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Nakia Parker  
*University of Texas Austin*

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**“Bold, Bad, Notorious” Hal Geiger: Politics, Violence, and Defiance in Reconstruction Era East Texas**

BY NAKIA PARKER

In March of 1872, the law firm of Chandler, Carleton, and Robertson sent a letter addressed to Governor Edmund Davis. The letter contained the findings of an investigation into a hotly contested special election for the position of justice of the peace, held on January 10-12, 1872 in Robertson County, located in east central Texas. The election was rife with accusations of fraud, violent coercion, and tampering of ballots. Thus, two of the candidates called into question the “freedom and fairness of the said election.” Many witnesses to the supposed shenanigans during the election, as well as the political leaders themselves, made sworn affidavits. One eyewitness, an African American voter named Jerry Landers, described the actions of a crowd which resorted to violent means to prevent Landers from casting his ballot. Landers had first entered a saloon on the night of January 11, when he came upon an inebriated mob. The gaggle of men then confiscated Landers’ ticket. Sensing danger, he hastily left the hostile scene, but the men followed him, and he recalled being “knocked down, kicked, and beaten with a board, and left for dead.” The affidavit then identifies the instigator of this mob violence: “One Hal Geiger, who was with the crowd that beat him, made the remark, “‘someone would find a man dead in the morning.’”<sup>1</sup>

This image of a vicious, mercurial Hal Geiger stands in stark contrast to the man described in a July 3, 1879 article in the Austin newspaper *The Weekly Democratic Statesman*. Geiger represented Robertson County, serving as one of the few African American in the 17<sup>th</sup> legislature of the state house of representatives.

*Nakia Parker is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at the University of Texas-Austin*

The newspaper reported that in a “furious” speech, Geiger insisted that “the poor people of Texas would hereafter pay no taxes at all unless the schools were given one fourth of the revenue.” Although the reporter characterized the speech as “furious,” the subject matter belies that description. Advocating for the rights of working class and for education seems a far cry from the man in 1872 who incited a crowd and participated in the beating of a man to within an inch of his life.<sup>2</sup>

These two contradictory examples beg these questions: Who was the real Hal Geiger? The violent, opportunistic man, or the altruistic politician concerned for public schooling? A man who was the victim of his circumstances and environment, or shaped by these circumstances? And what accounts for these deeply contrasting images? Robertson County, where Geiger lived, worked, and served as an influential political and social leader, exemplified Reconstruction Era Texas: volatile, violent, and dangerous for African Americans. Yet Harriel (Hal) Geiger’s brief, controversial, and contentious life demonstrates how one black Texan eulogized as “bold, bad, and notorious” deftly negotiated these precarious spaces through a combination of shrewdness, brashness, and aggressive self-determination.

Though Geiger led an unusual and eventful life, a minute amount of scholarship exists about him, in contrast to other prominent African American leaders who were his contemporaries, such as Jacob Fontaine and Norris Wright Cuney. In addition, unlike these leaders, who left much written evidence such as letters, very little of Geiger’s own “voice” remains extant in the record (besides his affidavit and various political speeches). Therefore, newspapers of the day provide what details we can construct of his fascinating life. Through these accounts, snippets of Geiger’s personality, virtues, and vices can be ascertained. Moreover, the written record can not only illuminate details of Geiger’s life, but also reveal the social, economic, and political environment and circumstances black people in Texas faced in general. Newspaper accounts of Geiger’s speeches and activities also shed light on common attitudes and stereotyping of African American masculinity during the postbellum period; but he defied such stereotypes in multiple, interesting ways.<sup>3</sup>



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The *Texas Legislative Manual of 1879-1880* related Hal Geiger's background in one sentence: "Harrold G. Geiger, of Hearne, Robertson county, was born in Lexington district, South Carolina, in 1839; moved to Texas in 1859, and located near Hempstead, Austin (now Waller) county; was born and raised and a slave, and received no education except what he has acquired by his own exertion; is a blacksmith and wagon maker." In addition, the 1880 U.S. Federal Census and newspaper accounts also provide insight into Geiger's life. The census record lists his information as follows: his birthplace, South Carolina, status, head of household, forty years of age, divorced, his occupation as "member legislator and merchant," and his race as "mulatto." Interestingly, no mention of a black or mulatto man named Geiger appears in the 1870 census, so the likelihood is strong that he kept the name given him while in bondage, and later assumed another moniker. As to further clues to Geiger's identity, articles in the Tuesday, November 5, 1878 edition of the *Galveston Daily News* and the November 9, 1878 *Norton Union Intelligencer* rather disparagingly describe Geiger as blind in one eye: a "yellow, one-eyed man." These details, although scanty, provide possible clues as to his life in slavery and his life as an emancipated enslaved individual in Texas.<sup>4</sup>

Slavery strongholds such as antebellum South Carolina, where Geiger was "born and raised a slave," could be places of physical torture for those subjected to human bondage. One narrative from the Federal Writers Project, from an unnamed enslaved individual born in Lexington County in 1835, recounted to his interviewer Elmer Turnage that "Old Marse Hiller was strict to his slaves, wasn't mean, but often whipped 'em," and would severely punish any slave who attempted to be literate. Runaway slave ads also reveal the marks of violence on recalcitrant bodies. For example, the July 9, 1828 edition of the *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser* contained this notice: "Brought-To the Gaol of Orangeburgh, S.C., on the 2d inst. a Negro Man 5 feet 4 1/4 inches high, says he belongs to Mr. Wm. B. Benton, who lives fourteen milse [sic] from Augusta, Ga. Said fellow appears to be about 25 years of age, has a scar on his forehead which he says was occasioned by a stroke with a stick; has also a scar on his left leg, occasioned by a burn."



