

Stories of Texas Women

Love & Marriage on the Texas Frontier

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Popular culture has long romanticized the notion of the American frontier in dime novels and on the big screen, but life in nineteenth century Texas was far from romantic. Life was dangerous and hard, and marriage was often more about opportunity and survival than it was about the cowboy stealing a kiss before he rode away. That is not to say that affection and respect were lacking in relationships, but that the "business of matrimony" was in fact a business.

When the Republic of Mexico relaxed trade and immigration laws in 1821 following independence from Spain, Anglo males flooded into north Mexico, particularly into Texas. Some of these male settlers brought families with them, but many of the men were single and for them marriage to a Mexican woman, a Tejana, was a fast track to citizenship as well as a way of establishing important business and political connections. Deaf Smith, Philip Dimmit and a number of other recognizable names from the Texas Revolution were married to Tejanas. Jim Bowie, an early Anglo settler in San Antonio de Bexar, was another such settler, marrying Ursula Veramendi, daughter of Juan Martin de Veramendi one of the wealthiest citizens of San Antonio and governor of Coahuila and Texas.

Such business arrangements were not necessarily without respect and affection. Bowie, a known slave holder and trader, honored his wife's dying request to free two of her slaves upon her death¹, but arrangements between Anglos and Tejanas were as much about convenience and companionship on the lonely frontier as anything else. In a letter home to his brother and sister, William Carey expresses typical nineteenth century sentiments on relationships:

¹ Legal Document #33, Jim Bowie Frees a Slave November 3, 1834. Phil Collins Texana Collection, The Alamo.

When I was in Natchitoches I wrote to you and stated I believe that soon I should look out for a companion. It would have happened this winter if the war had not commenced but fortunately it did. My selection was nothing to boast of she is tolerably ugly and tolerably poor and tolerably illiterate. but she is *virtuous* and a good housekeeper²

Perhaps it was in this unnamed woman's best interest that the revolution started and Carey's attentions were diverted!

While Mexico's immigration laws made it easy for Anglo colonists to settle in Texas, there was one law that hindered the ability of the few single white females in Texas to marry other white settlers. Unlike the United States, which had a separation of church and state, Mexico had a state religion; Catholicism. Therefore, all marriages had to be performed by a Catholic priest. Priests were scarce in east Texas where the majority of colonists settled. There were no permanent parishes and the colonists had to settle for the rare priest who traveled through the area to perform ceremonies. In the absence of the church, a couple wishing to marry could apply for a marriage bond wherein they would pledge a sum of money as proof of their intent to wed as soon as a church was established in the colony.

Thomas Miller, one of the Original Eighteen defenders of the Gonzales cannon and the Gonzales 32 who entered the Alamo after the siege had begun, and Sidney Gaston were issued such a bond on March 11, 1832. In it they pledged a sum of ten thousand dollars as proof of their desire to "enter into the solemn bands of matrimony" in the absence of "church or legal Established Ecclesiastical authority" in the DeWitt colony.³ What is interesting about this particular bond is that the bride and groom mutually agreed to dissolve their union sixteen

² Carey's letter first appeared in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (April 195), 513-518, as "A Letter from San Antonio de Bexar in 1836. It was later republished in John H. Jenkins, ed., *The Papers of the Texas Revolution* (10 vols.; Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 3:490-495.

³ March 11, 1832 Thomas R. Miller and Sidney Gaston Marriage Bond. Phil Collins Texana Collection, The Alamo. P.85.014

months later never having married in the eyes of the church thus avoiding the Catholic church's ban on divorce. This suggests that perhaps the notion of marriage was more fluid on the Texas frontier than in other places in North America.

This notion of fluidity and lack of convention also applied to the prevalence of interracial couplings in nineteenth century Texas. Under Spanish rule Mexico had become a mixed-race society with intermarriage between Africans, Europeans and native Americans a matter of everyday life. In the United States such interracial couplings were taboo if not altogether illegal, but in Texas where there was a decided lack of white women, such relationships were quite common. Not only were relationships between mestizo and Creole Mexican and Anglo-Americans common, as has already been demonstrated, but relationships between black women and white men were not unheard of.

As is true of the southern United States, the majority of these relationships were between a male slaveholder and a female slave and were therefore were not always voluntary. However, Mexico had no laws forbidding interracial marriage and there were incidences such unions, like that of David and Puss Webber who migrated from Tennessee to Texas to live a more peaceful life.⁴ There were also, of course, formal and informal unions between black men and women. These relationships presented particular considerations for black Texas women, the majority of whom were slaves, as their families could be torn apart at anytime if they or one of their family members were sold.

Most of the residents of Texas, Tejano or Anglo, were subsistence farmers. This was a hard life full of constant work and it was nearly impossible for a single individual to perform all

⁴ Angela Boswell. "Traveling the Wrong Way Down Freedom's Trail: Black Women and the Texas Revolution" in *Women and the Texas Revolution*, edited by Mary L. Scheer, 97-122. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2012.

the work necessary to survive on the frontier. Family units were important for survival and therefore marriage was essential for frontiersmen and women looking to build a life in nineteenth century Texas. The fluidity inherent to borderlands areas resulted in the concept of marriage looking different in Texas than in the United States for a while, but the establishment of the republic and additional Anglo settlement would soon change this.

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Stories from Texas. Texas Standard. Typewriter Rodeo. Recent Shows. The two remained close after the divorce " Sinatra Jr. called her the love of his life. But now, Cynthia Sinatra is asking the Texas Supreme Court to decide whether, despite the divorce, the two were still married under common law. Thomas Oldham, professor at the University of Houston Law Center, says in Texas, to be in a common-law marriage a man and woman must live together in the state as husband and wife and hold themselves out to the community as a married couple. "There's no minimum time," Oldham says. "The courts have clarified that the question is really "What was your reputation in your community?" Life on the Texas frontier was hard, and often dangerous. Native Tejanos had called the Texas province home since the Spanish explorations of the 1500s. Some American Indians had inhabited the land for thousands of years before that. As news of frontier opportunity spread throughout the U.S. and abroad, settlers packed up and moved to Texas by the thousands. The frontier provided no linen or lace, so women sewed tanned deer hide into buckskin clothing. Those lucky few who had managed to strap a spinning wheel onto their wagons before leaving their U.S. homes spun their own cotton to make less pungent and heavy clothing. Any kind of trade with the other far-flung Texas settlements required weeks of hazardous travel on dirt track roads. Currently unavailable on Scribd. A Texas Frontier Love Story. By Rod Wright. At the urging of Katharina's, father, The Texas President, Sam Houston sends his Rangers and a posse to destroy Great Eagles clan and save the two young women. John rescues Katharina, but she has been disfigured by the Comanche; With her beauty damaged, can John still love Katharina? Can she love any man after what she has been through".