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Ranch House Visit Recalls Osa Mitchell Saga

By SAM WOOLFORD
Not long ago I was invited to a meeting of the Friendship club. I do not know the aims, purposes or qualifications of the club, but judging from the gathering I would say its purposes are friendship and its membership seems to be composed of a lot of senior San Antonians who knew each other as boys.

Gus B. Mauermann was host at the old ranch house out on the Medina, the site where Asa Mitchell, his great-grandfather, built—and where he lies buried in the family cemetery on the ranch, once an estate of 14,000 acres which was fully equipped in 1839 with mesquite, coyotes and Commanche Indians.

Razed by '47 Fire

We walked through the old stone house, which was devastated by fire in 1947. Many of the old things were saved, although a number of papers and documents went up in flames. The sites of the slave quarters today make an ideal barbecue site; and on the ground knelt a part-Commanche woman, kneading the boiled corn into masa on a stone metate and baking tortillas on a flat iron grill for such moderns as Tom Tenge, Allee B. Ayres, Fred Reutzel, and a host of others.

The backdrop for this party, the Commanche woman and the 50 guests, who were eating the tortillas faster than she made them, was the old house with the story of its builder, Asa Mitchell.

With dim letters and old manuscripts, family Bible and records, Mauermann pieces the career of his great-grandfather. This man helped write and sign the first Declaration of Independence at San Felipe; fought at Velasco; was a commissioner to raise militia to fight Santa Anna during the Texas revolution; signed the articles for the provisional government; fought at San Jacinto; lost a son on the Mier expedition; came to San

Antonio in 1839; served as captain of the Home Guards during the Civil war; was harassed by Indians for 30 years.

College Founder

And as if that were not enough, he was one of the charter signers for the old Alamo college and for the San Antonio Female college—which grew into Westmoreland and is now merged with Trinity university. So it seems that some of the benefits of civilization we now enjoy came from the hard work and daring of one of our pioneers who from history has never had his just due.

Briefly, here is how Asa Mitchell came to his rest in the old family plot on the ranch:

Born in 1795 in Pennsylvania, he married and moved to Kentucky. He then embarked with his family on a "broadhorn," one of the Ohio-Mississippi river boats, and came to New Orleans. He, as many others, had heard of Texas; so in 1821 with 30 companions and their families they chartered the James Mottley and set sail for Matagorda. They landed after 40 days and started up the Colorado river; the women riding bareback. They had to leave the boat and all its stores under guard of eight young riflemen.

Supplies Lost
At the present site of Columbus, on U. S. Highway 90 on the road to Houston, they built a claphouse to shelter Mrs. Mitchell and a young son, Nathan, and the other woman. Then the men went back to the boat to get their supplies and the rest of the party. But the cannibalistic Karankawa Indians had gotten there first: The boat was stripped of supplies, and they never heard of the eight men again.

With all of his equipment gone, Asa Mitchell then went to La Bahia and got a bunch of Spanish mules from the early Goliad colonists, and started to drive them to Louisiana in order to get a new financial start. His wife and children continued living in their shack under the live oak trees, until his return.

A northern scattered the mules, but Mitchell finally got to Louisiana with 62 head; sold them, went to New Orleans, chartered the "James Lawrence," filled the hold with supplies (which he intended to sell at Matamoros for a profit), and headed for the mouth of the Colorado to pick up his family. He supposed them still to be living up the river at Columbus.

Reached at Velasco

A gale struck the ship, drove it inland; and when the water receded, Mitchell was sitting in a boat on dry land at about the present site of Velasco. So, that is how the Mitchell family came to settle in that part of Texas.

When he went to get his family he discovered that the Karankawas had attacked the camp in his absence, and Mrs. Mitchell and his son had fled to the Brazos to a blockhouse on the present site of Richmond.

He then returned with his family to the ship. Where it landed he built a house and went into farming, salt mining and tobacco raising, and eventually secured "a league and a labor of land," in Austin's colony. Here, in Washington county, he lived for a few years before moving to San Antonio in 1839.

Mauermann is authority for some interesting stories concerning the Mitchells and the war:

"Not many people know it, but numbers of the Confederate wounded were brought to San Antonio to recuperate. One old Confederate soldier stayed at the Mitchell home in San Antonio where my grandmother, Ella Mitchell Mauermann, was reared. He was crippled, and had a big cane so he could get around. There was an old-fashioned sofa in his room where he would rest in the

daytime. Great-grandfather Asa Mitchell had \$8000 in cash which he kept hidden in the springs of that sofa.