Whether Geiger's blindness in one eye derived from "a stroke with a stick," was "occasioned by a burn," or had more benign origins is unclear. Nevertheless, the quotidian acts of violence that occurred in enslaved life leaves open the possibility that his injury had a violent backstory.<sup>5</sup>

Robertson County, where Geiger eventually settled, appears deceptively idyllic and Edenic in local histories of the county. One account describes it as "873 square miles of river and creek bottoms and lush prairies; in a timbered belt of post oak, blackjack, cottonwood, elm, pecan, and mesquite trees...Tidwell and Sandy creeks meander west of Calvert." Since the county was strategically situated between two bodies of water, residents had access to the Brazos River and the Little Brazos River. This ideal location meant that the region enjoyed fertile soils and productive farmland (called the Brazos Bottoms) ideal for "King Cotton." Consequently, the fruitfulness of the area attracted many settlers, particularly potential yeoman farmers and planters.<sup>6</sup>

Population growth in Robertson County exploded in the decade before the Civil War and during the conflict. In 1850, the number of residents stood at just under a thousand, with 934 persons, thirty percent of this total being enslaved. Ten short years later, in 1860, the population swelled to 4,997 persons with almost fifty percent of the population in bondage—a staggering five hundred percent increase. The profitability of enslaved labor in this region, as well as other parts of Texas, meant that "white men of every political party affiliation were interested in land, cotton, and slaves." Unsurprisingly, "the resentment following the election of a Republican president in 1860 was as keen in Robertson County as it was elsewhere in the Deep South," and its citizens vigorously supported secession from the Union. During the Civil War, the enslaved population continued to increase with the migration of refugee enslavers from other parts of the South to Texas. Robertson County tax rolls reveal that between 1860 and 1864, taxation on enslaved persons doubled. This startling statistic suggests that many enslavers viewed the region as a relatively secure place to maintain their material wealth and human property.<sup>7</sup>

This security proved false and short-lived. In the summer of

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1865, Union troops rode into Texas counties, including Robertson, decreed that all plantation owners gather together their enslaved laborers, and then proclaimed that these individuals were “forever free.” Nevertheless, life as a Freedperson in Texas during Reconstruction proved no less safe or secure than life under slavery. Texas did not suffer from a Union army invasion like some areas of the Southeast, such as South Carolina, which is why many enslavers came to the state as refugees during the Civil War. Nevertheless, the state still experienced the repercussions of siding with the Confederacy in the sanguine conflict. Accounts from the Freedmen’s Bureau highlight the dangers faced by African Americans caught in this maelstrom, particularly in East Texas. Inspector General for the Freedmen’s Bureau, W.E. Strong, observed that even though major urban centers such as Houston and Galveston remained more amenable to the idea of emancipated people of African descent, Texas still experienced more violence against Freedpersons than any other former state of the Confederacy. In more rural areas such as Geiger’s Robertson County, the violence was even more pronounced. Another official, General Joseph Reynolds, sadly commented that “[y]ou cannot pick up a paper in East Texas without reading of murder, assassinations, and robbery...and yet not a fourth of the truth has been told; not one in ten is reported... the devil is holding high carnival in Texas.”<sup>8</sup>

Accounts from the Freedmen’s Bureau underscore the veracity of these statements. Captain Sam Sloan reported to the Adjutant General Maden on some of these gross miscarriages of justice: “Marie Edwards, a freedwoman, was shot and killed by Court Brown, a citizen of Robertson County...there has been no official investigation... William Tate, a citizen of Robertson County, shot and killed a freedman. Since then Tate has fled the County and as yet there has been no official investigation but is said to have been a cold-blooded murder.” In total, the Freedmen’s Bureau listed 2,225 perpetrations of violence against African Americans between the years of 1865-1869. The matter-of-fact tone of the above statements imply an air of resignation on the part of federal officials concerning their impotence in preventing these senseless acts and bringing the wrongdoers to justice.<sup>9</sup>



This volatile, dangerous environment made up the place that Harriel Geiger lived in for his brief forty-six years. Yet, despite these harrowing circumstances, and having “received no education except what he had acquired by his own exertion,” Geiger became a fairly successful merchant, lawyer, and politician. He was also confrontational, often violent, and opportunistic. The fact that he developed this unpredictable, conflicting personality gives evidence that he was a man determined to survive slavery, and later Reconstruction Era Texas, on his own terms.

The first public mention of Geiger’s foray into the political arena comes in the July 15<sup>th</sup> 1871 edition of the newspaper, *The Reformer*. The piece identifies Geiger as a potential delegate to represent Robertson County at the state Republican convention. Later, under the title “They Forge,” the newspaper accuses him of being manipulated by a white Republican, General Clark, into writing a fake letter that encouraged black voters to “accept one Hal Geiger as their leader, denouncing good Republicans.” A few months later, the first African American newspaper published in Texas, *The Representative*, also reported on Geiger’s political activities, but in a neutral tone. The September 9, 1871 edition simply listed Hal Geiger as one of dozens of men who sat on the Republican Executive Committee of Robertson County, with no hint of devious political maneuvering on Geiger’s part.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, two very different portrayals of Geiger appear in the public domain. One depicts him as a political figure engaged in unscrupulous activities, while the other objectively lists his service on a nominating panel. Interestingly, it is the *Reformer*, a white Texas newspaper, which casts the suspicious eye on Geiger’s doings and painted him as a man who overstepped his “place” by aspiring to influence in the African American community. This depiction of Geiger as an aggressive, cunning, and yet inept politician played into the common stereotypes surrounding black masculinity during the Reconstruction Era. For example, in his influential book, *The Clansmen*, (which later provided the basis for the popular film *Birth of a Nation*), Thomas Dixon blamed African-Americans for the Civil War, characterized black men as gullible political dupes of white Republican carpetbaggers and scalawags, and predicted



anarchy would result from "Negro rule." Hal Geiger was not immune to this unfair and patronizing form of branding. Nevertheless, a hotly contested election in January 1872 demonstrates that the accusations hurled against Geiger for political impropriety may have been legitimate.<sup>11</sup>

