

# Stories of the Adventures of Col. Herman Aiken

By Wilson T. Davidsons Featured in "Frontier Times"

**D**EEP sea-captain, pioneer merchant, surveyor, farmer and stock raiser, soldier, frontiersman, friend and confidant of Sam Houston—such were a few of the roles lived by Colonel Herman Aiken during the twenty-five years of his adventurous career in Texas.

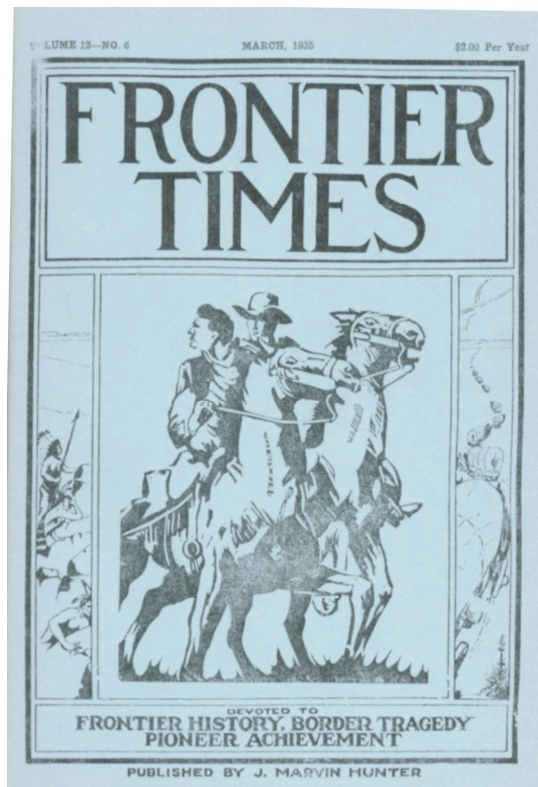
Born in Deering, New Hampshire in 1809 in the old building erected by Edward Aiken, his great grandfather and which is still in use, of Scotch - Irish ancestry, he was taken to Illinois at an early age. Here as a small boy he acquired the rudiments of an education and left home at the age of 14 to shift for himself.

He came to Texas in 1833, and in 1835 we find him as captain of a sailing vessel plying between New Orleans and Galveston, transporting arms, ammunition and supplies which were later to be used by the Texans in their fight for independence and, still more important, bringing many immigrants to Texas who were destined to take an active part in a "decisive battle of the world, the historic rout of the Mexicans at San Jacinto.

Soon afterwards he engaged in farming (see Episode No. 2) and selling supplies near Houston. Later on he had a store of general supplies at the old town of Nashville on the Brazos and subsequently a place of like nature at Caldwell.

At the outbreak of the war between United States and Mexico, 1846-1848, he raised a company and took an active part in this campaign. Colonel Aiken came to Bell county in 1851, and settled about seven miles north of Belton, building a residence which he called Casa Blanca, afterwards known as the Ed Flint place and here he engaged in stock-raising. At the same time he helped to promote the town of Aiken, a few miles away, on the Leon, now a ghost town, but (luring the Civil war a thriving village of six hundred souls.

In the year 1857 Colonel Aiken moved to a large farm on Elm Creek a few miles north of the present town of Troy and engaged in farming and stock-raising, his farm at this place being one of the largest at that time in Bell county. In 1859 he sold his stock interests, and moved to the Salado creek, nine miles south of Belton, took an active part. in the founding of Salado college, and the village of Salado. In the following year, on November 27th, just three days



after his 51st birthday, he died and was the first person to be buried in the old Salado cemetery.

Mrs. Josephine Aiken McGehee, of Ontario, Cal., the only living child of Col. Aiken says in a personal letter to the writer, April 1, 1934: "I remember Gov. Sam Houston stopping at our house in Salado, Texas. It was in '59 or '60, and spending the night with us."

