Texas in 1822: A Few Observations

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TEXAS IN 1822: A FEW OBSERVATIONS

edited by

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A man identified only as J. C. L. wrote to the American Farmer on December 10, 1822, telling some of his observations made in Texas the previous summer. Although the letter gives few clues to the writer's identity, he was probably James Chambers Ludlow, son of Israel Ludlow, a prominent land speculator who helped found Cincinnati, Ohio, and for whom the town of Ludlow, Kentucky was named. Israel, a surveyor, had built Ludlow Station, now in Cincinnati, as a frontier outpost about 1795. He brought his bride, Charlotte Chambers, there in 1797, and the following year their son, James Chambers, was born.

According to a brief biographical sketch, James Chambers Ludlow was six feet three inches tall, well educated for his time, and spent his youth in the wilderness among Indians and wild beasts. Other sources show that he was in Franklin, Missouri, in 1820-1821 at the time Moses and Stephen Fuller Austin were in that area planning their Texas venture. By the spring of 1822 Ludlow was back in Cincinnati and closely associated with his kinsman, Nicholas Clopper, who was making plans to join the Austin colony. Clopper and a party of family and close friends left Cincinnati on April 9, 1822, and traveled by water to the Texas coast. It was their understanding that another family group would follow them. The unidentified J. C. L. arrived in Texas in the same season as the Cloppers, traveled by the same means, and concentrated his efforts on the same area. He explored Matagorda Bay, which he knew by the older name of San Bernardo, visited Galveston Bay, and made some interesting observations about the Coushatta Indians along the Trinity River. James Chambers Ludlow definitely accompanied Clopper on a journey to Texas in 1826, and in August of that year joined four other men in petitioning Stephen F. Austin to found a town on Matagorda Bay. As Ludlow was described then as having "explored the country," it seems likely that he also accompanied Clopper on the 1822 trip and was the J. C. L. who wrote to the American Farmer.

After the 1826 visit Ludlow lost interest in Texas, possibly because he had suffered severely from the fevers endemic to the Gulf coast during the summer. Thereafter, although he held Texas lands until his death, his career centered at Cincinnati, where he had inherited considerable property and had become prominent in business and civic circles. In 1832 he built the Hall of Free Discussion, better known as Ludlow Hall, and dedicated it "to the interest of education, literature, and religion." About the same time he became a leader in the abolitionist movement in Ohio, serving as president of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society and encouraging James G. Birney in the publication of the Philanthropist. Ludlow's fervor for abolition made him unpopular in some circles. Once he was publicly warned that his activity
was hurting his city, and again, when a mob destroyed Birney's printing press, he feared that his home would also be attacked.\(^7\)

Ludlow married Josephine C. Dunlop, and was the father of eight children, five daughters and three sons, the last of whom was born the year before his death on August 15, 1841. A few years after his death, his eldest daughter, Sarah Bella, married Salmon P. Chase, another leader in the Ohio abolitionist movement and later a prominent member of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet.\(^8\)

If J. C. L. was indeed James Chambers Ludlow, the following letter is an interesting memento of his years in the wilderness before he became a prosperous businessman and a crusader against slavery.

To the Editor of the American Farmer:

Montague, Dec. 10, 1822

**VEGETABLE AND ANIMAL PRODUCTIONS OF TEXAS.**

Dear Sir,—Having perused with considerable interest, a few numbers of your valuable paper, it induces me to send you some observations made during an excursion to the Southward, last summer. Parts of the months of May, June and July, I was exploring the Province of Texas, where I observed a variety of new (to me) vegetable productions; and many others, with which I was acquainted—but, the luxuriant difference of their growth, owing to the more congenial temperature of the Texas atmosphere, produced so astonishing a change, as afforded me almost as much gratification as the discovery of a new species. I particularly remarked the prickly pear, which grows abundantly, bordering the coast of the Gulph, and around the bay of St. Bernards [Bernardo] [Matagorda]. One stalk I measured, was four and a half feet in height; a staunch trunk, apparently formed of the leaves, but grown thick and strong in the requisite proportion, to support the new productions that projected from around it in great numbers; some of which, were quite 12 inches, on the middle leaves or branches. Blossoms were putting forth, one of which appeared to have arrived at maturity, measured about 4 inches in length. A Mr. Vance, with whom I conversed, and who had spent the last six or eight years in the different provinces of Mexico, informed me that in the Province (where he contemplated spending the remainder of his life,) it arrived to much greater perfection than in Texas—so much so, that he intended trying the experiment of enclosing his fields with it by digging a small trench, and setting the largest and most flourishing leaves with their edges in contact with each other. He felt satisfied, that in less than three years, it would form a barrier impregnable to either man or beast; and from the growths I saw, I have full faith in the correctness of his theory.

Bordering the streams, I observed a great variety of grapes. One species, on the last of May, were about the size of the Madeira grape, although it was quite a month previous to their ripening—consequently, I could form no opinion of their quality. I am satisfied they do not partake of the Fox species, the vine and leaf being quite different. Another production of the
country, which I much admired, was the running rose. (I believe it is also a native of Louisiana.) It blooms early in the season, producing a blossom very similar to the Burgundy rose; but its running is the most astonishing quality relative to it. One stalk I saw, was quite 30 feet in length. Many of the inhabitants of Louisiana have them planted at one corner of their dwelling, and by being careful to nail them up as their length increases, they will in time have a living wreath around their residence; which, when in bloom, forms a most beautiful appearance.

