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THE BIG THICKET IN LITERATURE

by LOIS WILLIAMS PARKER

Hopefully, that enchanting wilderness known as the Big Thicket of East Texas is about to come into its own. There are at present six bills to create a Big Thicket Park pending in Congress. The importance of this area is emphasized by the fact that it has produced five governors.¹ Much has been written about the Big Thicket in the past several years, but it is not generally known that within its intimate and immediate boundaries lies the setting for two of the first novels of Texas.

What is conceded to be the first published novel (the anonymous *L'Heroine due Texas* Paris, 1819) of Texas has its setting on the Trinity River near Liberty, Texas. This colorful work is not the best in craftsmanship, but it yields a great deal of interest in historical and folk material. The plot tells of the romance of Ernestine and Edmund, two of the Napoleonic exiles who settled on the Trinity in 1818 at a spot they called Champ d'Asile. Under the command of General Charles Allemand, these two were among a hundred and fifty other refugees whose number grew to four hundred before they decided to take leave of the area. The story tells how Edmund built a "lean-to" with branches which he covered with the sail from his sloop. Ernestine "furnished the interior with moss" while Edmund spread dry leaves on the ground for a carpet, over which he spread several bear skins which he had bought in New Orleans. All of the group started building houses of a more substantial nature, "of medium-sized logs and with the cracks chinked with mud". A whole village of houses complete with forts was finished in record time. A friendly "Cochatis" Indian rendered aid during a siege of illness. Two members of the group fell victim to a number of cannibalistic savages who were having a feast when they were discovered by General Allemand. The bodies were recovered and given a proper burial. A hurricane took a number of lives. These and other exciting incidents befell the refugees. This is one of four accounts of the 1819 French settlement.

Ten years after the unsuccessful attempt of the French to settle permanently on the Trinity, Charles Sealsfield (pseudonym of Karl Anton Postl, the German monk) was probably poking around East Texas gathering material for what was to be the second novel with an East Texas setting. *Tokeah or the White Rose*, Sealsfield's first novel,² is the story of the Chief of the Oconee branch of the Creek Indians and an English girl, the White Rose, who was reared by him. The setting is in an area between the Neches and the Sabine Rivers and the time about 1812. Tokeah, who was the last descendant of the Mikos, and whose ancestors had inhabited the fertile lands at the head of the Oconee River for many years, hated the white men and particularly after their chief ceded lands to the state. Tokeah left Georgia with about sixty men and their families. He applied to the Pawnees and later to the Toyasks on the Red River for asylum. After their refusal to take him and his people in, he went to the Osages where he met a similar denial. He then descended the Sabine River, met the Sabines, but went onward until he met the "feeble tribe" of Coshatte Indians who pointed out to him the land between the mouth of the Sabine and the Neches. "The bosom of the Neches grew broader and broader as it swelled toward the lake, the

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somber cypresses and mangroves drooping dark branches into the water." They decided on the eastern bank of the Neches and built their village. "The sloping plain on which the village was scattered swelled, as we have already mentioned, immediately on the margin of the bank into a narrow elevation..." "It rose about twenty feet above water level and ran the whole length of the village." Apparently the location of the village was at a point where the walking distance was about an hour between the two rivers. Great swamps were also within an hour's walking distance. While all of the description may well be a figment of the imagination, it rings of authenticity. One feels that this village had to exist.

In 1835, Gideon Lincecum made his first trip to Texas. He kept a journal which is no literary masterpiece if grammar and syntax be the criteria, but for honest and forthright opinion and graphic observation, his is hard to beat. On February 9, 1835 he crossed Big Alabama Creek, better known as Village Creek in Hardin County and as Big Sandy in Polk County. On February 10, he wrote,

"This day passed through the thickest woods I ever saw, it perhaps surpasses any country in the world for brush. There's 8 or 10 kinds of evergreen undergrowth, privy, holly, 3 or 4 kinds of bay, wild peach tree, bay berry and so thick you could not see a man 20 yards for miles."

Lincecum was a medical doctor, a naturalist and a most interesting character. He carried on a heavy correspondence with many people, among them Erasmus Darwin. He lived on Dickinson Bayou for a while, but lived near Huntsville most of his time in Texas. He loved Texas, but left it after the Civil War because he disapproved of the "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags" who invaded the state.⁴

A couple of years after Lincecum's journey through Texas, Gustav Dresel provided a description of the Alabama Indians, their habitat, some observations on their customs and the terrain, but at this time the first white man of which we have a record had been living in the area of Sour Lake for about a year. This historic little town, where Sam Houston and many others vacationed in the hope that the medicinal waters could affect cures for whatever ailed them, is the oldest community in Hardin County.

In 1844 William Bollaert sailed down the Trinity. In his journal he discloses that on January 26, 1844 he passed through Swartwout in Polk County. He speaks of the ghost town of Smithfield. He gives a description of the Co-shatte villages, and he mentions a magnolia forest. He describes the Trinity River banks and mentions the "many large alligators basking in the sun". On January 27, he reached the town of Liberty. He lists some of the people and tells of their businesses.

In 1859 Hardin County had been created out of part of Liberty, Jefferson and Tyler Counties, and by the time of the Civil War many settlers had come to the area.

