

# East Texas Historical Journal

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Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 5

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3-1970

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### Recommended Citation

Brittain, Hazel M. (1970) "Stories my Grandmother Told me," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 5.

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## STORIES MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME\*

HAZEL MILLER BRITAIN

## I. The Days Before

For many years the area in Louisiana lying between the Arroyo Hondo and the Sabine River was disputed territory, claimed by both Spain and the United States. In 1806 a treaty was signed between these two countries causing this land to become known as the Neutral Ground.<sup>1</sup> It soon became notorious for there were no laws to be enforced and outlaws flocked to the area in great numbers.

Across the Sabine River, East Texas received her share of the overflow of the lawless ones and soon became known as No Man's Land—a sobriquet which is used sometimes today to designate this area of Texas. The treaty expired in 1819 but it took many years to dislodge all of the tough characters.<sup>2</sup>

Tenaha Territory,<sup>3</sup> most of which later became Shelby County, was one of the first parts of Texas to be settled by Anglo-Saxons. In this land of rolling green hills along the west bank of the Sabine, giant cypress trees cast their shadows across the swift waters of the river. One of them, known today as the Sam Houston Tree, has a circumference of 26 feet.<sup>4</sup> Stately oaks with pine and other varieties of trees grew thickly in the forest, made beautiful in springtime by blooms of dogwood, redbud, violets and tiny blue daisies.

The river as well as the creeks of Patroon, Tenaha, Bayou Siepe and Bayou Bleu teemed with white perch, catfish and bream. Deer, squirrel, wild turkey and other game were plentiful. When John Latham came to this new paradise in 1817, followed shortly by others, is it any wonder that glowing accounts were sent back to kinfolk and friends about the wonderful new wilderness?

And so the migration began as settlers hurried across the Sabine, heedless of the dark stories told of the activities of the outlaws. The early settlers of Tenaha Territory seemed to have been different in many ways from other people who came to Texas in colonies under protective leadership. Daring, independent and stubborn from the first, they came alone or in small family groups. They came from everywhere in the United States, from the old families of Virginia and South Carolina and from families of the mountain regions. Many were younger sons of large families, as the old English custom still prevailed in many families for the oldest son to inherit most of the family's property. Stories are told of the reluctance of some of the pioneer mothers to come to the wild new land, described as "the land of milk and honey." One of my great-great-grandmothers used this expression with scorn as she faced the hardships in the new land that she later came to love.

\*This is Part I of an account by Mrs. Britain.

Some people came because they were hopelessly in debt. Some, too, were in other kinds of trouble. So it came to be considered bad manners (not to mention bad policy) to inquire too closely into a neighbor's background. Historians are sometimes unjust on that score, however, for most seem to have been law-abiding people.

The first permanent home established in Tenaha Territory—or Tenaha District as it was sometimes called—belonged to John and Susan Latham, who came from Tennessee in 1817. Their sturdy log home was built two years later. It was a small but extremely well built structure made to withstand Indian assaults. Descendants of John and Susan occupied this house till about 1920. It still stands, though in poor condition. It is said to be one of the oldest houses in Texas.



Remains of the first home built by the Lathams in 1819. The original logs can be seen in center front.

The Lathams were followed shortly by other families—the Andersons, Bradleys, Truitts, Buckleys, Louts, Raines, Goodwins, Paynes, Middletons, Englishes, Halls, McWilliamses, Crawfords, Barbees, Wilburns, Sanderses, Daggets, Boleses, Tamplins and others that included my own great-great-grandparents Todd and great-grandparents Cannon. Great-great-grandparents of my husband, Dewey, were the Britains and Haleys.<sup>5</sup> Our ancestors who were to come later were the Robertses, Monroes and Ervins on my side, the Risingers, Scruggs and Pous on Dewey's side of our family. This immigration seems to have reached its peak about 1825 when the Methodist Church of Shelbyville was organized with the Rev. James English as its pastor.<sup>6</sup> Though not organized, the Baptists were said to be having prayer services in their homes at Hamilton located about twenty miles away on the Sabine River.

William and Martha Todd arrived in Shelbyville with the oldest of their twelve children, who were Samuel, William Jr., Mary, my great-grandmother Susan, John, James, Thomas, Wilson, Amanda, Candace, Martha and a son whose name is not known. The family came by surrey, with some of the boys riding horseback from their former home in Macon, Georgia. The family was accompanied by a procession of wagons and extra horses, cattle and other livestock. They brought about twenty slaves.<sup>7</sup>

Our grandfather, known as Captain Todd, settled his family on a large tract of land three miles from the present site of Shelbyville. Their first home of logs was replaced in a few years by a handsome, two-story, white house.<sup>8</sup> According to family tradition, the new furniture for this house was shipped up the Sabine River to Hamilton, the new river port. The oldest son, Samuel, seems to have been the Beau Brummell of Shelbyville and is the chief character in many of our family stories. There was a sad note in the enjoyment of the new home. A little son was thrown from his horse and killed. He was buried in the family's rose garden which in time became the family graveyard.

