

Jedediah Webb – Texas Circuit Rider

Chpt. 4

October 1877

Before leaving Buffalo Gap, Ranger Maloney received a wire from a fellow Texas Ranger in Brownwood, Ranger J.D. Whitley, who had been assigned to Brown County and several surrounding counties for the past five years. He leads a scouting group of 2-10 Texas Rangers depending upon the needs at the time. Currently, Whitley has 3 Rangers other than himself assigned to the area. Ranger Whitley requested that Maloney and one other Ranger join him as soon as possible to help with a problem brewing in the Brownwood area. Ranger Maloney assigned one of his Rangers, Jared Martin, along with a pack mule to accompany us to Brownwood. So two hours before dawn, Willie, Ranger Maloney, Ranger Martin, and I mounted up and began our journey to Coleman. The plan was to spend the night in Coleman and from there we would journey to Brownwood the next day. We would be pushing our horses and mules hard as each trip would be a full-day ride at a good clip.

The community of Coleman is a newly established community on Hord's Creek about 40 miles south of Buffalo Gap. It is sparsely populated but growing fast. Just like Buffalo Gap, trail drivers stop here to stock up on supplies and rest on their way to Dodge City, Kansas. It is not a rowdy place as the trail drivers know that Buffalo Gap and Cow Town are the next stops. There they can find the entertainment that they need after the hard work of beginning their trail drive. Just as Buffalo Gap is ready for a Methodist Church, I am hoping that the people of Coleman will be open to establishing a Methodist presence in their town.

We made good time and pulled into Coleman late that same day. When we dismounted in front of the community building, we quickly learned that an outbreak of Scarlet Fever and Pneumonia had hit the area. The community building had been converted into a make-shift hospital with 20 cots – each one filled with a very sick child or adult. Scarlet fever tends to hit children much harder than adults especially if it is complicated by Pneumonia. A testament to that fact was the make-shift morgue in a local root cellar which contained 8 bodies – 6 children and 2 adults.

The community building, which is a combination of courthouse, general store, and church, was besieged by grieving members of the community. Some were grieving loss, some were helping the sick, and all were praying to God for healing, strength, and comfort. There was no preacher to help with the grieving or the funerals, so I knew I had a lot of work to do. Willie wanted no part of grieving folks, so he set out to find a drinking establishment on the outskirts of town. Rangers Maloney and Martin set up camp just outside the town, and helped where they could.

I stayed with the people in the community building and did what I could to encourage the sick and the dying as well as the living. I introduced myself to the town leaders and set to helping where I could. I had a little bit of experience helping with the wounded and the sick, so I pitched in with both hands. Those sickened were covered with red rashes and fevers were running high. Their necks and tongues were swollen, and those of whom Pneumonia had set in were having trouble breathing. I prayed silently and aloud throughout the night but did not stop to quote scripture. There would be time for sermonizing later.

There was one person who stood out as an Angel of Mercy among those aiding the sick and the dying. Her name was Angela Cooper. I learned that Angela was a 20-year-old girl who one day aspired to be a doctor in the community. As I visited with her, I could tell she was very intelligent, very capable as a healer, and she had strong faith in God. I knew without a doubt within minutes that I wanted to get to know her better. I never felt that way before about any female whom I had met so far on my life journey. That thought elated and troubled me at the same time.

Angela lived with her mother and two sisters, Ruth 12 years old, and Judith 8 years old, in a tent near the center of town. She told me about her father and 4 brothers. Her father and one brother were killed in the War Between the States, one brother was killed by Indians and two brothers died from disease. She, her mother and sisters moved to Coleman with her aunt and uncle and their children to escape memories of their losses in South Texas and establish a new life out West.

When we had time to rest, I got lost in Angela's story and her incredibly strong spirit to live life and serve others. I must admit those qualities were outshined by her beautiful straight brown hair, sparkling green eyes, and a smile that could light up anyone's heart... certainly mine. Angela introduced me to her family and showed me where she lived. Angela's uncle had helped her mother set up a 16-foot by 16-foot tent for herself and the three girls. Blankets were hung to separate the sleeping area from the living area. It was quite crowded with cots, a table, a stove, and some rudimentary furniture. They had plans to build a small cabin, but help would be needed to do so. Angela's mother, Saphronia, worked as a seamstress; and Angela worked at the general store to supplement the family income.