In my excursions through the country, I visited several tribes of Indians. Some of them appear to have many of the habits and customs of civilized life—for instance, their living in well built cabins, cultivating the soil, rearing cattle, and horses, etc. etc. On visiting the Conchetta [Coushatta] tribe, residing on the waters of the Trinity, I was much astonished to observe some customs among them, which appear to me to be of a religious origin. The green corn dance, or, feast of the first fruits, appears very similar to some of the laws and regulations resembling Jews—and the respect with which the custom is venerated, and the tenacity with which they adhere to all the minutiae of its forms, will be proven by the following occurrence: After traversing for some days through a region destitute of inhabitants, either aborigines or emigrants, I arrived at an Indian habitation, and with great pleasure, observed a field of corn adjoining the hut, which appeared to be just in perfection for eating. After the usual introduction of shaking hands, and a few enquiries relative to my further route, I made application for the purchase of some new corn, although I observed the squaws preparing a dish of fish and beans to set before me, yet being a great lover of young corn, and it so great a rarity, I persevered in my application, and which appeared to produce some weighty consultation. Not before having any difficulty in conveying my ideas, which were all by signs, I concluded they were either very stupid, or were determined not to understand me—but to place the matter beyond being misunderstood, I tore an ear from its stalk and laid down some silver, and desired six ears for it. A boy, after some hesitation, was despatched for them. I directly placed one by their fire to roast, which was immediately opposed by the whole family, with some warmth. It then struck me, there was some superstitious reason for opposing it. I desisted, but taking some fire with me for the purpose of forming one near the door, (where there was abundance of fuel,) but in that I was again disappointed—the same objection was raised as before. I was then handed some spunk, steel and flint, to strike fire for myself—the day then was fast declining, and wishing to reach the village six miles further, I declined their offer, and after partaking of their beans and making some presents to the boys, I departed, and reached the town previous to sun down; where we were kindly received. I was pleased to find one of the natives, who spoke a little bad English. The king, and a number of others assembled on seeing us arrive, and we were solicited to partake of whatever they had—but determining not to burden them, as their provision was scarce, I directed my comrade to prepare supper; and the corn which had been brought on, was accordingly produced for the purpose of cooking—I observed it produced the same agitation and excitement, as at the place where we procured it. After some private talk among themselves, the one who spoke English,
came forward with a request from the king, that the corn would not be eaten in their village then; that it was an established custom among them, (and deemed almost sacreligious to act otherwise)—not to eat their new corn, until the "CORN DANCE" was over. The third ensuing day it was to take place, and would continue two, three, or four days, according to the determination of the heads of the tribe, when assembled. Contemplating to remain two days among them to rest our horses, we thought it best policy to comply with their request.

On a water excursion in the Bay of St. Bernard, [Bernardo] [Lavaca] I saw several singular animals, somewhat resembling the fresh water soft shell Turtles, from 12 to 30 inches diameter. Being ignorant of their dangerous qualities, I attempted to seize several by the tails, and was some time within an inch of succeeding; on relating this circumstance when I returned on board the ship, Dr.__________, who had been a resident some time on the coast, informed me, I might thank my stars I did not succeed in grappling one; that they possessed a poisonous quality, by inflicting a wound with the tail, which produced almost instantaneous death, but with the most excruciating pain. He had been witness of its effects but a short time previous, in the person of a young stranger; the wound was inflicted in the palm of the hand, which appeared to affect the system similar to the bite of the Rattle snake, but was more rapid and certain in its progress. It is of the species called stinging Bat, vulgarly called the 'Sting-a-Ree.' I did not put full faith in the Doctor's statement, until it was confirmed by indisputable authority, and then, rest assured, I felt very grateful for my escape.

Their appearance in water is similar, at a little distance (as before stated) to the Turtle. On a nearer view, the head and its posteriors resemble the Bat with extended wings. On moving through the water, they wave the sides of their apparent shells, which propels them through the water, together with the aid of three feet; the tails appear to be about one third of the length of the body, near the root of which, project the stings resembling cock spurs, and very brittle; decreasing in length to the termination of the tail. When the wound is inflicted the sting breaks off, leaving the broken part in the wound. This latter account is on the authority of others.

Yours respectfully,

J. C. L.

NOTES

1His letter appeared in American Farmer, IV (February 14, 1823), 375.
3Biographical Encyclopaedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century (Cincinnati and Philadelphia: 1876), 488.
4Clopper, American Family, 98, 104.
5Ibid., 128-130.


The old Spanish name of San Bernardo originally referred to a coastal area but later applied more specifically to Lavaca Bay. Walter P. Webb (ed.), *The Handbook of Texas* (2 vols.; Austin: 1952), II, 548-549.

The Coushatta Indians followed the closely related Alabamas to Texas from the Southern United States in the early nineteenth century, settling on the banks of the Trinity River. The Alabama-Coushattas now occupy an Indian reservation in Polk County, the only such reservation in Texas. *Ibid.*, I, 19-21. J. C. L. was following the old Indian trail that led from the mouth of the Trinity River to Nacogdoches and which became known as the Alabama Trace in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The idea that the American Indians were related to the Jews was a favorite one of some nineteenth-century writers. For example, see Henry Ker, *Travels through the Western Interior of the United States...* (Elizabethtown, N.Y.: privately printed, 1816).

J. C. L. gives a good description of the stingray, of the family *Dasyatidae*, that is still a hazard to bathers along the Gulf coast from Florida to Texas. Although the sting is not as invariably fatal as he implies, it is extremely painful and is as dangerous as the bite of a poisonous snake. That he was unfamiliar with the stingray indicates that he was not at all familiar with the Southern Gulf coast region.