The occasion referred to by Mrs. McGehee was probably in '59 during his successful campaign for governor and at the time he made a rousing speech at the old court house in Belton, that almost caused a riot. The General was firm in his opposition to secession. Incidentally, I have been told by my father, the late Capt. W. T. Davidson, who was present at this meeting, that the speaker in referring to one of his active adversaries, who was afterwards governor and state treasurer for many years, used the following language: "Little-----, Barking around after me! He has all the instincts of a dog except gratitude."

At the time of his death, Colonel Aiken had large land holdings, many of which were in Bell county. At one time he was deputy surveyor of Milani county, which district at that time comprised a large area, including the present counties of Bell, parts of Falls, McLennan, Coryell and a number of other counties to the northwest.

A strange incident in connection with Colonel Aiken's possessions is related to me by Mrs. McGehee: "At the time of my father's death, he owned quite a lot of this land \* \* \* his papers were lost quite a while, and found in the old well on the square of the court house (at Belton) and had been in the water so long that they were ruined when found.

"In 1854 he built the Cumberland Presbyterian church at Belton. In addition to his church membership, he was an Odd Fellow, and also took great interest in his Masonic work.

In speaking of Colonel Aiken, the Hon. George W. Tyler sums up his character in the following words: "Few men possessed more thoroughly than Col. Aiken the confidence and esteem of his fellows. His broad intelligence and practical experience united with a natural tactfulness made him a capable, forceful and useful citizen and leader of men. Firm in his principles, loyal to his friends, virile in character and of unblemished integrity, he was an outstanding figure in the early history of Bell county and of Texas."

While at Casa Blanca Colonel Aiken wrote some stories of his adventures which he called "Episodes." This was some time between 1851 and 1857, as he says "When I got on the high divide, below Cedar, where I now live, I could see various squads back in the prairie." These interesting yarns of pioneer days seem to have been laid aside and forgotten until 1923 when Colonel Aiken's son, the late Frank C. Aiken of Gatesville dug them out and turned them over to his friend Judge Tyler. Some time later Judge Tyler presented them to W. S. Hunter, for many years business manager of the Belton Journal and prominent business man of Belton; and finally Mr. Hunter turned them over to me. Frank C. Aiken vouched for the authenticity of these stories; and across the back of the manuscript in Colonel Aiken's own handwriting is inscribed: Fireside Tales, or Tales of Early Texas.

I give the stories in sequence in Colonel Aiken's own language.

"Early in the spring of 1837, while the Texas coast was rigidly blockaded by all of the Mexican navy, I was with many Texans in New Orleans anxious to get to Texas. Some of the more cautious proceeded by land. Being an old navigator, I preferred the gulf. I took passage on the schooner Flash, Captain Masteller, and a large crowd of cabin and deck passengers. Our cargo consisted of arms, ammunition and provisions for the Texas army. Nothing of note occurred until we made sounding off Galveston island, except most were desperately seasick.

"The captain was a hard drinker, the mate a fresh-water loby and inefficient, caused me to keep a lookout and for this purpose I had gone aloft, it being very foggy and drizzling rain. When I discovered within half a mile of us two sails, this intelligence I soon made known by hallooing at the top of my

voice, 'Sail! Ho!' when the rigging was soon crowded with anxious lookers. I soon made out one to be a Mexican man of war brig, the other a prize that had left New Orleans the day before us.

"The wind was light and our vessel heavy laden and a deckload of goods and families. Soon a blank shot was fired to bring us to, to which we did not heed. In a few minutes a shot was fired and so close to our jib that we knew that the next would be a broadside. Our colors was run up and jib let go and rounded to and awaited the boarding officer. The captain had requested me to observe from aloft the amount of their force while we were lying under their lee guns. This I could easily do and made out that their force on board was only 16, besides the boat's crew.

"The officer spent a half hour below with the captain in overhauling the manifest and papers. He then came on deck and ordered the captain to keep a light that night and keep under his lee quarter.

"During a few hours there was a general consternation among those who had families on board. We followed the directions until about 10 o'clock. It being very dark and squally our light was put out and our vessel ran into three feet of water and anchored, all sails lowered on deck to prevent observation.

