The Reminiscences of Frances Cooke Lipscomb Van Zant

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Frances Cooke Lipscomb Van Zandt was a Texas pioneer woman. She and her husband Isaac Van Zandt journeyed to the wilderness of northeast Texas when the Republic of Texas was only three years old. They settled in Harrison County and both of them contributed a great deal to the development of Texas.

Frances Cooke Lipscomb was born in Louisa County, Virginia, on March 4, 1816, to William and Ann Day Cooke Lipscomb. When she was ten years old her family moved to Franklin County, Tennessee. Although she had little opportunity to obtain a formal education she was brought up to be a lady, and throughout her life was known for the sweetness and gentleness of her nature. When Frances was sixteen she married Isaac Van Zandt, a young businessman who was three years older than she. After they lost their mercantile business in the depression of 1837, Van Zandt studied law and was admitted to the Mississippi bar.

In January 1839, the Van Zandts and their two children moved into a small, one-room log cabin at Elysian Fields in present Harrison County, Texas. The Van Zandt’s son, Khleber Miller, describes their first home in Texas in his autobiography *Force Without Fanfare*: "The house at Elysian Fields to which we moved was an unfinished, one-room cabin covered with hand-hewn boards fastened on with weight-poles. The door was hung with wooden hinges and had a latch inside. Glass windows were scarce then, but the builder of his house had by some means obtained a small window sash with panes of glass about six-by-eight inches in size, which he had placed by the side of the front door. The beds were built in the corners of the room by placing a post about six and one-half feet from one wall and five feet from the other and adding a side rail and footboard. The walls of the house made the headboard and one side of the bed. Rope and strips of rawhide laced across the frame of the bed served as springs."

Although life on the frontier was difficult, the Van Zandts were happy. Isaac Van Zandt practiced law and became a successful lawyer. He was elected to the Congress of the Republic of Texas in 1840 and 1841. President Sam Houston appointed Van Zandt Charge d’Affairs to the United States in 1842.

By 1847, the Van Zandts were prosperous and respected. They had six children, a new one and one-half story home in Marshall, and Van Zandt became a candidate for governor. Then tragedy struck. An infant son died, and then while campaigning in Houston, Van Zandt died from yellow fever.

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Frances Van Zandt found herself alone with five children under the age of eleven. Undaunted, she devoted her life to rearing them to be outstanding members of society. The Van Zandts had accumulated some land, but money was scarce on the frontier. One of the first things that Mrs. Van Zandt did was to sell their new house and repurchase the farm outside of Marshall where they had lived earlier. The family moved back into the old log house and lived there for some years before Mrs. Van Zandt built a two-story brick house.

After the death of her husband, the two most important things in the life of Frances Van Zandt were her children and her religion. Around 1852 she became interested in a new religious movement which eventually became the Christian Church, also known as the Disciples of Christ. She was so interested in the doctrine of this new church that she was expelled from the Baptist Church. She sent her eldest son Khleber Miller Van Zandt to Franklin College near Nashville, Tennessee, so he would be under the influence of men who were members of the new church. He frequently became homesick and wrote his mother many letters asking for permission to come home. She finally agreed, adding that she had plenty of work for him to do when he returned. He changed his mind and stayed until he was graduated. Around 1856 Mrs. Van Zandt rented her home and took her three youngest children to Franklin College to complete their education.

Frances Van Zandt sent two sons to fight in the American Civil War. Undoubtedly she and the others left behind suffered both mentally and physically, but her stoic comment was, "The men went to fight, and the women stayed at home, and worked and waited." Her sons returned tired and ill.

Mrs. Van Zandt's care of her children was rewarded when they all became worthy members of their communities. K.M. Van Zandt was a leader in Fort Worth, a co-founder of the first newspaper there, and co-founder and president of the Fort Worth National Bank for fifty-six years. He was also instrumental in bringing the first railroad to Fort Worth. Louisa married Jeremiah Morrill Clough, a district attorney of Harrison County and a state representative. Mrs. Van Zandt's second son, Isaac Lycurgus, became a physician and was also one of the leaders in early Fort Worth. Frances (Fannie) Cooke Van Zandt married Dr. Elias J. Beall, a prominent physician, and bore nine children. Ida, the youngest Van Zandt child, married James Jones Jarvis, a lawyer, judge, and rancher. Both he and Ida were active in promoting Texas Christian University and served in many official positions at the University.

Frances Van Zandt died on April 8, 1909, at the age of ninety-three. On October 4, 1938, a number of surviving Texas pioneers watched the dedication of the statues of Frances and Isaac Van Zandt that still stand on the northwest corner of the courthouse in Canton, in Van Zandt County.
Shortly before her death, Frances Van Zandt wrote her reminiscences in which she recounts "every day experiences" and vividly recreates the life of a pioneer woman in northeast Texas. In the early 1940s Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Pendleton Van Zandt printed a booklet which contained these reminiscences and gave copies to some of the descendants of Mrs. Van Zandt. One copy is now in the Barker Texas History Center in Austin, Texas. The pamphlet was reprinted in 1973 by Louise Burgess Logan and again distributed to the Van Zandt descendants so they might be reminded of their pioneer heritage and their ancestors who made a home in the wilderness that was early northeast Texas.

