

# **LOOKING FOR “IT:” Life and Adventures of a Texas Historian**

**By Paul N. Spellman**

## **Introduction – 1975**

Sam Fore, director of the HEB Foundation in Corpus Christi and a friend of mine, invited me to attend the Foundation-sponsored Christian Businessmen’s Conference in Los Angeles as his guest. I was happy to comply! We were in downtown LA for three days attending seminars led by some of the most prominent men (and a woman or two, it was 1975 after all) in the nation.

On Saturday, the second day of the conference, Sam asked me to run an errand for one of the speakers, New York syndicated columnist James Reston. Reston was one of my two favorite columnists in those days (alongside the brilliant wordsmith George Will) and I was thrilled to meet him at his hotel room door. Reston needed a book from the local (!) library to obtain a specific quotation he wanted for his presentation. I dashed to the LA public library by cab, explained the situation to the librarian who granted me a temp borrower’s card, found the book down in the dusty bowels of the library, and raced back to deliver the prize. Reston was most grateful – he in his journalist white shirt and suspenders garb – and I was hooked on the adventures of “looking for IT.”

The following stories are moments along the way of my career as a researcher and writer. Most have to do with specific books I was writing, some a bit more personal or the always

fascinating “side tracks” that I have walked over the past several decades. The 1975 story reaches pretty far back into my first career as a United Methodist minister, as do the first few tales of my Zadock Woods family research. The remainder date back to 1995 when I was a middle school Texas History teacher, and then 1998 doing my PhD research for the Texan Santa Fe dissertation that would be published as my first nonfiction offering.

Between 1999 and 2017 I was fortunate and blessed to have ten books published in the arena of Texas History. For each of those there is at least one story of some revelation or accidental discovery or misadventure that I share here. Since 2017 I have continued to work on a variety of writing projects which I will share near the end of this treatise.

I remember attending the annual Austin Book Fair back around 2007, selling my second Ranger book from under a canopy on a very hot street near the Capitol. Surrounded by seven or eight other booksellers, we chatted about the perils of publishing. One by one these kindred spirits told of the travails and rejections they had faced getting a publisher to even notice their work, some having toiled for more than a decade until they finally achieved their goal. I recall being somewhat embarrassed to say that I had never had any difficulty getting my first seven books in print, even having three publishers approach me about writing for them! It reminded me how lucky I have been in the business.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, telling stories of bygone days looking for – and more often than not *finding* – the “it” for which I was searching. I’m doing this at the suggestion of my wonderful wife Kathleen who thought this might be a memoir of sorts for our grandchildren, and I see her point. Somewhere in these tales is probably where I can be found, more so than regaling little children with boring diatribes about my years as a professor at a junior college. Although I

have dearly loved every day in the classroom, there is not a whole lot more to say than "I taught for thirty years, twenty-however-many of those at Wharton County Junior College." That does not make for scintillating bedtime stories for the grandkids!

Prior to about 2010 or so, research for me meant getting in the car/truck and heading for parts (un)known to seek that one bit of information I needed. Sometime I flew to more distant spots (New England, Missouri), but mostly I put thousands of miles on my odometers all across Texas and several other states as well. I made a jillion phone calls along the way, too, to librarians, archivists, genealogists, cemetery administrators, university professors, and museum directors. That was part of the adventure – talking with those wonderful folks, and with very few exceptions (there's a story or two coming) they not only helped me but were excited to participate in my adventure.

But over this last decade I have found that the digitized world delivers most of the information I seek right here at my computer window. It seems like the world of research is now at my fingertips and I admit to a certain level of relief to save the wear and tear of miles traveled. At the same time, there is a bittersweetness to this new world of Googledom: I do miss walking through Vermont cemeteries and Missouri libraries, and I miss the conversations I used to have, like the archivist in Pamlico NC and the staff at the now-defunct Alamo Archives, or the shopkeeper in Oklahoma, or the librarians in Brookfield Mass and Troy MO, or the county clerk in Lexington KY. I still go whenever I can but most of the stories that follow are about my travels to various places where I found what I was looking for...or more than I could have hoped for.

I've told most of the stories over the years to anyone who cared to listen, even politely so. My family has heard them and been kind enough to say they enjoyed them, and I have on many occasions used these stories as programs, or intros to programs, that I have delivered around Texas over the last twenty-plus years. There again, I have been most fortunate to get the opportunity to speak to hundreds (oh my) of groups, large and small, about the various and mostly Texas topics from the books I have published. I love speaking (that is, telling stories), and over the decades have had the chance about once a month more or less to do so. I've spoken at conferences and seminars, DRT and SRT and DAR and SAR, women's book clubs, reunion groups with special Texas ties, bookstore gatherings, docents, historical societies, and so on; love them all. I've been keynote speaker to groups with hundreds in attendance, and the occasional program where only a handful gathered. I've spoken three times at the annual conference of the Texas State Historical Association – the “big ‘un” for us Texas historians, and served one year on its program committee. Not bragging, just honored.

So here I go. These stories are from my “profession” as a Texas historian, but somewhere between the lines you'll find most of who I am as well, I suppose. And you'll find my constant message upon whose soapbox I stand: Tell the stories – YOU tell them, or they will disappear forever.

## **PROLOGUE**

### **The Growing Up Years**

I suppose I should begin with a little bit more background in case this turns out to be some sort of autobiography! Like my father before me, it doesn't seem like that would be such a big deal to anyone until I hear my kids ask "now when & where did you live and go to school" or such. I guess if they have any interest down the way they would have this to tell their kids about Dad/Poppa. But I'll be brief.

I was born in Corpus Christi as my parents were starting up their lives together. Mom was the prototypical housewife of that era, while Dad turned his chemical engineering degree into a stint as assistant chemist at Halliburton Oil. Dad also did a lot of "doodle-bugging" in West Texas during those early years, and Mom's mom Flora (Mimi to us) often took care of my sister Lauran (a year younger) and me for long periods of time.

In 1955 we moved to Chicago as Dad got "the big job" of head chemist at Marquette Cement; this was a big deal. We lived there about six years, residing briefly in Evanston and Western Springs before settling in Downers Grove (4728 Forest Ave – why in the world do I still remember that and the phone number, WO8-3430). My youngest sibling Martha was born there in 1958: Had she been a boy her name would have been Matthew Louis – a name that obviously stuck with me (my son's name), but the announcement of "a baby sister" was quite disappointing to me at the time.

My favorite teacher there was Mrs. Porter in 5<sup>th</sup> grade because she had once lived in Texas as well – compadres in a foreign land. I was the second oldest in my class and the second smallest (both to David Safranski). I was an avid reader and an A student with little effort, nearly always second to Greg Llish in every spelling/reading contest but usually first in geography/map games (I won a world geography quiz by knowing the location of Vatican City!?). Of several other memories, a favorite still is the family driving to Longfellow Elementary (our school) on a November night in 1957 to watch Sputnik II fly over in the midnight sky!

In the middle of my seventh grade year Dad was approached by two European entrepreneurs planning an innovative cement plant in upstate New York and in need of a cement expert slash plant manager. We moved to Albany that December and Dad went to work for Atlantic Cement, what would be his company home the rest of his illustrious career. We attended the schools in suburban Delmar through ninth grade, then moved for one year to Stamford, Connecticut, when Dad was promoted to “Assistant to the President” (a sketchy title for a sketchy job) and officed in downtown NYC, then back to Delmar for my 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years when he was promoted again to the more permanent/prominent Vice-President of Operations. He had one more step to Senior V-P a few years later which moved us back to Stamford, and then turned down cement company CEO offers a number of times thereafter.

I have fond memories of my Delmar years mostly because of my discovered passion for music and theatre in my adolescent years, much of which has defined me for the rest of my life. I was a lead tenor in the junior high choir until my voice “broke” one day at rehearsal – very embarrassing – and I became a baritone! I sang in the school and church choirs for all of those years, and in my senior year I was selected by Mrs. York to be the student choir director:

Magdalene York was a true inspiration in my life. I “won” the position by acting a little overly-dramatic at a tryout and besting Cheri Darrone and Judy Flambeau, both of whom were much better than me and despondent to have lost. One of my best-ever memories, though, was conducting a song at the Spring concert (1967) and then leading the choir & audience in the school song at my high school graduation ceremonies. A defining moment “on stage.”

Sidney Turner was the high school drama director, a diminutive man who stammered terribly in class but a giant of an actor when he stepped onto a stage & not a stammer to be heard! Peculiar. His production of “Brigadoon” when I was in 9th grade inspired me to tryout the next year and gain a small part in “The Mikado.” I was too immersed in choir to be in “Carousel” my junior year, but my senior year I did a staged ensemble reading of “The World of Carl Sandburg,” and then played Pappy in “Li’l Abner.” My best friend Herb Mayne was Abner, my ex-girlfriend but good friend Cheri was Daisy: it was a ton of fun & a darn good musical. That same year Mr. Turner took a group of us to NYC one long weekend to Broadway where we saw Cabaret (Joel Grey and Liza) and Man of La Mancha (Richard Kiley), OMG! Hooked forever!

Along the way I had great English teachers – Mr. Kellner, Mrs. Crummy (really!), and the hardcore Mrs. Blackmore (also my next door neighbor!) who scared the hell out of us seniors but got me ready for college like no other teacher. My other favorite teacher was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade Math in Stamford: I gratefully use Mr. Semanski’s math tricks and concepts still to this day.

## College Days & the Ministry

I spent a disconsolate freshman year at Bucknell University in Lewisburg PA thinking I would be a math major and work for my girlfriend Marcia's father at IBM; a good plan that went awry on several levels! A story I tell a lot: my first year of playing bridge and drinking Scotch in lieu of going to class got me essentially resigned to being kicked out with a 1.9 GPA. However, over the Christmas Break (1967) I was loudly called by God to be in the professional ministry – Lauran tells the story well - and set on a whole new course for the next 22 years of my life.

I called my Uncle Norman's good friend Grady Anderson, the admissions director at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, who said: "Come on down, Paul. I'll have a dorm room ready for you in the Fall." Geez, that was easy! Lauran, famously 362 days younger than me, accompanied me to Georgetown that fall as a freshman (and promptly spent all of our collective bank account funds; it's funny now). There's a lot of story during my three Southwestern years but suffice to say I graduated with a major in American Literature and double minor in Religion and Theatre! (That should reveal a lot!) Three years of choir and theatre consumed most of my time and joy there. "Royal Hunt of the Sun," "You're a good man Charlie Brown" (Snoopy), "Tiger at the Gates," "Inherit the Wind," "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail," "Lion in Winter" (I won the actor's award as the surly Prince John), and "Carnival" (Jacquot the Clown) were some highlights.