The Republican Party in Texas, following the pattern of most Southern states, was a divided one. Radical Republicans wanted harsher treatment for "rebels," broad application of freedmen's rights, and a more guarded approach to internal improvements. The moderate faction, on the other hand, propagated a platform of railroad construction, advocated leniency toward former Confederates, and encouraged African Americans to accept a subservient role in the Party. One political faction of the party, spearheaded by Rusk County's Major James W. Flanagan, vociferously endorsed this position. Flanagan and his followers claimed to represent the interests of agricultural areas like Robertson County and East Texas in general. Yet, because of the economic dependence of these regions on agrarian labor, especially the labor of African American sharecroppers, these politicians shied away from or blatantly ignored the needs and protests of their primarily black constituency. White economic welfare came before black civil, social, and economic rights.<sup>12</sup>

The one-sided political and economic aims of this faction outraged African-American leaders within the Republican Party, who played a vital role in helping the party ascend to power in Texas. Men such as George Ruby, Jeremiah Hamilton, and Sheppard Mullins realized they needed interracial cooperation to enact changes. Yet, they also were forced to acknowledge that many white Texans remained relatively unconcerned over matters of importance to their fellow black Texans, such as fair educational opportunities for children, and protection from extra-legal violence and economic exploitation. During the beginning of the Reconstruction Era, African-American politicians achieved some success, such as establishing schools and repealing the oppressive apprenticeship laws put into effect right after the Civil War. Despite these minor victories, by the early 1870s, many African American voters like Geiger felt, quite justifiably, that the Republican Party gave only

lip service to advancing the position of Freedpeople in society. This dissatisfaction added to the contentiousness and instability of the party's existence in Texas and seeped down to even supposedly minor aspects of political life.<sup>13</sup>

On January 9-12, 1872, a special election took place in Calvert, the seat of Robertson County, for the office of justice of the peace. According to a local history of the county, Calvert was the equivalent of a biblical Sodom and Gomorrah with dive bars and in desperate need of law and order:

Calvert was a boom town at birth, and lawless men flourished. Saloons and dives opened up and ran twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The swinging doors of the saloons flapped constantly, and the barber shops that were built at the corners with a back door entering the bars behind a screen ostensibly did a thriving business all day long and until closing time at night... Gamblers, confidence men, and street walkers operated under limited restraint, alluring those who found temptation to their liking. Sin was ascendant. It has been said that the corner "had a dead man for breakfast almost every morning" and the jail was the largest building in town.<sup>14</sup>

After the fiercely contested election, accusations from the losing candidates, a "Captain McHugh and Connolly," of impropriety prompted a legal investigation. Sworn statements from men such as Calvert's Mayor Charles Gillespie, Alderman and prominent local auctioneer H. Bergman, and special policemen Silas Johnson and Abram Raynon all concurred that "the election was conducted impartially...and they know of no one who was hindered in the right of suffrage by force, fraud, threats, intimidation." Geiger's statement agreed with their claims, but went a step farther. He swore that "everyone had free access to the polls;" furthermore, "voters were only denied the right to vote when they had left their [r]egistration papers at home, otherwise we are all good Republicans and voted the Republican ticket." After examination, the law

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firm of Chandler, Carleton, and Robertson found that, “no fairer election was held in this state, or indeed in any other state, the candidates who record the majority of voters are fairly and legally elected, and are entitled to certificates of elections.” However, the affidavits of several witnesses tell a different story, one in which Hal Geiger, along with fellow “good Republicans” assumed major, violent roles.<sup>15</sup>

The nightmarish experience of Jerry Landers mentioned at the beginning of this paper proved just one of many accounts of violence either directly committed or instigated by Geiger and his associates. Thomas J. Powell claimed that one “Will Hearne,” the influential Democratic candidate for justice of the peace whom a disillusioned Geiger was now politicking for, grabbed the ticket of “a colored man named Billy, and substituted fraudulently the Democratic ticket.” Hearne brazenly performed this illegal act numerous times, “within ten feet of the ballot box.” Charles Jefferson also recounted another one of Hearne’s shameless acts. Jefferson witnessed Hearne approaching an African American man who had just departed the voter booth and demanded to know whom the man had voted for. When the man replied he had cast his ballot for McHugh and Connolly, Hearne viciously attacked him and declared “you God d—d black son of a b— I can whip you and all your protectors.” Hearne defiantly told his companions that he was ready to be jailed for his actions, but they reassured him that “They can’t do that while we’re here, for we’ll clear up the whole town.”<sup>16</sup>

Another report came from an African American voter named Humphrey Johnson. He contended that Geiger’s intimidation tactics spread like wildfire among the African American community in Robertson County, and that Geiger may have tried to “convince” other voters of the futility of voting for a party that did not appreciate their support nor advocate for their interests. Johnson claimed he received a warning that “Hal Geiger was in search of me in order to mob me like he did Jerry Landers and also George Murphy... because I was electioneering for the Republican ticket and one of the leading influential Freedmen.” This mention of Geiger’s activities implies another reason (besides political disillusionment) that Geiger would engage in such violent and illegal activities against



potential allies and fellow sufferers of white injustice. Johnson apparently had stature in the political and social arena, and Geiger may have viewed him as an impediment to his rise in the black community.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Johnson's further testimony provides evidence that the stereotyping of Geiger's violent behavior was not simply hyperbole by the newspapers. He knew firsthand of how vicious Geiger could be. He had experienced a previous violent altercation with the 'notorious Negro': "Hal Geiger beat me with a stick and kicked me in a very violent manner about five weeks previous to the late election because I was electioneering for Captain McHugh and Connolly." Therefore, Johnson remained firmly convinced that his decision to leave Robertson County that evening before voting prevented his murder.<sup>18</sup>

