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Randolph B. Campbell

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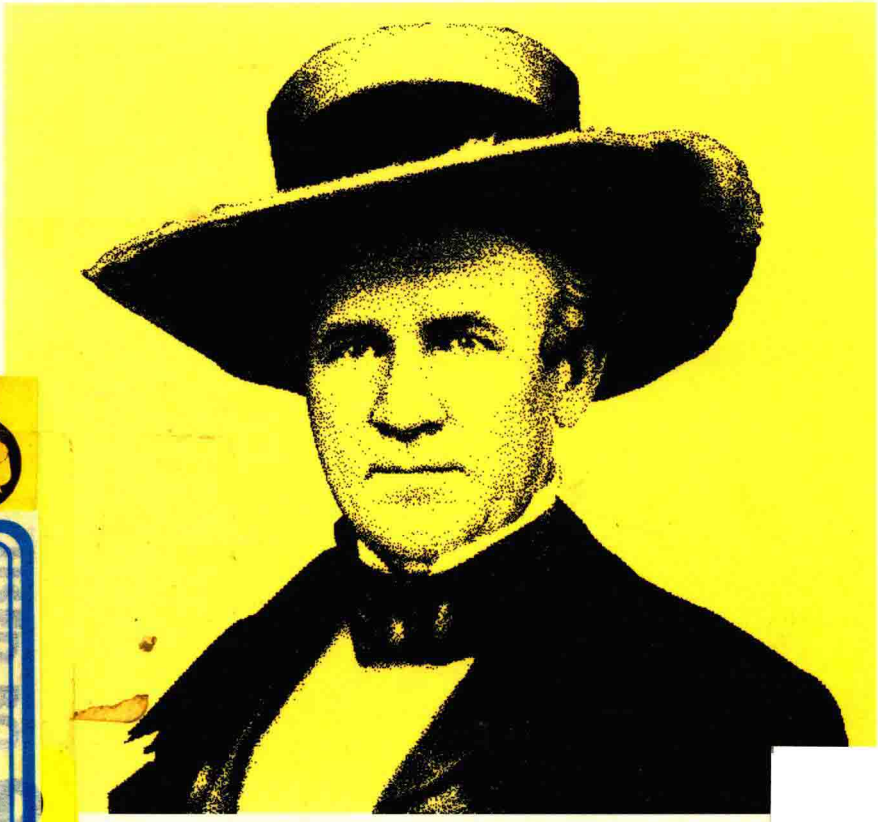
and the American Southwest



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Sam Houston

and the American Southwest

Sam Houston
1793–1863

For Landon and Clay,
native Texans with roots in Virginia

Foreword

The right man and the right place intersected at the point at which Sam Houston entered the American Southwest. The encounter made a durable impression on American History.

Houston was restless from early boyhood to old age. He moved about as his family had, unable to strike roots anywhere, unwilling to accept conditions as they were. He therefore long envied the wild liberty of the red men among whom he sometimes lived, and he remained a homeless exile through much of his life. Therein he exemplified an American type that had long fascinated Europeans.

The place in which he would ultimately make his mark was all but empty when he first appeared there. The great Southwest had abundant space, few people—all potential, little actuality. Populated only by scattered bands of roving Indians, it developed but slowly. It existed first under the nominal suzerainty of Spain, then of Mexico after that country attained independence; but it neither enjoyed the benefits nor suffered from the hardships of tight government control, whether from Madrid or Mexico City. Remote from the centers of power, population, and authority, the area lingered underdeveloped. It was therefore open to incursions from the United States of such wanderers as Houston.

The arrival of settlers from the United States, whether authorized or not, created problems that soon led to violence. Disputes sprang from differences in language, religion, outlook, and interests; and the clash of cultures between the remote Mexican

government and the heedless, headstrong American settlers ultimately culminated in Texan independence.

But the Texans in due course discovered the difficulty of organizing a stable society within which to enjoy the fruits of their migration. They knew the model of the states they had left and wrestled with the problems of establishing their own government—first as an independent republic, then as a state within the federal Union—while fending off attacks from the Mexican authorities. Sam Houston played a prominent part in these events, first as a military leader, and then as a civilian legislator and executive. In the process he discovered the values of stability and order, so that when the secession crisis came in 1861, he remained loyal to the Union while other Texans chose to join the rebellious Confederacy. His life thus throws light on the development of frontier society.

OSCAR HANDLIN

Preface

Sam Houston forged a life of great adventure, frequent controversy, and lasting achievement. Governor of two states (the only man ever to achieve that distinction), commander in chief of a victorious army, president of an independent republic, and for thirteen years a United States senator, he personified the southwestward march of the American nation during the first half of the nineteenth century. Houston was courageous, sensible, and practical. He was right far more often than he was wrong, and he never hesitated to oppose mass opinion so long as there was a chance of converting it to his way of thinking. In short, Sam Houston's biography aids in understanding the growth of the United States and the possibilities and limitations of leadership in a democratic society. His story both entertains and enlightens.

