

SAM HOUSTON'S LAST FIGHT



ALBERT CASTEL



AMERICAN HERITAGE • NEW WORD CITY

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The people gathered on the Galveston wharf broke into cheers as soon as they saw him. There was no mistaking the tall, white-haired man in the Mexican sombrero descending the gangplank of the packet that had just docked. It was their old hero, Sam Houston, returning to Texas from Washington, where he had recently completed his final term in the Senate. By cheering him that spring day in 1859, Texans felt they were cheering Texas itself because he was so closely identified with the state and had played such a large part in its inception and development. Even more, they were honoring a man whose career had extended over more than half the nation's history and who had contributed mightily to the shaping of that history.

Born in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1793, Houston, at fourteen, had traveled in a covered wagon with his widowed mother to the wilds of Tennessee. There he lived much of the time among the Cherokee Indians, who adopted him into their tribe and gave him the name of Co-lon-neh, "The Raven." For the rest of his life, he found he enjoyed the company of the red man as much or more than that of his white compatriots. He acquired a native-like penchant for using subtle, secretive methods to achieve his ends.

From an early age, Houston took a keen interest in military life. When the War of 1812 began, he joined the army and became an officer; at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in eastern Alabama - where on March 27, 1814, Andrew Jackson and his Cherokee allies all but annihilated a stubborn band of Creeks - Houston displayed outstanding courage, suffering terrible gunshot wounds in the shoulder and arm and gaining the notice and favor of General Jackson. After the war, he entered politics and with Jackson's backing became first a member of Congress, then governor of Tennessee. Some of his friends were beginning to press him to consider the White House when suddenly, without explanation, he resigned the governorship, left his beautiful young wife (they had been married only a few weeks) and fled to the land of the Cherokees in Tennessee. All anyone knows for certain is that he had discovered that his wife loved another man, and that rather than hold her in a meaningless marriage, he sacrificed his political ambitions and removed himself from her life.

For the next several years, he was a broken man. The Chero-

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kee conferred upon him a new name - Oo-tse-tee Ar-dee-tah-skee, "Big Drunk." But eventually he pulled himself together and in 1833 headed for Texas to realize the "great destiny" he had always believed awaited him in the West. He quickly rose to prominence in Texas affairs, and in 1835, when the Americans there rebelled against the rule of the Mexican dictator Santa Anna, Houston became commander of the Texas army. Avoiding battle while his own forces grew stronger and the enemy's weaker, he surprised and defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, securing for Texas its independence. He served two terms as president of the new Lone Star Republic, and by skillful diplomacy helped bring about its annexation to the United States in 1845. During the ensuing years, he served as a senator in Washington, where he joined Henry Clay and Daniel Webster in trying to maintain peace between North and South. Meanwhile, with the dissolution of his first marriage, he married Margaret Lea - a union as happy as the first had been tragic.

Returning to Texas from Washington in the spring of 1859, Houston was sixty-six, but although the wounds he had suffered at Horseshoe Bend and San Jacinto ached painfully on rainy days, and although his once-thick chestnut hair was thin and white, his massive six-foot-two-inch frame was straight and solid, and his blue eyes remained clear and commanding. Above all, he retained his sense of destiny, and with it, a young man's ability to dream. His current dream was to become president of the United States and to save the nation from the civil war that threatened it.

It was only natural that Houston would want to culminate his career with the highest office and greatest honor of all. To understand his desire to save the Union - at a time when many of his friends would willingly have seen it dissolved - it's vital to realize that Houston was a loyal adherent of Andrew Jackson.

Back in 1830, when South Carolina had first threatened secession, Old Hickory had declared, "Our Union: it must be preserved!" In the mounting crisis of the eighteen fifties, Houston made this his guiding principle. Like Jackson, he believed that slavery was an artificial issue, contrived and exploited for partisan purposes by unscrupulous demagogues on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. But he feared that unless something

was done to reduce sectional hostility, the inevitable result would be the breakup of the Union.

What was needed, he decided, was some great new issue or cause that would divert public attention away from the slavery controversy and restore national unity. After trying and abandoning various other strategies, he finally took up the banner of Manifest Destiny: He would unite the American people by appealing to their powerful lust for territorial expansion.

To the south lay Mexico - enticingly rich, invitingly weak. Houston envisioned himself as taking the lead in establishing an American "protectorate" there. Not only would the North and South forget their differences to join in this glorious enterprise, a grateful and admiring nation would reward him with the White House. As president, Houston would follow in the tradition of Jackson, spiritually reuniting the North and South and discrediting the fanatics and agitators who sought to tear the Union in two.

It was, as historian and Texan Walter Prescott Webb called it, a "grand plan," one as bold as Houston himself and far-reaching in scope. And Houston's dream of a Mexican conquest was not nearly as fantastic as it may seem today.

The idea of American conquest of Mexico was not a new one. In 1805, Aaron Burr had plotted to make himself king and seat himself on the throne of the Montezumas. In 1848, there had been a strong push to keep the United States flag flying permanently over Mexico City, where Winfield Scott's victorious troops had planted it. And only recently, President James Buchanan had openly advocated annexing the upper portion of Mexico. Moreover, filibustering - in this sense, engaging in unauthorized warfare with a foreign territory, was a popular ambition in the 1850s. In 1851, a band of Americans had invaded Cuba, and in 1856, a physician, lawyer, and mercenary named William Walker had defeated the Legitimist Party in Nicaragua and made himself - for a brief time - its military head. Houston simply proposed to do some filibustering on a grand scale.

The chronic political chaos in Mexico at the time provided both an excuse and an occasion to intervene. In his last speech be-

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fore the Senate, Houston had argued that most Mexicans would welcome an American protectorate as an escape from anarchy; from a strictly military standpoint, therefore, conquest would be easy.

But before he could conquer Mexico, Houston first had to reconquer Texas. In 1854, he and John Bell of Tennessee had been the only two Southern senators to vote against Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the controversial act that repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had barred slavery in the northern portion of the Louisiana Purchase. Since most Texans believed that the Kansas-Nebraska Bill favored the South, Houston's opposition to it cost him much of his support. In 1857, when he ran for governor, he was soundly defeated - the first time Texans had ever rejected his leadership. He was returning home in 1859 determined to avenge this loss and regain his customary hold over their minds, hearts, and votes. Once in the governor's chair at Austin, he would, God willing, carry out his Mexican plans.

The prospects were highly propitious. The settlers in the southern and western counties blamed Governor Hardin Runnels, the man who had defeated Houston in 1857, for failing to protect them against Indian raids and the ravages of Mexican guerrillas under the rebellious outlaw Juan Cortina. In addition, Texans everywhere in the state were beginning to realize that the Kansas-Nebraska Act had merely led to trouble for the South; in 1859, they were prepared to vote for Houston for the same reason they had voted against him in 1857 - his staunch opposition to the act.

Houston ran simply as "Old Sam Jacinto, the People's Candidate." He was so confident of victory that he made only one speech during the campaign, whereas in 1857, he had made dozens. In that speech, delivered at Nacogdoches, he denounced his opponents as secessionists motivated solely by an avaricious desire for office and power. The South, he declared, was in no real or immediate danger from the North; but if it were, it would find safety under the Constitution and within the Union.

When the votes were tallied, the old hero had 36,257 to 27,500 for Runnels. The defeat of 1857 was avenged.