The testimony of Richard Perry also provides a clue as to the possible motivations behind Geiger's conduct. Perry, an African American Baptist preacher, played an active role in Republican politics in Robertson County. On January 9, he was participating in organizing the vote among African Americans when Hal Geiger warned him to stop. Geiger told Perry that his efforts were wasted since he had "already gotten to the people" and gave the reasoning that "the Republican Party had stolen from them enough, that he was now going to try another party, and that "neither he, nor his friends, were voting." This claim by Geiger, however, did not stop Perry and he continued to get out the vote. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, Geiger resorted to desperate measures to stop Perry's efforts. Perry stated that Geiger stood up and promised that "all that will vote a Democratic ticket Will Hearne has gave me the money to pay for your hash." Perry also witnessed the actual changing of ballots by Geiger and accused him of holding a grudge against the Republican Party: "He said as the Republicans wouldn't give him an office he meant to be a d—d stumbling block in their way." By all accounts, in this election, Geiger did indeed prove to be a "stumbling block" in the way of Republicans. The Democratic candidate, Will Hearne, won the election. Moreover, Judge Ned Butler, who claimed he witnessed Geiger taking away a Republican ticket from a voter because it "wasn't worth a g—d," estimated that

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between two hundred and five hundred African American voters stayed away from the polls due to the intimidating tactics and fear of economic reprisals.<sup>19</sup>

These detailed affidavits paint a less than flattering picture of Hal Geiger and emphasize his volatile personality. Giving the disinterest of white Republicans at the time in black political and social issues and their focus on reserving offices and public patronage for themselves, Geiger doubtless harbored resentment against some in the Republican Party for his failure to obtain an office. That he had political aspirations is clear from the fact that less than a decade later, he ran twice for state legislature and numerous other civic positions, such as sheriff. Apparently, he also wanted to send a powerful message to Republicans that they should not take African American voters for granted. Yet, why did he resort to violence?

In some ways, Geiger acted no differently from many white political leaders in Texas, indeed in other states as well, men who used physical coercion to influence election results. What makes Geiger's case so unusual is that he was a black man, living in the dangerous region of East Texas, a place extremely difficult for African Americans to obtain any kind of political, economic, and social traction. Yet, he still managed the almost improbable feat of cultivating "friends in high places," namely white Texans of political, economic, and social stature. Thus, at this moment, he had very little concern about currying favor with African Americans with more traditional methods, and certainly did not appear afraid of censure or being called to account for his intimidating and bullying tactics. Geiger put on a bravura performance on the local political stage, cultivating backing from white political rivals to emphasize the fact that he was a man in the Republican Party who could not be ignored.

After the troubles of the 1872 election, the record falls silent for six years concerning the public activities of Geiger. He reappears in the October 2, 1878 edition of *The Galveston Daily News*. In an article entitled "Color at Calvert," the Robertson County Greenback Party held a convention, composed of a multiracial coalition of sixty black voters and eight whites. Not only did Geiger

(still considered a Republican), preside over the hearings, but the Greenback Party also nominated him to serve in the state legislature. According to the article, “the greatest confusion prevailed.” This statement may be a false one, meant to disparage the Greenback Party and the interracial composition of the meeting. Nevertheless, this brief posting reveals Geiger’s chameleon-like ability to survey the political scene and adapt accordingly. By the 1870’s the Republican Party’s political clout had diminished substantially due to infighting and the growing power of state Democrats. Thus, some Republicans decided to fuse with third-party movements, such as the Greenback Party, in an attempt to regain control from the opposition. It seems Geiger shrewdly realized that to survive politically, he too needed to build alliances across party lines with influential white political leaders.<sup>20</sup>

William H. Hamman was among the politicians at this Greenback convention and the party’s candidate for mayor. Previously, Hamman voted Democratic, but eventually turned his allegiances to the Greenback Party. Like many white Southerners at the time, Hamman expressed contempt for African Americans and doubted that they could be prosperous and productive with the ‘gift” of freedom. In a section in his scrapbook entitled “Views held by General Wm. H. Hamman on November 18, 1865 as to the North, the Negro, etc.,” he condescendingly stated that:

I do not believe that the negro can be used successfully unless he can be compelled to labor regularly and from the beginning to the end of the year. I have no confidence in the moral suasion in the case of a negro who is at best not above a half savage. The retrogradation of the negroes commenced at the moment of their liberation and will continue until the race is exterminated. Their idleness will beget want, want will give rise to temptation, and temptation makes the villain... Shall I remain in this latitude? or would it be better to go where there are, at least, fewer, or better still, where there are no negroes?<sup>21</sup>



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Less than a decade later, however, Hamman found himself, not in a place “where there are no negroes,” but rather at a convention with “sixty negroes,” apparently burying his deep-seated disdain to consort, at least politically, with Geiger and other black male constituents. The predominately African American composition of the convention also demonstrates that Geiger could gain support from black voters through less dubious methods, and apparently used his persistent determination to achieve personal political ambitions.<sup>22</sup>

However, not all African American politicians cultivated the same amicable feelings towards Geiger. While running for state legislator, Geiger once again became involved in a physical altercation with fellow civic leaders. The October 13, 1878 *Galveston Daily News* recounted an incident during the campaign that occurred between Geiger and an African American politician from Harris County, Richard Allen. Allen’s background mirrored Geiger’s almost completely—he was born enslaved, self-educated, trained as a skilled carpenter, and rose in the ranks of the Republican Party to become the candidate for lieutenant governor in 1878, the first Black man in Texas to seek such an office. Apparently, Geiger was not in a congratulatory or conciliatory mood as regards to Allen. When Allen began speaking in front of a large crowd of 500 voters, “mostly colored,” Geiger and a man named P.W. Hall attempted to drown him out by yelling loudly, but “they signally failed to confuse him.” Despite the rude distraction, Allen campaigned for more than two hours, in the condescending words of the paper, “with an able speech for a colored man....and was repeatedly applauded by his colored hearers.”<sup>23</sup>