And "Haydn's Head," a long-winded drama of the famous composer written by senior John Merrill, the best actor I ever worked with. I played the lead role of Franz Josef Haydn, and Dr. Angus Springer, legendary head of the Theatre Department, played my butler! John Merrill



had already headed for Canada rather than being drafted and years later became Canada's national theatre director! (Speaking of the 1969 draft, my draft board number was 104, high enough to evade being sent to Vietnam.)

In 1971 it was on to SMU and Perkins School of Theology, marrying Tudy in 1972, church jobs in Tyler, Central Congregational in north Dallas, and at Highland Park UMC. Then came a Master's degree in 1974 and a doctor of ministry in 1975, and off to Corpus Christi and First UMC and most happily of all in 1975 the birth of Matthew Louis. Three years in Corpus, three years starting Oak Meadow UMC in San Antonio (where daughter Paula was born in 1979), three years in Kingsville, and six years in Austin at Hyde Park UMC, rounded out my pastoral career.

With a midlife crisis of sorts in 1989 (I had just turned 40) I made a career decision to try my hand at education (always an option anyway: In 1974 while at SMU I had been invited to be assistant pastor in Corpus – which I accepted, but was also invited to be Instructor of Christian Education at Seattle Pacific University!). Tough choice then, an opportunity now fifteen years later.

We four headed back to Corpus for a fresh re-start in a teaching career, thence to Houston in 1993 and living with Tudy's widowed mom as I taught at the high school and college level while completing my PhD at the University of Houston. I had earned a Master's degree in History at UT-Austin while pastor at Hyde Park, then a Master's degree in School Administration from A&M-Corpus before we landed in Houston.

I think that is enough about that part of my life, and a segue to the stories I intended to tell in the first place when I began this project!

## **Chapter One – 1986, Zadock Woods**

In 1983 we moved to Austin where I served the flailing Hyde Park United Methodist Church that was getting ready to close down save one last chance. I was the last chance, I guess, and, with nothing much to lose really, we went to work. For six years the church grew because the few folks believed in what they were doing and they – and God - made it happen.

The University of Texas shuttle stopped at the corner where the church stood and in the fall of 1984 I took advantage of that to begin taking graduate courses during my lunch hour. I chose Texas history courses because of an innate and inbred love I had from my own family's rich Texas heritage as especially chronicled in story and page by my grandfather L. U. and two of his brothers, my great uncles Paul and Christian.

Late in 1986 a professor inquired as to my aspirations for obtaining a graduate degree, something I really had not thought about until he asked. I had enough courses under my belt by then to consider writing a master's thesis and garnering an MA in History. Seemed like something I could do, so we worked for a month or so on topics until one day it dawned on me that my own family history had merit. My ancestors Zadock and Minerva Cottle Woods, and their children, came to Texas with Austin's Old 300 back in the early 1820s, and together they represented the prototypical American frontier family of that era. My professor agreed that the Woods story would be suitable for thesis work.

My grandfather had written a short missal, back in the late 1940s I think, about Zadock and Minerva, part of a vertical tale of our heritage as the German Spellmanns and the Woods clan eventually married in the 1880s; it was a good starting point but pretty slim on details. For

example, nowhere could I find the names of Zadock's parents in any of my grandfather's papers. Minerva's parents, yes: prominent community leaders settling in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts Bay Colony, then moving the entire and large clan to Vermont Territory to build Cottle town in a beautiful valley in the late 1700s. Zadock was apparently a stonemason and contractor from Brookfield, Massachusetts who had moved to Cottle town to make some money and had courted the Elder "Deacon" Cottle's lovely daughter to the dismay of her parents and kin. My grandfather thought they may have married in 1798, but had little documentation. He also wrote that by 1801 they were all in Missouri, and two decades later a handful of them heading for Mexican Texas with Stephen F. Austin.

**So my first discovery adventure was finding Zadock's parents.**

The last name Woods (or just as often Wood) is obviously pretty common, and that was certainly so in New England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; they were everywhere! But no Zadocks, well, plenty of Zadocks but none in the Woods clans I searched in the many colonial and then U.S. census rolls. It was one of my first serious forays into the world of historical research, and my first discovery I guess was that of the frustration that comes with the territory: so many trials and errors and dead ends when patience is a virtue but a disconcerting one.

I remembered tales from my grandfather related to the Woods family and the Texas Revolution noting that no Woods were at the Alamo but one of the Cottle cousins died there. So I thought I might take a chance that the DRT's archives (still housed at the Alamo then) might have some sort of lead for me. The Spellmans tell the story of Zadock's sons Norman and Henry Gonzalvo (Gon) having artifacts in the Alamo Museum but related to the events later in 1842 and 1843 (another story for later).

I drove to San Antonio and spent some time at the closed-stack and marvelous Alamo archival library, assisted by a staffer named Rusty who small-world-ironically was a cousin to Kathleen (who I didn't even know yet). Rusty poked around the records and located a slim manila folder with the name Woods on it. There wasn't much inside, just a few sheets of paper with various names and dates rather loosely organized. But there were **TWO moments of finding "it"** awaiting me there.

The first was a genealogical chart recorded once upon a time by a distant cousin I did not know. On it, rather casually in retrospect, were Zadock's parents' names – Jonathan and Keziah Keith Woods of Brookfield, Mass!! Like it was no big news, but it was to me! In the next twelve months or so, as I did my thesis work, that tidbit of critical information opened an entire world of information for me: first names, the wife's surname, and a location are key ingredients for a researcher. I put a zillion threads together to tell the story that became my master's thesis, and received my degree in 1987.

The second "it" was an unintended discovery that probably was a much larger contribution to Texas history than Zadock's dad's name. It was an artifact again casually inserted into this otherwise insignificant file folder that had Rusty and the archives director amazed and excited as well. A tiny slip of paper was folded in the file, and in precarious condition (being 150 years old as it turned out!). On it in scraggly penciled cursive: a receipt for a wagon load of corn procured from one Zadock Woods in February, 1836, by a passing entourage from Tennessee on their way to San Antonio. The note was signed by "Daniel Cloud," who was, I learned in the moments that followed, a twenty-year-old companion of one David Crockett and one of the 188 who fell at the Alamo one month later! Quite a treasure.

The other story I love to tell about my Zadock research is the discovery I made, quite by accident, in an old church building in South Woodstock, Vermont, in 1987.

Finishing off my thesis research, I still had one gap to fill for my sources: proof that Zadock had been in Cottle Town (South Woodstock) sometime between 1795 and 1799. I had documentation that he and Minerva Cottle had married in 1798, but nothing concrete about his being in the town during that time.

Of course, this meant going there and looking for such evidence! I flew to NYC and rented a car, driving up through Connecticut and into central Massachusetts where I took a full day to track down Zadock's family's farm around Brookfield. I located what I thought was most likely the land grant – thanks to a local librarian and a beaver-dammed pond just as Zadock's father Jonathan had described in the land deed. The remainder of the family land and several other landmarks had since been swallowed up by the expansion of the Quabog Reservoir. It's beautiful country.

I drove north into Vermont and got a hotel room in Woodstock, a lovely tourist-laden community about twenty miles north of where I was bound. A country road curls down through a valley and into the very small, New England-quaint South Woodstock consisting of two turns in the road, a general store, a handful of old homes and buildings, and of course a cemetery. Also "in town" stands a 200-year-old church building, white and high-steepled just like in the postcards. No longer a house of worship, I learned at the general store that it was empty and a planned local museum would eventually be located there.

I walked across the street from the store and to the old church. The door was unlocked, so I stepped in and hollered a polite hello, but my voice echoed around the vacant rooms and no

one called back. I strode through the building noting a bit of furniture here and there and no sign of any work yet done for its museum era-to-be. After a few minutes I had seen all there was to see – nothing really, and I headed for the front door. To my left, though, I spotted one more small room and I stepped over into it. There was no furniture, but in one corner on the floor sat an ancient safe, rusted on the corners, its heavy door swung open to reveal a pile of papers strewn about onto the hardwood floor.

I sat on the floor and began sifting through the loose papers. There were all sorts of documents, mostly it seemed financial records of one kind or another, nothing special, with dates ranging back through the early 1800s. Near the bottom of the crush of paper I finally spotted what looked like, and turned out to be, a registry from a general store years gone by. The book was long and narrow with double columns on each page. On one side of the pages were lists of dry goods items purchased and across from each list the name of the buyer. The handwriting was generally the same throughout with perhaps a total of three or four store clerks taking turns filling in the information over a period of time.

On the first page of the store registry was the date “1796.” Wow! And, as I learned after a while, the registry came to a close in the spring of 1798. The timing was perfect, and I sat and read through every page, recognizing a number of Cottles along the way. On an October day in 1797, I found “it.” Nails and coffee purchased, the buyer one “Zeddock Woods!” I kept looking. Again later that same month, and twice in December, Zadock’s name was neatly penned by the store clerk, the buyer’s first name spelled differently each time: correct spelling back in those days was more of a suggestion than a rule.

But there he was, in Cottle Town in late 1797, surrounded by Cottles as he hired out as a master stonemason, building mostly brick chimneys for the mansion-size old homes (at least three of which still stand today).

There are a few follow-ups to the story. For starters, as I stood to leave the premises, I wondered about taking the registry with me for safe-keeping and as a family heirloom. No one was working in the building and quite clearly that was no plan for storing such treasures: someone could come in there and throw the whole pile away without ever thinking twice. The thought of that made me wince, but stealing the book was not any more palatable. So I left it where I found it, regretting that decision for years after....until:

About ten years later, cousin Ronnie Woods met me at one of the annual October Woods-Cottle-Harrell Reunions in LaGrange, Texas, to inform me that he had visited Vermont earlier that year, partly in response to this story I had told at a previous reunion, and had found that store register still there, still on the floor by the safe but otherwise untouched and okay.

Nearly two decades after that, around the year 2013, Kathy and I took an extended vacation across New England as she had never been in that part of the country. We took an Amtrak from NYC up to Albany, met my old high school chum Herb Mayne for a quick visit, then rented a car and for the next eight days made our way across and into the six states that comprise New England. We loved Boston and Providence and New Haven, and incidentally but not on purpose until we realized it, stepped on the campus of every Ivy League school except Cornell! From Columbia to Dartmouth, Harvard and Yale and Brown, we finally finished up at Penn and Princeton before we headed home.

Our first stop after Albany was a night at a B&B in South Woodstock, where we enjoyed an evening of regaling stories from the host who was dutifully impressed that I was a descendant of “the” Zadock Woods, noting that the building where we were staying had been an old mill owned by the Cottles until 1800. Across the street was a 200-year-old utility building that may have been a more modest home than the Cottle manses, built solidly of brick and stone and with no less than *four* brick chimneyworks! Could this have been Zadock’s dwelling? Our innkeeper certainly thought so.

