

GIFTS AND ACQUISITIONS

Social Notes from the West

Many Jerseymen, particularly from the rural areas of Hunterdon, Somerset, and Burlington Counties, took part in the great western migration of the middle of the last century. In many cases they left behind friends and relatives to whom they described their experiences in letters that have since come to fascinate historians. One such record has been published in the *Journal*, the letters describing the Reeve family's overland journey to California in 1849,¹ but there are many similar records in the Library. Among the Samuel B. How Papers, for example, is a group of letters from Samuel's son, Henry K. How, describing how he migrated to Eagle Pass, Texas, in the 1840's to set up shop as an apothecary among the outlaws and the Indians.

One very unusual document pertaining to the settlement of the West was presented recently to the Library. That is a broadside, the gift of Dr. H. Justin Ross, printed as a promotional poster for the "Central New Jersey Texas Colony," an organization that flourished sometime between 1875 and 1880. The promoters encouraged "immigration to TEXAS," where, so they said, there are "very CHEAP and RICH LANDS; good markets; good health; good water; no Winter, but a delightful and pleasant climate the year round." Now three recently acquired letters from western pioneers give an ironic turn to the promotional language of the broadside. Part of the Thompson Family Papers, these letters were written between 1860 and 1870 and describe some unusual aspects of pioneer western life in quite different terms from those used by the eastern promoters.

The first letter, dated August 28, 1860, is from William Craig of Hillsboro, Hill County, Texas (about thirty miles north of Waco), to his brother John S. Craig of Hunterdon County, New Jersey. William's tale is a sad one. "While you have been blessed with fine seasons," he wrote,²

We have had the reverse. Last year was the most unfavorable crop year in Texas for a long time, a great failure in the cotton crop & also in the corn and

¹ "From Tennessee to California in 1849, Letters of the Reeve Family of Medford, New Jersey," edited by Oscar O. Winther, *JRUL*, Vol. XI (June, 1948), 33-84.

² In all these letters a certain amount of punctuation had to be added for intelligibility, but I have retained the original spelling.

wheat. Last winter was one of the severest winters ever knew in Texas—nearly all the wheat was killed by the first hard freeze & norther. . . . The destruction to stock was very great—hundreds & thousands perished by the cold—others died of poverty before the grass started in the spring. . . . A third of the chickens froze to death in their ro[o]sts and others that lived nearly all had their toes frozen off.

This is but the preamble to a one thousand word jeremiad about farming in Texas. Probably in order to explain why he had not paid his debt to his brother, Craig went on at length about the lack of water in the summer, the freezing cold of winter, and the scarcity of money year round. Then he ended the letter with the following social commentary.

The excitement in this state in reference to Abolition movements for the past six months and particularly for the last two months in this state has been very great. There are a good many Abolitionists scatered through the State & these have induced the Negroes in many places to set fire to and burn up whole towns & private dwellings grain &c, and to po[i]sen the people. A great many towns have been burnt and it is expected that many more will be burnt. a short time since just east of the Trinity River within a distance of thirty-five miles 26 bottles of strichnine was found distributed among the Negroes to poison the people. It was found on friday and on the next sunday the negroes was to have put it in all of the food and drink [of] the white people. These 26 bottles of strychnine was distributed among the negroes by two white men wheelrights. They had been living there for more than a year and was well thought of as very worthy citizens. They were both hung & several of the negroes also were hung at the same time. They hang all they can get hold of that are in any way implicated with the negroes in this insurrectionary movement. In many places large quantities of firearms have been distributed by them Abolitionists among the negroes to use upon the whites in obtaining their freedom. They are induced to believe by these Abolitionists that by these acts they will all soon be free. It is true that many of them have been made free from the tramels of earth by being in the most convenient place when found, both of the Abolitionists & Negroes & many more will yet meet the same doom if this continues.

The Civil War intervened between Craig's letter and another, written by Joseph E. Sullivan to Miss Charity Thompson, a cousin of the Craigs. Writing from San Patricio, Texas, on the Nueces River west of Corpus Christi, September 23, 1866, Sullivan used most of his letter to describe the games and amusements common to his place and time. He described first a wild horse hunting expedition:

I came home from a horse hunt this day and I had a very pleasant time wile out although we had quite a good deal of rain, wich is not the most exceptiable

thing a man can wish fore when camped out. We had a fine time a running whild horses, and Lassuing them on the poraries. it is very dangerous work although there is great amusement in it.