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I have been asked to tell something about my early life in Texas. My most vivid remembrances are of the happenings of our family life, and would not be of general interest. Still, our every day experiences were the experiences of our neighbors and early friends, and my recounting some of them may help those who have come since to understand more clearly the conditions we then faced, and the hardships we then endured. But Texas was to me the land of promise; the land of our adoption, and the trials of those first years — which then did not seem very great — but made me love it the more!

We started to Texas from Tennessee early in January, 1839. My husband, Isaac Van Zandt, was then twenty-five years of age and I was nearly three years younger. We had two children, Louise and Khleber, aged four and two years old, respectively. My husband, in the financial crash of 1837, had lost his all in a business venture in Mississippi, and had after that studied law. He had been on a visit to Texas the previous Fall and had decided to move to the new country.

We came down by boat from Memphis to Natchez, where Mr. Van Zandt had to attend to some business. From Natchez we went up to Red River, and then up Nachitoches. Thence, we went overland to old Camp Sabine on the east bank of the river of that name. It was then an abandoned Post of perhaps fifty houses. There was good water there, and the empty houses made it a convenient and much used stopping place for people going back and forth.

We stayed there several months, waiting with as much patience as we could for some money my husband expected from a former partner. This never came, and we were exasperatingly poor. Worst of all, my husband, who was never very strong, was often sick. There I sold my two best dresses, one for five bushels of corn, and the other for a bottle of medicine. Everything combined to make our stay at Camp Sabine a period of great anxiety.

We finally traded the small amount of furniture we had shipped to Texas for transportation to Harrison County. Our first house there was an unfinished log cabin of one room. We had two neighbors within a mile
of us, but the post office was about fourteen miles away. I was constantly afraid of Indians, but we were never troubled by them. Indeed, I never saw but two after we started to Texas.

It was sometimes necessary for my husband to be away from home, and during his absence I found the neighbors always ready to do anything they could for me. I wish that I could emphasize this feature of our early Texas life, the spirit of helpfulness and friendly fellowship that always prevailed. It was one of the best of the good things of the new country. We were all strangers together, willing to lend or borrow as the case might be. Anything one had was at the disposal of the others. If we had no meat, we felt no hesitancy in going to a neighbor's for it, if he had any. To the first wedding to which I was invited in Texas, I carried the dress in which the bride was married, and the plates from which we ate the wedding dinner. During my husband's first long absence from home—three months—I do not recall that I stayed more than that number of nights alone, the family which had the wedding always supplying me with one of the girls for company. I would help them alter, and make over old dresses and garments, for it was very few new ones that any of us had.

In sickness our neighbors were always ready to do all they could to help. I remember that once Mr. Van Zandt was called away from home when his little brother, who was then living with us, was very sick. He sent for a neighbor man to come and stay with me, and another man came and took our gun and killed a deer for he knew we needed meat. When not well myself, I was as well cared for by my women neighbors as if they had been my own sisters.

And these were the common people, and I love to be classed with them for was it not from these that Christ chose His first disciples? It was these who heard Him gladly, and was it not the poor widow whose mite put to shame the rich men's gifts? I would love to live in a community where each one's social standing was determined by merit, and not by money.

The two years we lived in Harrison County were years of much privation and hardships, as were incident to the life of the pioneers. Early in 1842 we moved into the first home that we had owned in Texas. It was one large room with a puncheon floor. I have recently been told that this home is still standing. It was of logs with boards nailed over the cracks, but it was so open that one day the wind blew the top cover off the bed. It was from this house that we started to Washington, and it was in this cabin (or one similar to it in which we have previously lived) that the Homestead Law was conceived.

It has been said that "Necessity is the mother of invention", and we found frequent verification of this. The want of crossings on the rivers often taxed our utmost resources. Once, when moving in an ox-wagon, we came to an impassable stream. We had to camp, build a raft and take
the wagon to pieces. This was carried across one piece at a time, then the load, and finally, the chickens. To our grief some of these got out of the coop, and we had to leave them. We were agreeably surprised to find them on the opposite side of the river — they had flown across the river to us.

When our need for things was pressing, we usually found a way for making them. One time Mr. Van Zandt needed a saddle — he made it, having only a drawing knife with which to fashion the saddle-tree from a dead sassafras which he cut down for the purpose. His shoes were gone, and he could get no others. He bought some red leather, made a [shoe] last, and manufactured some very respectable shoes, which he wore to Memphis. One night Matthew Cartwright came to spend the night with us. We had no candles for the supper table so my husband scraped up some tallow, made a wick, squeezed the tallow around it, then rolled it over, and over again, until it was straight, and we had a very good candle.