Our first order of business the next morning was to walk 300 yards to the old church building, still untouched inside, still with an open front door and no one to greet us. I led Kath into the corner room and, lo and behold, someone had in fact been at work there in those intervening years. There was (and is) a long glass case situated across the middle of the room containing various artifacts and documents professionally set, titled, and safe under the museum glass. In the corner the safe still sat, but the papers had long since been picked up and sorted – some were in that glass display case, and a shelf of books stood inside the open floor vault.

I pulled the old register out from the stack, set it on the display case, and showed Kath Zadock’s name on the several pages in it. What a special treat to see it again 26 years later! I – we – decided this time to leave it there, but I inserted a business card and a note on one of the pages that bears my ancestor’s name in case anyone ever should venture there in the future.

I hope “it” still resides there.

**A Trip to Missouri** – When the Woods and Cottle Clan left New England around 1799 or so, they headed to the frontier along the Mississippi River Valley and into Missouri Territory.



There they established a small town that they named Troy (after Homer's Iliad) and Zadock Woods built the first inn and fort right in the town's center (a replica of it is still there). It seemed like a natural stop for my early research, so I made a road trip from Texas to Troy to see what I could find.

The town of Troy sits in a beautiful area where the Missouri River begins its last ride into the Mississippi from the West. It was an easy trip and I noticed the historical park downtown as soon as I drove in, imagining the Woods and Cottles settling there 200 years earlier! But my primary objective was the local library and archives to find more on that twenty-year period when they resided there.

The Powell Memorial Library hosts, among others, the Lincoln County Historical Society records where I hoped to find information on Zadock and his kin. There at the library I met Mrs. Marjorie Evans and her associate librarian Mrs. Marcella Pollman. To my delight the mere mention of Zadock drew a smile and a happy nod of instant recognition; wow! (This would have been some time in 1986, I think, amazingly 38 years ago now!) Not only did they recognize Zadock and Minerva, they immediately guided me down one of the aisles to a shelf of resources where I would find some wonderful information that went into my book. Principal among the resources was an 1888 volume of Goodspeed's The History of Lincoln County, Missouri: Zadock appears more than a dozen times in this 600-page book. Nearby were court records from that time period, land grant records, and even newspaper records of the period 1801-1821. Zadock was everywhere!

Ultimately these records would serve my book well; I procured an extra copy of Goodspeed which I still have in my library today. But the reason I add this side trip to my story is

my ensuing conversation with Marjorie Evans. For starters she was (is?) quite a character herself, reigning over her library and archives as queen, and knew quite a lot about Zadock in Missouri but not much about his Texas life. I was happy to share some of “the rest of the story” and she seemed pleased UNTIL I mentioned that when he came to Texas he had left behind a life squandered by drinking and carousing in Troy, especially during the Banker’s Panic (1817-1819) when he had lost almost everything. Mrs. Evans was aghast that I would ever think Zadock was anything but an outstanding founder and citizen of her fair city! I mentioned Texas records and family stories that said otherwise, but she would have none of it. I referred her to resources that mentioned Zadock repenting of his ways and being baptized in the river before heading to Texas, but again she insisted that he had been a good Baptist all the while in Missouri Territory.

We finally agreed to disagree and that was the rather abrupt end to our conversation. Her assistant Marcella winked at me following the discourse as if to say, “Now you know what we all put up with here.” I left on uncertain terms with the head librarian, but I had found even more than I sought or that I had bargained for!

At the other end of the research for Zadock Woods was locating the spot where he died on his 69<sup>th</sup> birthday, September 18, 1842. It was and is common knowledge that the old fighter was killed in the Dawson Massacre that occurred near the larger Battle of Salado Creek east of San Antonio. Mexican General Adrian Woll had led 1,000 troops into Texas and occupied the city a week earlier, and hundreds of Texans had ridden for the town to run him off. About three dozen men from the La Grange area got to the battle a few hours late and found themselves trapped on the prairie by a company of Mexican troops and its cannon, their only cover a small motte of

trees that was soon decimated by cannon fire and strewn with more than 30 bodies. Zadock's two sons who were there, Norman and Gon, survived. Norman was captured by the Mexican troops and hauled off into Mexico later where he died at the old Perote Castle prison in 1844. Gon was one of only two Texans to escape the massacre.

The exact whereabouts of the massacre are known only from a casual reference by an eyewitness who mentioned the site being about "a half-mile from the Salado fight" going on. Since the late-to-the-fight company was coming from east-southeast of Salado Creek (along a market trail), that narrowed the search area to about five miles N/S and a mile or so E/W: that's still a big area and, of course, 150 years later all grown up with commercial buildings and Loop 410 and more. (An historical marker had once stood at the intersection of Eisenhower Road and Loop 410 but was later moved miles away so it could be seen better by tourists!)

Well, I was determined to find that site and had been looking in the area off and on for several years when one more idea came to me: to look at the most southern tip of that proposed five-square-mile ground.

(I've told this story many, many times; It's one of my favorites. I even told it during the annual Texas Storytellers Association Conference on a big stage in Abilene, I think in the mid-1990s. That was a treat and the audience seemed to like it.)

On the southernmost possible location of the massacre now resides Fort Sam Houston, where a piece of Salado Creek twists along at its edge before heading north where the Salado battle raged in 1842. From staring at many maps and driving up and down the area I considered that the massacre may have taken place where the fort now sits, inside its fences. One summery day I drove to San Antonio and to the check-in station at the fort's main gate. I explained my task

to the appropriate officer in charge who believed me, I guess, because he gave me a permit sheet to put on the dashboard and allowed me to drive to the edge of the fort parade grounds, cautioning that I “must stay on the main road and not veer away from it.”

I drove from the main buildings out on to the parade grounds and down the dirt road that cut through the center. Out near the perimeter of the fort I realized that the creek where I wanted to look was about 250 yards off to my left, a pretty hefty walk on a hot summer day. Without thinking (obviously!) I turned my car north and *drove off the road*, across the parade grounds, and parked beneath a shade tree 100 feet from the creek bed. Got out of the car, hiked down through some scrub brush to the creek bed to have a look. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for after 150 years – skeletons? Rusted rifles? A cannon ball? Silly me.

After about ten minutes of wandering about – finding nothing of course, I heard the sound of a motor of some kind and getting louder and louder. I walked back up through the brush to my car, arriving at the same as a massive Army Apache helicopter descended from the sky to about 15 feet above my head, its rotors blasting noise and air right at me!! I was terrified, all the more so when the soldier in the back of the chopper turned his machine gun right at me!!!

It occurred to me that I may have broken the rules...But resolute that I hadn’t intended to do any harm, I reached inside the car (hearing the wrenching sound of the gun arming!!!) grabbed the permission slip and waved it hopefully at the helicopter.

After about twenty terrifying seconds, the chopper flew away.

I drove sheepishly back to the gate, was properly chastised, and headed home. Alive. Stupid. But alive.

Never have found the precise location of the Dawson Massacre.

## **Chapter Two – 1995, Race to Velasco**

In the school year 1991-92 I had embarked now on my second career, that of an educator whose specialty was Texas History. After a year getting into the field as a permanent substitute in the London School District outside of Corpus Christi – where my sister Luran had already been teaching for twenty-plus years (I was teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math!), I was hired by the nearby Tuloso-Midway ISD to teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade Texas and 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History – hurray! The family moved into the district and Matt and Paula attended school there for a couple of years.

In my seventh grade class that first year I had twenty-six students. There were 23 boys and three girls, all but four Hispanic as a reflection of much of that area demographic. One of the boys, I will always remember, was the leader of the middle school hallways gang, but he and I got along great when I invited him to leave his bandana out of my classroom and relax from the gang pressure and responsibilities for an hour each day; he did. Mr. de La Garza was my teaching partner and mentor, a young but well-seasoned teacher and one of the best I've ever come across.

Six weeks into the school year I realized that the supplemental reading material for seventh graders taking Texas History, especially a class like mine whose student average age was almost fourteen and whose reading level was that of a fifth grader, was, well, non-existent. Besides the middling school text, these boys soon tired after trudging through *The Boy at the Alamo*, *The Girl at the Alamo*, *Susanna at the Alamo*, and *The Dog at*, well, you get the idea.

Late in September I signed up to attend the annual Texas Social Studies Conference that year being held in Austin. I went there for the singular purpose of trolling the bookseller kiosks

in search of decent reading material for “my boys.” Was that futile! Everyone was sympathetic but no one had anything for me.

This “It” turned out to be completely unexpected.

One of the book tables was hosted by Joanne Long, she of the small but active Dallas mom ‘n’ pop company Hendrick-Long Publishers. Joanne and her husband (and now their son Michael) were long-time booksellers and publishers and well respected across that genre. I had a delightful visit with Joanne, the outcome being the familiar “There isn’t much out there for you” but ending with “Why don’t *you* write something, Paul, and send it to me. If I like it I’ll publish it.”

Didn’t see that coming! I ruminated on that for the remainder of the school year and the next summer I embarked on a writing adventure – juvenile historical fiction. I decided early on to write what was familiar to me which at the time was all of the Zadock Woods work I had done for my master’s thesis five years earlier. Zadock and Minerva had five children, the youngest being Henry Gonzalvo “Gon” Woods. When Gon was a pre-teen, his older brother Leander fought and died at the 1832 Battle of Velasco, a battle whose significance was not realized until three years later when the Texas Revolution erupted.

I wrote RACE TO VELASCO at a fifth grade reading level but with those Tuloso-Midway boys in mind, and filled it with constant action – Indians, floods, snakes, ship stowaways and cannons firing, and ultimately the battle itself. I put Gon and his friends on a trek down the Brazos River to catch up with his brother Leander, only to arrive just to witness his brother’s death at the foot of the circular Mexican fort on the sands along the Gulf waters.

I sent the manuscript to Joanne Long and she liked it enough to publish it in 1995. Over the years it has made its way into a number of school district classrooms and libraries, and into

the hands of youngsters across Texas. It was never a best-seller by any stretch, but I have always felt satisfied with the project I undertook. One follow-up was that, inspired and encouraged, I wrote the rough drafts of three more Gon Woods stories, taking him and his friends out to Apache country on the Nueces, up to Nacogdoches for intrigue and adventure, and to Gonzales in late September, 1835, where the Revolution's first shot was fired. But by the time I had set to work on those, Joanne retired, the company shut down for a while, and those three novels have never seen the light of day. Maybe before I'm through (see later in this story!).

### **Chapter Three – 1999, Hugh McLeod**

In the summer of 1993 we moved from Corpus Christi to Houston so that I could work on my PhD in History at the University of Houston. I had tried my hand as an adjunct lecturer at Texas A & I University in Kingsville teaching a night course each semester while I worked my day job at Tuloso-Midway, and then one year at Gregory Portland ISD, and got “the bug” for teaching at the college level. Having a PhD seemed a necessity at that juncture, although ironically never actually was as crucial as I thought at the time. Still, I’m glad I did it, graduating from U of H in December of 1997.

