Secession in the Piney Woods

Martha Emmons
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by Martha Emmons

Old Nacogdoches has often been called "the cradle of Texas history." And well it might be. But for me, on fire as I was for history and folklore, Nacogdoches, over in the piney woods, was Happy Hunting Ground.

I rolled into that town, old in history but new to me, one day in late August. I was driving my shiny new Model T Ford, yclept Secession because it was grey-and-blue and because it had frequent uprisings as we bounced over those unsurfaced roads of East Texas. The roads were unfamiliar to me. So was my new car. So was driving any kind of motor vehicle. Never until that morning had I driven an automobile one mile.

I planned to arrive looking as trim and neat as did Secession, whom I dusted off several times along the way. Especially for that first appearance I had bought a pretty pink suit, with a white kid belt touched up with gold along the edges. But the late-summer heat plus the washboard roads twisted that kid belt and its metal trimmings into a strange knot, all gathered up in the back. The gold had leaked greenish-blue all around the waist and far, far up the back toward the shoulders of that pink jacket that was to have been so handsome.

Green splotches notwithstanding, I did get a room at the Redland Hotel. I checked in, soon got myself re-arrayed, and then went out to visit the family of some fine friends from Baylor days. Already I was in love with the place: with Nacogdoches, with its people, with the pines, and with East Texas. Wanted to learn more about it.

I lost no time exploring the region. Little old Secession and I were soon driving around just anywhere, a-sleuthing after anything to be found concerning the people, the places, their past, and what might yet be. And all of this in spite of an ominous warning. Lost in a back road one day I met a friendly gentleman of Cajun ancestry who told me that "All Nacogdoches is haunted by evil spirits, and so are all roads leading to it." Pretty dangerous ground. Still we got around, Secession and I.

From the first I could see that I was dealing with young people a bit more sophisticated, more daring than were the high schoolers I had known. At the first senior class party they made off with "Whiskey Tony," as they called the little fake-fur monkey which was tied to Secession's radiator cap. Every day for weeks someone among them innocently and anxiously inquired if I had "found Tony."

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Eager to launch a local history program I gave my American history classes as first assignment, six snapshots, to be handed in two weeks later. With each picture was to be a short statement of the historic significance of the place. Promptly came the pictures, loads of them; so many that I knew I could never find time during school hours to assort them. I took them home with me and began going through them. To my surprise I found one house after another where Thomas J. Rusk had committed suicide. At first I thought there must be some mistake. Then with more and more pictures in widely separated spots, each the site of the demise of the illustrious Thomas J. Rusk, it all became clear, too clear. New teacher. What would she know about which house was which? What difference did it make? Any snapshot would do; so on went the caption "Place where Thomas J. Rusk committed suicide." Yes, that was it. Pretty well figured out except for one thing. Those youngsters failed to consider that in my ramblings I just might pick up a few facts here and there, and at least might recognize some houses. I knew they must be having great fun comparing notes: "I turned in a picture of the Episcopal rector's home"; another: "Shoot! That's nothing. I snapped a picture of the very house where she lives. What the heck? I'll bet she never notices it," and so on. Good time being "had by all."

One evening at home I selected about a dozen snapshots in as many locations, each purporting to be the place where Thomas J. Rusk committed suicide. I strung them along two lengths of red velvet ribbon. Next morning I took them to school. Just before the first class I hung them from the holding at top of the board, front and center. The class entered, all smiles, all civility. After roll-checking and other preliminaries I told them how I was enjoying the pictures, finding them interesting and instructive. I took a long pointer and indicated the one at the top. Naively I began: "For instance, I was interested and a little surprised to learn that Thomas J. Rusk committed suicide at this place on Irion Hill, the house now occupied by the Saunders family, I believe." I saw the sly looks implying "Poor thing!" but went bravely on. "This house stands on Orton Hill and is now owned by my good friends, the H. B. Davis family. Here, I understand, Thomas J. Rusk committed suicide." On and on for a few more pictures. By that time they were laughing, all right, but were laughing at themselves. A tall boy in the back of the room arose and strode to the front and saying, "You win!" removed the picture he had brought. Others followed. Then we got down to business.