"About 1 o'clock a fresh squall struck us off land our cable, when we were compelled to make sail and lay off and on until daylight, keeping as near in as possible in hopes that at day light we could get in at Galveston pass.

"Just at daylight, while standing in shore, I heard the cry of breakers. As I had not slept and had, by the captain's request, kept the deck, the captain was forward, myself and Captain J. W. Henderson, now "Smoky," stood aft near the wheel. The captain immediately gave orders to put down the wheel and round the vessel in stays. I saw the danger of the maneuver and pushed the man from the wheel and kept her head on and asked Captain Henderson to defend me in my position as the least of the vessel at that time would in such a surf he sure to capsize the vessel and all might be lost. The captain, with his pistols in hand, started off swearing vengeance against me.

"As he got about halfway a tremendous breaker swept over us submerging the entire vessel, with the force of a tremendous jar. I was thrown against the wheel with such force as almost to deprive me of sense and a rush to get out of the cabin followed. Barrels, boxes, crates were washed overboard and but for the timely grasp of a deck passenger the captain would have gone with the balance of the lost merchandise and for a minute a deathlike paleness, took possession of every face."

As soon as the first panic was over all assembled around and requested me to take full charge of the vessel and offered me protection from the captain

and all law and as self-preservation is the first law of nature. I consented. The captain saw his position and came and took me by the hand and added his request with the rest and from that time to his death would have risked his life to save mine. The vessel worked through the breakers and lay bedded in the sand. We took in all sail.

"While in the breakers, the fog cleared up and we discovered shore about a mile off and a crowd of armed men who commenced firing their musket balls at us, one of which passed close to my head while at the wheel. After a consultation it was agreed by all that I should take a boat's crew and first land the women and children, which was very critical, as some had to be thrown into the boat owing to the swell. In this I succeeded and landed all safe on shore. We found that a squad of about 30 men had been stationed on the island under Col. Turner to keep off or prevent the landing of the Mexicans, and while we were busy in landing the passengers we could see our Mexican brig outside about two miles off observing our position and operations, Thus we were saved the mortification of being carried to Mexico and yoked up in the chain gang.

Among the passengers on the Flash was W. W. Hall. chaplain of Congress. E. Brush and family, Mr. Manor, now of Travis county; a large family by the name of McCampbell from North Alabama; Captain James W. Henderson, now of Houston; Major Frampton of Austin county, and about 100 whom I do not recollect."

"In the spring of 1838, in Harrisburg county, I was making an effort at farming 10 miles from the city of Houston. My stock of provisions which I had laid in the year before was nearly exhausted and Texas paper-money had taken the place of hard currency and times getting hard.

"Early one morning I took my rifle and started out in search of a venison or other game around the thickets that surrounded my camp as I had not at that time built a house. My family consisted of a wife and a little daughter about 13 months old. I had silently groped about two hours when I heard voices in the direction of my camp. Being 10 miles from neighbors I feared all was not right.

"I immediately started through the openings of the thickets and got to within 50 yards of my camp when I beheld 30 athletic Comanche warriors and four squaws. The chief, a powerful man, was giving orders.

"Some were packing upon their pack horses pots, kettles, tin- pans, etc. Others were opening and examining the contents of trunks.

"In one corner of the camp stood ins- wife with a billet of wood and with a deadly determination of protecting and saving her child from the squaws who seemed anxious to take it alive.

"Thoughts that would fill a volume forced themselves upon me and no time for deliberation. In an instant I raised my rifle to my face, drew a sight upon the chief before I was discovered by them.

"I then hailed in Spanish as best I could and ordered them to unpack my goods and vamoose. I told them that the first attempt to raise a rifle to me and I would kill the big captain. Every eye was fixed upon me and seemed to obey any order of the chief in sending me upon my eternal errand.