I completed my class work in short order while holding down teaching jobs initially at Duchesne Academy (a Catholic girls school in Houston) and then at St. Thomas High School (Catholic boys). My supervising professor at UH was the estimable and wonderful Dr. Stanley Siegel who steered me through my courses and then sat me down one day to discuss dissertation topics. He thought I would be at my best doing historical biography which sounded fine to me. He told me to spend a summer looking at three early Texas figures – Ashbel Smith, Thomas Rusk, and Hugh McLeod, the first two having unsatisfactory bios from long days past. I settled on McLeod partly because of his leadership of the 1841 Texan Santa Fe Expedition for which there seemed to be a plethora of primary sources from eyewitness accounts by expedition members. There was remarkably little, however, on the man himself, which I think was appealing to me as well, to find new information about a character from that era and introduce him to the field of Texas History. Dr. Siegel was enthusiastic about my choice.



I worked on my dissertation from the fall of 1995, having completed my classwork, into the summer of 1997. I defended my dissertation before an august committee that Fall and passed my written finals in time for a December commencement (which I did not attend...).

Any number of discoveries along that path make for anecdotal tales, including: McLeod being last in his West Point graduating class; McLeod marrying the cousin of Texas President Mirabeau Lamar – Rebecca Lamar being quite the heroine in a famous shipwreck off the Carolinas coast; McLeod going AWOL from the U. S. Army stationed in Louisiana and crossing the Sabine into Texas just in time to help defend the city of Nacogdoches in the Texas Revolution; and McLeod’s post Revolution and career-long political bouts with Sam Houston. The eventual book title of “Forgotten Texas Leader” stems from the fact that he went up against Houston time and again on a myriad of issues and election campaigns, but always lost! McLeod was well-known during his day but largely and quickly forgotten by History which leans into the winners.

The working title of the dissertation was “‘Like a Meteor Glancing,’” a reference from a newspaper report on the famous 1839 Battle of the Neches that mentioned McLeod as quite the heroic figure of that battle against the East Texas Cherokee. [When it came time for publishing, that title was creative but not informative, and fell off the front page.]

Although I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know McLeod and introducing him back into Texas History, the over-arching contribution of FORGOTTEN TEXAS LEADER is the middle third of the book describing in unprecedented detail the 1841 Texas Santa Fe Expedition and its consequences. Utilizing the journals and diaries of several of the participants and then filling in the blanks with my own research, the book has found particular favor in Texas historiography for the story of the ever-scribed “ill-fated” Expedition.

The “it” story, though, is a side piece that I did not know I would experience, related as it turned out to both my work on McLeod and, of all things, Gon Woods as a grown man and Texas Ranger in 1840!

During the early Republic of Texas years when Lamar was president, Hugh McLeod was appointed the first Adjutant General of Texas, tasked with literally creating the job itself. In that position, and because he seemed to want to be in the thick of things whenever possible, many of the first-ever official reports of the Army of the Republic were written by McLeod. Besides his participation in the Battle on the Neches, McLeod also was at the March, 1840, Council House Fight in San Antonio taking on Comanche warriors, the official report being his doing.

Following the Council House Fight at which more than a dozen Comanches and a few Texans were killed on a downtown square and several captive children killed hours later by the remaining retreating warriors (the Minerva Lockhart story), a hastily organized Texas Rangers unit pursued the Indians up into the Hill Country to finish them off. McLeod did not accompany the Rangers this time, but later wrote the official AG report of their experience; but Gon Woods *was* there. After two weeks of searching for the Comanches, a Lipan scout located a wintering Indian village just east of where the town of San Saba sits today, snuggled up into a large pecan woods along a stream. The Rangers attacked the village at dawn. Most of the Comanches managed to get away, but not before they had stolen all of the Rangers’ horses corralled nearby and leaving the Rangers to walk the 100 miles back to Austin.

In McLeod’s report, available today in the Adjutant General records in the Texas State Archives, is a hand-drawn map of the area where the daybreak battle took place, showing a box canyon (where the Ranger horses were left and then stolen), a mile-long dry river bed that

headed due north out of the canyon, and the pecan orchard where the Comanches were discovered and attacked. Accompanying the map is McLeod's account of the battle gleaned from interviewing the Rangers.

Because McLeod wrote the report, and certainly because Gon Woods by complete coincidence happened to be part of the story, I felt the urge during my dissertation research to locate that battle site. I was initially stymied by the fact that there were no substantive clues as to *exactly* where the battle took place, only general directions north of Austin. I did come across enough information from other sources to believe that the battle was in the general neighborhood of San Saba, leaving a hundred or so square miles – that's all – to look. Off I went.

I drove around the San Saba area for an hour or so the day I traveled up there and found in fact one (of several) historical markers around the town that mentioned a Comanche wintering camp and long-ago battle fought there during the years of the Republic. Still fairly vague as to a specific site, I took my best guess from what little information I had and drove back down State Highway 281 until I was about one mile or so south of the possible battlefield. I parked my car in the ditch and climbed the nearby barbed wire fence right about at the No Trespassing sign attached to it.

I stepped into a wide-open prairie that was waist high in brown grass and, because I could not see the ground, brandished a nearby broken-off tree limb to ward off critters or snakes that I might encounter. I walked due west across that open field, probably about seventy-five yards...*and nearly fell into the box canyon!* It was more of a hole in the ground than canyon, camouflaged by the high grass, but as I climbed down into it, big enough to have held seventy-five Ranger horses.

On the north end of the hole was an opening which I stepped through, and found myself walking along a dry river bed heading due north! About halfway along I encountered a herd of about fifty sheep cluttering the stream bed, uninterested in me and in no hurry to give way as I shoved and kicked my way through.

Another half mile and the creek bed opened onto a large open farm field. Across the field about another seventy-five yards was, almost unbelievably, a pecan orchard!

**I had found "it."**

I walked across the furrowed field and peeked into the orchard, imagining Comanche tepees and the attack of the Rangers at dawn. The rifle shots would have blinded the whole area in thick white gun smoke, allowing the Comanches to disappear while the Rangers re-loaded.

Now the rest of the story. I was over a mile from my car and not really excited about retracing my steps when I noticed off to my right at the end of the plowed field was a handsome ranch house, obviously the property of the owner of the land upon which I stood (technically as a trespasser). I decided to walk to the house, introduce myself, and hopefully bum a ride from a friendly rancher back to my car. Or, I thought as I began to walk, I would be greeted by fierce PhD-student-eating dogs or shot by the owner wondering how I ended up where I did! It was a nervous trek to the porch!

The screen door opened – no dogs had barked or snarled – and a well-worn man in his fifties stepped out in front of me. He carried no gun but did have a curious look on his ranch-tanned and wrinkled face. I smiled and introduced myself as fast as I could get the words out, pointing behind me as I explained myself. He listened without comment, then extended his hand in a friendly gesture. For whatever reason he believed my implausible story.

After a few minutes of conversation he invited me to come around behind the house and to a pre-fab shed about twenty feet square. He unlocked the door and pulled on a light switch hanging from the ceiling as we stepped inside. In the shadows I could see that on all four walls, from floor to the ten-foot ceiling, were stacks of cigar boxes, hundreds of them. He pulled one from within reach and handed it to me. Inside were seven or eight arrowheads and a couple of larger cutting stones. I looked back up at the boxes and he nodded with a smile. "Yep," he said. "My grandfather bought this ranch and whenever he turned the field after harvest the grandkids would come over to follow his tractor and pick up arrowheads as they popped from the ground. I was one of those grandkids, and my kids and now my grandkids still carry on the tradition. "This," he pointed, "is what we've gathered over the years. Seems there was a Comanche wintering camp here for many generations. Arrowheads all over the place." Wow!

And one more story. The rancher was kind enough to give me three of the arrowheads as a parting gift and then drove me back to where my car still sat, waving a farewell as he left me there. As we drove around his property and back down 281, I had noticed a modest nob hill in the corner of the land. If this was an old Comanche campsite it would be interesting to climb up that nob hill and see what I could see, including the creek bed I had walked earlier. So I drove back north a bit, parked the car along the shoulder, and clambered up the small hill that rose about thirty feet above the land. On top the hill was pretty flat for about thirty feet square, and littered with a two-inch layer of flint and shale and broken rocks. Everywhere I looked were shards of broken or unfinished arrowheads, spearheads, and knife-size stones! Not sure anyone had been on that nob hill in 150 years or so, but it was easy to imagine as I stood there looking in all directions over the prairies and plateaus of that country: young Comanche boys given the

unenviable task of look-outs on that hill for however many winters and generations, spending the dull and boring time carving arrowheads for their fathers, scattering the broken pieces back on the ground.

Didn't even know I was looking for it, but it was pretty cool.

The other McLeod adventure had to do with the Texan Santa Fe Expedition, which in the summer of 1996 I decided I would re-trace. Noting the fact that I would be traveling across northwest Texas and New Mexico in the *summer*, oh my, it would be authentic to the scorching and merciless heat that faced the ill-fated expedition from June to September in 1841.

The expedition itself is filled with misadventures, wandering lost on the Llano Estacado, Indian attacks, and an ignominious surrender to Mexican troops which ultimately led to a "Death March" for many of the survivors from New Mexico to incarceration in and around Mexico City. That's what the whole middle section of my book is about, and its erstwhile commander Hugh McLeod managing to make more dire mistakes of judgment than would seem humanly possible!

My first mistake, of course, was to drive from Austin to Fort Worth to Lubbock and into New Mexico in the first week of August! Miserable, but an empathetic experience. I rode alone, occasionally taking nondescript photos of a barren landscape save the occasional oasis mirage and staying the several overnights in likewise nondescript highway motels. With one exception, that is, being the Turkey Hotel in Turkey, Texas, an historic relic out near the Middle of Nowhere. That was a nice moment.

Oh, and Tuleta Canyon in the Panhandle is awesomely beautiful, a hidden treasure southeast of the more popular and equally beautiful Palo Duro Canyon.

So five days into the trek I was in central New Mexico near the spot where McLeod surrendered what was left of the original 320 members of the Expedition to Mexican troops who promised a respectful and temporary detention, all of which proved false.

I had gleaned from the Expedition journals that the Texans were marched to a small mountainside *villita* named Anton Chico, where they remained under heavy guard until their subsequent forced-march a thousand miles through the frigid wintry mountains to Mexico City. I had driven 99% of the journey now and only needed to take a pic or two of Anton Chico – it still showed up on current highway maps – and then head home. I headed off the Interstate onto a State Highway and then to a smaller county road as I reached the edge of the mountains, recognizing the fact that I was all but lost in this wilderness and alone. What I did not recognize until I had ascended into the hills on a gravel road was that I was out of gas!