The reason for the bad blood between Geiger and Allen is curiously silent in the existing records. Considering Geiger’s background, the altercation between the two could simply have been due to the normally contentious nature of Texas politics and the manifestation of political jockeying for power between the two men. He also may have resented Allen’s nomination, considering Geiger’s apparent political ambitions and his previous resentment of the failure of the Republican Party to recognize his civic potential. What we do know, however, is that whatever simmering

tensions existed between the two men erupted in November 1878. The November 9, 1878 edition of *Norton's Union Intelligencer*, under the appropriately named title "Bulldozing at Hearne," gave a condensed overview of the clash.<sup>24</sup>

Allen alleged that while speaking to a large audience in Hearne, he saw Geiger, described by the paper as "a one-eyed yellow man, a keeper of a small dive-in, standing with a heavy sash of green calico over his shoulder." Geiger pointed at Allen and then declared "G—d—n you, you shan't speak, boys put him down." In an apparent pre-planned attack, the crowd of nearly one hundred men, a few white, but the majority African-American, arrived on horseback and foot, then rushed the stage, and pounced on Allen. According to the article, the mayor and marshal of the town tried to arrest Geiger, but their efforts came to naught, since the mob "frustrated their efforts." Allen emerged out of the scrape unharmed because he retired for the day and went into hiding after hearing Geiger's threats "to take him out and hang him" if he attempted to speak again.<sup>25</sup>

Once again, Geiger's bullying nature erupts full force in this account. In fact, this "bulldozing" incident—a term used to describe the practice of whites' physical intimidating African-American voters in Southern Reconstruction era politics—is suspiciously similar to the numerous eyewitness testimonies concerning the 1872 election for Calvert's justice of the peace: the manipulation of the crowd by Geiger for "evil ends," the threat and carrying out of physical violence, and Geiger's escape from immediate reprisal and punishment for his criminal acts. Yet, perhaps because the 1878 election was a high profile one that received greater newspaper coverage, or perhaps due to the influence of Allen, the "bulldozing in Hearne" incident led to the arrest and trial of Geiger after this incident.

Three days later, Geiger appeared before the county court to answer charges against him. For the next several weeks, the newspapers followed the case with almost rabid interest that rivals contemporary interest in Court TV programs. The November 12, 1878 edition of the *Galveston Daily News* reported that Geiger hired an attorney to represent him, and that "your reporter observed two or three negroes, Matt Perkins and Bill McKinney, among Hal Gei-



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ger's witnesses, who participated in the bulldozing, but against whom no complaint has yet been filed." On November 14, the reporter wrote that the case against Geiger was still "grinding away," and "there was no telling when it would end. Fourteen witnesses in defense of Geiger had given their testimony, but the reporter arrived in time to hear only one account, the deputy sheriff, a white man by the name of T.D. Jones." He insisted that he had seen nothing out of the ordinary happen that day. He claimed that although "he saw both Allen and Geiger, he saw no act of violence from the latter toward the former, and further stated that he saw nothing during the speaking to calculated to cause bloodshed or insurrection." However, it is a testament to Geiger's keen intelligence, forceful personality, and charisma that he received support from a crowd of approximately one hundred individuals to protect him from initial reprisals, but also that both white and black men came to his defense and testified in his behalf in court.<sup>26</sup>

Although Geiger enjoyed these supporters, newspaper accounts reveal a biased opinion toward him, primarily among white Texans. The November 16, 1878 edition of the *Daily News* opined that justice needed to be served in the Hal Geiger bulldozing case. The trial had adjourned for the week, but the article expressed that "the good citizens of this county are very indignant at the action of Geiger and his associates at Hearne and hope to see them all brought to justice. Prominent citizens who witnessed the affair say strong cases will be made against the rioters." Unfortunately, the wishes of "the good citizens" of Robertson County remained unfulfilled. Less than a week later, the Friday, November 22, 1878 edition of the *Brenham Weekly Banner* declared the results of Geiger's trials in two curt sentences: "Hal Geiger, the Hearne bulldozer, has after a lengthy examination, been discharged. The whole proceeding has been looked upon as a stupendous farce." The November 23, 1878 *Galveston Daily News* newspaper offered more information as to why Geiger could not be detained. Commissioner Bergman decreed that the court did not find any violation of the revised state statues on political bulldozing; moreover, the prosecution failed to show a transgression "of any other provision of election law." Bergman did decide, however, to send the details of Geiger's case



to the district attorney in Austin, and if that court overturned his findings, Geiger could be tried again under federal law.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, Commissioner Bergman is the same H. Bergman who was the Alderman of the city of Calvert during the hotly contested 1872 election. Undoubtedly, Geiger benefited from having a fellow co-conspirator presiding over his trial. The press lampooned Bergman's decision. Smarting from this stinging indictment, he defended himself in a letter to the *Galveston Daily News*, on November 22, appealing to the paper's impartiality and questioning the covering reporter's journalism skills. Bergman claimed that the reporter could not possibly know the details of the Geiger case, since "the correspondent had never been there "more than five or ten minutes at any one time while the Gieger [sic] trial was in process." Bergman also offered to willingly publish the entire testimony taken at the trial to prove his supposed fairness. He sanctimoniously concluded his letter with the statement "when an officer of justice finds himself swayed by public opinion, no matter how overwhelming that sentiment may be, it is better for himself as well as the country to retire from his position." Despite Bergman's insistence he ruled justly on the bulldozing incident, these words ring hollow knowing his involvement with Geiger in the corrupt election of 1872.<sup>28</sup>

Geiger received more good news in December of 1878. Despite his legal troubles, with a fusion of support from Greenbackers and Republicans, he won election to the sixteenth state legislature as a Republican. A piece in the December 5, 1878 edition of the newspaper *The Weekly Democratic Statesman* lamentingly (and with blatant partisan opinion) attributed Geiger's election as proof of "the achievements of Negroes, Greenbackers, and fire-eating Democrats." In fact, his victory demonstrates the strength of Geiger's political acumen, his personal tenacity, and his ability to mold his personality to curry favor with people across color political, social, and economic lines, despite his polarizing actions and confrontational behavior.<sup>29</sup>