On the high school grounds stood a building reconstructed from the stones of what had been the Old Stone Fort of Nacogdoches. So far as I could see it was serving no purpose and had no furnishings except two long tables. At one end of the building was a raised platform
extending the width of the room. Soon came the suggestion that we open the Fort and start a museum in it. Nothing happened for a while. Then one day a girl brought a coverlet with the story accompanying it; and a letter written from a place in Tennessee, in 1862. In the letter the writer gave his views of the conflict then on, and gave his dismal forecast for the outcome of it. Another student brought a spinning reel. Then everybody caught the fever. Gifts came rolling in, some from persons not known to be interested in such a project. Class members volunteered to list the articles, others to arrange them in the Fort. Well-wishers supplied two display cases. Guns and knives were assigned to a table. Resourceful youngsters improvised a room on the platform. Brown paper and a goods box became a fireplace. An old corded bedstead supplied resting place for the coverlet. An old trunk turned up from somewhere, and from the attic of the old Orton home place came a clock, and a rocking-chair with a widened desklike arm on the right side, both mementos of the days when Mr. Orton served in the Congress of the Republic of Texas.

With so many interesting relics of course we must show them off. Our first open house was for the grade school children and their teachers. Class members took their places about the room, some in period costumes, and proceeded to give the younger seekers-after-history the "true account" of every article. But the temptation became too great for them. Soon I noted undue excitement at the guns-and-knives table. I strolled over that way just in time to hear about a certain knife with a deer's foot handle, given to us by someone who said it was about 75 years old. The "informant" solemnly declared, "Cain killed Abel with this knife." I think I lost consciousness for a few seconds; then I heard that "Daniel Boone hunted bears in Kentucky with this knife." I don't know what other wonderous exploits featured that seventy-five-year old knife. About that time I saw Morris Smith uncoil himself and tell his listeners that "This trunk was found in Banita Creek, half-filled with Spanish gold." When I could get a word with them I took the boys to task about telling such enormous whoppers. They advised me, "Now you go right on back over there and tell those teachers all about the Haden Edwards letters that we found in the band house downtown, and leave us to deal with these kids. We know what they want to hear. We've got to make it interesting to them."

They must have done it. Here they came, every time they saw the doors of the Fort open, evidently desiring to hear more of the same. Soon came parents, grandparents, many of them bringing relics procured under all sorts of juvenile duress. One man declared, "That grandson of ours shook us down for everything on the place that he thinks has any history to it. He was with us one night last week, and we haven't seen his great-grandmother's square-lensed eyeglasses since. They'll turn up over here at the Fort before long." They did.
We began to have so much company that we could see that some­body needed to be on hand to greet visitors at all times, or at least at certain specified times. Students gave hours at the Fort according to their schedules. Two or three times a week I “held the Fort,” as we said.

One day just as I was herding out one group of visitors and just as the five-minute bell rang for class passing, here came another group. I saw no way to get away from them. My stance on tardiness to class was well-known. Only the day before, I had laid about me with some who had drifted into late arriving. I closed my tirade with about these words: “You are all my friends. But if you can't get here before that last bell stops jingling, please do not embarrass me. Just turn your steps to the office and get a tardy slip.” I tried to hustle the visitors out, and as soon as I could decently get away I fairly flew across the campus, up those numerous short flights of steps, landed at the top step just as the darn bell gave its last jingle. At the door stood suave, genteel John Byrd. He paraphrased my own words: “We are all your friends; but if” . . . etc. And very gently the door closed. Then the class called a “business meeting” and delegated a member to give proper invitation to “Miss Secession” to enter.

One result of the episode was the decision, reached in another business meeting, to move down to the Fort with classes, maps, and all, and hold as many classes there as many times a day as could be arranged. Then visitors could come and go as they liked and our work could go on. Besides, such an arrangement would “keep Miss Secession out of trouble.” We did just that.

“Holding the Fort,” hosting visitors, giving intelligent attention to arranging the relics required help, sometimes errand-running. Instead of one “second in command,” as I usually had, I relied on all of them. Especially for fast errand-running I called more and more on a trio: Macra Jenkins, Fern Farris, and Bill Parsons. Because of a student's blunder in pronouncing The Three Musketeers, the trio came to be called the “three muskeeters.”