I figured I had less than twenty miles of fuel in the tank and it was a hearty forty miles back to the last gas station I had passed. I was in a peck of trouble. So I pressed on up the dusty road for another mile or so, rounding a corner and slowing as I drove into the serene and tiny Anton Chico, its adobe brick buildings thrusting me 150 years into the past. I remember that there was really only one street that wound through the several dozen edifices, and I crept along what felt like a ghost town: no one was outside on this blistering hot mid-afternoon. My fuel gauge now sounded the alarm with its blinking yellow light. I turned a corner to the left and spotted what looked like a store of some sort a half block away: surely someone would be there, and a telephone perhaps to call AAA (no cell phones in those yesterdays).

Instead, as I drove up the store, there in the front lot hugged behind an adobe brick column was a single gas pump! No way, I thought to myself as I also added a prayer or two to the

consideration. Sure enough, it was an active pump that saved me from some alternate despair or at least serious delay. I had a pleasant visit with the general store owner, who in fact nodded in recognition at my story of the 1841 Expedition and pointed me to the remains of a building where, he said, the Texas soldiers had been held for several days. My gas tank full, I wandered over to the building, where only two of the walls and a part of roof still stood, took some photos, felt the ghosts, and borrowed an ancient brick as a souvenir.

Never imagined that this “it” would be a gas pump. And speaking of gasoline (and oil)...



## **Chapter Four – 2001, Spindletop**

Texas A & M Press was kind enough to offer to publish my dissertation with the encouragement from Dr. Siegel and other members of my committee. We worked into the summer of 1999 until FORGOTTEN TEXAS LEADER came to fruition: my first big league book!

During that same summer the staff at A&M Press and I chatted about possible future projects together and a number of ideas crossed the table. Somewhere in that discussion came the calendar recognition that in January, 2001, the estimable Texas State Historical Association and others would be celebrating the Centennial of the Spindletop Oil Boom that occurred in Beaumont under the watchful eye of Pattillo Higgins, Anthony Lucas, and the Hamill brothers. Lucas Well #1, which blew in on January 10, 1901, like no other oil discovery in United States history, much less Texas, changed the petroleum industry forever. The publishing staff was not aware of anyone at that time working on a book for the commemoration and so the idea was hatched. I would put together a perspective on the oil boom and, with everyone at the ready, get it into print in time for the celebration.

Time was of the essence.

In the Fall of 1999 I was beginning my second year as full time instructor at Wharton County Junior College, commuting from the Galleria area of Houston forty minutes each day, and each way, down Highway 59 to the Wharton main campus. But my schedule still afforded me the time to do the research and the writing that would be necessary. I needed an angle, and perhaps a shortcut, whatever that meant: A & M Press would need a manuscript in its hands by early the *next* summer!

So, two stories. My late father-in-law had been steeped in the oil business for his whole career and the family had several connections into that industry that might prove helpful. First on the list of contacts would be Michel Halbouty, the eccentric wildcatter-cum-millionaire who was not only the co-author with James Clark of the 1952 seminal SPINDLETOP, but whose office was some ten blocks from where I was living! A visit with Halbouty would be a crackerjack place to start.

I made an appointment with his secretary for a September morning visit and arrived at his lavish office a few minutes early, where I spoke with his engaging assistant until he buzzed me in. Michel (he wanted everyone to pronounce it as a French “michelle” but I don’t think anyone ever called him anything but Mike or Mr. Halbouty) was not what I imagined for a wildcat oil man now in his seventies. He was short and narrow with a pencil-thin moustache, jet black hair, a wiry character with a sparkle in his eye that belied the cunning genius of “the man.” I shook his hand and introduced myself as Al Boatman’s son-in-law, and was relieved that he readily recognized Al’s name and his contributions to the oil business; I was in.

We spoke several minutes about oil and gas, and I demonstrated my knowledge about him with an anecdote or two that I had read. He responded with a slight smile in assent.

“So, Paul, what brings you here to my office today?”

“Well, sir, the hundredth anniversary of Spindletop is coming up in sixteen months, and I am working on a book for the event.”

“I see.”

“Yes, and I thought you might be able to steer me in a direction for materials and information.”

“You know,” he said with a slight change in the tenor of his voice, “I wrote about Spindletop forty years ago.”

“I know you did,” I said eagerly, “that’s why I thought I would –”

“Then why the hell are YOU going to write about it?!” Halbouty interrupted.

I was stunned, and at the moment was wondering myself why I was doing that! I had no answer for him and Halbouty didn’t seem to have any more time for me, so I shook his hand and walked away. As I retold that story to family and oil business friends, they all got a great laugh at my expense since they knew Michel T. Halbouty and his devilish personality far better than me.

In the weeks that followed that memorable encounter I wandered through several librarys’ stacks on the oil industry, read through Clark and Halbouty’s (really excellent) 1952 book, and still had no real lead that was inspiring me. Back only those twenty-odd years ago, it is amazing to think there was almost no Internet to speak of – what a long way we’ve come in such a short time.

One of my go-to places when I was working on both Woods material and my dissertation was the Eugene C. Barker Center adjacent to the LBJ Presidential Library at the edge of the University of Texas campus in Austin, now called the Center for American History (although we old timers still know it as the Barker Center). The Center is a veritable treasure trove of primary sources and wonderfully knowledgeable and helpful archival staff, and any student of Texas History doing any research of any kind must go there at some point in time.

I drove to Austin one fall afternoon and inquired as to the resources related to oil and gas in Texas, and Spindletop. The first round of assistance was good but not inspiring and consisted of Clark and Halbouty’s book, of course, and a handful of archival records only distantly related

to my specific subject. I was somewhat discouraged until one of the staff said, somewhat casually as I recall it now, that there was a file cabinet on the floor that was generically labeled something like “Oil and Gas in Texas.” He escorted me across the reading room to the beige two-drawer cabinet. Well, the label in fact said “Oil Pioneers of Texas Collection.” Inside were literally dozens of file folders consisting of transcripts of recordings taken in 1951 during and after the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Spindletop Celebration held in Beaumont. Wise oral historians had descended upon the crowds at Spindletop, ferreted out those who had actually been at Spindletop in 1901 – more than two hundred of them, and recorded then transcribed their reminiscences for what became this collection.

It was one of the great discoveries of my research career, and over one hundred of those memoirs became the substance of the book I published as SPINDLETOP BOOM DAYS. Although there are technical materials in my book and plenty about the months leading up to the January 10 gusher with Higgins and Lucas and the Hamills, the bulk of my story is a very personal one, remembrances by those who experienced it, some as children and teens, and some as the wildcatters who bolted to Beaumont by the tens of thousands in the months that followed.

**“It” was a great find.**

The book came out in December, 2000, in time to be accepted as a commemorative work by the Centennial Commission, and in time for me to attend the January 10 celebration in Beaumont and sign & sell my books. I remember quite vividly that an unexpected Norther howled into the countryside just before dawn and brought us unprepared Texans to our knees with the suddenly frigid temperature. I had brought only a light raincoat and I was miserable as I sat politely through a live NPR radio interview that morning. I sold a few books but most of the crowd

headed home as quickly as they could after the initial festivities, which had originally included a gusher (of water not oil) exploding from the ground at the appointed moment but was canceled for fear the freezing water would be harmful as it sprayed the crowds.

## **Chapter Five – 2003, Captain John H. Rogers**

As the Spindletop project came to a close, the A&M Press staff and I chatted about another project or so on which we might collaborate. (Mary Lenn Dixon, the associate editor, was so wonderful during our work together.) In one of the Spindletop chapters I looked to the arrival of the Texas Rangers in Beaumont and Sour Lake to quell the violence that 30,000 rabid, untethered oil men were causing. I had studied the Rangers only minimally but had become more interested in them with this work in the 1901-1905 era. The conversation finally came around to my doing a Texas Rangers book, but we could not agree on the specific direction: I wanted to look at one of the Ranger captains who commanded the force at the turn of the century, but the staff really wanted a much larger volume on all four of those captains. I was in my fourth year at the junior college and had just accepted a position as chair of one of its divisions: a 600-page tome on the “Four Great Ranger Captains” seemed too much for me at the moment.

As it happened, one of the A&M editorial staff had just taken the chief editor position at University of North Texas Press in Denton. Ron Chrisman, young and ambitious and very talented, met me at a history conference and asked if I would be willing to write the one-Ranger biography for his press. (It wasn’t really “jumping ship” per se because A&M and UNT are part of a larger consortium of publishers, all of whom get along just fine.) I accepted his invitation and we settled on John H. Rogers, one of the four great “Ranger Captains” (the others, btw, being J. A. Brooks, John R. Hughes, and Bill McDonald).

John Harris Rogers was one of the Rangers sent along with a small company of Ranger privates to the oil fields in 1904 and 1905 where his untarnished reputation as a man of high moral character and a sense of justice grew even larger. So I already had some basic information

on the man, giving me a bit of a head start on his biography. I thought at the time how odd it was that of the four only McDonald had a biopic published and not a very good one at that. (By 2016 there were excellent biographies in print on all four, the Hughes story written by my friend and colleague Chuck Parsons, and the hefty new McDonald book by another friend Harold Weiss. We have had several conversations since about a publishing effort that would place the four together, but nothing yet.)

I worked on Rogers in 2001 and 2002, and the first edition came out in 2003 (a second two years later). Several months into the research, most of which consisted of hours and hours in the Texas State Archives in Austin looking through the Ranger Monthly Reports as filed in the Adjutant General records, I had a good base of information on Rogers' travels, arrests, and sundry materials. These reports are often tedious because of the detail, sometimes hard to decipher because notes were hand written and one hundred years old, but still a valuable treasure buried in the piles of browning parchment.

At one point I came across the name and address of descendants of the captain, the Rogers family who lived in Dallas. I made a connection with them and they were thrilled about my project. They had surprisingly little new information for me, however, and were more amazed at what I had found that they had never heard before.

One of my unanswered questions at that juncture, and one the family could not answer, was the location of Rogers' birthplace. Well, I knew it was around Seguin, Texas, but had not found any specific homestead. Rogers' father had died when John was young and his mother had re-married (a younger John Crier), and their stories basically disappeared even in census records. But early letters to John from his mother had been addressed from Kingsbury, Texas, a small

community ten miles east of Seguin, making me think that the home was out in that area somewhere. That search took me to Seguin and the Guadalupe County courthouse and land records, and eventual success in finding a land deed of several acres nine miles east of Seguin and a mile north of Kingsbury. It was quite satisfying the day I met some of the Rogers clan and escorted them out to the site where their famous ancestor was born.

In March, 1887, the twenty-four-year-old Private John Rogers was involved in one of the deadliest gunfights of the Texas Rangers' history, the Conner Fight in East Texas. In that midnight battle Rogers was seriously wounded as was his compatriot Sergeant J. A. Brooks and several others; Ranger Jim Moore was killed. Rogers took nominal command by daylight as his captain William Scott was gravely wounded, and local townspeople came to their rescue. The Conner clan was decimated in the battle and the few who escaped eventually were brought to justice at the business end of a gun.