In the late 1830's came David Cannon with his first wife Martha.<sup>9</sup> The story of this couple, a romantic one, is filled with sadness. David was related to the Cannon family of towel fame, but his own family was not wealthy. The family of his sweetheart, Martha Peaster, was wealthy and frowned on his courtship of their daughter. Instead they encouraged another suitor, a wealthy widower. At first their efforts seemed successful, but David believed he was first in Martha's affections and was determined to stop the wedding.

He obtained a marriage license secretly and enlisted the aid of a sympathetic minister. On the night set for the wedding, at the home of Martha near Abbeville, South Carolina, David came on horseback to a spring near the house, leading another horse wearing a side-saddle. A trusted friend accompanied him on a third horse. David sent his friend inside with a message to Martha pleading with her to meet him at the spring for old time's sake. She could not resist her lover's plea. Soon she was persuaded to mount the other horse and hurry away without so much as a good-bye to any of her family. There is no record of the reaction of the bridegroom deserted at the altar.

David and Martha proceeded at once to the minister's home some distance away and were married. They spent the night there. Early the next morning they started on the long journey to Shelbyville where two of his sisters, Mrs. McWilliams and Mrs. Hall, lived. The entire trip was made by horseback.

Two children were born to the couple; a son, Vana, and the baby, Martha. Life was hard in the new land for David and Martha. Frontier life was too rugged for the delicately reared girl. The many Indians still about struck terror to her heart. One day a messenger hurried to Shelbyville, telling of a planned uprising of the Cherokees near Nacogdoches in the adjoining county. The rumor proved false but Martha died—the family story says from fright, but perhaps it was a heart attack. A short time later little Martha was injured when accidentally dropped by a relative. This injury left her badly crippled for life. David later married, Mary,



Elder William Brittain who was born in 1774 and died on September 16, 1850. He is believed by many to have been the first Baptist Minister to preach in Texas.

daughter of Captain William Todd. Their children were Maggie, Mary, Sarah, W. H., James T. (Tink), Susan, Calvin, Napoleon and Samuel David, my grandfather.

Elder William Brittain and his wife Rosanna (Rosy) came to Hamilton about 1834,<sup>10</sup> from Surry County, North Carolina. Numerous slaves tended a herd of cattle and the many horses and mules pulling wagons loaded with provisions needed for the couple, their five married children, their families and the five younger children accompanying them. Sons-in-law were Raborn Haley and Elihu Tandy Wilburn. The name of one daughter-in-law was Betsy Haley Brittain. Her parents may have been with the group. What a caravan this must have been!

Grandmother Rosy Wright Brittain was a great-great-granddaughter of John Washington, who was the great-grandfather of George Washington. Her father John Wright and his cousin George were born a few miles apart in the same year.<sup>11</sup> John later moved to Surry County, North Carolina, where Rosy was born and where she was married to William Martin Brittain on March 15, 1802. *History of North Carolina Baptists* tells us much of the life of Elder Brittain with records similar to the following: "In August, 1809, the Flat Rock Church in Surry County, North Carolina,



Rosanna Wright Brittain (wife of Elder Brittain) was born in 1784 in Surry County, North Carolina, and died on October 29, 1856.

received by experience a young man of much promise. At the next meeting in September it was unanimously agreed that Brother William Brittain should be 'tolerated' to go on in the exercise of his gifts as a preacher at any time and any place where it may please God to call him." Did he even then think of Texas? For many years he seemed content to preach in his native state while operating his large farm with the help of his sons. This additional work for ministers was the custom at that time from sheer necessity. In 1817 we read: "Brother Brittain was receiving for his services, an annual stipend of twelve dollars, a great coat, and food for himself and horse." Perhaps, being human, Rosy wondered if churches in Texas were more generous for she came more willingly, it seems, than some of our grandmothers. It is more likely that she shared the missionary spirit of her husband, who spent his life fighting what he considered the evils of the day. Also, he believed the rugged frontiersmen of Texas to be in need of the Gospel.

And so to Texas they came. When the weary travelers arrived at the new log town of Hamilton, they made a raft on which to cross instead of going down the river to the regular ferry. All of the Brittain children who were old enough preempted on public land along the river as did the father, William. He built his first home where Hamilton cemetery is now

located. (Due to another Texas town's having the same name, both town and cemetery later became "East" Hamilton.) Elder Brittain used one room of his home as a classroom where he taught school and also as a church where he preached his first sermons in Texas. His grave is located directly under the pulpit. After 1836 the little church was organized as "East Hamilton Missionary Baptist Church." This courageous man is mentioned in all books on Baptist history in Texas. He was moderator of the East Texas Baptist Convention held in 1843 when he was seventy-three years of age. He freed his slaves at his death, leaving each a small tract of land, and some of their descendants still live in that area.