After we went to Harrison County there was a new baby, and no cradle for him. The saw and drawing knife were called on, and a complete bed was made.

The scarcity of meat is one thing that goes hard with the settlers of a country where game is not always plentiful. I didn’t know that I cared so much for meat, until I felt the loss of it. I think the best piece of bacon I ever ate was a piece for which I bartered a chicken. A young woman camping nearby wanted to buy a chicken. I had none to sell but when she said she was so tired of bacon, I proposed an exchange. A neighbor took our gun to use, and we were to get half of the game he killed.

One day his son came and said that his mother wanted me to come and eat dinner with her, because her husband had killed a turkey and a possum, and she didn’t know how to divide. So I went, expecting a good dinner, but the turkey was all eaten before I got there. To save the poor woman’s feelings, I tried to swallow some of the possum, but found it a hard job.

At one time a hunter camped near us. His wife told me how good bear meat was, so white and tender, like good pork, and I was very anxious for some. At last a bear was killed, and I was not forgotten in the distribution. As soon as it was cut up, the woman came bringing me a piece; but her first words were, “Will you have some of the figger? We call this kind nigger at our house.” It seems that this bear was old and dark but my appetite for bear meat of any kind was now gone.

She came to get me to help her make a dress, but I told her I would make it entirely for a small hatchet, several of which I had seen her boys have. This she readily agreed to, and thus earned for my little three year old boy the “little axe” that he had ever seen. About the same time I gave two Indian hunters a bunch of peacock feathers for a ham of venison.

After the first few months, however, we had plenty of meat which we secured from a bunch of hogs that slept under our house. The presence
of these hogs was a great comfort to me, especially when my husband was away from home, for I knew that I should be aroused by their noise if anyone came prowling about.

Meat was not the only article of food that was often very scarce. Sassafras tea was much used instead of coffee. Our house gained the reputation of being the best stopping place, because it made the tea from the dried bloom of the plant, instead of the roots. The corn for our meal was ground on a handmill. We would sift it, take the finer meal for bread, and cook the coarser part for hominy.

The women had to spin, and weave the cloth from which they made the clothing for their families. If one had no loom, then she would exchange work with a neighbor who had. One job of which I was especially proud was a pair of socks for my husband. I had made him an overcoat from a blue blanket, and had some scraps left. A friend told me how to card them into wool. By mixing this with cotton and spinning it, I had an unusually good thread for the socks. These little incidents may serve to make plainer the perplexities of our every day life in those early Texas years . . .

In the Summer of 1844, Mr. Van Zandt, chagrinned and disappointed over the failure of the Senate to adopt the treaty [for the annexation of Texas to the United States] (though feeling sure of the ultimate success), and realizing that he had done all he could do, asked to be recalled. He took the children and me to Louisville while awaiting his recall, and returned to Washington. When this came (the recall) he rejoined us in Louisville, and we came on to Texas, reaching here in November. Thenceforth we made Marshall our home. We lived for two years rather outside of the town but in 1846 we moved to a place nearer in.

There was standing on the place when we bought it only a smoke house and a good room, which was to be the kitchen. We lived in this while our house was being built. I remember that before it was finished, in the spring of 1847, we one day had a number of my husband's friends to dinner, and of course it was very crowded in our small quarters, and we had the table set under the gallery of our new house, which was built with a basement. Mr. Van Zandt was laughing about our outdoor dining room, and General Rusk said, "Never mind. He that humbleth himself shall be exalted, and we are going to make him Governor." This was shortly after he had been nominated for that office. Immediately after our return from Washington his friends had wished him to run for Congress, but I was very much opposed to this, for I did not want either to break up our home and go back to Washington or to have him gone so long.

We then had five children, who were Louisa, who afterward married Col. J.M. Clough, Khleber Miller, Isaac Lycurgus, Frances, who married Dr. E.J. Beall, and Ida, who married Major J.J. Jarvis. A younger
son was born in 1846 after our return to Texas but he lived less than a
year . . .

After the visit at home when his baby died, Mr. Van Zandt left to
meet his various appointments. He travelled on horseback. It took him
a long time to go distances now covered in a few hours. I never saw him
again. He died in Houston early in October. When we went to live in Mar­
shall it was a village of a hundred or so inhabitants. After my husband’s
death I continued to make it my home until several years after the war,
when I came to Fort Worth, where all my children now live.

My family of six is still unbroken, as when my husband left it at his
death fifty-nine years ago. Our life in Marshall was quiet and uneventful,
nothing worthy of note occurring. The town grew, and we had many
neighbors and friends. Our war-time experiences were those of thousands
of others in Texas. The men went to fight, and the women stayed at home,
and worked and waited. Those of us who had been long in Texas had
had training in hardships and poverty that stood us in good stead in this
later trouble.

I remember Dr. Elam Johnson saying at this time, "Plague take these
old Texans, they can stand anything."