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THREE "R's" AND THE HICKORY STICK ON THE TEXAS FRONTIER

by Ty Cashion

Twenty-six year-old Jonathan Hamilton Baker of Virginia arrived in Texas in 1858 armed with a blank diary, a trunk full of dog-eared schoolbooks, and a guarded optimism that he could bring enlightenment to a westering people with more pressing concerns than "readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic." For sixty years he posted entries in the diary, providing details of his life and the events and processes that unfolded around him. The first three-and-a-half years of Baker's diary – 1858-1861 – describe the rough beginnings of establishing a school under the most trying frontier conditions. These were times of Indian raids and impending war between the North and South. If such distractions were not enough, the young schoolteacher's own health would test his ability to affect the lives of students who did not always share their parents' desires for them to embrace the civilizing advantages of education.

Although Baker never revealed what motivated him to make Texas his new home, publications of the day regularly appealed to educators to come west. In 1856, *De Bow's Review* announced "many openings" for teachers. "Texans are alive to the advantages of education," it claimed. "What [the state] wants is a body of intelligent teachers that [sic] are able and willing to impart the rudiments of a plain English education to the rising generation."¹ Whether Baker read that particular tract is anybody's guess, but he surely seemed determined to take advantage of that same opportunity. After a semester in the developing village of Fort Worth, where several schoolmasters served the meager student population, Baker moved to Palo Pinto, on the very edge of Anglo settlement. There he encountered a tenuous society clawing to gain a foothold in a raw and unstable land. At the end of his first term, he wrote:

"On the 2d day of Nov. '58 I commenced my first 5 mo. school here...under rather discouraging circumstances...in a rented house 14 ft. sq and a dirt floor...[Palo Pinto] is a new place, not thickly settled, on the Indian frontier, no school house, and [just] by coming I made some enemies at the start. I have labored under discouragements all the time since I have been at the place. Indian excitements, [malarial] chills, machinations of the envious, &c. have all operated against me."²

Perhaps the most disruptive factor was that the population was so mobile; no one had ties to the place and students were always coming and going.

Teaching under such conditions taxed Baker's ability, yet he felt well prepared. He had received some training in Virginia and possessed a modest library to which he occasionally added. He also studied on his own and made regular entries about his continuing scholarly interests. In the classroom Baker concentrated on the "three R's" and routinely drilled his students by having them memorize and recite lines and compete in spelling and declamation matches. But he also lectured on topics such as hygiene, politeness, and good

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behavior, and drew from his own library to teach the older children advanced lessons in subjects such as algebra, anatomy, astronomy, chemistry, and world history. Perhaps in the sciences, at least, the students would have been better off sticking to the basics, given the knowledge of the day. Commenting on his lesson in anatomy, Baker ran down the list of the "Ultimate Elements of which the human body is composed." Seizing on the element albumen, he asserted that it "enters into the composition of the hair, nails, the brain, &c. and coagulates in alcohol. On this depends the destroying of the drunkard's mind."³

Baker, a devout Christian and teetotaler who helped organize Palo Pinto's temperance society, rarely passed up an opportunity to convey moral lessons to his students. But some of the townspeople believed that he spent too much time giving devotionals and having the students pray. One day Baker arrived at the schoolhouse and found a list of resolutions tacked to the front door. The last one read: "That if J H Baker wishes to open his school by prayer that he perform said duty before 8 o'clock so as to be ready to teach at 8 in the morning."⁴

As the resolution suggested, Baker was never a lone figure in the wilderness dispensing wisdom as he pleased and on his own terms. At times he no doubt would have preferred it that way. However weak, the State of Texas held some regulatory powers over him, such as requiring that he keep a daily record of school activities. A "Common School" law passed by the state legislature in 1854 compelled Baker to answer to a county board of trustees – the very ones who left the resolutions – elected by patrons who paid tuition. First in Forth Worth and then at Palo Pinto, school committees required Baker to stand for an examination before awarding him a certificate to teach. By majority vote they hired him, set the length of his sessions, and determined his salary.⁵ Once, when high enrollment provoked complaints from Baker, the board at Palo Pinto further limited his authority by appointing an assistant they paid out of his own salary. Baker commented: "The price is more than I ought to have given, yet I thought rather than be considered contentious or penurious I would give it the remainder of the session."⁶