I read the official reports of the Conner Fight – they were pretty bland, and several much more exciting and embellished newspaper accounts from that year. It seemed natural that I should go up to East Texas and walk on that battleground myself before I told the story. An historical marker was said to be along a county highway not too far from the hamlet of Hemphill, and a three-hour drive from Houston was an easy Saturday trek.

I found the historical marker without too much difficulty, but the countryside there is thick with a magnificent forest of towering oaks and pines and there did not seem to be any more exact location than “in this area.” I parked my car by the marker on the side of the road and looked for any kind of trail or gravel path into those woods: the night time battle had taken place



at the secret camp the Conners kept tucked away in those woods, and therefore not out in some plain sight site.

I walked about fifty yards from the marker and did spot a cut through the trees, probably an old fire break that had filled back in over the years. But it afforded me a minimal path into the deep woods so I took it. Not one hundred feet off the road I happened on to a small graveyard overgrown with weeds and brush, two or three broken gravestones arranged awkwardly together, and what was left of a barbed wire fence now rusted and cut and coiled in the weeds. I could only make out one of the gravestone etchings, but it said “Bill Conner” was buried there.

Well, Bill Conner was killed in that 1887 gunfight and buried about where he dropped according to a report and a newspaper account I had read weeks earlier. Apparently other kin had been buried there in the years that followed, including what I think was a young boy cousin.

**It was a nice find.**

Eleven years later, in October, 1898, now *Captain* Rogers encountered the thick of a gun battle in the streets of Laredo that nearly took his life, again, and crippled him for the rest of his life. A quarantine against smallpox had been issued for the city of Laredo and Texas Rangers were sent there to bolster the local constabulary in enforcing it. This meant keeping the people in their homes, inoculating as many as possible, and accompanying the several doctors through the neighborhoods. The Hispanic populace objected to the quarantine partly out of misunderstandings and a general resentment towards Rangers in general. When the resistance grew to violence in the streets, a phalanx of armed Rangers, including Rogers, strode down the main street in search of the instigator of the swelling riot. Snipers from the roof tops and windows

opened fire and the Rangers shot back – I always imagine this as the climactic moment in some John Ford Western, wow!

A shotgun blast slammed into Rogers' right arm shattering bone and muscle and nearly tearing the arm off of his body just below his shoulder! Rogers fell to the ground in agony and was carried back out of the fray by one of his privates. A doctor did the best he could to stanch the profuse bleeding and more or less tied the arm together as a temporary measure. Rogers was taken by medical wagon to San Antonio where a more comprehensive operation repaired what was left of his arm. But the destruction had been enough that about three inches of his right arm was cut out during the operation, leaving him unable to hold a rifle properly after he had healed some months later. Instead of retiring from the law enforcement business, Rogers had a gunsmith build a bent-stock rifle according to specifications that would allow him to hold and fire the rifle with his shortened arm!

I wondered as I read those official accounts where, or if, I might find that bent stock rifle. The Rogers family was not aware of its whereabouts. I went over to the Texas Ranger Museum in Waco where they have rooms and rooms of marvelous artifacts, but not Rogers' gun. Somewhere in the conversations I was told that there were Ranger artifacts in San Antonio in a building adjacent to the Witte Museum. So I made a trek to San Antonio and walked inside a rather nondescript building that sits next to the Witte and near the zoo entrance. Sure enough, there was a large glass case display labeled "Captain John H. Rogers." Along with a number of his possessions was the bent-stock rifle!

**Found "it."**

Turned out, by the way, that these Ranger items were owned by, or loaned to, a group known as the Former Texas Rangers Association. These folks are, I guess you would say, a “break away” group who at some time in the past parted company with the Waco museum organization – and perhaps under somewhat negative circumstances. They took with them a large collection which at the time was deposited there by the Witte. I spoke to that organization a year or so later in Kerrville (all of the folks in full 19<sup>th</sup> century costume!) and learned that they were raising funds to build their own Ranger museum nearby in Junction. That apparently didn’t work out, for they are now ensconced in Fredericksburg at the old fort grounds on Highway 290 with a very nice pavilion and small shop open to tourists.

When the Rogers biography was published in 2003 (and the only second edition I have ever done a few years later), UNT Press and Ron Chrisman chatted with me on a follow-up Ranger book, this time on Rogers’ colleague J. A. Brooks. However, even before I got into that work, I was keeping really busy “on the side” writing some other stories.

## **Chapter Six – 2000-2003, Novel Writing**

As I finished up the editing of my dissertation that became FORGOTTEN TEXAS LEADER in 1999 and worked through the SPINDLETOP BOOM DAYS project with A&M Press the next year, I guess I got the writing “bug” because I found myself spending countless hours toying with some ideas I had for historical novels. I had dashed through the three (ultimately four) sequels to RACE TO VELASCO and had a lot of fun with those even though they remain unpublished (but see Chapter Twelve below). I thought I might try my hand at fiction for older readers, high school to adult. Neither A&M Press nor UNT was particularly interested in historical fiction at the time, but I pressed on anyway just for the fun of it, never really expecting that these “side” projects would ever see the light of day.

In the long run and the “rest of the story,” these projects eventually became THE LOST TREASURE OF BUFFALO GAP (still unpublished), ‘UNTIL I COME HOME;’ LOVE LETTERS FROM THE WAR, 1918-1919 (published in 2015), and THE MURDER OF WILLIAM MARSH RICE (published in 2017).

### **The Lost Treasure of Buffalo Gap**

BUFFALO GAP came about because I had been invited to Abilene to chat with the editors of McWhiney Press, a small private publisher connected to McMurry College. They were doing some work on a grand project to create an historical village in the tiny hamlet of Buffalo Gap some miles south of Abilene and for whatever reason had decided that I might be of some professional help to them. I drove up there one weekend as a consultant and we spent much of

that Saturday walking around Buffalo Gap where two or three old buildings, including the original jailhouse, a cabin, a mercantile store and a blacksmith shop, already stood on a small city block site. They explained their dream of expanding the site into a full-blown tourist attraction and showed me plans for the larger village they hoped to build. (They since have done just that although their relationship with McMurry University has deteriorated as has the historic village.)

I leant what “expertise” I could, such as it was, and enjoyed the time spent with them. During the conversations I hatched an idea to write a juvenile historical novel *a la* RACE TO VELASCO, and basically bartered a deal with the editors to help them with their village and in return have them publish my novel. Everyone seemed quite okay with the deal.

In my research before and after my visit, and from stories the guys told as we walked the village site, the idea of a story of the beginnings of Abilene and the Gap (literally an opening in the high hills to the south where buffalo herds roamed over many millennia), the coming of the railroads in 1880, and the early ranchers who settled there, began to emerge. I learned about the legends of a mysterious Indian chief who wandered the hills, and lost treasure that might be “in them thar hills,” and more. I also decided to write this story for a bit more mature age group, high school rather than 4<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> graders: The vocabulary would be more expansive and the story more gritty.

Even as I was finishing up SPINDLETOP BOOM DAYS and working on the other projects mentioned, I typed away at LOST TREASURE almost every day. During the mornings I taught my classes at the junior college, but the afternoon “office hours” were spent writing. The biggest difference with this story from Velasco was that, although there were many historical figures wound into the tale, all of the central characters were fictional. This made for a fascinating “feel”

in my writing, sometimes watching the words flow onto the page and even surprise me as these characters took on a life of their own: it's a weird sensation and one that I felt even more intensely when I worked later on the Rice novel.

I think LOST TREASURE is one of my favorite accomplishments in terms of good writing (whatever that means): I think my best work has been with the Spindletop book, the Captain Brooks biography, the Rice novel, and this one. The "IT" that I found in Buffalo Gap was the utter delight writing fiction and experiencing the birth and growth of characters and plots and outcomes in a story of my own creation.

The rest of this story, however, was one of frustration. By the time I had finished the rough draft and sent it to Abilene, McWhiney Press was undergoing a very painful transition with change of leadership, lack of funding, and an uncertainty as to its future as a publishing company. My manuscript got lost in that shuffle for years, then returned to me by a new editorial board. A few years later I tried them once more – we had made a deal of sorts back in 2000, but nothing ever came of my second effort. I am guessing that I will self-publish the Buffalo Gap story someday soon (Note: Late 2024, I am working hard on it!).

## **Chapter Seven - The Roscoe Chittim Story**

My late ex-mother-in-law Tuleta Boatman came to me in 2001 asking a favor I was pleased to grant for her: finding her father. Roscoe C. Chittim, born in 1889 in Missouri to a later-annulled common law marriage between an Anglo boy and a Cherokee girl, had apparently lived an exciting life of adventures, married a Dallas socialite in 1917, and died in 1924 when Tuleta was only a toddler. She had never known her father save the stories her mother Vera told her over the decades that followed: would I tie those oft-told tales together for her, Tuleta asked, and compile a biography?

I spent an entire summer “looking” for Roscoe based on census information and the various stories Tuleta recounted from her memory. The stories seemed exaggerated if not altogether fabricated at first, but I ultimately discovered that they were all essentially true and that Roscoe had indeed spent a life of great and wonderful adventure.

During the summer I wrote a rough draft of the stories that I corroborated and placed in the correct timeline of his life, my plan being to print a handful of copies for Tuleta and my kids. One of the gaps I had in his story, though, was his service during World War I. I knew he had joined the army in June, 1918, and I found his service records putting him at Camp Travis, Fort Dix, and as a machine gun squadron commander in the Argonne Forest Offensive that ended the “Great War.” I found his discharge date in May of 1919, but the 11 months of his service was otherwise pretty superficial.

Near the end of that summer I gave Tuleta a brief synopsis of what I had found to that point and mentioned that the war year was kind of blank. After a dramatic pause, she said: “Well,

I have some letters he wrote while he was in the army.” Wow! I wondered out loud when she was ever planning on telling me that and she explained as well that she had never read them – too painful, she said. But at my urging she handed me a red velvet box in which over forty letters were deposited (along with myriad other fabulous primary sources of his service). The addition of portions of those love letters written from the trenches in France really made the story of Roscoe Chittim complete.

### **What an “IT” that turned out to be!**

The rest of that story is: I finished up the fifty-page manuscript of Roscoe and Vera’s story, printed about a half dozen copies to distribute to kin, and laid the project to rest. Fifteen years later I resurrected the story, expanded it, and published it as ‘UNTIL I COME HOME;’ LOVE LETTERS FROM THE WAR, in time to be a part of the centennial commemorative of World War One.

