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Sparks And Aurora

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THE REGION WAS NOT UNTOUCHED BY THE TEXAS Revolution against Mexico of 1835.36, for 30,000 Texans, retreating before General Santa Anna's armies, fled overland to Beaumont, then followed the Neches River down to Joseph Grigsby's place, where they were able to cross into the United States. Some refugees, however, traveled by water, and an account of this flight as it touched the Sabine area is given in Scrap from Texas History by Mrs. Mary S. Helm, covering the period from 1828 to 1843, and published in 1884.

Mrs. Helm's family having left Texas, returned in 1835 to their

home at the head of Matagorda Bay. When word came of Santa Anna's arrival at San Antonio on February 23, 1836, and, presently, of the fall of the Alamo, residents began to flee. Mrs. Helm was not among the first, but finally the family decided that escape was necessary. After a perilous journey overland and on a raft, they arrived at Velasco, where they finally were able to board a ship bound for the United States. Wrote Mrs. Helm:

We procured a boat . . . and went aboard; but they would not take our baggage . . . we were horrified to find not even our provisions, or beds or cooking utensils were permitted to come on board. . . . When the first meal was ready none of us were invited. I sent for some soup for the sick. It was denied. I went myself and took it, under a remonstrance. . . . I insisted in private to my friends that, as we should soon be in port in the Sabine, we must try to stand it without a quarrel. . . . When the vessel came to anchor in Sabine Bay, all the men went ashore to hunt. We were still some twenty miles from the place where we expected to stop, there being no high lands in the lower Neches. . . . While we thus lay at anchor in Sabine Bay, I think the very day of our arrival, came a sailing sloop from the mouth of the Brazos, with all our goods and provisions. They landed us at the place now called Beaumont.

When news was received of the Texian victory at San Jacinto, provisions in the town of Beaumont had become so depleted that it was proposed to send a boat to Galveston, and Mrs. Helm and her family sailed aboard it. She wrote:

Headwinds kept us in the bay (Sabine) until we had consumed all our provisions; I proposed to try to go to Galveston by land, so we landed at the mouth of the Neches.

By the time of the Revolution, Commissioner Nixon had issued grant titles to De Zavala's colonists amounting to 404 leagues and 32 fractional parts of leagues to families, and 60 leagues to unmarried persons. Some of these were in the Lake Sabine area.

With land so cheap, it was natural that individuals should avail themselves of the opportunity by purchasing great quantities of it and forming small companies for the promotion of town sites. One of these groups, regarding which available records give few details, was formed at San Augustine and included Chief Justice Chichester Chaplin, son-in-law of the expelled Haden Edwards, one-time empresario; Almanzon Houston, attorney, land promoter, and soldier of fortune; and Alexander Horton, who had been a delegate to the Texas Consultation of 1835, from the Jurisdiction of San Augustine and long influential in east Texas affairs.

A town to be called Aurora was contemplated in 1837, as indicated by an indenture made October 10 of that year between Horatio M. Hanks and Almanzon Houston, in

which Hanks sold to Houston 1,107 acres of land which was part of the headright granted him by the Mexican government. In its description appeared: . . . known better as the tract of land on which the City of Aurora is to be situated." Nearly three years later, on June 4, 1841, this advertisement appeared in the Houston Morning Star:

THE CITY OF AURORA. . . . Situated on the Sabine Bay near the head of the bay. This city was laid off so as to contain 300 shares of 5 lots to the share; one hundred shares to the class; divided into three classes 1st, 2d, and 3d. This first class has been sold, the drawing for each class has taken place, under the direction of the Chief Justice of San Augustine County; the 2d and 3d classes are now offered for sale in certificates of stock of 5 lots to the share and the purchaser or holder of the certificate will be entitled to draw numbers of lots, to the number of the certificate he holds, and a general warrantee deed will be executed at any time when presented to the agent of the company. The proprietors invite the attention of the public to this place; well aware that the depressed state of the country is not encouraging to the improvement of towns and cities, they wish no one to purchase property in it unless they are well satisfied of its future success. . . . A. Huston (sic) Agent.