People continued to flock to the new land. Whatever faults they may have had, there were few weaklings among them. Even among the women it was not considered desirable to be too "refined." There was Mrs. Sample, a generous neighbor with those in trouble or want, who took a great pride in the toughness of her family. She often told my great-grandmother Cannon and others that she hoped all of his six sons would die with their boots on. She had her wish, for each of her sons died by some form of violence. Some of her descendants became officers of the law in Shelby County and other parts of the state. They were feared by criminals. One of them was married to my aunt, Clara Miller. We were proud of Uncle Willie Sample's record as sheriff at Sweetwater, Texas.

One story is told of a family, that we shall call the Dentons, for that is not their name. Mr. Denton, accompanied by a brood of small children, came by wagon to Tenaha Territory in the late 1820's. He established a home on a tract of forest land. He was a moody person, not very well liked by his neighbors, but the children seemed eager for friendships. Years later the oldest boy confided to a friend that his mother had left their home in the States unwillingly and that his parents had quarreled on the way. One day, the boy related, his parents walked into the dense woods bordering the road they were traveling, his weeping mother being led by his father. After a time Denton returned alone. The frightened children did not question their father but grieved for their mother in silence.

There were many troubles to plague our forefathers. It was hard to understand the strange new culture of the Latins that prevailed before 1836. They especially resented the restrictions on their church activities. The resourceful old-time preachers learned to manage by "going underground" in the guise of school teachers. They taught a lot of Scripture along with the three R's! Then, too, the outlaws from [what had been] the Neutral Ground continued to slip across the Sabine River, stealing cattle and horses from the settlers. If an owner protested, he was often shot from ambush.

About 1826-27, a delegation was sent to Nacogdoches to appeal to the Mexican authorities for aid. Their pleas were ignored. Captain Todd, Rev. James English and others asked the United States government for help. Though sympathetic, the officials were unable to be of assistance. Some of the settlers returned to their former homes in the States, but the stubborn stayed. All of them, even the women, had learned to love this "promised land" and meant to keep it.

Every able-bodied man armed himself as they banded together to reduce depredations. Extremely loyal to each other, they became by necessity toughened and stubborn, and perhaps a little contemptuous of the two governments that had failed to help them, attitudes that did not serve them well in days that came later.

The settlers were so successful in their endeavors that few outlaws in the Neutral Ground ventured across the Sabine. Our forefathers literally became a law unto themselves in their little Kingdom in the Pines! Strangers traveling through No Man's Land were strongly advised to have their credentials in order first, for they would be eyed with suspicion. The people were now managing their affairs quite well, almost too well.

They solved their church difficulties too, to some extent. Autocratic Jose de las Piedras<sup>12</sup> had refused to help them protect themselves; but he seems to have admired the "spunk" of the audacious Anglo-Saxons in fighting their own battles. When one of his soldiers reported church services being held near Hamilton he replied, "If they are not doing anyone harm, do not molest them."

The little towns of Shelbyville, Hamilton and Patroon<sup>13</sup> prospered. The people shipped their logs, cotton and other produce down the river Orange. Hamilton became a busy trading center. Crowds always gather when a boat, laden with wonders from the outside world, was due arrive. There were four stores dealing in general merchandise, a warehouse, a saloon, and a cafe. The latter, famed for its hot cakes, was owned by a freed colored woman known as Aunt Rhode. A new Baptist church was built which also served as a school house. Though made of logs it was a large well-built structure with a huge fireplace at one

Proud little Shelbyville was about twenty miles away, perched on a hill between Tenaha and Town Creeks. From the troubled beginnings of Tenaha this town has played her part in history. First called Tenehaw, then Nashville, later Shelbyville in honor of General Isaac Shelby from Tennessee, it seemed to have been a sort of cultural center for a wide area. People sent their children to board with the townspeople to attend school, which was considered outstanding for that time. The seat of government for Tenaha District (Territory) was located in Nashville. There were several stores, a boarding house and two doctors, one of them a Dr. Rather. James B. Tucker, Martin Palmer,<sup>11</sup> and Emory Rains were near Shelbyville at various times and were leaders in the community. An Indian girl named Polly Warr died and was buried on the crest of the overlooking Tenaha Creek. Her tomb was made from solid rock. In her white friends were using this lovely spot to bury their own dead. In 1830 many of the log homes had been replaced by more pretentious structures like the old homes in the United States.

Patroon, located about halfway between Shelbyville and Hamilton, was a village of one or two stores and a large school used also as a church. It was surrounded by a prosperous farming community.

In many ways things were going well. As the frail cuttings of rose hedges and cape jasmines brought from the States grew luxuriantly around the log homes, our grandmothers felt at home again.