Less violent amusements were at hand as well, but of a nature, we are sure, that served to shock the Methodist sensibility of Miss Thompson no less than wild horse hunting.

You spook about atending one picnic, well, that is more that I have eve atended since I came to Texas, and I doant think there is much chance of atending aney very soon in this cuntry, for that is a kind of amusement that the young folkes of this town doe not cair about. The onley kind of amusement that we have in this town of aney consequent is parties and them we have here in abundance. We have a dance nearly evry weeak & some times twice & three times a weak. The young Ladies of this town excell aneything I eve saw in the line of dancing. They practice it from there childhood. I have learned to bee quite a dancer since I came to this town. About four weeaks ago I went to Corpus Christi to attend a complimentary ball. . . . I had a very pleasant time. I think there was about three hundred persons present and I enjoyed myself finley I assure you. and wen I tell you that I road thirty miles to attend the ball you will think that I ough[t] to have enjoyd myself very much.

Politics provided yet a third possible amusement for the Jersey emigrant to Texas, but one that Sullivan eschewed.

You spoke about there beeing a Reble meating in Hunterdon county. well, there is know other kind of political meating here fore they are all Rebles and strong ones at that. They are all And. Johnsons Men. fore my part I get a long very well with them fore I never have anything to say to them in regards to political affairs fore it will not doe in this cuntry fore a Yankey as they call me fore to say much in regards to politicks.

Out of door amusements were clearly Sullivan's forte, however. He uses much of the letter to describe his enjoyment of horses and horseback riding, ending with the comment that he wishes that Miss Thompson had "one of our fancie little ponies in Jersey sow that you could ride on horseback." He then wrote of how he spent his Fourth of July holiday:

In the afternoon I saddle my ponie, toock a gun and went out a whild turkey hunting and I hev good luck and killed three larg one sow that I came hom and had Turkey to eat the 5th July.

Obviously, Sullivan enjoyed life in San Patricio, a town in a southern and fairly well-developed area of Texas, perhaps not even properly "frontier" as we have come to define the word. Certainly

his letter has a far different tone from the final one of the three, written by an unidentified resident of Atlantic City in central Wyoming Territory to his "Cousin Mary" back in New Jersey. His horrendous description of an Indian massacre and poignant understatement of homesickness tell us more about life on the frontier than any number of dispassionate histories could.

Your letter of March 24th is to hand and its contents read. I am happy to hear that you are all well and that Spring is coming again in Jersey for that is more than I can say of this wilderness Country with the earth still covered with Snow. Since I wrote you our town has been one of sad mourning. Last Thursday week a band of the Arapahoes Indians on the war path slaughtered and mutilated six men of our town whilst going to their laboring in the morning not a mile from town. As you have no idea how barbarous the Red Skins are I will give you a fenit description how they torture men and then leave them to die. The first Young man we found after the Indians had left was shot down then striped of all his clothing. after taking his clothing off they shot three Arrows in him one in each lung and one through the bone of his left arm and after all that torture the weather freezing that young man walked a half mile with the arrows in his lungs, he lived thirty six hours after we found him and talked rational before he died. All the others was killed dead and striped of their clothing some scalped and filled with Arrows one had his head chopped to peices with a tomahawk and another one had his pick which he used in Mining stuck through his body. Now I must change the subject for it pains me to write about it after seeing all the poor boys as they laid side by side in their Coffins.

The Citizens of this place South Pass & Miners Delight about three hundred in all have gone to Wind River Valley where the Indians was camped five days ago and if they are still there tonight to Morrow morning will be a sad morning to them, I fear, as the men will show them no mercy and will kill the last one of their band if they can. We have Church here regular every Sabbath afternoon, yet it makes no change in business. on that day the Gambling & Billiard Halls Keep open all day & most of the Stores, but very few people out here respect the sabbath day

I see you had an idea that our houses on the plains where something similar to those where you live. I will tell you they are very different. Our house here are built of logs and the cracks stoped up with mud, the roof is covered with small poles and then covered with dirt about six inches thick which makes them very warm in winter and cool in summer and as it rains but very little in this country the roof seldom if ever leaks.

If we Batchelors out here do ever get a woman we will have to come to Jersey or some other State to get them

I hope I shall live long enough to see Jersey once more and have a pleasant time visiting my many relatives. Now it is ten O'Clock and I will have to close. Give my love and well wishes to all the family.