Then, late in 2023 I received an email from some Pennsylvania folks who were developing a musical video production of letters and stories of American war veterans, from the Revolutionary War through Afghanistan. They had found my book about Roscoe and asked permission to use it as a resource for the WWI episode! Wow! Of course, I replied, and over the next several months we refined the book’s story, chose a love letter (that my daughter Paula read for the production!) and a song from that era. Over Memorial Weekend 2024, I flew to Pittsburgh to be present at the “debut” of their production (“From A Distance”) in a small local theatre in nearby Midland PA, a delightful experience over-all. As of this writing these folks are hoping to produce a PBS show in 2025 or 2026! Rooting for them!



## **Chapter Eight - William Marsh Rice**

When I was doing the research on the Spindletop book in late 1999 and 2000, it registered somewhere during that time that the Lucas well that gushed on January 10, 1901, occurred about sixteen weeks after the Galveston Storm that wiped the little town off of its island and killed over 6,000 souls, still the worst natural disaster in American history.

In addition, and I don't recall exactly where or how this popped up, I bumped into William Marsh Rice's story – the founder of what would become Rice University, a wealthy philanthropist murdered by his personal valet in a futile attempt to get to the old man's riches: yes, the butler did it! More importantly, Rice was murdered on September 22, 1900, fourteen days after the Galveston Storm and about 100 days prior to the Spindletop gusher!

The idea merged into an historical novel, THE MURDER OF WILLIAM MARSH RICE, featuring the investigation into Rice's death by a fictional Pinkerton detective who begins the story sitting in a Galveston hotel on the morning of September 8, 1900, as the hurricane approaches. The dramatic climax – as the detective confronts a professional killer hired to stop the investigation – occurs on the Beaumont oil field as the Lucas gusher explodes in the background.

It was almost too much to hope for but I launched into the story with great enthusiasm. I confess that as an avid fan of Robert B. Parker's Spenser detective novels I couldn't help but try my hand at a first-person approach, the story seen through the eyes and experiences of the fictional detective I created. I have always believed this book to be more homage than larceny to the late author.

The most remarkable “it” of the Rice book was how the main character sort of took over the writing! I would often sit back from the computer and say, I didn’t see that coming, or, I didn’t think he would say that! It’s an eerie, surreal but exciting experience writing first person fiction.

### **Wharton County Junior College**

I suppose I should take a brief aside to relate my experiences, such as they have been, as Instructor of History at the junior college. There’s not a lot to be said so I’ll keep this short.

As I was completing my PhD work at U of H in the 1990s and living on Olympia Avenue in Houston, I held three part-time jobs teaching in preparation, I hoped, for a college/university position upon completion of my degree. I taught as an adjunct (part timer) for U of H, Houston Community College, and Wharton, begging for classes prior to each semester but also juggling the schedule so I could get to them all! The University of Houston classes were on the main campus; the HCC classes varied each semester from southeast (near Hobby Airport) to far west (Cinco Ranch) to north (by Bush Airport); and the Wharton positions were either at their temporary Sugar Land campus or their temporary Richmond campus! Exhausting, and lots of miles!

In the late Spring of 1997 I had already interviewed for a full-time post with HCC – and not made the cut, when I applied and got an interview at Wharton. They hired me to replace Joe Tom Davis, a terrific guy and friend who had taught Texas History there for three decades before retiring in ’97. I would teach Texas and U. S. History classes starting in the Fall. (I didn’t graduate

from UH until December of that year, but having a PhD at a junior college is kind of like owning a three-piece suit working at a flower shop; nice but no one really cares.)

My first twelve years at WCJC I taught on the main campus down in Wharton, and the first three of those years I was officed in a tiny cubicle in the Science Building that managed to barely accommodate a desk, a chair, a book shelf, and one visitor at a time. But my colleagues John Morris and Bob Rosebush, their tiny offices on either side of mine, were delightful and great to be around. Bob was retired Secret Service and had great stories!

In the Spring of 2000 I was visited by the vice-president (and by that time good friend) Ty Pate, who crammed into my office to ask me a big favor: Would I consider serving as chair (roughly aka Dean) of the Communications & Fine Arts Division? That division included English, Speech, Music, Art, Theatre, and Developmental Ed (remedial Math and English)...not History! The request was built around an English Department in chaos & rebellion, and there was apparently no one in the whole division who could or would take the chair position. I guess, then, I was to be a sacrificial outlier lamb led to the slaughter without killing off one of their own!

I think Ty knew some of this at the time, but I was after all an English major by degree and had spent a lifetime in music and theatre: "Don't throw me in the briar patch!" I said yes.

I spent the next 8 ½ years as division chair, teaching only five History courses per year, doing all of the division chair duties (hiring, firing, budgeting, scheduling) and simultaneously heading up the English Department, the Speech Department, and the Developmental Ed department along the way. When I gathered the three fine arts areas into a Fine Arts Department in 2007, I headed that, too. I sang with the college choir and participated in some of the theatre productions. And I had a really big office!

I calmed the English Department down after about a year of counseling (my former career came in handy!) and revamping (see “firing and hiring” above), until the thirteen full timers (old and new) actually got along. I’ve always felt a great deal of pride in accomplishing that.

By 2009 I was contemplating college administration as a career goal, with the Dean of Students position on the horizon and then maybe higher. But when that didn’t happen I realized I also was missing the full time classroom experience, so in 2010 I left administration and returned to the position as Instructor of History. I also moved to the (new) Richmond campus for my office, and for the last thirteen years taught there and at the (new) Sugar Land campus. From 2009 until 2023 I was privileged to read out the names of the graduates every Spring commencement, and for at least five years I emceed the annual Employees Banquet.

After an even twenty-five years at WCJC, I retired in the summer of 2023. I am considered an “adjunct” and on-call for part-time teaching. I still love being in the college classroom. I lost count a while ago, but I estimate that over those many years I have stood in front of some 6,500 students in my WCJC classrooms! Some of them took me for two or three courses; some came along after an older sibling; and a few, near the end, remarked that “their mother had had me for a course once upon a time,” oh my! [I run into a lot of these folks still and generally they seem to have good memories of our classes together.]

Like I said, not a whole lot there, but I was immensely happy at WCJC and the school has treated me well; no regrets. And I feel like my books and programs and speaking engagements all across Texas has made me something of an “ambassador” for WCJC and community colleges in general.

## Chapter Nine - Captain J. A. Brooks, Texas Ranger

Back now to 2004. As the Captain Rogers book was circulating well and I was in some demand to speak all over Texas on both the Rangers and Spindletop, Ron Chrisman at UNT Press asked if I would consider a second Ranger book. My thoughts immediately went to another captain of the Rangers, and a colleague of Rogers, J. A. Brooks (for whom Brooks County in south Texas is named). I probably had 75% of the material I needed already thanks to my research on Rogers coinciding so often with Brooks's story (El Paso, the prizefight, the Connor Fight, and more). Ron thought that sounded fine so I went to work.

The Brooks book was a pretty easy project and more entertaining than Rogers because, well, Brooks himself was more interesting. A raucous character, a straight and legendary shooter, and ultimately a drunk sitting in Falfurrias as a county judge, Brooks was the opposite of the more religious/pious Rogers, even though they were good friends for decades.

Two "finding it" stories for the Brooks project.

From the outset I was thinking about the book cover for Brooks. I had a photograph of Rogers that appeared on his bio but didn't want to do the same for this story. I wanted to express Brooks's gunfighter persona while grabbing the attention of a casual reader *and* getting the okay from the publisher. As I researched and wrote I kept an eye out for what that might be but with no luck. Then one day, Kath and I were at a backyard gathering of some friends just chatting about nothing in particular when Mark Leifrig, the youngest son of our neighbors and I think a senior in high school at the time, came out to the party showing off some of his latest art work: sketches and drawings that were very impressive. I can't recall now the exact moment it hit me,

but some time not too long after I got with Mark and asked him to work on the cover for me. He was pretty excited and came up with several ideas. Ultimately, his depiction of Brooks drawing his gun at some would-be villains became the cover of the book that was published in 2007.

The other discovery related to Brooks was, well, *literally* related to Brooks. In my research I found his family in nearby Pasadena, Texas, his only daughter and her daughter and grandchild. I contacted them by phone and they were thrilled to hear about my project and eager to visit with me. Kath and I drove out to their modest home and had a delightful visit, learning of several very personal stories that became part of my story.

During our conversation they mentioned casually that there was a box of the judge's papers out in the garage somewhere, would I like to look through it? Oh my, yes, please! The box was just a nondescript cardboard with papers literally thrown into it, jumbled and folded and a mess. We politely sifted through the strewn papers, not really finding anything of value at first. But two items eventually emerged that were major discoveries.

The first was a Rolodex-style daily calendar that Judge Brooks had kept on his desk during the last, sodden years of his life. Page after page had been scribbled on in almost undecipherable gibberish penmanship. It took all of us a while to "translate" it, but when we did we realized Brooks had wanted to write his autobiography in those last days and, we surmised, as he sat drinking in his chambers late at night he would pull the calendar to him and begin writing his recollections. He started with his being born in Kentucky and as a boy during the Civil War years, watching as soldiers marched to and fro along the road by his physician father's small ranch. He wrote of his father's death, his moving to north Texas as a young man to join up in the cattle drives, and then the story would peter out (I guess he would pass out at his desk). What was so

remarkable, and frustrating, was that as we turned the pages of the desk calendar there he would be again, trying again, starting all over with his birth, the Civil War, the cattle drives...and then nothing. Several blank pages, another start, same stopping place. I think we counted at least four attempts, but none got any farther along. Still, we would not have had that information otherwise.

Also in that clutter was a large envelope with a legal-size parchment page folded neatly inside. Background: In a story I had already researched to some degree, Ranger Lt. Brooks rode into Indian Country (Oklahoma) once in search of horse thieves, only to encounter a well-armed outlaw at a general store looking for trouble. He found it. As guns were drawn and triggers pulled, the brigand fell dead at Brooks's feet! Some months later Brooks was arraigned in a district court in Arkansas accused of murder by pals of the deceased! The legendary "Hangin' Judge Isaac Parker" was rightly horrified that a Texas Ranger doing his duty would be a defendant in his court and the case was tossed. Still, many believed that this injustice would hang over Brooks for the rest of his already estimable law enforcement career. So some of his colleagues sought to expunge the false accusation once and for all and, apparently, from the top. A year or so later Brooks received a formal pardon from Grover Cleveland, President of the United States!!

And there we all sat on that sofa in Pasadena together, **staring at the pardon! "It!"**

## **Chapter Ten - Finding Wharton**

In 2008 I was pretty busy at the junior college serving as division chair of Communications & Fine Arts, and chairing the English, Speech, and Fine Arts departments simultaneously as I taught six courses of US and Texas History that year. I was speaking somewhere in Texas almost every three weeks either on Spindletop or more likely the Texas Rangers; not much time to research or write anything new.