Many of my fellow historians at Texas colleges and universities must be thanked for their assistance in the preparation of this biography. Alwyn Barr, Walter Buenger, Gregg Cantrell, Cecil Harper, Denise Joseph, Marilyn Rhinehart, A. Ray Stephens, and Ron Tyler all read the manuscript and provided essential critiques. My friends and colleagues, Don Chipman, Richard Lowe, and William Wilson, listened and advised patiently as I worked through the problems of conflicting sources and interpretations. Among my graduate students, Matthew Nall worked as a research assistant and reader, and John Daniels, who completed a master's thesis on Houston in 1991, provided invaluable

aid in locating material and arguing key points of evaluation. Robert S. La Forte, chairman of the Department of History at the University of North Texas, offered financial assistance so that I could obtain illustrative materials.

I also owe debts of gratitude to Bruce Borland of HarperCollins for sponsoring my proposal for a Library of American Biography volume on Houston and to Lauren Harp and Michele DiBenedetto for their work in turning the manuscript into a book. Finally, Professor Oscar Handlin did a brilliant job of editing, eliminating more excess verbiage than I care to remember. In sum, the biography benefited greatly from the efforts of many others, but the finished product is solely my responsibility.

RANDOLPH B. CAMPBELL

Sam Houston

and the American Southwest

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CHAPTER ONE

"You Shall Hear of Me"

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Sam Houston, like Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun, was descended from Scotch-Irish migrants who arrived in Pennsylvania during the eighteenth century and moved southwestward down the Shenandoah Valley. However, unlike the Jacksons and Calhouns, who continued on into the South Carolina backcountry, John Houston, who came to Philadelphia in 1730, went only so far as Rockbridge County, Virginia. There, about seven miles from Lexington, he established Timber Ridge Plantation. John's son, Robert, expanded and improved Timber Ridge into one of the finest places in the region. His son, Samuel, inherited the plantation and married Elizabeth Paxton, the daughter of another wealthy Scotch-Irish planter. The Houstons were not Tidewater aristocracy, but they certainly qualified as members of the slaveholding gentry of western Virginia.

Samuel Houston served during the Revolution as a captain in Daniel Morgan's rifle brigade. He enjoyed military life and remained in the Virginia militia after the war, serving as a brigade inspector and attaining the rank of major in 1803. However, Major Houston's modest success came at the price of inattention to his plantation. By 1806, he was on the verge of bankruptcy—with a wife and nine children to support. The fifth child in this family, born on March 2, 1793, was Sam Houston.

Samuel Houston reacted to his financial problems, as did many Americans in similar circumstances, by planning a move to the west. In September 1806, he sold what remained of Timber

Ridge Plantation, paid his debts, and bought 419 acres in eastern Tennessee on which to make a new beginning. Major Houston's health failed, however, and he died late in 1806. His family moved to the southwest without him.

In the spring of 1807, Elizabeth Paxton Houston and her nine children loaded all they owned into two wagons and traveled to their new home near Maryville, Tennessee, south of Knoxville. Although Tennesssee had been in the Union only since 1796, settlement had progressed into the central part of the state by 1807, so the Houstons did not live on a frontier menaced by hostile Indians and lawlessness. On the other hand, eastern Tennessee was thinly populated (the whole state had fewer than 250,000 people then) and largely undeveloped. The Houstons and their slaves, reduced in number to five, had to clear the forests and establish a farm. In the meantime, they lived with relatives already settled in the area.

Sam Houston, who turned 14 the spring his family moved to Tennessee, had little formal education to that point, probably less than one year, but he had spent a lot of time reading the books in his father's library. In Tennessee he proved anything but a dutiful son, showing no interest in school or farm work. He attended an academy in Maryville for a brief period but thought it just as boring as the schools in Virginia. He did, however, discover Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad* and found its stories of heroic warfare so thrilling that he committed much of it to memory. He worked at clearing land and establishing a farm, but apparently his effort was indifferent, at least in the eyes of his brothers, who constantly criticized him and complained to his mother. Houston's response was to keep his own counsel and continue as best he could to go his own way.

After two years in their new home, the Houstons acquired an interest in a store in Maryville and decided that Sam would work there as a clerk. Clerking had less appeal than farm work, however, and Houston soon disappeared from his job and from home. Word came that he had crossed the Tennessee River southwest of Maryville and was living with the Cherokee Indians. Elizabeth Houston sent two of her sons to bring the runaway home, but they arrived to find him resting under a tree while reading the *Iliad*.

They were told that he "preferred measuring deer tracks in the forest to tape and calico in a country store." The "wild liberty of the red man," Houston later wrote, "suited his nature far better than the restraints of the white settlements."