As a state legislator, Geiger served on the Roads, Ferries, and Bridges Committee. His activities in the legislature demonstrate an interest in the plight of the small businessman like himself as well

as concern for social issues of the day, which seems curious after examining his previous forays into politics. One such instance is found in a Brenham newspaper, the *Daily Banner*, which reported on Sunday February 23, 1879 that Geiger voted against a road being built in Robertson County to protect merchants since the company did not abide by its contract. On the matter of social equality, the *Daily News* published a story about Geiger leading a crowd of over one hundred men, peacefully, to protest the senseless murder of an African American man named Tom Calhoun, who was shot in the mayor's courtroom. Unlike the extra-legal means that Geiger previously employed, he vowed to the newspaper that white Texans had no reason to fear a riot on the part of African Americans; rather, "they were going to fight the matter by law."<sup>30</sup>

In addition, two passionate speeches given by Geiger further emphasize these contradictory aspects of his character. The March 8, 1879 *Galveston Daily News* recounted that Geiger stood up before the legislature to decry the usage of the poll tax to discourage voting from African Americans and poor Southern whites. He declared that "suffrage is God-given and the greatest right of the American people." He also spoke out against convict leasing lamenting the targeting of the poor in this practice. He stated that "[a] man comes in court and the judge sentences him...the sharpers and the scalpers are there to take his scalp and he receives for his labor twenty cents a day. The law provides that he shall not work over 12 hours, but I tell you he puts in fourteen and does not fail to receive the strife on his back when he fails to do his duty, let him be white or colored. The county needs to protect the white as well as the colored." These speeches stand in stark contrast to the man who once deprived men of their right to vote through violent and dubious means.<sup>31</sup>

Despite these poignant speeches, Geiger still retained his usual combative streak. On April 23, 1879, the *Daily Banner* reported that a court in Austin fined Geiger for fighting. Various newspaper articles also refer to his battles in the state House of Representatives. The March 12, 1879 *Galveston Daily News* mentioned that Geiger gave an "excited speech" about, of all things, the "bulldozing" of minority members of the party! For this "unparliamentary language" (according to the article), the legislature formally censured Geiger.

When the resolution came before the members, Geiger, in a rare moment of humility, “retracted and begged the pardon of the house.”<sup>32</sup>

Geiger also had choice words for an old political rival, Richard Allen, who also served in the sixteenth legislature. Allen returned to Houston, his hometown, in July 1879 to attend a “colored convention,” a political meeting of African American politicians that worked to secure the civil rights of black Texans. He told a correspondent of the *Daily News* that he had “attended the colored association and was not interrupted by Hal Geiger and his mob.” When asked his opinion on Allen’s statement, Geiger told the reporter that “the night before Allen was to arrive, he was warned by God in a dream that if he met Allen at the association, he would have to shoot him, and he went to Calvert to avoid a difficulty.” Given the newspaper coverage of Geiger at the time, perhaps this statement attributed to him is facetious at best, a blatant falsehood at worst. In any case, the time Geiger spent advocating for the rights of the poor and less fortunate during his first term as a state legislator likely did nothing to assuage his dislike of Allen.<sup>33</sup>

Although Geiger declined to go to Houston, ostensibly to avoid crossing paths with Allen, he could not avoid him forever. In October 1879, he received the news that he would be tried in federal court on the bulldozing charge against Allen. In an article entitled “War among the Colored Giants,” the October 11, 1879 *Galveston Daily News* reported Geiger’s arrest in Hearne and his subsequent arrival in Waco to await federal charges. The court released Geiger on his own recognizance. Thus, Geiger maintained a semblance of personal autonomy and was deemed trustworthy enough to be released without bail. More evidence of Geiger’s ability to dictate his own terms in a hostile environment is found in the November 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Denison Daily News*. This newspaper recounted that the Waco court honored Geiger’s request for a deputy sheriff for his protection, since he “swore his life was in danger.” That the court allowed Geiger any privileges at all in a region that trampled on the rights of African-Americans, particularly black men, stands as a testament to his ferocious reputation and demonstrates that white leaders begrudgingly acknowledged Geiger’s influence and stature in the community.<sup>34</sup>



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The public perhaps had their full of news of Geiger's antics. Very little press concerning the trial appears in the newspapers, and the information that was reported resembles a human-interest story than a heavyweight political drama: "Last evening we heard that one witness was very sick and a juror had left the city on account of illness. The case cannot be a very healthy one." The uneventful trial lasted only six months; thus by April 1880 Geiger once again dodged another conviction and the federal court acquitted him on all charges.<sup>35</sup>

Although newspaper accounts provide clues as to Geiger's motivations, personality, and actions, these records tell us little about his personal life. By 1880, the federal census described Geiger as head of household and divorced, with no children. Moreover, an examination of his surrounding neighborhood according to the census also does not reveal any direct links to possible relatives. Newspapers are more transparent, however, about details surrounding his involvement in political activities. In September of 1880, Geiger, ever the determined and opportunistic politician, had switched his allegiance firmly to the Greenback Party, and won reelection to the state House of Representatives. Articles in the *Galveston Daily News* emphasize the contentiousness of the campaign, an October 27, 1880 article declaring that "politics are hotter here than ever before," and that "the greenbackers are attempting their same old game of bulldozing, headed by Hal Geiger. Three or four fights occurred today among the colored people, with Geiger being the principle actor." Apparently, two close calls with possible prison time for illegal activities had either no effect on Geiger's method of waging political battle or changed public sentiment toward his behavior.<sup>36</sup>

This political outcome turned out differently than the first. Geiger lost his bid for a second term. Yet, serendipitously, Geiger did not stay out of politics for long. The candidate who defeated him, E.C. Mobley, moved from Robertson County and resigned his position. A special election took place and by the slim margin of two hundred votes, Geiger regained his seat in the legislature. The September 21, 1881 issue of the *Brenham Daily Banner* declared that he owed his victory to African American voters and a fracturing of the white vote: "The negroes voted solidly for Geiger and

the white vote was divided among three candidates.” Thus, despite his past misdeeds, Geiger, through guile, charisma, and advocating for the rights of black Texans, resumed his political career but also complicates the common scholarly narrative of the lack of effectiveness of the African-American vote after Reconstruction’s end in 1877.<sup>37</sup>