The trustees seemed to take their job seriously, and addressed an oft-ignored state requirement that the county build a "substantial school house."⁷ They first voted to hire a contractor from nearby Weatherford to construct a two-story school roughed out in native stone and finished with plaster both inside and out; \$1,375 was allotted for the forty-by-thirty-six-foot school building. What they got, however, was a much smaller, single-story building, sixteen-by-eighteen, constructed of rough-hewn logs. The shell cost the county only \$85.⁸

A disheartened Baker taught in the open structure during the spring of 1859. One morning, about the time the children were arriving, the teacher noticed the sky growing dark:

About 8 o'clock the rain commenced falling, and continued to fall in intervals all day, sometimes very hard. Our school-house not being finished, [we] were poorly situated for a rain. The water ran into the house

underneath, blew in at the cracks, and wet the floor perfectly wet; and the children tramping over the floor worked up the mud so that it had the appearance of a hog-pen.

We could do no good studying, and concluded to go home, but found that we were water-bound. The ravines had all filled up with water and the creek ran very high and swift, so that we could not get across until late in the evening; and then were set across on horses.⁹

After Baker appealed to the board members, they eventually provided material to finish the building and also voted to add an extension. But they expected Baker himself – without pay – to perform the construction work between sessions. And even then, some of the townspeople complained. After acquiring an assistant at the rate of \$1.25 per day, the teacher-turned-carpenter noted in his diary:

We then went to work, sawed out one [part] of the old house, faced up the sides, dug out the foundation for the new house, hauled the framing timbers and plank to the place, and employed L. S. Bise to build the chimney for \$20. But I find this evening that some of the sanctimonious, pusillanimous, invidious [*sic*], and parsimonious ones object to the mode of procedure and intend to thwart me in my purpose if they can.¹⁰

After putting up rafters and a roof, weatherboarding the gable, framing the windows and making shutters, then laying the floor and a hearth, the school remained unfinished. When Baker laid down his hammer and resumed teaching, his first entry of the new session read: “I feel quite tired tonight.” He did not get around to completing the work until more than a year later. Baker noted that the repairs and construction cost him \$140.¹¹

Baker faced other problems that might seem familiar to any public school teacher today. On one hand, a few citizens grumbled that he was making too much money. On the other, Baker complained about being overworked: “It requires my time so closely that I am at the school-house soon after sun up and remain there till dark, doing [*sic*] extra work before and after school.” Issues such as discipline, apathetic students, absenteeism, school prayer, meddling administrators, and low pay provoked Baker to complain almost endlessly. After being criticized by an irate parent over a trifling matter, he vented: “I am really sick of such little-souled [*sic*], narrow-contracted, pent-up, diminutive, deformed mockeries of humanity!” And, like many modern teachers at the end of a particularly onerous semester, he expressed: “I am glad that I am done and do not expect to teach another school at this place, or any where else if I can do as well at any thing else.” When the next session began, however, he was standing before another class.¹²

The greatest source of Baker’s day-to-day frustration was maintaining discipline, perhaps because he did not know how to administer it effectively. It is unlikely that his training included anything beyond the elaborate rules and prescribed punishments that he borrowed from a teacher he met in Fort Worth. Baker relied chiefly on what he called “the rod,” and when that failed, he was inclined to innovation and experimentation.