Actually, the Cherokees, about whom Houston had heard from white traders in Maryville, were anything but "wild" Indians. For hundreds of years before their first contact with Europeans in the mid-sixteenth century, they had lived in a large area covering eastern Tennessee, western North and South Carolina, northern Georgia, and northern Alabama. Never an especially warlike people, the Cherokees could not match the military strength of the English and colonists in their war from 1759 to 1761, and in one treaty after another they ceded territory to white settlers. Cherokee culture emphasized openness and flexibility, and as a result they adopted the ways of whites more readily than did any other tribe in North America. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, most Cherokees lived as sedentary farmers and hunters in some sixty or seventy loosely formed bands, each with its own chief. Some had intermarried with whites, and it was common to have two names—one Cherokee and one English. The "wigwams" of tribal leaders were likely to be two-story frame houses, and slaveholding was common. After 1821, due to the efforts of Sequoyah, the Cherokees would have their own written language. In short, Sam Houston's Indians were anything but "barbarians" of the warpath and scalping knife.

Houston joined the Cherokee band led by Chief Oo-loo-te-ka (also known as John Jolly), who lived on a small island in the Tennessee River about fifty miles southwest of Maryville. Sam quickly learned their language and participated in their games, hunts, and festivals. He was especially fortunate in that Chief Oo-loo-te-ka liked him and offered to adopt him. Houston received the Indian name Colonneh, which he translated as "The Raven," a symbol of good luck to the Indians.

Life with the Cherokees was, in Houston's words, "greatly to his own satisfaction and comfort," but it shaped his future as well. He developed an abiding understanding and respect for his hosts' culture that he extended to the Indian way of life in general. Few, if any, white leaders matched Houston's concern and sym-

pathy for the Indian. His adoptive father, Chief Oo-loo-te-ka, may have taught lessons that reached beyond Indian culture and Indian-white relations. In Cherokee, the chief's name meant "He Who Puts Away the Drum," signifying a leader who sought conciliation and peace rather than war. Sam Houston would win fame as a soldier, but as a leader, he rarely favored war over peace, even when everyone around him clamored for a fight.

Houston returned to his mother's home in the late summer of 1810 for a brief visit and a new suit of clothes. He stayed long enough to get into trouble by demonstrating a weakness for alcohol that eventually went beyond youthful lack of restraint or the general fondness for liquor on the American frontier. In September 1810, the Maryville militia held a muster, accompanied as usual by tapping kegs of beer and barrels of whiskey. Houston and one of his friends got drunk and decided to beat a drum outside the courthouse window while the Blount County Court was in session. That bit of fun earned him a five-dollar fine for "disorderly, riotously, wantonly . . . annoying the court with the noise of a drum."

Houston returned to the Cherokees until the spring of 1812. In total, he lived among the Cherokees for most of three years. On each trip home, he bought presents such as powder, shot, needles, and blankets for his Indian friends and in the process went $100 into debt with merchants in Maryville. His credit exhausted, Houston had to find a way to make money and pay up. The earning power of a 19-year-old man who had little formal education and no liking for farm labor or clerking seemed very limited, but Houston hit upon a bold expedient—he became a teacher. He opened his school on a farm near Maryville in May 1812, advertising it with a broadside that set tuition at $8 for the term. This was slightly above the usual rate, but Houston indicated that the superior quality of the instruction justified the additional cost. Doubtless the whole venture seemed ludicrous to many around Maryville, but he had to turn away students. When the session ended in November, he had earned enough to pay his debts and found that he thoroughly enjoyed teaching. Later, as a United States senator, he described how, while instructing his students with a sourwood stick pointer as a symbol of "ornament and

authority," he "experienced a higher feeling of dignity and self-satisfaction than from any office or honor which I have since held." Sam Houston enjoyed being in command.

The War of 1812 began in June shortly after Houston opened his school. Tennesseeans, Jeffersonian Republicans in the majority, were ready to blame the British for everything from stirring up the Indians against white settlers to threatening the nation's honor, and they supported the war enthusiastically. Men joined the army in numbers presaging Tennessee's nickname, the Volunteer State, earned in a later war. Sam Houston, however, was not among the early volunteers. After completing his first term of teaching in November 1812, he decided to further his own education and enrolled in the local academy to study math. However, Euclid soon defeated him and ended whatever thoughts he may have had of a permanent career as a teacher. On March 24, 1813, a recruiting party for the United States Army came to Maryville, and 20-year-old Sam Houston stepped up to take a silver dollar off the drumhead and enlist. When he went to his mother for permission, she gave it with the warning that her door was always open to the brave but never to a coward. His brothers accused him of disgracing the family by entering the ranks as a private rather than seeking a commission worthy of Samuel Houston's son. Sam replied that honor could be served in the ranks as well as with a commission. "You don't know me now," he said, "but you shall hear of me."

Houston began training with the Seventh Infantry at Knoxville and became a sergeant within a few weeks. In July 1813 his regiment merged with the Thirty-ninth Infantry, and he was offered an ensign's commission. He won another promotion, to third lieutenant (platoon commander), in December. Houston's rapid rise resulted from his learning the drills quickly and from his personal qualities of openness and friendliness. Doubtless his physical size helped too. Always tall for his age, Houston at 20 was 6 foot 2 inches in height and weighed 180 pounds. With wavy brown hair and handsome features, he was a commanding figure who stood ready to live heroically in the tradition of the *Iliad*.

Houston saw action in the War of 1812 only against the Creek Indians, but the campaign in which he was involved offered