Ruth and Judith were delighted to meet me, and they asked all kinds of personal questions: "Who are you? Where are you from? Are you really a preacher? Do you like our sister?" I answered all of their questions and said, "Yes, I do like your sister... and y'all as well." They seemed to be thrilled to be talking to a man. They also voiced that they were afraid for Angela as they were sure she would get sick as well. They asked, "Are we all going to die and if we do will we get to see Father and our brothers?" Angela and I kept our distance from them as we talked in order to protect them from catching Scarlet Fever. I tried my best to give them assurance that God loves us and is watching over us and protecting us. We bid them goodbye and returned to the community building.

Maloney and Martin left the next morning for Brownwood while Willie and I stayed to help with the burials. I insisted that the Rangers go ahead of us as they were needed in Brownwood immediately. Maloney left with hesitation, but he understood that we each had different jobs to accomplish. I assured him that Willie and I would follow in a couple of days and that I wanted to help in any way that I could with whatever was going on in Brownwood. Maloney told me he didn't know what was going on in Brownwood, but I suspected he was withholding information...maybe to protect me from getting involved.

After Maloney hit the trail, we busied ourselves digging graves and preparing the bodies for burial. Two more children died the previous night, and it was decided to do a mass burial for the 8 children and two adults. We gathered everyone together in the cemetery in a common area for the burial sermon. I opened with a variation of a traditional Methodist Prayer, "Almighty God, we gather here today to thank You for Your grace and the grace of Jesus Christ in this dark hour. We acknowledge these lives that have been torn from us. Expectations of the many years we once held for them to be with us are gone. The mystery of death has stricken us; but dear God, strengthen us and comfort us as we mourn their passing from this Earth. Keep us mindful of the joy they have received as they have seen Jesus face-to-face. Into Your hands we commend these souls. Fit them for love and service in Your kingdom. Into Your hands we also commit our lives and fit us for Your kingdom so one day we will all be reunited together with You in heaven forever and ever. Amen."

Overwhelming grief and pain were on everyone's face, and I knew the people needed to hear that God will get them through this storm. I continued, "Jesus showed us over and over that He has the ability to calm the storms of our lives just as he stilled the waters of a storm as told to us by the Apostle Mark, *'On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing' And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Be silent! Be still.' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" (Mark 4:35-41).* The people needed to be assured of the eternal salvation for their children who had not yet had an opportunity to accept Christ as their savior, so I added, "Jesus tells us today, that we need to have faith in Him to calm our storms. He also promises that our children belong to Him and will always be with Him, *'but Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs'" (Matthew 19:14).*

The people also needed to hear that God loves us and supports us in good times and bad. I continued, "Although life is imperfect and hard, God will always strengthen us in hard times, as the Prophet Isaiah said to God's people, *'Have you not known? Have*

you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:28-31). The best way to conclude a funeral is with the assurance that we will all be reunited one day in a perfect heaven, so I ended with this, “The Apostle John tells us in his vision of revelation that there will one day be a new heaven and earth in which all of God’s children will dwell, *‘And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” (Revelation 21:3-4).* We concluded the funerals by reciting the 23rd Psalm and going to each plot and saying goodbye to the departed again recognizing that we will see each person again on the other side of eternity.

The next two days went by swiftly. After the funerals, I took time to speak to the community leaders, and I found that the Coleman community needs and wants a preacher desperately either a part-time circuit rider or a full-time preacher stationed in the area. Many of the town members have a Methodist background, so my report to the conference will be that Coleman is ready for a Methodist presence. Who knows if I might want that position myself - especially if I get to know Angela better. As I bid farewell to Angela the last night, I asked her if I could write to her and call upon her again soon. I guess what I was really asking her was, “Please don’t fall in love with another man until I have a chance to get to know you better.” But I was hesitant to be that real with my feelings and ask her to put her life on hold. Angela said, “Yes, of course. I would like to see you again very much.” Those words lifted me to the clouds and kept me awake well into the night. It is funny how such a good thing can turn your life to turmoil. I finally turned my thoughts and concerns over to God and fell asleep.