But the Mexicans were becoming more alarmed at the continued immigration of the Americans into Texas. Though the citizens of Tenaha District fared better perhaps than some, their churches were again deprived of their liberties. After a period of relative peace and prosperity, perhaps many of the men were not averse to more fighting. Most able-bodied men again armed themselves and struck out for the nearest company of soldiers to enlist.

A young man in Tennessee had been watching with extreme interest the activities of his fellow Tennessean, Sam Houston and others. He felt an irresistible urge to follow their example and was concerned for the safety of friends and relatives already living in Texas. He seemed to have loved the new land of Texas before he had ever seen it and believed it to be worth fighting for. First there were obstacles to overcome—one being the reluctance of his wife Amanda to leave Tennessee.

In the end he had his wish; he came to Texas in time to take part in this fight, and my great-great-grandfather Moses Fiske Roberts became a citizen of Texas.

[To be continued]

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Webb and Carroll, eds., *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1952), II, 270-271 and I, 6. It was an informal agreement rather than a treaty between Lieutenant Colonel Simon de Herrera for Spain and General James Wilkinson for the United States on November 6, 1806. Troops of both nations faced each other at the Camino Real crossing of the Sabine River, but the action of the commanders averted a clash that seemed imminent. Although the Adams-Onís Treaty of February 22, 1819, fixed the boundary at the west bank of the Sabine, it was not until 1821 that Spain accepted this provision. By that time the disputed area was pretty well taken over by lawless elements of society. The strip extended from the thirty-second parallel to the Gulf of Mexico, but it was the northern third that caused the most trouble, harboring many vicious characters who were not dislodged when the boundary dispute was settled. For many years it retained its bad reputation and was known variously as the Neutral Ground, Neutral Strip, No Man's Land, and the Devil's Playground. See also Louis R. Nardini, *No Man's Land* (New Orleans, 1961), 80-101.

<sup>2</sup>*Handbook of Texas*, II, 600.

<sup>3</sup>*Op. cit.*, II, 723.

<sup>4</sup>Further information about this tree is not available.

<sup>5</sup>The names Anderson, Bradley, Buckley, Raines, Goodwin, Haley, Latham, Crawford, Sanders, and Todd appear in *The First Census of Texas 1829-1836* compiled by Marion Day Mullins (Washington, 1962), 6-13. Hereafter this work will be referred to as the Mexican Census.

<sup>6</sup>This would have been a local organization perhaps. There is no official record of any Methodist congregation earlier than the one established at McMahan's Chapel in July, 1833. See *Handbook of Texas*, II, 122. In M. Phelan's *History of Methodism in Texas* (Nashville, 1924), 24-25, we

find: "Another instance of early preaching which has been advanced . . . [refers to] James English, a Methodist local preacher in the records of some of the later preachers . . . referring to him as assisting in a revival held in 1834; we have seen no reference anywhere to the church he is said to have organized, or a church house credited to him."

<sup>7</sup>In the Mexican Census taken in the Tenaha District in 1835, Todd's children are Samuel, Susan, Mary, William, John, Thomas, Wilson L., and James. The eldest Samuel was nineteen, the youngest was six.

<sup>8</sup>As seen in 7n Todd was eligible for the grant of a league and labor, as was Samuel also (*Handbook of Texas*, II, 20-21) but their names do not appear among the original titles of record in the General Land Office. See *An Abstract of the Original Titles of Record in the General Land Office*, a reprint of the 1938 edition (Austin, 1964), 78-151. The painting of houses at this early date was most unusual in East Texas.

<sup>9</sup>In the 1850 census of Shelby County David Cannon is erroneously listed as Daniel Connor, but all other details agree with family and other records. Vana (Revanna) was then aged fourteen and the state of his birth Mississippi. This would set the date of David Cannon's arrival in Texas no earlier than 1836—unless he came on ahead of his family.

<sup>10</sup>The name does not appear in the Mexican Census. Occasionally a family was overlooked, but Brittain did not apply for a land grant. Instead of this, various members of his family "took up"—settled on small tracts northwest of Hamilton, later called East Hamilton.

<sup>11</sup>G. W. Pashell, *History of North Carolina Baptists* (Raleigh, 1955), II, 147-148. A well-authenticated family chart confirms the descent of Elder Brittain's wife Rosy.

<sup>12</sup>Piedras was expelled from East Texas in 1832. See *Handbook of Texas*, II, 375-376 and G. L. Crocket, *Two Centuries in East Texas* (Dallas, 1932), 140-151.

<sup>13</sup>Patroon was not established until about 1860. See *Handbook of Texas*, II, 346.

<sup>14</sup>Palmer (Parmer) moved to San Augustine in 1836 and then to Jasper County where he was chief justice in August, 1838. He died there in 1850. *Ibid.*, II, 340.