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## ANSON JONES, DEAR ANSON JONES

by *Buck A. Young*

In every young man's life, he is influenced by several institutions. Usually, first is the home, then school, and finally church. Certainly, I was more affected by my family, especially my mother and father, than anyone or anything else as I went through my early, formative years. My future was shaped by the practical lessons of life taught by those wonderful people.

The next most influential entity, though, was my elementary school with its old-maid teachers and bald-headed principal. Baytown's Anson Jones Elementary School, named after the fifth and last president of the Republic of Texas, does not exist anymore, at least not as an active school. The old, pinkish-brown brick building is still there on Stimpson Street behind Horace Mann Junior High, but it is now used by the school district as a media center. The name and the students have been transferred and combined with the former black school into Carver-Jones Elementary.

On the September morning in 1938 when my fifteen-year-old sister Bernice took me by the hand and led me to Miss Yeverton's first grade class, the twenty-three-room school was already an established institution in the Tri-Cities. It was the first permanent school building built by the Goose Creek School District. On its cornerstone is engraved "Goose Creek Ward School, 1922, J. E. Crawford, Superintendent." It is a U-shaped building with the center portion two stories high and each wing one story. From the back of the U extends a two-story auditorium. Also in the back is a covered walkway leading to a stucco cafeteria that was shared with Horace Mann. Beside the stucco cafeteria was a steam plant that provided heat to both schools. Its black smoke stack was then the tallest structure in the Tri-Cities outside the refinery. The front of Anson Jones resembled the Alamo, its entrance framed by two channeled columns that supported a rounded arch of circles. This architectural style was repeated on the other elementary schools built in the early days of the town.

Almost from the first day of school, the person who exerted a great influence on my life was Mr. L. P. Hodge, the tall, thunderous, bald-headed principal of Anson Jones. An orator and an accomplished storyteller, Mr. Hodge could gain and hold the attention of the most fidgety child as he weaved tall tales of Texas history during the weekly school assemblies. He could be counted on to give his stirring account of the Battle of San Jacinto at least three or four times a year. The

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*Buck A. Young lives in Baytown, Texas. His poignant reminiscence of school reminds us all of those earlier days.*

nearness of the historic battlefield to Baytown certainly reinforced my interest in the significance of the story, but it is Mr. Hodge's wild account of the battle that I remember so vividly, not any textbook version later forced upon me.

Mr. Hodge always began his presentation with a brief summary of the events leading up to the battle, including the Alamo and Goliad massacres, then he set up General Houston's plan of attack on Santa Anna's sleeping army. "As old Sam knew he would," Mr. Hodge said, "Santa Anna finally got his tail in a crack. He placed his scattered forces in a position where retreat was impossible. Swamps were on three sides and an open field in front. On the afternoon of April 21, after having retreated for six weeks, old Sam formed a line of infantry that extended 1000 yards, placed a cannon at each end, and sixty horsemen under Mirabeau B. Lamar on the extreme right to prevent the Mexicans from breaking away to the prairie."

"It was really amazing," Mr. Hodge continued, "that an experienced army like Santa Anna's could be taken by surprise by a much smaller force advancing for a mile across a bald prairie in the middle of a warm April afternoon. But, it happened."

As he described the decisive 18-minute fight, Mr. Hodge walked around the stage, his voice rising in pitch and intensity, his gestures becoming exaggerated. "As they approached the Mexican barricade, a few bursts of musketry came from behind the Mexican breastworks. Several Texans raised their rifles and replied. Hold your fire, old Sam shouted. Damn you, hold your fire."

"Then, twenty paces from the barricade old Sam gave the signal. A round from his cannon flattened the breastwork. The line of infantry let go a volley and ran forward with their hunting knives drawn, yelling, 'Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!' They had their battle cry and before the afternoon was over, their revenge."

At the point in the story where the Mexicans are driven into the swamps and the tall Tennesseans stand over them with their long rifles cocked over their heads, Mr. Hodge really swung into action. "Me no Alamo, me no Goliad," Mr. Hodge mimicked the Mexican soldiers as he held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "The HELL you didn't," Mr. Hodge's rich Tennessee voice boomed as he swung down his imaginary rifle on the head of an imaginary hapless soldier.