The next morning, Willie and I loaded up Sadie and got started for Brownwood. As it would be a hard two-day ride, we headed out really early. So early, in fact, that in the dim light of early dawn, we startled a durned ol’ Polecat on the road; and Sadie was sprayed as she tried to give it a good stomping. We all learned a lesson about leaving skunks alone. We finally came across a creek, and we tried our best to scrub the oily, stinky, spray out of Sadie’s legs, but to no avail. We had to put up with the pungent odor for days after that. We lengthened Sadie’s tether to allow her to walk further behind for the rest of the trip. We did not see a wild creature for the rest of the journey to Brownwood. I fully believe that the Skunk spray kept them away. The rest of the two-day trip went by without incident.

Ranger Maloney had filled me in a little on the Brownwood community. Five years ago in 1872, Brownwood was a small community of three or four businesses, a log courthouse, and about five dwellings. Last year, the town had an estimated 120

inhabitants, and it grew considerably in business and trade. A Presbyterian Church, a Baptist Church, a bank, and a post office were established. A schoolhouse was built that also served as the town hall. Brownwood lay on the cattle driving trail from South Texas, so it had stores and saloons which catered to the trail drivers who came through the area heading up to Buffalo Gap. Farmers had begun to move into the area to farm cotton. Things were really looking up for the community of Brownwood.

Once in Brownwood, we discovered what the situation was that called for extra Texas Rangers to intervene. Ten children had been abducted from the area over the past 5 days. No one had seen the abductors, but Texas Rangers Maloney, Whitley, Martin, Bill Casey and Jeremy Wedgewood all left the day before we arrived to follow the abductors' trail to the south. By reading the tracks, they surmised that the renegades numbered between 12 to 15 and they were driving at least 20-25 horses and a wagon along with them. Their tracks headed south toward Laredo and the Mexican border. It was assumed that the renegades had plans to sell the children to slave traders in South America.

Ranger Maloney had left word for me to follow as soon as I could and to bring along a few men and women to help with the recovery and care of the children. I quickly spoke with the leaders of the community, and they identified a man and two women – Ramone Cortez and his wife Maria as well as Susan Hamilton to accompany Willie and me as we headed south. I admired the courage of these three people, and I was determined to protect them with my life. We left Sadie in good hands at the town livery as we needed to move quickly.

Late that evening, we were met by Ranger Casey who had doubled back to lead us to the other Rangers. They had already spotted the renegades who had pitched camp and bedded down for the night. As far as they could tell, the renegade band was made up of 14 men of different races: White, Mexican, Black, and Apache Indian. Ranger Whitley was able to recognize a couple of the renegades through his spyglass. These people were loners who were not allowed to live in the civilized communities from which they had come. It was a rough and cold-hearted bunch. The children, numbering 25 in all and of various ages, were tethered together at the waist with their hands tied behind them. It appeared that the renegades had stolen over 30 horses, and they were pulling a wagon that looked to be filled with guns and ammunition. The children appeared forlorn and exhausted as they most likely were forced to walk behind the wagon for days. All of this required the renegades to take a slow pace as they headed south. They must have assumed that there was no law enforcement in the area who would follow them – a tragic assumption on their part.

Ranger Maloney instructed Willie, me and the other civilians to circle behind the renegades while they were being distracted by the Texas Rangers. Our job would be to lead the children to safety as far away and as fast as we could walk them. We determined that when the time came, Ramone and the women would walk the children as far from the camp as possible while Willie and I covered from behind.

The shooting started before we could fully circle behind the renegade camp. The children were terrified by the sounds of the guns, and they all lay flat on the ground. Fortunately for us, the two renegades assigned to watch the children ran to where the assault was taking place. The children were now unguarded, and we sprang into action. Ramone and the women quickly got the children to their feet and led them away from the camp. The children were frightened by the gunfire and were more than willing to be led away from that terrible noise.

From my vantage point, I could not see the battle going on not 100 feet away. The trees blocked my view. Willie and I leveled our rifles in the direction of the shooting and waited. The next few seconds seemed like a lifetime. We heard the heavy volume of shots being fired and the shouts of men being hit. Suddenly, two of the renegades came crashing through the thicket straight toward us. As one saw Willie, he headed straight toward him, and he was quickly gunned down by Willie. The other renegade saw the fleeing children and took off after them. I turned and shot him in the back as he approached the children. Willie then put several more bullets into each of the renegades to ensure they did not get back up. I guess I will never know if my shot was a wounding blow or a killing blow. Willie took care of that.