During the Civil War the Thicket was a hiding place for deserters and dodgers of service. This is the basis for a four-act play, *The Keyser Burnout*, by Larry Jene Fisher written in 1940. This play was produced in the Thicket a number of times that year. In 1942, Larry Jene Fisher copyrighted a play called *Gusher, or So Lived an Oil Town*, which had as its setting Batoga (Batson-Saratoga) with the time 1902, when the area was experiencing an oil boom. This

play is rich in Big Thicket vernacular and gives a close-up look at boom town life. It is too bad that this talented young man died young.

In 1950, Jewel Gibson published *Black Gold*. Mrs. Gibson was an English teacher for many years at Sam Houston State College. Her husband, who was quite familiar with the Saratoga-Batson area, helped her in this effort. While this work is not as well done as William Owen's *Fever in the Earth* (Putnam, 1958) it is, nevertheless, the source of much authentic description of life in the Thicket during those exciting times. The hotel, the saloon, the people are all real; however Mrs. Gibson's statement that "dal" is generally used in place of "damn" in the Big Thicket is incorrect. It is not in use now nor has it ever been in popular use.

When William Owens was working at Kress's in Port Arthur in about 1934, he fell in love with the Big Thicket.⁶ He visited the area often. In later years, from 1952-1958, he was also in the Thicket area frequently. He met Lance Rosier and was instrumental in getting Lance and Roy Bedichek together. He knew Larry Fisher also. It was during this time that he did much research on oil history and gathered material for his *Fever in the Earth*. This engrossing work, thoughtfully executed, is the most polished novel of the area. It is the story of Hale Carrington, "a penniless young man who was struck by the plague of greed". Here one encounters the true picture of the boom town, all of its people, all of its "smells and sounds."

The first novel describing in any measure the life at the sawmills of this area was written by Kate Randall Blackwell. It is called *Corn for the Oxen* and that is what a great part of it is. However, this little work has a good deal of milltown life and was written by one who knew the sawmill community well. She was the wife of a sawmill doctor and a long time teacher in Hardin County.

Leslie Bradford Scott has written the only "shoot-'em-up" about the Big Thicket area of which this writer is aware. *Dead at Sunset* is not too bad as "shoot-'em-ups" go, but he did not happen to know that there were no stage-coaches in the area at the time of the oil boom. Outside of this error, there seems to be accuracy in locations and directions, and fairly authentic, if gory detail.

Junius (Jim) Watson's *Joe Jacoby* is a story of tragedy and tenderness expressed by a dog and his East Texas sawmill folks. The setting is Buna. This novel has the rare quality of being a story that can be appreciated by both the adult and the child. For the most part the plot is fast moving. The character delineation is excellent. Watson's style reminds one of Fred Gipson's, but it also has a distinctive quality all its own.

Francis E. Abernethy is responsible for the most outstanding work on the folklore of the Big Thicket. *Tales from the Big Thicket* contains more actual history than any other work to date. It is a collection of essays expertly edited by Abernethy, with an introduction and the concluding chapter by himself. Stories by Alice Cashen and Ruth Scurlock of Batson, Saratoga and Sour Lake are included. Archer Fullingim has a highly interesting chapter on Big Thicket folks. Saul Aronow describes the area geologically, while William Owens gives us the flavor of the folk music. Perhaps the most interesting chapter is from a manuscript of Frances Pitts Norvell, but was written by V. A. Collins, and called "Settling the Old Poplar Tree Place". There are other essays by natives of the area including my own tales from my great-uncle Owen Williams.

Aline House has written briefly of the Hardin County area in *Big Thicket: Its Heritage*. It contains some excellent pictures, some historical and biographical sketches, a few ballad type verses along with legend of the area.

Aline Rothe's *Kalita's People* is perhaps the best account of the Alabama Coshatta Indian life in the Big Thicket. Mrs. Rothe holds the attention of the reader throughout this work. She has included a copy of the by-laws and the corporate charter of the Indians.

Dempsie Henley published *The Big Thicket Story* which he revised and called *The Murder of Silence*. It is an interesting piece of work by a colorful character, even if it has been referred to as *The Murder of English* a number of times.

The Big Thicket has probably been the inspiration for more poetry than most of us are aware. There are no published collections at this time. An epic type poem by Alice Ewing Vail called the "The Big Thicket" was published by Naylor in 1952.

It is entirely possible that diaries, memoirs, or journals of the late 19th century and early 20th century may yet show up. A Big Thicket novel surpassing anything done to date could come from the pen of F. E. Abernethy, Alice Cashen, Ellen Reinstra, Mary Lasswell, Pete Gunter,⁴ Archer Fullingim or half a dozen others who know the area and its people well, but one cannot help thinking we shall soon be hearing new creative voices of the now generation.

NOTES

¹Governors William P. Hobby, Allen Shivers and Price Daniel were natives of the area. This was the adopted home of Governor George Wood who is buried in Polk County and of Sam Houston, President of the Republic and first governor of the State.

²Thomas W. Streeter in his *Bibliography of Texas 1795-1845* (part 3, vol. 1, p. xvi.) points out that this should have been listed as one of the first four novels of Texas by Sister Agatha Sheehan (*First Four Novels of Texas*, Washington, D. C., 1939) rather than *Das Cajutenbuch*.

³Gideon Lincecum's journal. Entry for February 8-10, 1935. MS. University of Texas Archives.

⁴Burkhalter, Lois Wood. *Gideon Lincecum, a Biography* (Austin, 1965).

⁵Letter to the author.

⁶Dr. A. Y. (Pete) Gunter's *The Big Thicket* (Austin, 1972), is another of his many efforts to save the area.

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