Meantime another town was being planned for the region near Sabine Pass. On October 19, 1839, Stephen H. Everitt, attorney in Jasper County, representing John Bevil, appeared before Chief Justice Palmer of that county and filed an intention of laying out a city to be known as the City of the Pass, covering 1,650 acres.

This document, on file in the Jefferson County Courthouse, describes the town as being two and one-half miles from the sea; part of the land to be laid off in business and residential areas, totaling 2,500 lots. Provision was made for churches, a courthouse, a customhouse, and other public buildings, and an inducement for settlement rather than speculation was that "twenty lots shall be reserved for actual settlers who shall receive a title to such lot as they may have set aside for them on the condition that they reside upon it one year and improve it by building thereon, the lots to be selected by the proprietors."

Space was allowed for the "purposes of landing lumber, cotton, freight of various kinds, which said space shall be marked out by the proprietors; one hundred feet square is hereby donated to S. H. Everitt to be run so as to include the site upon which his warehouse now stands with the right to collect and charge wharfage at all times."

In a letter to Mirabeau B. Lamar, President of the Republic of Texas, dated at Beaumont March 11, 1839, Attorney Everitt wrote:

It is necessary that a post Rout should be Established from this point to the Sabine pass as the custom House is Established there and the nearest post office is 40 miles. Will

you say a word to the P. M. Gen on the subject,

The City of the Pass soon changed its name. Col. Edward Stiff, in his Texas Emigrant published in Cincinnati in 1840, wrote:

Sabine City is located on the west ridge of Sabine Pass, the site being somewhat elevated above the surrounding country. Vessels drawing nine feet water, can enter the pass, and of course the City of Sabine will possess commercial advantages over any point east of Galveston.

William Kennedy, in *The Rise, Progress and Prospects of the Republic of Texas*, published in London in 1841, described the settlement of the area and said: "Sabine, at the mouth of the river of that name has a custom house .

Little more seems to have been done as to the proposed City of Aurora. Scattered court documents show that many purchasers of lots there turned them back to Almanzon Houston, giving him quitclaim deeds in return for their notes.

Several months after the Battle of San Jacinto, John Sparks, a tall, raw-boned native of the Tennessee hills, inspanned his oxen to a loaded, high-wheeled covered wagon, in which rode his young wife Melinda and two small children, William and Julia Ann, and began the long overland journey to Texas.

The trip was long and tedious, and at night John Sparks slept on his long rifle, with his dirk close at hand. Sometime in 1838 the family arrived at the mouth of the Sabine River and crossed to Pavell's Island, at the junction of the Sabine and Neches Rivers and partially in Louisiana.

The Pavell brothers operated a shingle mill there, and when big John Sparks applied to them for a job, they set him to hewing out cypress shingles. Life on the island was not easy, and Sparks, with his small family, had little time to join the pay night drinking bouts that were the chief amusement of other men. Two more children had arrived at the Sparks home by 1841, and John Sparks sought more remunerative occupation.

On the mainland, the City of Sabine was growing, and the need of communication between towns in lower Jefferson County and Beaumont was becoming acute. Taylor's Bayou was a broad sluggish stream with muddy banks in which settlers' horses and wagons often bogged down, on the few occasions when efforts were made to trade in Beaumont. To Sparks came the idea of establishing and operating a hand ferry.

With such tools as he had and could borrow from his friends on the island, he fashioned a crude boat. Then he stretched a rope across the stream, anchoring it securely to cypress trees, and he filled in the steep muddy banks with oyster shells. From the ferry

tolls, he soon was able to build a small house nearby, within the area now covered by the Gulf Oil Corporation Refinery, and his family came from the island. Little cash was in circulation, but when his patrons lacked money he accepted furs, melons, garden truck, or fresh meat—anything he could use or sell. He was a thrifty man, and by September 12, 1853, he had saved enough money to buy two parcels of land, one of them 130 acres and the other of 30 acres, from Allen and Nancy Franklin.