"The carnage that day was terrible," Mr. Hodge concluded. "Over 600 Mexican soldiers were killed, 200 more wounded and 700 taken prisoner. Few escaped, even Santa Anna was captured trying to sneak away in a private's uniform. His own men gave him away by yelling 'Hail, El Presidente' when he was brought back into camp."

In my six years at Anson Jones, I must have heard the story a dozen or more times, but it never failed to move me. In my boyhood imagination, I could easily place myself at General Houston's side as we slaughtered Santa Anna's dragoons.

At our weekly school assemblies we always started the program with a prayer, the pledge of allegiance, and the school song. Most people remember their high school song, perhaps a few remember their junior high song, but who remembers their grade school song? I can. It went: "Anson Jones, dear Anson Jones. To thee we praises sing. You have taught us to be true, firm, and faithful in all we do. The standards you have set, we will all uphold. We'll be true to the Blue and Gold, and your honor we will hold. To thee we praises sing. Anson Jones, dear Anson Jones."

When my brother Dick sang it, the school name came out "Aner-son Jones."

When Mr. Hodge wasn't fighting the Battle of San Jacinto, we had syndicated programs that traveled throughout the Texas public school system. We had musicians of all kinds, jugglers, glass blowers, artists, and once a woman born without arms who could paint, play a guitar, write letters, and even comb her long hair, all with her feet.

And, of course, we had special holiday programs and class plays during the school year. My first grade class presented a program about Holland which necessitated a Dutch boy costume from Mama's sewing machine. Miss Yeverton furnished the wooden shoes and the cardboard windmills and tulips. At Christmas, my class joined the second graders in dressing in white sheets and tinsel halos and parading through the darkened auditorium with lighted candles as we sung "O Come All You Faithful."

For Halloween, we drew pictures of pumpkins, witches, and black cats. We had an annual school carnival where we dunked for apples, fished in an imitation pond for prizes, walked the cake-walk, and entered the spook house where older kids moaned and groaned, dangled paper mache goblins in front of us, and placed our hands in bowls of warm spaghetti and told us they were human brains.

All the holidays were observed at school, mostly through the use of reams of construction paper and stacks of poster board. There were paper turkeys and Pilgrims at Thanksgiving, decorated evergreens, plump Santas and miniature nativity scenes at Christmas, Honest Abe silhouettes and heartshaped valentines in February, and chocolate bunnies and white lilies at Easter. And, so the year went.

There was even time for reading, writing, and arithmetic. Starting with simple ovals and push-pulls, I was soon copying crude letters in

my Big Chief tablet. I already knew my ABC's, thanks to my older siblings, and was soon reading my first Dick and Jane book. Simple addition and subtraction were no problems as long as I visualized pennies instead of sterile numbers. Consequently, I brought home good reports during my first year of school.

My first year at Anson Jones made a mark on me physically as well as intellectually. One winter's day at recess I walked behind a swing occupied by a little girl named Betty King. I intended to give her a push with my hands, but missed the wooden seat. Its corner struck my left cheek just to the side of my eye, cutting a deep gash and knocking me to the ground. I cannot recall how long I laid on the school yard, though at the time, it must have seemed ages until my brother A. L. pushed his way through the circle of children surrounding me, picked me up in his arms, and carried me to the school nurse. She cleaned the blood off my face and clothes, bandaged the cut, and called for Mr. Hodge to take me home.

That day my mother was preparing to come to school to attend a P.T.A. meeting. She had never been to one, but had succumbed to my pleading and had arranged for Bernice to stay at home from high school to watch my baby brother, Kenneth. Mama didn't go to the P.T.A. meeting that day, or any other day. Instead, she waited at home while Bernice went with Mr. Hodge and me to Dr. Marshall's office in old Baytown where my cut was sutured and dressed. The jagged scar remains a constant reminder of my days at Anson Jones and of Betty King.

Next to the accident, which certainly would not be the last in my twelve years of public schooling, the most memorable event during that first year of school was meeting Miss Spence. Every grade school seems to have a mean, cranky old-maid teacher who all the children fear and hope they never have as a teacher. Such a person was Miss Spence, or so the story was told to me my first day of school. "Watch yourself around Miss Spence, she has eyes in the back of her head."