Routed by Vet

"One day the Yankees came to search all the houses for money and valuables; and when they came to the Mitchell home and into the room where the old Confederate soldier was staying, the wounded veteran got up and beat them over the head with his cane, and they left without making further search."

This was while the war was going on.

"All the Confederates were enemies, and the Yankees came another time looking for the gray-clad soldiers who had returned home. They said they were particularly looking for Hiram Mitchell, who was a 'Rebel' captain. The Yankee captain said to my great-grandmother: 'We know where Hiram Mitchell is. He's out at the ranch, and right after dinner we are going out to get him.'"

"Well, she mounted a horse bareback as soon as they left and went out and told Hiram, and he got away. You'll never make me believe that Yankee captain wasn't giving him a chance to clear out."

As usual, San Antonio had its ups and downs during the four years in which our ancestors indulged in that bitter conflict sometimes known as the War of the Secession.

Troubled Times

As the war clouds gathered the important figures either took sides, or remained discreetly silent; for many did not know which way to jump. The impassioned speech of Charles Anderson for the Union in San Antonio caused a small riot, and forced him to leave stealthily in the night for New York city via Matamoros.

Robert E. Lee paused briefly in this old city on his way to report to the war department in

Washington, and was relieved of his baggage by irregular Confederate troops (and it was never returned).

Even Sam Houston, onetime president of the republic, refused to take the new oath of allegiance when he was governor of Texas (at the outbreak of the war), and retired to private life.

Small wonder incidents occurred, for this town of less than 10,000 had voted on secession and the majority were against it. But as feelings grew stronger many sojournered to distant climes, pending the outcome of what they felt to be a domestic crisis.

Therefore, Asa Mitchell as captain of the home guard was in a very precarious position to maintain law and order in a city somewhat divided against itself.

Not Vigilantes

Some historians have dubbed the home guards "The Vigilantes," which doesn't sit too well with Mr. Gus, who says:

"They didn't take the law into their own hands. They kept down trouble. They were fully organized under their government to keep the peace."

That night of the meeting of the Friendship club, surrounded by his old friends who were enjoying themselves, and with his hunting dogs yelping approval, the former mayor got to reminiscing:

"The Old Bat Cave, which was the name for the city hall and police station, was on the northwest corner of Military plaza."

"This was where the mayor held office, where court was held and prisoners were kept. Sam Bell, the original one, had a jewelry store and was a strong Union man. He also was a good friend of my great-grandfather, Asa Mitchell, who was then the captain of the home guards."

"One day Mr. Bell, wishing to show his feelings in the

matter of secession, hung the U. S. flag up over his place of business. The Confederates then in control of the town arrested him and locked him up in the Bat Cave. Asa Mitchell went over and told the judge, Sam Bell is my friend and I want him let out of the Bat Cave," which the judge did.

Returned Favor

"About the time the war was over the Union soldiers got control of San Antonio, and they arrested Asa Mitchell for being a Confederate officer and as captain of the home guards, and locked him up in the Bat Cave. Sam Bell went over and told them, 'Asa Mitchell is my friend and I want him let out of the Bat Cave,' and they did."

There's one more story Mauermann tells about those old days: "Before moving to San Antonio, Asa Mitchell lived in Washington county in the old Austin colony. In the spring

of 1836 a dozen Tennessean volunteers, with Davy Crockett, came by the plantation on their way to the Alamo. Nathan, the boy who had come down the Mississippi on the 'broadhorn,' had sailed to Matagorda and was to fight at San Jacinto in a few weeks with his father, Asa, was sitting on a fence when the Crockett party arrived. He later said that one of them—wearing a venerable stovepipe hat—came up to him and offered to trade hats, and would give a \$10 gold piece to boot. He made the trade. So Davy Crockett took Nathan's coonskin cap, and Nathan stuck the stovepipe hat on his own head. He couldn't buy another hat in the settlement, so he wore Davy's to the Battle of San Jacinto and lost it in the charge.

"And that is how Davy Crockett's hats got into both battles, the Alamo and San Jacinto."

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