After Geiger’s second term in the state legislature, the historical record becomes almost silent concerning his later years. After avoiding attendance at the colored conventions, he finally made his presence known at a meeting in Houston in the summer of 1884. By the 1880s, the African American politicians that gathered at these events were divided over the direction of black protest and rights. Mounting losses of economic and political power, along with increased acts of violence toward freedmen, left some of these men wondering whether the agenda of the conventions should center on social issues, such as education, temperance, and gambling. Geiger may well have been one of the leaders advocating this accommodationist stance.<sup>38</sup>

A year earlier, in June 1883, he planned community activities in Hearne to celebrate Emancipation Day in Texas, otherwise known as Juneteenth. The June 20, 1883 *Galveston Daily News*, a newspaper that formerly excoriated Geiger, highlighted the main portions of his speech, which on the surface carry an air of the “politics of respectability” and reflect the ideological tensions of the colored conventions debates: “Hal Geiger...made a good speech. He admonished the colored people to do right, buy farms, educate themselves, and not antagonize the white race...and if their children were not educated it was their own fault.” From this scolding reprimand, it seems Geiger wholeheartedly embraced this conservative agenda. On the other hand, could Geiger’s words have been taken out of context, and these stern words for the Robertson County black community be a commentary from the white editors of the newspaper on “proper” behavior for African Americans? Interestingly, the article reported on another orator at that same Juneteenth celebration—William H. Hamman, the Greenback Party leader who was present at Geiger’s nomination for state legislator in 1878. Perhaps, then, Geiger’s speech provides another example of



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a virtuoso “performance”: appeasing white patrons while politicking for influence in the black community.<sup>39</sup>

The last mention of Geiger in press accounts concern his sensational murder. In 1886, Geiger earned his living as an attorney. The May 19, 1886 *Galveston Daily News* reported in an article entitled “A Courtroom Tragedy,” that Geiger was in a Hearne courtroom defending “lewd women of the town for vagrancy” when he purportedly made insolent remarks to the presiding judge, O.D. Cannon. Cannon stood up, calmly shot Geiger five times as point blank range, and left him in the courtroom mortally wounded as punishment for his lack of deference and for Geiger’s offense to Cannon’s ‘honor.’ According to scholar Bertram Wyatt-Brown, white Southern men like Cannon expected that “blacks show obedience with apparently heartfelt sincerity. Grudging submission to physical coercion would not suffice.” Nevertheless, although the article deemed Geiger’s shooting a “tragedy,” the correspondent also depicted him in typical stereotypical language: as a “bold, bad, notorious Negro,” a “terror” who enjoyed “great prestige among his race, but was also feared among them.” Put simply, Geiger deserved his fate. His wounds were life-threatening and there remained little hope of recovery. After almost a month of suffering, the June 22th edition of the *Brenham Daily Banner* announced Geiger’s death with this terse eulogy: “The notorious Negro, Hal Geiger, died of his wounds on the 11<sup>th</sup> on this month. There will be no mourning over Geiger’s death.” Apparently, there was no desire for justice concerning his murder either. On July 8, 1886, a jury deliberated ten minutes and acquitted O.D. Cannon of his crime.<sup>40</sup>

While there seemed to be no apparent mourning over Geiger’s untimely and tragic demise, his life story remains extraordinary, indeed almost larger than life. Popular twentieth-century author James Michener evidently thought so—in his massive historical fiction work on the state of Texas, he created the character of an African American civil rights advocate who mentions the murder of Geiger when reciting the history of black Texans. Geiger’s life, however, should not be reduced to a paragraph in a fictional work. Furthermore, his lived experiences complicate the common scholarly arguments concerning African American life during Re-



construction Era in Texas. Although a self-educated man, merchant, politician, and lawyer, Geiger did not totally subscribe to respectability politics, on many occasions employing violence and intimidation. Yet, he also tirelessly fought for issues such as equal treatment under the law for white and black Texans, for fairer educational opportunities, and for social justice. Indeed, Geiger proved to be not merely a passive victim of white violence, nor an angelic black political and social figure, but a complicated and fascinating individual whose story deserves to be unearthed.<sup>41</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Affidavit of Jerry Landers, Texas State Archives, Secretary of State Election Records, Box 2-12, folder 572, *1872 Robertson County Election Returns Contested*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Weekly Democratic Statesman*, July 3, 1879, accessed October 16, 2014, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/tdnp/>, University of North Texas Libraries, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History. Hereafter cited as UNT, TDNP, PTH.

<sup>3</sup> For previous scholarship on Hal Geiger, see J. Mason Brewer, *Negro Legislators and their Descendants* (2nd edition), Austin TX: Jenkins Press, 1970; Lawrence D. Rice, *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971; Merline Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares: The Black Leadership of Texas, 1868-1900*, Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1985; Dale Baum, *Counterfeit Justice: The Judicial Odyssey of Texas Freedwoman Azeline Hearne*. Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Biographical sketch of Harrold G. Geiger, *Texas Legislative Manual of 1879-1880*, 259, accessed October 16, 2014, [http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/scanned/members/bios/16th\\_Geiger.pdf](http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/scanned/members/bios/16th_Geiger.pdf); 1880 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, accessed October 16, 2014, [http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=1880usfedcen&rank=1&new=1&M-SAV=0&gss=angs-d&gsfn=H.G.&gsfn\\_x=NP\\_NN&gsln=Geiger&msydy=1880&msypn\\_\\_ftp=Texas&dbOnly=\\_F000686E%7c\\_F000686E\\_x-%2c\\_83004006%7c\\_83004006\\_x%2c\\_83004005%7c\\_83004005\\_x&uidh=xxd&pcat=USFEDCEN&fh=0&h=40622374&recoff=&ml\\_rpos=1](http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=1880usfedcen&rank=1&new=1&M-SAV=0&gss=angs-d&gsfn=H.G.&gsfn_x=NP_NN&gsln=Geiger&msydy=1880&msypn__ftp=Texas&dbOnly=_F000686E%7c_F000686E_x-%2c_83004006%7c_83004006_x%2c_83004005%7c_83004005_x&uidh=xxd&pcat=USFEDCEN&fh=0&h=40622374&recoff=&ml_rpos=1); *Galveston Daily News*, Tuesday November 5, 1878, *Norton Union Intelligencer*, November 9, 1878, UNT, TDNP, PTH.