After the battle was over, the superior fire power of the Rangers was evident. There were no dead Rangers and only two were slightly wounded. On the other side, there were 9 dead renegades and 5 prisoners with two of them being severely wounded. Ranger Maloney had told me earlier that the Texas Rangers as a rule don't like to take prisoners as it is too much work to keep them alive and transport them to the authorities. In this case, several were purposely taken alive to determine their motives and who their contacts were at the border. Ranger Whitley and his men would follow up on identifying who at the Mexican border was arranging the transport of children further south. Perhaps they could net some "bigger fish" down the line.

There were 25 children total who were abducted. All were safe. Other than the 10 from the Brownwood area, there were 15 from other communities. The children were hungry and exhausted. We fed and watered them and attended to any wounds they had such as scratches and blisters on their feet. Maria and Susan did a great job of calming and caring for the children. We encouraged them to be strong and have faith in God that He would get them safely back to their homes. We were anxious to get back to Brownwood to put the community's worries to rest, so we immediately loaded the kids onto the wagon; which, by the way, was filled with stolen guns and ammunition. We gathered together any articles that might identify the renegade men. The Texas Rangers recognized a couple of them. I recognized one of them as Simon Evans, a boy I grew up with. He disappeared a few years ago, and we assumed he was dead. Now I know what he has been up to. We buried their bodies in a shallow grave and left them to the mercy of scavengers.

Back in Brownwood, the children were returned to their families and those from other communities were held until parents could be notified. The Texas Rangers were

hailed as heroes and deservedly so. The renegade prisoners were turned over to the Sheriff for proper jailing, but not before they all spat at us and swore vengeance against us all. "Great," I thought, "So now there are 5 more varmints who want to get even with me."

As I reflected on the people involved in this altercation, I realized that people of all colors were involved on both sides. The renegades were White, Mexican, Black, and Apache Indian. Of the rescuers, Maria and Ramone were Mexicans, Susan was Black, and one of the Texas Rangers was of Hispanic background and another of American Indian descent. This illustrated to me that all humans choose whether to do good or evil. It does not matter what color skin, male or female, country origin, or age one is. Behavior is a matter of choice. Satan can influence anyone to do evil, and God can influence anyone to do good. Only a relationship with God can lead a person to live a holy life. All humans regardless of national origin or skin color can be reunited with God through Jesus Christ. For this reason, we must all follow Jesus' great commission and evangelize to all people of all nations.

It was time to celebrate, so we gathered together at the Baptist Church for a service of praise and thanksgiving. Several preachers spoke, and I decided to focus on God as our great protector who protects us from our enemies. "Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are gathered here today to praise God and thank him for the safe return of our children. God is our great protector! As Moses told his people, '*Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you*' (Deuteronomy 31:6). The prophet Isaiah shared God's words to his people who were in fear of their enemies, '*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*' (Isaiah 41:10). As I reflect on the epic battle between good and evil in this world, I turn to the words of the Apostle Paul when he told us that our biggest battle is not against people but with the forces of evil, '*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*' (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus tells us not to worry because He is in charge, '*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*' (John 16:33). This world has been far from perfect after Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden. This is not the world God intended for us. We built this world as it is through our freedom of choice. We have to live with our decisions - some good and some evil. Today, with God's help we have defeated the evil among us! Amen and Amen."

After a few more words from other preachers and community leaders, we also heard from the families of the captured children. Ranger Maloney and Ranger Whitley assured the community members that they would continue to investigate and bring others responsible for this slave trading to justice. Everyone was filled with love for God and the Texas Rangers who came to the rescue of the children. I also made sure that the community knew of the bravery and valiant deeds of Ramone and Maria Cortez and

Susan Hamilton. We sang songs of praise to God for His infinite mercy and protection, and we celebrated into the evening with fellowship and good food.

The next day, I visited with the leaders of the Brownwood community and made plans to begin a Methodist Church or at least assign a circuit rider to visit as part of a circuit. Willie and I bid farewell to the Texas Rangers and the community of Brownwood, and we loaded Sadie up for the trip home. We were facing a 50-mile trip with a layover in Comanche. I wondered if I would run into those boys who claimed to be in Wes' gang as they were from the Comanche area. I am sure they haven't forgiven me for shooting them – although it was in self-defense. I doubt that they saw that shooting as justified. I told Willie that we should be cautious on the trail and keep a look out. Willie was way ahead of me on caution. He knew those boys, and he knew they most likely were in the area.