I heeded the advice and stayed clear of the rigid, unsmiling old-maid. That is, until the day at recess when I rounded the corner of the building in haste as I ran to the swings. I bumped into an adult. My initial surprise turned into panic when I looked up and saw the adult was Miss Spence.

"Why, hello," said Miss Spence, without breathing the expected fire and brimstone. "What's your name?"

"B-B-Buck," I stuttered, an act I had never done before. Within a few minutes, however, she had settled me down with more questions about my age, my teacher's name, my parents' names and the like. I

soon lost all fear of her and from that day until I left Anson Jones six years later, I was her "pet." Naturally, I took some ribbing from the other students for being a "teacher's pet," but they all feared Miss Spence too much to give me a hard time, and, I suspect, there was a little envy mixed in.

Later, I tried to speculate why Miss Spence had "adopted" me. Perhaps I had sparked some lost maternal instinct in her. I was quite small, just over three feet in height and some thirty-six pounds in weight. My uncombed white hair topped a head much too large for the body it sat upon. It took me years to grow into my head. Then, there was my birthmark. It ran diagonally downward from the corner of my right eye, about an inch and a half in length. I was already sensitive to the stares and blunt questions from strangers about the hairy mole. During play, I was extremely sensitive to any nicks or cuts on or near it. Even anyone touching it caused me to react all out of proportion to the pressure exerted on it. I lived with that mole and its psychological effects until I joined the Air Force at age nineteen. Finally, at an air base in northern California, I had a surgeon remove it from my face and life. It is permanently preserved in a small vial in the San Francisco Medical Center. Perhaps it was that physical flaw that touched the old-maid's psyche and enabled her to show feelings of tenderness towards me. At the time, however, it was only important to me that it was happening and thus enabled me to adjust well to school life.

Each year school started the day after Labor Day and I wore my new clothes and new shoes on the first day to show them off. This was the annual ritual we went through. In late August, three sets of play clothes—khaki pants and colorful print shirts—were bought, along with the Big Chief pencil tablets, box of number two pencils, and 24-color sets of Crayolas. A new pair of shoes was bought if the child's foot size had changed sufficiently to require it, and if a serviceable used pair could not be passed down the family chain. The winter coat was a lined zippered jacket, bought a size too large since it had to last several seasons. A pair or two of blue overalls for work projects, and a Sunday church outfit consisting of dark blue dress pants and a long-sleeved white dress shirt completed our wardrobe. Even though J. C. Penney's was selling dress shirts for 88 cents, there was little spare cash in our working class family.

Within a few days, the newness of the school year wore off, and the shoes were kicked off and worn clothes from the previous spring appeared again. In Southeast Texas, elementary-age boys seldom wore shoes except to church and on special occasions. Only during the cold weather months of November, December, January, and February did

we wear shoes to school, and even then, on those frequent summer-like days we came home with our shoes tied together by the laces and slung over our shoulders. Occasionally, in stopping to play while enroute from school to home, we left our shoes behind and had to run back for them. Early one fall Dick forgot his shoes when he stopped along the Interurban tracks to play sandlot football. When he went back after them, they were gone, probably we all guessed, to a shack in Oak Addition. Somehow Dad adjusted his budget for the three or four dollars for a new pair. It was the only time one of us had two pair of shoes in the same year.

Most of the time we boys went barefoot, and in so doing caused the soles of our feet to become tough as leather, thereby protecting us from the grass burs and sharp stones. There were other hazards, as I soon discovered, like broken glass. By the time I was ten, my soles were a criss-cross pattern of scars.

Our school lunches, carried in brown paper sacks, matched our plain attire. Some of the more affluent children brought black, refinery-type metal lunch pails with a matching thermos for their milk. The closest thing to a lunch pail that Dick and I had were two empty stainless steel quart honey buckets. They proved too bulky and too working class, judging from the taunts of our schoolmates, so we conveniently lost them in the high weeds of an open field and returned to carrying the plain brown bags. The daily fare seldom changed—a sandwich of potted meat with lettuce and mayonnaise, a sack of frites, a fried pie, lemon or cherry, and a banana. I was not too impressed with the food our mother prepared for us until the day my lunch was stolen and replaced with a sack containing just two sour pickle sandwiches. That was the first realization I had that there were those less fortunate than us. The boy who took my lunch came from a very poor family and his father was dying from TB. I did not have the heart to turn him in to the teacher.