"There was a suspense of a minute or more when the chief gave orders to unpack my goods. Throwing them on the ground, mounted their horses, the chief delaying until the last, they loped off with their accustomed yell. When out of sight I started to meet my wife when she swooned away upon the ground and a reflection of the imminent danger of losing my wife and child in captivity my own nerves, which before seemed like iron, gave way and I became as effeminate as a child."

"In 1846 when Major Bryant was for some distant outside of the settlements upon Little River and J. Mercer upon the San Gabriel and Captain Merrill on Brushy, all several miles from any settlement and had their houses strongly picketed in, I attempted to get to Austin by Mercers and Merrills.

"After a hard day's ride, occasionally secreting myself from Indians seen in the distance hunting buffalo, which blackened the prairies, about one hour after night I arrived at the tall picket fence of Captain N. Merrill.

"All was silent and dark. I hailed. After some lime the captain asked "Who was there?" Finding that I belonged to the white tribe he came out and opened his gate and admitted me. Had put my horse in a strong picket stable, cared for and locked in.

"After being seated he told me that I was fortunate as the Comanches were watching about at dark for him. Got supper, lodging and breakfast and started for Austin upon a trail. When about two-thirds of the way, had crossed Walnut creek in the bald prairie, I took a chill and, too sick to ride, I got down, stripped my horse, tying the end of my lariat to the saddle and partially to my arm but in such a way as to slip with any considerable strain.

"After my chill left the fever was very high and a temporary derangement which I had expected after my misery abated.

"A drowsiness came over me and I slept. When I awoke it was night and cold. I wrapped in my blanket and made the best of my lodging. As I was suffering much from thirst, at early dawn, I saddled up my cavia and started and proceeded about two hundred yards when I passed a fresh trail.

"I could easily see that it was but a few hours old and about fifty horses. After a few hours as I traveled slow feeling very unwell, I discovered a company in

the South on the trail which I could make out to be whites and at once knew that they were in pursuit of the Indians.

"Upon my arrival in Austin I learned such to be the case and they had stolen 30 head of horses in ten miles below Austin. The company, as usual, pursued for several days, finally lost the trail and returned without the horses.

"How providential that they did not perceive me, or my horse betray my locality. If they had it is likely, in my weak state, my fate would have been sealed. A Special Providence."

"In December 1846 being in Austin and desirous of examining the country in a N. E. direction, the San Gabriel, Salado, etc., down Little River, I supplied myself with some provisions and nothing of particular note occurred until I was warned by a cold norther to turn my back to it and make for Bryant's Station. When within about eight miles in the post oak woods on the south side of Little River a bleak cloudy (lay I suddenly came upon a large encampment of Comanche Indians about 1,000 in number.

"I felt that my life depended upon my coolness and sagacity. I was immediately ordered to vamoose. I felt that my trusty deringers could do me no good with such numbers and to leave so suddenly would almost insure a ball in my back and I would try a little stratagem. And having several land patents just issued from the land office upon parchment, a seal attached by a blue ribbon which looked very official, myself and horse tolerable well apparelled, I pulled out one of the patents, opened it, told the men around me as best I could that I wanted to see the chief, mentioning over the names of Sam Houston, Burleson and others that I supposed they were familiar with. They pointed out his tent.

"As I rode up to his tent he came out and ordered me to vamoose. I did not heed him but rode up and handed him the open parchment, pointing out the name of Sam Houston, the great seal of the land office. A crowd of minor chiefs gathered around and as they could not talk English and I but little Spanish, I could not make them understand my important mission.

"After some consultation they handed me the patent and again ordered me to vamoose. I put away my patent, buttoned up my coat and started off as careless as possible. When I had got some timber between us I put spurs to my horse and done some very responsible riding and soon made the swift current and had to cross quartering up stream.

"I did not consult the chances of my horse going down stream or any other danger. When about half way across I heard a yell in the bottom behind me. My horse took fright, made the bank and another mile I was sate at Bryant's Station."

"In 1848, needing some relaxation from my confinement in the store, several of my neighbors agreed to make a trip of discovery and examination of the vacant country about the head of the Cow House and Leon. When the time arrived they all, from various excuses, declined making the trip. As my business was arranged for my absence I started alone on horseback with about twenty days provisions in a wallet and a forty foot rope by way of feed for my horse.