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<sup>5</sup> South Carolina WPA Narratives, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, accessed November 15, 2014, [<sup>6</sup> J.W. Baker, \*A History of Robertson County, Texas\* \(Waco: The Robertson County Historical Survey Committee, 1970\), 1, 3; Dale Baum, \*Counterfeit Justice: The Judicial Odyssey of Texas Freedwoman Azeline Hearne\* \(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009\), 7.](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mesn:1:/temp/~ammem_qEbq::;City Gazette and Commercial Adviser, July 9, 1828.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>7</sup> Baum, *Counterfeit Justice*, 8, 42; Richard Denny Parker, *Historical Recollections of Robertson County, Texas, with Biographical & Genealogical Notes on the Pioneers & their Families*, ed. Nona Clement Parker (Salado, TX: The Anson Jones Press, 1955), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Baum, *Counterfeit Justice*, 49; Kenneth E. Howell, "The Elusive Story of Violence in Reconstruction Texas, 1865-1874," in *Still the Arena of the Civil War: Violence and Civil War in Reconstruction Texas, 1865-1874*, ed. Kenneth E. Howell (Denton: The University of North Texas Press, 2012), Kindle edition.

<sup>9</sup> *Freedmen's Bureau Records: Texas Reports of Murders and Outrages*, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, accessed November 8, 2014, <http://freedmensbureau.com/texas/millicanoutrages.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> *The Reformer*, July 15, 1871; *The Representative*, September 9, 1871, UNT, TDNP, PTH.

<sup>11</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001), 111.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row Publishing, 1988), 300; Carl Moneyhon, *Republicanism in Reconstruction Texas* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1980), 84.

<sup>13</sup> Alwyn Barr, "Black Legislators of Reconstruction Texas," *Civil War History* 32, no. 4, (December 1986), 347-48.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Denny Parker, *Historical Recollections*, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Affidavits of Charles Gillespie, H. Bergman, Silas Johnson and Abram Raynon, Texas State Archives, Secretary of State Election Records, Box 2-12, folder 572, 1872 *Robertson County Election Returns Contested*; Affidavit of Hal Geiger, Texas State Archives, Box 2-12, folder, 572, *Robertson County Election Returns Contested*; Letter of Chandler, Carleton, and Robertson Law Firm, Texas State Archives, Secretary of State Election Records, Box 2-12, folder 572, 1872 *Robertson County Election Returns Contested*.

<sup>16</sup> Affidavit of Thomas J. Powell, Texas State Archives, 1872 *Robertson County Election Returns Contested*.

<sup>17</sup> Affidavit of Humphrey Johnson, Texas State Archives, Secretary of State Election Records, Box 2-12, folder 572, 1872 *Robertson County Election Returns Contested*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Affidavit of Richard Perry, Texas State Archives, Secretary of State Election Records, Box 2-12, folder 572, 1872 Robertson County Election Returns Contested; Affidavit of Ned Butler, Texas State Archives, Secretary of State Election Records, Box 2-12, folder 572, 1872 *Robertson County Election Returns Contested*.

<sup>20</sup> "Color at Calvert," *The Galveston Daily News*, October 2, 1878, UNT, TDNP, PTH; Rice, *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> "Views held by General Wm. H. Hamman on November 18, 1865 as to the North, the Negro, etc.," *William Harrison Hamman Papers, 1840-1879*, Box 2R29, William Hamman Scrapbook, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>22</sup> "Color at Calvert," *The Galveston Daily News*, October 2, 1878, UNT, TDNP, PTH.

<sup>23</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, October 13, 1878, Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *Norton's Union Intelligencer*, November 9, 1878, Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, November 12, 1878, *Galveston Daily News*, November 14, 1878, Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, November 16 1878; *Brenham Weekly Banner*, November 22, 1878; *Galveston Daily News*, November 23, 1878, Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, November 22, 1878, Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *The Weekly Democratic Statesman*, December 5, 1878, Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *The Brenham Daily Banner*, February 23, 1879; *The Galveston Daily News*, August 19, 1879, Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, March 8, 1879, UNT, TDNP, PTH; Hal Geiger speech, quoted in Pitre, *Through Many Dangers*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> *The Brenham Daily Banner*, April 23, 1879; *The Galveston Daily News*, March 12, 1879, UNT, TDNP, PTH.



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<sup>33</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, July 20, 1879, Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, October 11, 1879; *The Denison Daily News*, November 8, 1879, Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, April 24, 1880, Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *The Galveston Daily News*, October 27, 1880, Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *The Brenham Daily Banner*, September 21, 1881, Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Alwyn Barr, "Early Organizing in the Search for Equality: African American Conventions in Late Nineteenth Century Texas," in *Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans and their Quest for Justice*, ed. Debra A. Reid (College Station, Texas A& M University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>39</sup> "Emancipation Day Celebration," *The Galveston Daily News*, June 20, 1883, UNT, TDNP, PTH.

<sup>40</sup> "A Courtroom Tragedy," *The Galveston Daily News*, May 19, 1886; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 25th edition), 363; *The Brenham Daily Banner*, June 22, 1886; *The Galveston Daily News*, July 8, 1886, UNT, TDNP, PTH.

<sup>41</sup> James Michener, *Texas: A Novel* (The Dial Press, Reprint Edition, 1985, 2014), 694.