Occasionally, Dick and I were permitted to buy a hot lunch at the stucco cafeteria. For fifteen cents we could buy a complete meal; for ten cents, with the nickle pocketed for a later treat, we got a large bowl of pinto beans, a handful of crackers, and a half-pint of milk.

Most of the youngsters in my neighborhood rode a yellow school bus to Anson Jones every school morning, but walked home in the afternoon. One reason we walked was that the afternoon bus had to wait thirty minutes for the junior high kids to get out of classes and we elementary kids were much too impatient to wait that long. The real reason, though, was that we enjoyed the walking and the exploring opportunities it offered. We would vary our route from time to time, thereby keeping up with the latest remodeling projects such as the new

Central Assembly of God Church at Pruett and Nazro Streets where stacks of lumber and bundles of ceramic tiles invited boyish play.

The usual route home was to go down Massey Street to the Inter-urban tracks, then down the tracks to Pruett. Once south of the Inter-urban tracks, the route home led between houses, across open fields and down alleys. We seldom used the streets, except as linkage. Soon, I had a mental map of my town, and more important, knew where every fruit tree was located. This information would soon be invaluable for nighttime raids in the autumn when the fruit was ripe for the picking.



*Mrs. Earhardt's fifth grade class at Anson Jones Elementary School for the 1942-1943 school year. I'm standing in the third row next to the teacher. My girlfriend for so many years, Erma Lee, is on the first row, third from the left.*

My elementary years thus passed with more pleasant memories than bad. The plays, assemblies, and carnivals I enjoyed with my classmates, and I was also called out of class occasionally to accompany Miss Spence's sixth grade class to special movies and events. Unfortunately, some unpleasanties did occur; in fact, I suffered not one, but two instances of disgrace in Mrs. Kennedy's second grade room. The first concerned grades. I had completed the first grade with the expected As and Bs, experiencing little trouble with the school work. The first nine weeks of the second year, however, I spent too much time at play

and not enough at my homework and received a red D in arithmetic. Naturally, I was mortified about the failing grade and took a good ribbing from my brothers and sisters plus a mild rebuke from my parents. To prove to them, but mostly to myself, that I was capable of making better grades, I worked extremely hard the next term and brought the arithmetic grade up to an A. I also promised myself I would never fail again and kept that pledge through college.

The second incident involved my standing in front of a hissing radiator while the front of my overalls dried. As youngsters are prone to do at least once during their early school years, I ignored nature's call too long, and before I could raise my hand to be excused to go to the bathroom, I wet my pants. Now, Mrs. Kennedy was a no-nonsense type teacher whose method of discipline was to publicly shame the student. When a little girl was bad in class, she was marched to the front of the room, bent over the teacher's desk, her dress lifted, and the ruler was applied to her exposed, white-cotton-covered posterior. A child discovered having wet himself was stood before a radiator to dry. This proved uncomfortable to all around the shamed child for the area soon grew rank from the smell of heated urine, and the child was shunned for the rest of the day.

It was in the second grade that I really experienced the concept of death. What memories I had of my maternal grandmother's death and funeral in 1937 were faint and unreal just as was my grandmother. She was only a picture on the wall. But, Patrick had been a classmate and a friend, and was now dead from a ricocheting bullet fired by an older boy shooting at cans at the earthen tanks off Nazro Street. Why didn't he get up and start playing again? Why did he look so pale and ashen? Our class went as a group to the Paul U. Lee Funeral Home and sat and wept as the minister tried, unsuccessfully, to answer those questions. As I sat there, trying to picture Patrick playing in Heaven, which the minister assured us he was doing now, I felt a quiet sadness that slowly worked its way deep into my soul. The feeling remained and has been reinforced by every death I have since experienced. I now realize it is God's way of easing lingering grief.

With such preparation of the first two years of school behind me, I entered the age of enlightenment in Miss Locke's third grade room. It suddenly occurred to me that there was a world outside the borders of my neighborhood and hometown. I began to wonder about such things as people from other places, from other countries. What did these people look like? What did they do everyday? How were they dressed? What language did they speak? What did they think about? The deep feeling of an unnamed wanting filled my soul. During the quiet moments at night when everyone else was sleeping, or as I sat

alone in my secret hide-a-way, these thoughts would come to me and this feeling would almost overpower me. Somehow I knew my life would be different from that of my brothers and sisters. I did not know why I felt this way, only that I did.