"After leaving the settlements I proceeded by slow and cautious rides up the timber that skirts the north side of the Leon. Sometimes I would venture to take the praline from one point of timber to another. Sometimes secreted in some ravine as a squad of hunters would pass. Sleeping without fires, after climbing bills, descending into valleys and making my selections of land, of water, timber and all that is desirable. when we had the country to choose from, ere I had half accomplished my mission twenty-five days had elapsed and my provisions gone and about one hundred forty miles to make to get home. As no accidents had befallen, I became more careless. I started for home having my wallet filled with mineral specimens, occasionally obtaining a few sweet grapes and plums. The second morning homeward I discovered two Indians about two miles off. They appeared to be flanking me on the south or timber side.

"About noon I got into a deep dry branch, Stampede Creek, raked my wallet for a few crumbs, examined my fire arms and put them in first rate order. As I had 24 rounds without stopping to reload I did not fear any force unless from ambush. I had proceeded about one mile to a point of timber, now owned by Mr Beeman, when an athletic warrior, nearly naked and richly painted and his head decorated with feathers, his rifle cocked across his horse, charged out from behind a thicket.

"When I first saw him was about 50 yards. I drew both holsters, wheeled my horse and had a sight upon my man in less than a minute, by which he, was within 15 steps of me. He immediately pleaded for his life as he saw it would be fatal for him to attempt to raise his rifle. I asked him his tribe. He said he was a Tonkaway, his name was Lewis, a big captain. I told him I was Captain Aiken, a big little captain and as he was in my power I would spare him if he would never molest a white man again, which proposition he readily pledged his faith by my dividing my tobacco, which I did.

"I then told him that he must go and not turn around as he went or I would shoot. I then felt my precarious situation as there was a village in Cedar Creek, on Peppers Creek and on Birds Creek. All I was compelled to pass and very near the villages. Being unacquainted with the bottom and meanderings of the Leon and having nothing to eat I determined to go as direct as possible. I got safely across Cedar Creek. When I got on the divide below Cedar

where I now live I could see various squads hack in the prairie. I shaped my course to Peppers Creek near where Mr. Carpenter lives. Saw a crowd proceeding towards the War Crossing of the Leon, now Belton. I lay by in a ravine until they were out of sight. When I started I saw the largest drove of loafers that I had even beheld, I judged over fifty, on the trail of the Indians.

"I halted a little to let them pass as I feared such a drove. I proceeded to a point on Birds Creek near where Puett lives, took a dim buffalo trail in to the creek. I found that it was dry and the bluff about 40 feet down nearly perpendicular. After trying several expedients I went down with my rope and pulled my horse. "It was getting dark and I did not take lime to search for the trail on the opposite bank, but started through the hushes. I soon found progress impeded by vines, got down, and with my knife, cut my way slowly.

"About ten at night I got to a little clear place and stripped my horse, turned him loose and sat down upon my saddle, hungry, thirsty and fatigued and sick. About midnight came a slight shower. I sucked my blanket which refreshed me very much. Fell asleep and slept to daylight when I climbed a tree and could discover the trail a few steps off and that it was a long ways out to the prairie. I got down, took my knife, cut a way to the trail, saddled up my horse and by 9 o'clock arrived safe at Mr. Griffins who had just settled at the Three Forks of Little River.

"I staked out my horse, got breakfast and laid down and took a good sleep. After dinner started for Cameron and reached there in time for breakfast next morning. I found that all were astonished as I had by some means been reported killed and eaten up by the Tonkaways. That night I rode up to my own door to the astonishment of my wife and children and relieved her of the perplexing cares of administration and a short widowhood. My dress was in ribbons, my pants torn off above the knees, each leg tied up in a pocket handkerchief and hat all a come down and a beard of four weeks. It was difficult to know to what tribe I belonged."

~~~ The End ~~~

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