Among the several pages of his "Advice and general rules of decorum and order" were abstract appeals to the students' better nature. Following is one laborious example, a passage that his young students no doubt found difficult to comprehend:

Propriety of deportment is the valuable result of a knowledge of one's self and of respect to the rights of others; it is a feeling of the sacrifices which are imposed upon self esteem, on our social relations, being a sacred requirement of that harmony and affection which exists among all philanthropic individuals; therefore, as praiseworthy students, let your propriety of deportment be based upon modesty, sincerity, and courtesy.¹³

More readily understood were rules regarding the usual kinds of behavior that always lead students to trouble, such as using bad language, cheating, and talking in class. One example is worth noting for the way it reflects the times:

You must avoid making use of all vulgar...language, or any expression implying profanity, such as "By Golly," "Dog-gone-it," "By Jehu!" and all similar silly and unmeaning phrases.¹⁴

A look at the punishment for such behavior takes the edge off the humor, however. The phrases "severely whipped" and "immediately expelled" come up time and again.

Indeed, the rod got quite a workout. Baker regularly entered remarks about whipping the students. Eventually, he came to realize that corporal punishment only steeled resolve in the more refractory students and provoked them to retaliate. In the fall of 1859, after a rash of whippings and the expulsion of a student who had shown contempt for Baker's rules, some of the class determined to lock him out of the schoolhouse. "I had no difficulty getting in, and they did not resist my authority," the teacher wrote. "At noon the doors were fastened again, but I found it a very easy matter to get them open."¹⁵

Shortly afterward Baker decided to change course. One entry read: "Commenced a new system of school government by merit and demerit marks in the place of scolding and whipping." It was not long until he commented: "If the conduct of the students continues so good all session, there will be some pleasure in teaching [them]."¹⁶

For whatever reason, most likely expediency, Baker resumed corporal punishment. A major incident that grew out of a routine whipping reminded him why he had retired the rod in the first place.¹⁷ On a day when seventy-three students were packed into the cramped schoolhouse, Baker had to break up a fight, and, as prescribed in his rules, he "corrected" them. But this time, instead of a hickory stick, he used a cowhide. He noted that evening:

The mother of one of the boys is out shedding tears of anguish, and heaping execrations upon me for the correction.... It is very strange that people...get the idea into their heads that I am an enemy to their children, and that I am disposed to abuse the[m].

Baker probably thought the incident had run its course when he wrote: "The effects of the whipping yesterday is rather wearing away.... The old lady

has not faced me yet. She seems to be determined not to see me any more." Two days later, he entered:

The whipping affair exploded today with a tremendous crash! The old man came home and found that his darling son was miserably mistreated by the inhumane school teacher! The old codger asked for a settlement, and showed many signs of displeasure. Indeed he foamed like a mad bear and appeared like his hide could hardly hold him! He gave me no small cursing! But I looked at the old sinful creature and could but pity his ignorance and miserable foolishness! The abuse fell at my feet as harmless shafts, for I did not think the source worthy of resentment!

Upon reflection, Baker admitted privately: "I may have hit the boy harder than I ought to have done, yet it was not my intention to abuse him." Unable to get satisfaction, the parent appealed to the trustees, who admonished Baker to retire his cowhide and again take up the rod. Using the cowhide, they believed, was humiliating. At length the parent demanded a formal apology, and when Baker was unwilling to give one, the man promised to give *him* a "cow hiding" of his own. Baker expressed no intimidation:

Spent the morning reading and preparing to meet my invincible enemy, to take my cow hiding. I got me a good stick, a cow hide, a bowie knife, and six shooter, and went to town and waited for him, but he did not come.

He noted the end of the affair with this entry: "I learn that . . . my cow hide man . . . left early this morning in a westwardly direction, and I have not heard of him since."