This land, fronting on Lake Sabine, was part of a 250-acre tract that the Franklins had purchased from Thomas Holt in 1851. Sparks immediately set to work building a house, into which he moved his family in time for the birth of another child. Then, within the week, fire destroyed the new home, and the family returned to Pave11's Island, where friends took them in. But by the autumn of 1854 he had started another house which he completed in the spring, and the family returned. Crops produced good harvests, and on March 3, 1858, he purchased an additional 100 acres of land from C. S. Hunt, on what was known as Old River Cove, for \$80.

At the Foot of Austin Street

The eleventh Sparks child arrived November 21, 1859, and within a few days Sparks' elder brother Solomon, with his wife and seven children, arrived from Tennessee. The brothers began the construction of another house, only a few yards from John Sparks' home. It was designed in a style that had become common in east Texas. A gallery or porch ran across the front, and two rooms were built on each side of a long open hallway or "wind-way," which was latticed in and used as a general room for the family and their friends and for the dances that were the chief social diversion.

The girls, as the years passed, found suitors among the scattered families in the area, who came poling up the lake in flat-bottomed boats or loped in astride flea-bitten cow ponies. Arabella, daughter of John Sparks, was the first to marry, and when she became the wife of Fred Gentz a third house facing the lake was added to the settlement, at what is now the junction of DeQueen Boulevard and Lake Shore Drive.

Life in the little settlement was busy but usually pleasant. The women carefully saved wood ashes and scraps of fat from meat that was being prepared for curing, and from this, when it was "rendered up," came yellow soap to fill great vats. Patches of indigo were planted in protected spots for making dyes, most of the obtainable cloth being white. Dresses for the women and Sunday shirts for their men folk were fashioned from the dyed materials. Scraps of cloth were hoarded for use in making quilts and comforts.

Work for the men was plentiful, and fishing, hunting and trapping were also necessary for subsistence. Cattle and hogs ran wild in the swamps and along the shore of the lake, while the bayous teemed with alligators which were killed for their hides. Preservation

of meat called for time and skill; there was pickling in brine to be done, while hams and bacon had to be smoked for days over slow fires of corncobs.

The mail runner between Galveston, Sabine, and Beaumont brought news of the outside world, and although isolated, the community was a contented one.

A colorful visitor in the John Sparks household was Samuel Lee, sea captain. His life had been eventful. He was born in Denmark, and after serving his apprenticeship on a sailing vessel he came to the United States, landing at New Orleans. Thence he shipped to Texas, and he liked Jefferson County so well that he remained. He took up a claim on Hillebrandt's Bayou, where he lived until he married Eliza Sparks, June 14, 1860, the ceremony being performed by George W. O'Brien, Beaumont justice of the peace. Then he built a house near the site which John Warne Gates later selected for his mansion. Jim Sparks, the next of the family to marry, brought his bride from Beaumont to another house on the lake shore. Julia Ann Sparks married Jim Courts, and another home was added to the settlement.

Sabine Pass, which had been incorporated on June 15, 1861, and was the largest town in the district, was the main shipping point for cattle, hides, cotton, that crossed Lake Sabine in barges and flat-bottomed boats. Efforts had been made over a long period to connect the town with Beaumont by rail, and after discouraging setbacks due to the type of country over which the railroad would have to be run, the Sabine and East Texas Railroad was completed from Sabine Pass to a point above Beaumont. About four miles west of the Sparks settlement, railroad contractors built a passing track and named the junction Aurora, in commemoration of Almanzon Houston's projected city. There were no residences at the junction, but houses of the little Sparks village could be seen from it, and presently that village, too, became known as Aurora.

As the Sparks—now Aurora—settlement grew, disease and the infirmities of age began to take their normal toll, and John Sparks, for a burial ground, selected a site 50 by 50 feet, a short distance from his home. Many of the early residents were buried there, among them Solomon Sparks, who died while in the Confederate army at Sabine, and his nephew Albert, who died in service at Beaumont.

