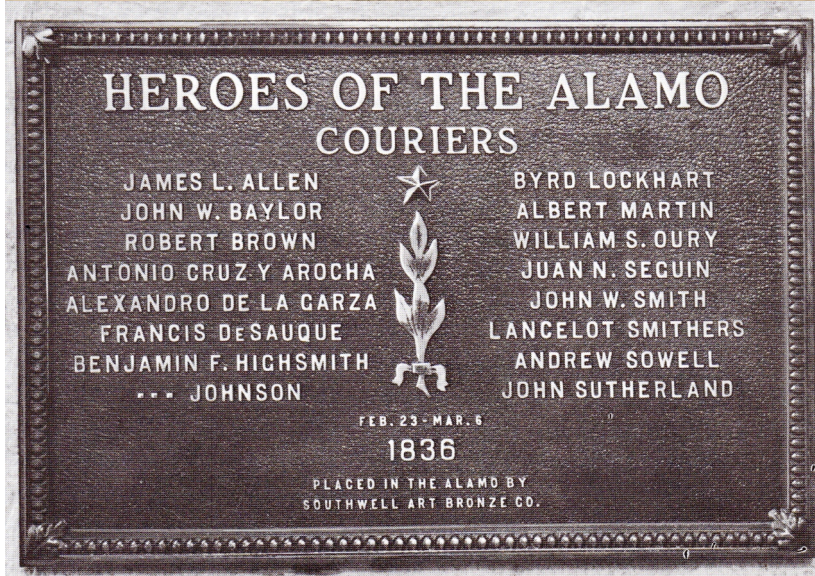
the fellow for his next shot; instead, they had to place him in a casket. Strange as it may be, another duel caused Oury to become the owner of the first Arizona newspaper, the *Tubac Arizonian*. This duel, between Oury's best friend and the owner of the newspaper ended harmlessly, but he and his friend bought the paper for \$2,500.

Like his brother Granville, Oury was an ardent secessionist, but unlike Granville he did not take up arms. On July 27, 1861 Colonel John R Baylor in command of the Second Texas Rifles defeated the Union forces at the Battle of Mesilla and declared that Arizona was a Confederate Territory. Baylor proclaimed himself the governor of the Arizona Confederate Territory, which was then in existence until 1862 when the territory was recaptured by the federal forces under the California Column. Oury held no official position in the new territory, but he was a strong supporter of the Confederacy. His brother Granville has the distinction of being the only person to serve as a delegate to both the Confederate and the U. S. Legislature. Granville also served as a Captain in the Confederate States Army. In February of 1861, William Oury was a participant in the notorious Bascom Affair which set off a war with the Apaches that lasted for 25 years. It has been so well-documented that I will not get into it here. But, if you are not familiar with the story, just Google the "Bascom Affair." Although not a uniformed member of the Confederacy, William Oury had a long running battle with the occupying Union Army who confiscated all of his land and his printing press. It was not until long after the war that he was able to get his land restored to him. And oddly enough, his oldest daughter married one of the primary occupying officers and Oury became very close to him. In 1864, Tucson became an incorporated city and Oury was chosen as its first Mayor.

The event that brought William Oury his worst notoriety occurred in 1871 and is known as the Camp Grant Massacre. All Apaches were assigned to reservations by this time, but they were notorious for leaving the reservations on raiding parties that killed white people and stole their cattle. The U. S. Army would provide no protection to the citizens, so a Committee of Public Safety was formed with Oury appointed as the leader. At dawn on April 30, six whites, 48 Mexicans, and 92 Papago Indians, lifelong enemies of the Apaches, attacked the Apaches camped at Camp Grant. It turned out that the camp was almost totally old men, women and children. The results were 144 dead and mutilated Apaches; all but eight were women and children. Ninety-nine of the participants were indicted for their actions in the massacre. At the trial it was felt that most of the killing and mutilation had been done by the Papagos and that because of all the depredations committed by the Apaches, the jury only deliberated 19 minutes before acquitting all defendants. In 1873, Oury was elected

Sheriff of Pima County and served in that capacity until 1877. In 1884 he was elected as first president of the Arizona Historical Society. He died on March 31, 1887, and is buried next to Inez, who died on January 28, 1891, in the Holy Hope Cemetery in Tucson.









Source: *William Sanders Oury*, by Cornelius C Smith, Jr.