Given the times and the circumstances, Baker was probably more right than wrong. Yet his inexperience and propensity for hard-headed self-righteousness led him to violate the spirit of the rules he so coveted. One, of which he was especially fond, read:

By honoring the teacher with an implicit obedience, due to the situation of his high office, you shall, in return receive his best attention and kindest regard, and cheerful attention to the best of his abilities.¹⁸

But when one student, evidently too shy to perform at Baker's command, refused to stand up and recite a few lines, the frontier teacher overreacted:¹⁹

I told him he must do what I told him, not thinking that he would resist my authority; but he did, and I took out my watch and told him I would give him one minute to comply. The minute passed and he sat on his seat. So I gave him a whipping and compelled him to do what I bid, though he was the most stubborn child I ever had any thing to do with; and I thought a time or two that he was determined to do his own way, [and] let me whip [him] as much as I could.

When the boy's father, a Mr. Dillahunty, saw the "stripes and whelks" [*sic*] on his son's back, he demanded an explanation. This time Baker was more contrite. He apologized, admitted that "the child was abused," and expressed relief that Dillahunty was willing "to act reasonably and agree to just let the matter drop as it is."

If Baker saw corporal punishment as an expedient measure, it was in part because illness so often limited his ability to maintain order in any other way. At different times he complained about suffering from boils – on one occasion he had four on his face and one on a thigh muscle. He suffered various “bites,” came down with persistent coughs, and contracted the flux – an abnormal discharge from the bowels. “Have taken Ayer’s Cherry Rectoral at times all day,” he wrote during that illness. Still another time he became constipated. After taking pills and eating stewed apples failed to produce any results, he finally tried “taking oil” – “the first thing that has moved my bowels,” he noted.²⁰

Worst of all, Baker suffered from occasional spells of malaria, a malady he had contracted while teaching in Fort Worth. What began as a headache grew so severe that he had to call a doctor, which he could ill afford. The physician pronounced Baker’s sickness as a case of “Bilious fever” and left him two doses of mercury and some quinine. Upon taking the latter, Baker exclaimed: “It is an awful stuff – the most bitter thing I have ever tasted.” He said that, however, before following it up over the next few days with “peruvian bark,” “carbonet of iron,” and a half ounce of “bitter shavings of some kind, I do not know what.”²¹

Baker survived the cure but ever afterward was susceptible to chills and fever, usually during cold weather, and relapses left him anxious. Once, after laboring to cut and haul a load of firewood for his school, he voiced a hope that the exercise would do him good. A few hours later he commented: “Much to my chagrin and surprise I was visited by my old nemesis, the chills. What can be more provoking than to feel the chill coming on and at the same time be hearing a class of juveniles recite their first lesson in three syllables!”²²

Despite all the fresh air and sunshine, the frontier could be an unhealthy place for children as well. Baker noted that after school one day a student roping a mule became tangled in the lariat and was “dragged over the rocks till his skull was torn off.” At other times epidemics thinned Baker’s classes. During the winter of 1859-1860, many parents kept their children out of school while an outbreak of typhoid fever ran its course. Once again, Baker had to attend a funeral. The enrollment at that time dropped from eighty to thirty-seven, leaving Baker concerned that the session would be suspended.²³

That was not the only time disruptions set the students back. The schoolhouse, the largest public building in town, was usurped for other functions that townfolks believed more important. Several times Baker had to dismiss school for week-long revivals. While he looked forward to the meetings and hung on the words of every sermon, he also noted: “I find that losing one week from school has a deleterious effect upon myself as a teacher, and upon the students.” Inclement weather also caused Baker to suspend classes.²⁴

Nothing caused greater disruptions than the constant threat of Indian raids. When warriors stole horses in the middle of town and killed or carried off citizens in the outlying countryside, the students were understandably

abuzz, causing Baker to complain that their minds were not on their studies. Raids and sightings usually found Baker borrowing a horse to fulfill his duty to the home militia. For almost the entire month of May 1859 and again in January 1861, the town's schoolteacher was off on campaigns to fight Indians.²⁵

Of course, there were also happier times. Nothing gave Baker more satisfaction than seeing the children show off what they had learned at the end of each session in front of the townspeople. To prepare his students, Baker drilled them, heard their speeches, and readied a stage where honorary guests delivered words that preceded the children's recitations. An entry at the end of a session in 1861 evinced pride in a job well done:

About 9 A.M. the school and some of the citizens assembled at the schoolhouse, formed a procession and marched to the academy, where the examination of the students took place. In the evening the students recited their pieces, and in so doing contended for prizes.