In such a place as Nacogdoches, a program of all-indoors study of history would be like the action of the teacher who pulled the blinds down while the circus parade passed by and then kept the children in after school because they didn't know their geography lesson, about the wild animals of Africa. Many of the students became interested in the Alabama-Coushatta Indian Village in Polk County. I had never heard of the Indian Village until I spent a night in Livingston en route to Nacogdoches from Houston. Secession soon learned the way to the Indian Village. I took oversized loads of schoolkids with me. Sometimes individuals would go in small groups on their own. At that time the plight of the Indians was not good. Mr. Clem Fain, of Livingston, led
the way in calling them to the attention of the federal government. A number of our students made posters and wrote themes, to help in the undertaking.

From reports of all those outside activities naturally came the idea of an all day "history tour" just for American history classes. And so the plan was arranged, with administrative blessing. High school students knew the roads better than I knew them. They also knew places and persons of interest to such a study. Certain students prepared lectures, each selecting a subject or else accepting one from one. I gave forth only two dicta: (1) that they be on time, and (2) that each bring a lunch, because I didn’t know where we might be at getting-hungry time. All the rest I left to committees: itinerary, transportation, and correspondence with those whom we wished to interview. We were to leave from the Fort promptly at eight o’clock. The transportation committee reported "plen-tie" transportation, and that each person was to pay fifty cents. There were 84 to go. Came the day, came the hour. I arrived a few minutes before takeoff time, and found trucks-and-trailers loaded one with boys, the other with girls. Virgil Prince collected the fares. Standing by, ostentatiously showing a package for me to think of as a lunch—but which was quite likely a folded-up newspaper—was a lad called "Skinny" Simons, a great favorite of mine. With disarming smile and manner he asked, "How about letting me go on this tour?"

"Can’t do it, Skinny," brusquely from me. "I wouldn’t a bit mind your going. But you are not a member of any one of the classes; and if I let the bars down I would have the whole school, and it would turn into a picnic. This is not a picnic. It is a history lesson."

Only a smile from Skinny. I was sorry, but I couldn’t help it.

I got on with the girls and right on the stroke of eight we started, first stop to be the cemetery. The boys came along behind us. At the cemetery several students made their little talks; the others took notes, some of them using friends’ shoulders as writing desks. I grew almost tearful over their "sweet, sweet attitude," making do with whatever was at hand for desk space. A few more stops in town, with a student-lecture at each spot. Next stop was a mile or two out of town. A student lectured about some person who had figured in Texas history. "Then the Mexican government had him put in jail," he said. From somewhere in the crowd came a doleful moan: "Um-m-m! ‘Fo’ Gawd!" as only Skinny Simons could utter it. I looked for him. "Skinny Simons! Get out of this crowd and go back to school," I ordered. Virgil Prince piped up: "He paid his four bits." Then they told me how I had looked right at him two or three times, and how in the cemetery they had shielded him by putting their notebooks on the shoulders of those in front of them, etc. He had come forth with his well-known expression just to let
me know he was there. He had also waited about it until we were far enough from school that he thought I wouldn't have the heart to make him go back.

Down through the years I have used that incident as "the right way to do a wrong thing." The lad had not tried to persuade me, or to put the responsibility on me. He asked for permission. I refused it and gave him the reason. From that point he took matters in his own hand. No doubt his zeal for history on that particular day was that he wanted to accompany his sweetheart (whom he later married). I said, "All right now. I don't care what they do to you when you get back to school on Monday. So far as I am concerned, you are a.w.o.l. from class." Sweetly smiling, he said, "Yessum," and that was that. On we went. I never did know what they did to him at school. He may have smiled himself past the discipline committee, I don't know.

Sometime along in the dead of winter I went to the show with some friends one night, all of us in Secession. After the show we went to the home where I was staying, and up to my room. I wanted to show them a new hat or something. While we were up there we heard a car take off. One remarked, "That sounds like Secession," but we thought no more about it. When we came down, there in the bright street light where I had left Secession was nothing. But nothing. I began to cry, to call "the law," and to realize that I had not paid my automobile tax, all at the same time. After what seemed a long time here came the constable, "Doc" Watson, and we started out in search of my "little grey-and-blue Ford." As to number, I was too excited to know. But he said he knew that little Ford. Then he asked me a lot of questions, among others, was the key in the ignition? Yes, but what had that to do with us now? All I wanted to do was "find Secession." "Oh, I just wish some of those old high school kids would come by," I wailed. "They would make short work of finding Secession and the person who took her." Just then here came a carload of them, about three couples. I shouted, "Secession's lost. Go hunt 'er!"