Civil War hardships came to residents of lower Jefferson County. Danger of invasion by Federal troops from the Gulf of Mexico was always present; Federal foraging expeditions ran off the livestock, and sometimes engaged in skirmishes with Confederate forces that came upon them unawares. No troops moved through Aurora, but many traveled down the Sabine and East Texas Railroad, or passed offshore as they were moved by boat from Beaumont to the Pass. Fighting in Louisiana was sufficiently close so that settlers felt the threat of active warfare, while scouting parties on the lake were numerous. The war came very close when ships on the placid waters of Lake

Sabine engaged in the battle at Sabine Pass. With the conclusion of hostilities, life soon settled into its normal routine in the tiny settlement.

The cattle industry in the area received impetus when the Beaumont Pasture Company was created on March 14, 1878, with William McFaddin, C. C. Caswell, O. M. Kyle, Valentine Wiess, William Wiess, and Samuel Lee as members. The principal purpose of the group was stated to be "the mutual and common protection of our livestock interests, and the improvement of the breed of the same, etc. . . . The chief object of this company is and shall be to purchase or lease pasture lands (in addition to about 7,500 acres already purchased) to the extent that may be deemed necessary." The area included was between the Neches River, Taylor's Bayou, and Lake Sabine and "at such other places as the stockholders shall unanimously agree."

William McFaddin and his son were appointed managers of the interests; Valentine Wiess became secretary and financial agent. At one time the company had more than 40,000 acres under its control, upon which was built much of the great cattle industry of Jefferson County. Literally hundreds of thousands of cattle roamed over the great McFaddin Ranch and the White Ranch, south and west of Port Arthur.

On a day in 1881, Sam Lee mounted his horse and rode over to the Page home in Sabine Pass to ask Miss Mary Page if she would be willing to come to the settlement and start a school. Miss Page described his visit when she later wrote:

I was very young when Sam Lee came down to Sabine Pass and wanted me to come to Aurora and teach his daughter, Emma. But I'd had advantages the children there didn't have. We had a free school in Sabine Pass for children under 14 and after that we had to pay, but we could continue our studies that way. My father said I was too young to go away from home to teach, but my mother said, "You go," and I went. Beginning in 1881 I taught nearly three years in Aurora and was then called home when mother hurt her wrist in a fall and needed me to help her.

Although Miss Page was employed primarily to teach Emma Lee, she was permitted to take other children in her school, which was a room in the Lee home. She visited her parents at week ends and during vacations, making the trip down the Lake in a rowboat equipped with a mast and sail. It is recorded that when an offshore wind prevented her landing on a return voyage, Fred Gentz picked her up out of the boat and carried her ashore.

Mrs. Jack Beaumont of Kountze, Tex., the former Emma Lee, recalled that Miss Page wore "a very pretty poke bonnet trimmed with a number of artificial roses."

In 1883, Fred Gentz built a one-room schoolhouse, and Miss Laura Parker became the instructor. Miss Kate Remly, who lived at Grigsby's Bluff, taught there later, riding to

and fro on a white horse.

During the winter of 1885, the settlement was swept by an epidemic that took a heavy toll of both children and adults. On August 20, 1886, a severe hurricane struck the section, the brunt of it felt at Sabine Pass. Discouraged, the families on the Lake decided to move nearer Beaumont. They dismantled most of the Aurora houses and took them along. Sam Lee's house remained, but he sold his interest in the Beaumont Pasture Company on August 8, 1887, for \$10 and a deed to 439 acres of land, part of the old Joseph Grigsby headright on the Neches River near the present town of Port Neches.

Aurora had so completely become a ghost town in February, 1895, that, during a severe freeze, cattle on the McFaddin range virtually demolished the still-standing Sam Lee house by trying to get in through the doors and windows for protection from the cold. Yet before the end of that year the city of Port Arthur was born, to grow so swiftly in accordance with its promoter's plans that it could almost be said to have sprung fully matured from his mind.

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