To add a fitting end to the occasion, the students marched once again, this time around the square, after which Baker wrote: "The crowd dispersed in the evening, seeming to be pretty well satisfied with the exercises."²⁶

What we know of frontier schools in Texas comes in large part from old-timers' reminiscences of their childhoods. The perception is usually idyllic, even if the relationship between teacher and student often has been portrayed as a test of wills. Seemingly ubiquitous are stories of unruly boys whose mission seemed to be running off their schoolmasters. Such tales usually end with an even tougher teacher wielding a big hickory stick. Some recent books, such as *The Empty School House* and *Journey from Ignorant Ridge*, tell these stories, as well as those of hardship and triumph. Winnowed out, however, are the day-by-day details of life.²⁷

In Baker's diary, his immediate observations, thoughts, and reactions provide a fuller and more accurate picture that adds resonance to, and sometimes contrasts with, standard reminiscences. What emerges is a record of tedium and constant struggle, punctuated by little victories and small satisfactions. Baker eventually abandoned teaching and became a moderately successful merchant. A few times during the three-and-a-half years of entries sampled here, Baker paused to reflect on his life, his endeavors, and his hopes for the future. Further transcription of the diary will tell whether he ever stopped to reflect on his days in the old one-room schoolhouse as an experience that grew fonder with age.

NOTES

¹De Cordova and Frazier's Land Register, "Texas - Character of the Country, Emigrants, Etc." *De Bow's Review*, vol. XX, 1856, pp. 241-248.

²Diary of Jonathan Hamilton Baker, Tarrant County Historical Commission, Fort Worth, Texas, July 13, 1859.

³Baker diary, December 9, 1858, January 27, November 22, 1859, January 23, February 7, July 10, 1860.

⁴Baker diary, July 25, 1859.

⁵Frederick Eby, comp., *Education in Texas Source Materials* (Austin, 1918), pp. 264-270.

⁶Baker diary, July 15, 1859.

⁷Eby, *Education in Texas Source Materials*, p. 266.

⁸Baker diary, January 17, March 18, 1859.

⁹Baker diary, May 5, 1859.

¹⁰Baker diary, October 14, 1859.

¹¹Baker diary, October 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 1859; January 22, 24, 31, February 2, March 9, 1860.

¹²Baker diary, September 28, 1859; February 12, 19, 1860; April 25, 1861.

¹³Baker diary, October 16, 1858.

¹⁴Baker diary, October 16, 1858.

¹⁵Baker diary, December 23, 1859.

¹⁶Baker diary, February 21, May 8, 1860.

¹⁷The incident is discussed in the Baker diary, September 9-14, 1860.

¹⁸Baker diary, October 16, 1858.

¹⁹The incident is discussed in the Baker diary, July 8-12, 1861.

²⁰Baker diary, February 8, March 9, July 28, October 10, 1859; January 4, 23, April 19, 1860.

²¹Baker diary, January 24-29, 1858.

²²Baker diary, January 20, 1859.

²³Baker diary, February 10, 13, 15, 21, March 2, 7, 15, 1860.

²⁴Baker diary, August 3, 16, September 30, December 1, 1859.

²⁵Baker diary; see May entries, June 6, November 11, 1859; see January entries, 1861.

²⁶Baker diary, October 11, 12, 1859; March 23, 1860; June 22, 1861.

²⁷Luther Bryan Clegg, *The Empty School House: Memories of One-Room Texas Schools* (College Station, 1997); Mary Ley and Mike Bryan, eds., *Journey from Ignorant Ridge: Stories and Pictures of Texas Schools in the 1800s* (Austin, 1976).