While on the road back to Dublin, I had a chance to talk with Willie about the killings that took place in Brownwood. Willie was disappointed that the Rangers took prisoners. He said, "Them varmints deserved to die for what they were doing to those children. We should have killed them all. I just don't understand why they would tear those children away from their families just to make a buck." I was encouraged by this emotion shown by Willie. I had not seen him so sympathetic before. I asked him if he thought we murdered those men. Willie said, "Don't matter what you call it, they just needed to be dead." I told Willie that one of God's Ten Commandments is "[Thou shalt not kill](#)" (**Exodus 20:13**). I explained to Willie that the Greek word for kill refers to premeditated killing with hate in one's heart, and the punishment God commands for murder is "[Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death](#)" (**Leviticus 24:17**). God does not take murder lightly as murder is evil and abhorrent in His sight. I asked him if he believed that we are murdering Indians or killing Indians. Willie answered, "I murder those Injuns. I have hate in my heart when I kill them. My dead family wants me to do this – to take revenge for their heartless murders." I decided that I will continue to work with Willie on the difference between killing and murdering.

I turned to my own thoughts on the settlers' relationship with the American Indians. After Moses died and Joshua led God's people into the Promised Land, God would order Joshua to take his army and annihilate certain tribes already established in the area. God knew these pagan people needed to be removed from the Promised Land. I do not believe that God has given that same command to the European settlers to annihilate the native tribes in America. The Indians fight us because we are invading their ancestral home. I cannot blame them for that anger. We must strive to achieve peace with our Indian brothers and sister and introduce them to the love of God and His saving grace. Our cultures are quite different from one another, but we can overcome those differences through compassionate communication and action. Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, and to love and pray for our enemies. We are a long way from that command right now here in the Texas Wilderness.

We took our time on the road to Dublin as there were no appointments made that we must meet. Willie and I had an opportunity to just enjoy God's beautiful nature and each other's companionship. We stopped over at several settlements on our way to Comanche. All was going well in these communities, and I invited them to come to Comanche for a community service. In Comanche, we held the community service at the Baptist Church. Several pastors came to speak. The sermon I gave was the same as I gave at Copperas Creek, Turkey Creek, Buffalo Gap, and Brownwood as these people all experience the same harshness that the Texas Wilderness has to dish out. They were glad to hear of the providence of God and how much He loves us and weeps for us in tragedy and rejoices over us in our successes on striving for holiness.

At last we arrived in Dublin. It is now deep into October, and everyone is excited about All Hallows Eve and All Saints Day at the end of the month. It was good to see family and make plans for what I call the "Thanksgiving and Christmas Trail." Every town on the circuit wants me to be with them for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Of course this is impossible. I cover a lot of ground and cannot be everywhere at once. My thoughts turned to Angela and how I wanted to see her again and how much I wanted to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with her; however, duty calls and I must spend those holidays on my circuit. I completed a report to the Methodist Conference about new church plants. I recommended that a new circuit be considered for Coleman, Brownwood, Copperas Creek, Turkey Creek, Buffalo Gap and Cow Town. This would be a circuit of over 200 miles on the edge of civilization in Texas. An alternative would be to modify some of the existing circuits in the area to include these settlements, but I cautioned against enlarging existing circuits as the preachers are already over-tasked. I had to mention this even knowing that my logic does not always match the logic of the Bishops who run these conferences.

I settled in to plan for the "Thanksgiving and Christmas Trail" and to enjoy the peace offered by being home and surrounded by family and loving friends. The peace didn't last long. Jeremiah, my preacher friend, approached me and told me that three of Wes' gang members have been in the area, and one of them left a message for me, "You're a dead man, preacher." I didn't need to be told that the message was from Jake Colter. He will never forgive and forget that I had to protect myself from him. I cannot help but wonder why I keep falling into people's bad graces. A preacher is not supposed to end up on people's vengeance lists. I will ask God to give me advice on how to avoid making people want to hurt me. Perhaps if I truly want to avoid people's anger, God will tell me to become a mountain man and build a log cabin high up in the mountains away from civilization. I didn't think that I could ever move to the mountains without Angela at my side.

Matt Stephen

Jan. 2024