I did attend the annual conventions of the Texas State Historical Association and its smaller offshoots in East Texas and South Texas, and I gave I think two or three papers at those conferences. These sessions always included a raft of publisher kiosks of every sort and kind, and it was pleasant to peruse some of the latest works coming out; I did some book signing for A&M and UNT Press as well at the conventions. At the larger TSHA convention that year (2008) I was approached by a marketing agent for Arcadia Publishing Company out of North Carolina, the publishers best known for their small local history books always adorned with book covers of sepia photographs: They appear on bookshelves everywhere, even in pharmacies and gift shops and local grocery stores.

The marketing person asked me (and probably every other author who walked by their table) if I would be interested in doing a book with them. I knew about Arcadia but had not thought of working on that kind of photograph-heavy project. But the royalty offer was fairly inspirational, the regional/national exposure appealing, and I had no other work in progress. I said yes. I seem to recall that Arcadia took my name and number down and called me a few weeks later, giving me some time to think about a topic for the book-to-be. By that time I had suggested



Wharton, either the city or the county or both, as a possibility, the subject met with enthusiasm. But I had one caveat: I needed some time to see if there were enough available photographs to tell the Wharton story.

The Arcadia books are strictly formatted with a template that allows for almost no flexibility, thus all of their books are similar except for specific content. There are so many pages, so many photographs, and word limits on the captions and chapter introductions. More to the point of the story, there is a minimum of about 450-500 photographs that must be made available by the author before the publisher aids in the selection of the 240 that will end up in the always-125-page book! It's a unique system that in retrospect I would not do again, but it was an interesting exercise at the time.

My pause on the contract, then, was to see if I could find hundreds of Wharton-related photos in the first place; writing the thing would not be too great a challenge. I went to the college library first, no luck there. Looked for pics in books related to Wharton, not much there. I searched through annuals and city/county commemoratives, a bit more but way short of the minimum requirement. Zip at the Texas State Archives and the Fort Bend George Library files. A local librarian suggested several older folks in the Wharton area who might have photo albums: that sounded like a lot of work for little payoff!

I was about ready to decline the very nice offer from Arcadia when someone suggested I swing by the Wharton County Historical Museum at the edge of the little town. I knew the museum was there but really had not thought to check in. But I figured there would certainly be some photos on the walls and so on from which I could glean a stack for the project.

One afternoon I drove to the museum and introduced myself to Marvin Albright, the ageing and delightfully eccentric museum director (not far from retirement), and his stalwart assistant Janet Hobizal. They were very kind and congenial, and even seemed to know who I was – a WCJC professor who had published some books! Nice. I told them of my project and the minimum requisite of authenticated photographs. Marvin began regaling me with some tales of Wharton Gone By, but Janet took me by the arm and ushered me off of the museum floor and into a side room, a kind of walk-in closet. She pointed at a stack of about four wide shelves and the twenty-plus long 4” by 6” file boxes sitting next to one another.

Janet pulled one of the files off the shelf and set it on the narrow counter below. I opened the lid and inside I found over 100 ancient photographs related to Wharton, each dated and indexed with people and buildings on the photos listed on the back! A hundred photos in a box, twenty boxes...**Found “It!”**

Eighteen months later IMAGES OF AMERICA: WHARTON appeared on bookshelves with my name on the front and over a sepia photograph of Wharton High School’s very first band.

## **Chapter Eleven - Old 300: Gone to Texas (2010-2014)**

In the Spring of 2010 Kath and I were casually discussing my next writing project when the idea of Austin's Old 300 (the first colonists to Texas) came up. I had mentioned it many times before because I belonged to and had spoken several times to the Old 300 Association of descendants. But the thought of researching 300 families and then writing such a compendium was daunting to say the least. The Association had commissioned another author to write a much smaller book back in 1999 (it was 75 pages long and had about 70 families) and then an update in 2009 (about 110 families mentioned), but if I were ever going to take this on it seemed only right to have all 300 families in there, even if some might only be a sentence or two. Too much. Too big.

Kath's response: "If you don't write it, who will?" Uhm, no one.

So I agreed to look into the project for three months to see what it was going to take. And, of course, I ended up doing the project! It became the longest project of my writing career, with two full years of research and two more years of writing and editing and publishing; whew! But I've always been proud of the work that went into the book, and the response (and sales) over the last decade has been quite phenomenal. The first draft was nearly 700 pages long and would have been even longer, so the editing (to 445 pages) was a major part of the work I did.

The "looking for it" part, of course, was finding information on the 300 families that signed the first colonist contracts with Stephen F. Austin's arrangement in the Mexican state of Coahuila-Texas. Even the list itself proved somewhat complicated because the original editor of that list, the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly's* Lester Bugbee in 1897, had a number of names either

misspelled or incorrectly listed or repeated! The staff at the General Land Office of Texas in Austin, where the original contracts are filed, was so very helpful in sorting this out with me and were also very excited that I was doing the book. That was an encouraging start.

The first “it” of this project was actually the cover design for OLD 300; GONE TO TEXAS. As I entered the GLO building the first time I noticed a long mural on the hallway wall depicting Austin and some of his colonists at the border of the colony they would soon build together: perfect! I got permission from the GLO to use it as my cover, and just to make sure also received permission from the artist, Sara Lee Hughes at Texas State University: she was really pleased and excited.

The rest of this story is pretty hum-drum for a reader here in that the painstaking work to find solid information on the 300 families lacks much anecdotal drama: One just plows into the bountiful records and does the work. *The New Handbook of Texas*, *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, the GLO records, Ancestry.com, the “Austin Family Papers,” Census Records from 1790 to 1830, and a jillion treks (and emails and phone calls) to libraries, archives, museums, and county courthouses, kept me plenty busy for over 20 months. I also received materials (often family stories that might or might not be true but were still good stories!) from many of the Old 300 descendants.

Of course I found some delightful surprises and previously unknown or unpublished information about the colonists, most of which ended up in the final draft, and have been pleased over the years since to share that information in programs I have done all over Texas. One of the more interesting discoveries, that in fact would be a correction to a longstanding case of mistaken

identity, focused on the person of one Churchill Fulshear, the father of Old 300 settler Churchill Fulshear, Junior, the latter whose name now adorns a growing town in Fort Bend County.

The elder Fulshear (1775-1831) had in almost all historical notations been identified as being “French.” As I was making notes on this family I thought that odd: a Frenchman named Churchill?! I could have left it along but of course I had to pursue **it**! Turns out, the origins of this claim came from a sentence in the somewhat iconic 19<sup>th</sup> century book *The Evolution of a State* by Noah Smithwick, in which the author lists 1820s residents on Bell’s Landing on the Brazos River, to wit: “William Morton, Jesse Cartwright, Horatio Chriesman,...Joseph San Pierre – French, Churchill Fulshear, the widow of McNutt,” and so on. If one is careless the sentence could be – and apparently was - read as “*the Frenchman Churchill Fulshear!!*”

Given a new lease on the information I was then able to find Fulshear, not in France, but on the Pamlico Sound in North Carolina, the likely disinherited son – another story – of Shadrack and Mary LeGuin Fulshear. I enjoyed following up from there: Churchill, Senior, was quite the adventurer, and all-American!

Other “discoveries” that are in OLD 300 and have contributed to this field of study include: there were settlers from every one of the twenty-four states of the United States at that time; six of the original Austin Colony deeds were granted to women (!); and four of the deeds were granted (unknowingly I’m quite sure) to Native American Indians!

### **Lots of Its!**

I started writing the manuscript for OLD 300; GONE TO TEXAS about 15 months into my research, and wrote another full year after while still gathering the last little tidbits for the final

draft. I wrote the Introduction last, as is often good practice, and I think it's one of my best efforts of all my book intro's.

Publishing was another adventure. UNT Press was mildly interested in my project but not enough to pursue at that time (they've since offered to re-publish but I've declined), so I took my first real leap into the self-publishing world. In the olden days you sent a few thousand bucks off to a publisher and they delivered a truck load of boxes to your driveway with a "Good Luck" farewell. You would then cart the books wherever you traveled and sold them as you went. *Ick.*

But in the modern world, publishers such as *CreateSpace* with Amazon (now *KDP Select*) are much more helpful in design and final editing and marketing support. And the process is "print as ordered:" There is no warehouse with stacks of my book laying around gathering dust; Kindle and eBooks are part of the contract as well. And, as opposed to both ancient days and academic presses, the royalties are much more substantial! My cost when I order books to sell at a conference is always the same, and the profit I make depends on how much I mark-up the book and how many I sell. Nice.

The downside is not having the support of academia to get your work peer reviewed and marketed at historical conventions or through press or journal releases (there's still the inevitable rolling of the eyes & "Oh, it's self-published"), but at this point in my career I was much more invested in getting the book out – my way – to folks who were interested than receiving officious accolades or critiques from my peers. I have plenty of earlier books to my academic credit and that's enough for me. This book pops up in gift shops and public libraries and school libraries and historical societies and even restaurants (e.g., the Old 300 Barbecue in Blanco and the Lit Book Bar in Richmond!).

As a footnote, I subsequently self-published '**Until I Come Home;**' **Love Letters from the War, 1918-1919** (2015) and also **The Murder of William Marsh Rice; A Galveston Storm Novel** (2017), both of which were smooth and successful enterprises as was the Old 300 project. And if no one is interested in my Velasco sequels, I may self-publish those as well (see below). And Buffalo Gap, too.

## **Chapter Twelve - The Adventures of Henry Woods**

May, 2024. Looking into my first summer “fully” retired from teaching, I had two projects I wanted to work on. One was my teen novel, THE LOST TREASURE OF BUFFALO GAP, a project now twenty years in the making, oh my! The manuscript is finished, my good friend and neighbor Roland is hard at work doing a fantastic cover for me, and I am looking about for a national publisher.

The second is putting the five “tweens” novels together as a series and getting those published.

I settled on THE ADVENTURES OF HENRY WOODS; LIFE IN EARLY TEXAS, as the overall series title, with individual titles for each book. On Pinterest, of all places, I found a great piece of art by Morgan Weistling depicting a young farm boy who could very well have been like Henry! That painting adorns the inside title page of each of the five books. Henry himself is my ancestor: Henry Gonzalvo Woods (1818-1869), the youngest son of Zadock and Minerva who in his adult years was always known as Gon, but for the purposes of these stories I stuck with Henry. He is accompanied in these adventure novels by three fictional friends; the adventures themselves are based on actual events in Texas history, two of them - the battle on Velasco Beach in 1832 and the battle of Gonzales in 1835, in which Henry actually took part!

While looking about for a publisher I came across American Writing Services, publishers offering a very attractive discount summer deal to do my five-book series. I took the deal. I admit it was a rough and tumble relationship with AWS, but by the end of July the first two books were in fact being published, the other three in the works with a promising conclusion late in August.