"Yessum. We sure will" came sympathetically from the group.

From time to time they drove alongside and anxiously asked, "Have you seen Secession yet?"

"No. But don't you leave me!"

"No'm, we won't" came from the dear ones.

And so the hunt continued.

We shook every grain of red dust all over old Nacogdoches, and combed the woods around. At last I gave up, discouraged and beaten, told the constable to drive on into town. As we came on down North
Street, there a few doors up from my house set Secession, all calm and undisturbed in the winter moonlight, key still in place—and I spent the next ten years of my life trying to find out “Who stole Secession?”

The straight of it seems to be about this. A fine, quiet lad who helped in his father’s drug store closed the store that night and walked up the street toward his home. On his way he found Secession sitting there, key in place and ready for travel. He got in and drove to his house, a few doors up the street. At home he went inside, called a few of his friends. “Come on over,” he said. “This ought to be good. I’ve got Secession.” As they trailed me they would have to drop back now and then, to keep me from hearing the girls giggling. All that time I was waxing lyrical about the “precious things. Lord bless ’em! Here they are at this time of night, trying to help me find Secession. They ought to be home in bed.” All this in tears. Those youngsters must have gone in cahoots with the whole school, and maybe “Doc” Watson besides, to keep me dangling at the end of the string for so long.

I never did battle over gum-chewing in class unless it became a real disturbance. One time the class assembled for their final examination. I noticed one after another sawing away on gum. I said something about it. One said, “Oh, please let us chew gum! I can think better when I’m chewing gum.” Others chimed in with the same plea. I stopped. “Is there anything to all this?” I asked. “Can you really think better when you’re all stoked up with chewing-gum?”

“Yes, indeed!” came the chorus.

I scrambled around in my desk, to provide everybody with the stuff if they thought that gave them an advantage. I had several pieces but not enough for everybody. Penny collection hurriedly followed, and I pitched in what they lacked, and dispatched Joe Prince on a long lope to the nearest store, to buy needed brain-aid. He was back in a few minutes, and on went the examination. I don’t know whether the gum helped or not; but far be it from me, I thought, to interfere with any young persons’s thinking power.

One evening a senior student called and asked if he might come down and get a little help on the test slated for next day. Students often did that. I was always glad to clear up anything that I had failed to do in class discussion. He asked a few questions. As he took his leave he thanked me for the time; then he “stood tall in his boots” and said, “Now I’m gonna say something that you won’t like. It may make you mad.”

“Fire away,” I said.

Then, in about these words, he said: “It’s about the questions that we usually have on our tests. I often notice those on the board
for the first class. Maybe they are hard, but they are such that if any­
body has studied he can answer them. But by the time we get there,
at eighth period, we've been mean all day and you're tired; and it looks
like you just put anything up on that board that comes to your mind.
Sometimes the questions are not related to what we've been studying."

It is natural for any one of us to think of the other fellow's ques­
tions, the other fellow's task as easier than our own, and I pointed that
out to the student. But even allowing for that margin of error I knew
there was basis for the lad's contention. Often I would gamble on
writing the questions for the last class, during my study period, would
be interrupted, and the quality of the questions would suffer. Besides,
whether he did or did not have a good point, he was a citizen of that
school and as such had the responsibility of doing what he could do
to correct inequities. It was just as well that we looked at the situation
together. I saw a way open. Make out both sets of questions at the
same time, then give the first class a choice (by number) of the set for
their test, and leave the other set for the last-period class. That is what
I should have done from the first.

That student's conference with me was in all seriousness. But those
youngsters did pull many a prank. Resourceful, audacious, mischievous,
I suppose they were all three. At graduation time, my first year with
them, a senior girl called me at my home and said she would like to
come right on down. She brought with her a beautiful package,
wrapped in the school's colors. As she handed it to me she said," We
are all graduating. We thought you should graduate too. I've brought
you a graduation gift." Of course I was deeply touched. I tore into
the package—and there found "Whiskey Tony," kidnapped at the first
class party and kept in hiding ever since. Oh, they were rascals!

The Old Stone Fort building has been removed from the high
school grounds to the campus of Stephen F. Austin University. New
buildings are on the high school grounds, but in the windows of the
old high school building I can still see and hear the shouts of those
old kids, as I sprinted from the Old Stone Fort: "Yea, Miss Secession,
run! You can make it!"