It was also the time I started transferring some of the great knowledge I was accumulating at Anson Jones to practical use. My geography book described ancient Persia and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, so I renamed two converging gulleys in my neighborhood. I saw pictures of great bridges spanning mighty rivers, so I built a wooden structure across "Thunder River" that washed away with the first heavy rain of the spring. Scattered chunks of oilfield concrete foundations became the ruins of Ur and I rode flashing chariots across imaginary deserts. I relived all my reincarnated lives.

I was a soldier with Alexander the Great and fought in Egypt and Persia. I rode an elephant with Hannibal across the frozen Alps. I was at Carthage when the Romans destroyed that city-state. I manned a long bow for Richard the Lionhearted at Jerusalem during the Crusades. I stood on the Plains of Montreal during the French and Indian War with the eagle feather of an Iroquois warrior in my hair. I felt the disgrace at Waterloo with Napoleon and fell at Little Round Top at Gettysburg with the last gasps of the Confederacy bleating in my ear. I made the charge up San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt and lay in the mud at Verdun, France while a million men died around me. I was, and am, War Incarnate, the sum of all battles fought throughout man's bloody history.

In the next instant, I was a traveling companion to Marco Polo in Cathay. I circumnavigated the world with Magellan and survived that first harsh winter in Plymouth Colony. I followed the crudely marked path taken by Daniel Boone and carved a state out of the wilderness. I sat in Independence Hall in Philadelphia and heard the thirteen colonies declared free states, then repeated the process at Washington-on-the-Brazos when a band of rag-tag Texans declared themselves free of Mexican tyranny. I traveled with John C. Fremont over the California Trail and mapped a route tens of thousands would follow. I was an Irish railroader and saw the golden spike driven at Promontory Point, and then was a starving Norwegian on the bleak Dakota prairie scratching out a meager living raising wheat. I panned for gold on the Yukon River and watched the Aurora Borealis arc across the northern sky, and then ate dust on the Cimarron Strip as I staked out a claim on a piece of oily-smelling worthless land. I was, and am, Discovery Incarnate, the search for all that is new and different.

But mostly, I was Superman in a home-made cape, leaping tall buildings in a single leap. I was a half-naked Tarzan swinging through

trees on crumbling poison oak vines. I turned my toy pistols backwards and became "Wild Bill" Elliott, a peaceable man unless riled, then pre-disposed to clean out a whole nest of outlaws. I was a gallant RAF pilot in my lone Spitfire, engaging the entire German Luftwaffe for mastery of the skies over England. I was every Indian chief who ever fought against the white man, but since I knew no Cherokee names, even though I'm one-eighth that blood, I became the greatest of the Sioux warriors, Crazy Horse, and single-handedly wiped out Custer's command. I was, and am, Boy Incarnate, a rag-tag, barefoot dreamer of dreams.

In the fourth grade, I moved upstairs to Mrs. Knox's room. I also moved up to notebook paper and a fountain pen, always filled with Script Sheaffer's washable blue ink. America's entry into World War II on December 7, 1941 overshadowed practically everything that happened that school year, in fact, about the only other memorable event occurred the day Pauline Massey, who sat in front of me, wet herself.

Mrs. Earhardt was my teacher for both the fifth and sixth grades and so I did not have the opportunity to be in Miss Spence's room. She was our reading teacher in the fifth and I sat upon her lap as she read Texas history to us. Thus my 1,000 days at Anson Jones came to an end.

I started in Anson Jones with about two dozen kids and most of them stayed with me for all 12 years of public school and even into junior college. Billy Richards, Mona Baker, George Burnett, Charlene King, Lillian Monroe, Murphy McNulty, Doralyn Mallory, Jerome Morse, Betty Washburn, and Barbara Williams are names that come to me over the span of many years, but I can still put a face with each of those names. I can see them on the playground, in class reciting a lesson, or walking across the auditorium stage to receive an award for high grades or perfect attendance. In late spring of 1944, as the tide of war was at last turning in the Allies' favor, we twenty-four students walked out of that pinkish-brown brick building on Stimpson Street for the final time and moved over to stucco-covered Horace Mann Junior High. Our childhood innocence remained at Anson Jones.