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THE TEXAS DIARY OF EDWIN WELSH BUSH, 1852-1854

C. T. NALL

One of the most interesting periods of early Texas history concerns the Texas immigrant—the odyssey of those thousands who left the older states for the promise of the new land to the west. The usual picture of the new Texan is that of the poor dirt farmer who, finding the struggle unequal in the older states, packed his few belongings, carved G.T.T on the door of his unkempt cabin and began the long trek to the promised land across the Sabine. That there were other types is evidenced by the diary of Edwin Welsh Bush, who was not driven by debt, unproductive land, nor a hostile sheriff, but by the greater common denominator of opportunity.

Bush was a young man in 1852, the year of his first of two visits to the new state. The Bush family’s home was Gallatin, Tennessee, near Nashville, where they were associated in some type of business. Edwin had been preceded to Texas by an older brother, Christopher, who had settled in San Augustine and acted as agent for the family business. The brother had also invested in land and had holdings in San Augustine, Nacogdoches, and Cherokee counties. Christopher died in 1852, and the younger Edwin had been sent by the family in October of the same year to settle his dead brother’s estate and to collect outstanding debts owed to Bush and Sons in Gallatin.

The diary kept by Bush is more than a daily journal. While the first part is an account of his two trips to Texas between 1852 and 1854, the last half contains entries of a business nature, showing accounts owed to Bush and Sons, information concerning land, and in some instances copies of letters. The entries in his diary are almost daily on the first trip. In some ways a meticulous young man, Bush kept a careful account of his expenditures—the cost of lodging and meals, the tolls on roads and across rivers, the cost of socks, collars, “segars,” the cost of shoeing a horse or repairing a buggy, and though temperate in his use of alcohol, there are entries for brandy.

Bush left Gallatin on October 11, 1852, accompanied by a younger brother, Samuel. On this first trip, he chose the long overland route to Memphis rather than the water route which would have taken him down the Cumberland to the Ohio and then down the Mississippi. While Bush found Memphis an imposing sight, he was quick to condemn some of its citizens for their disrespect for the Sabbath. “All the drinking houses and bar rooms are open today and the side or back doors of most of the business houses.”

Nineteenth-century travel literature is replete with evidence of the difficulties and hazards of travel. Indeed, the wanderlust of our ancestors is remarkable in the face of these obstacles and gives testimony to their determined spirit. Bush’s overland trip from Nashville to Memphis took five days, a journey which today could be covered in as many hours. But the
favorite mode of transportation in an area where railroads were few was the steamboat. The great rivers of the West—the Ohio, Mississippi, Missouri and Red—with their smaller tributaries were the arteries which at once brought in goods and settlers, and were the great avenues which carried the produce of the land to the world markets. Bush was impressed with the great wharves at Memphis and with the bulging storage decks of the steamboat Saint Paul with goods for the New Orleans markets.

If the steamboat was the easiest form of transportation, there were nevertheless dangers connected with it. Bush recorded that only four miles below Memphis, the Saint Paul was stuck fast on a sand bar and remained there until the early hours of the next morning. On his return journey two months later his own boat collided with another. The second smaller boat sank with some loss of life among its passengers.

Bush left the Saint Paul just below Vicksburg and again chose the overland route across Louisiana. After a three day journey, they reached Natchitoches October 26. He noted that Natchitoches was the second oldest town in the United States, adding that the oldest was Philadelphia. He described the town as “an old rusty looking place,” and commented that since it was cut off from the Red River, it was about to be superseded by Grand Ecore as the major shipping point for entry into East Texas. Leaving Natchitoches the next day, Bush and his brother took a stagecoach to Fort Jessup, an old military post near Many, and from there they proceeded to Sabine-town, ferrying across the river, and rode on to San Augustine.

At San Augustine, Bush met friends and acquaintances of his dead brother including Colonel John Bates, an early settler of San Augustine county; “General” James Pinckney Henderson, the first governor of the state of Texas; and Henry Rankins, another early settler of the county. He spent only one day in San Augustine. Indeed, Bush never remained more than a few days at any one place, but journeyed incessantly throughout the East Texas area. Though he failed to state the reason for these travels in his journal, it is probable that he was attempting to locate other properties owned by his brother and acting as agent for the family business. In his journal, Bush constantly commented on the condition of the land in areas through which he passed. He journeyed to Rusk, where he noted some good land “near Mud Creek in the direction of Jacksonville and Larissa.” He arrived in Tyler on November 8 and went out to see some land in the northern part of Smith County.

On November 14, he and his brother set out on a “western tour” which lasted thirteen days and took them through eleven counties to the west of Nacogdoches. He constantly noted the condition of the land and the appearance of the towns. Crockett he thought a “poor looking place” surrounded by poor land. He wrote that Anderson was “decidedly the handsomest village I have met with in Texas.” He found Port Sullivan “a devil of a place.” Up the Brazos he noted that land was selling for one to two dollars an acre. Around Springfield, in Limestone County, he wrote that land was encumbered by “eleven league claims” and was not selling at all. Bush returned to Nacogdoches on November 27 and set off the next day for San Augustine,
his point of departure for his return journey to Tennessee. Before leaving he wrote that he attended a dance at “old man George Teel’s” and had a “glorious time.”

Bush never became resigned to the slowness of travel. He complained that it took his stage seventeen hours to cover one fifty-seven mile stretch of his journey between San Augustine and Grand Ecore. On his return journey to Tennessee, Bush chose the all-water route. He and his brother boarded the Compromise at Grand Ecore which took them down the Red River to the Mississippi and on to New Orleans where they would board a boat for the up-river trip.

A two-day stopover in New Orleans gave the brothers the opportunity to tour the city. Some indication of what they saw might be inferred from Bush’s description of New Orleans as “the city of sin.” To add to the hazards of the up-river trip, Bush was faced with a superstitious captain who refused to leave until a few minutes past Friday midnight. The legendary Mississippi river gambler received some confirmation in Bush’s remark that some of the passengers spent most of their time at the backgammon and card tables.

But Bush considered his fellow passengers a dull lot, and but for the collision already mentioned, found the trip up the river without excitement. His single entry for a four-day period is “Nothing remarkable.” He reached the mouth of the Cumberland on December 19, and there boarded the Senator, which he described as a “contemptable [sic] little boat.” They proceeded up the Cumberland reaching Nashville the twenty-first and Gallatin the next day.

There are no further entries in the diary until April 11 the following year, the date Bush began his second journey to Texas. Greater interest centers on this second trip which lasted more than a year. Though his entries are fewer, they are more informative. Exclusive of one three-and-a-half month period when he acted as schoolmaster at Melrose, a small settlement between Nacogdoches and San Augustine, Bush continued to be rather itinerant.

The second journey began with a steamboat trip down the Cumberland. Again, Bush found the trip unexciting and commented only that there were “frequent stoppages” and “a dull set of passengers.” The Embassy took him to Memphis where he boarded the Magnolia, one of the large packet boats on the Louisville-New Orleans run. At New Orleans he boarded a smaller boat, the Dalman, for the trip up the Red River to Grand Ecore.

Bush arrived in San Augustine April 25, two weeks after he had left Gallatin. After spending a few days with friends, he moved on to Nacogdoches. There he visited the Adolphus Sterne and may have lived at the Sterne’s home for a few days while he was in town. By this time he had become familiar with the East Texas area and with some of its leading citizens. He recorded that he was introduced to Thomas J. Rusk, United States Senator from Texas, whom he found “rather profane but disposed to be agreeable.”

After a short trip to Cherokee and Anderson counties, Bush returned to Nacogdoches and was in town when Sam Houston spoke at the courthouse
on June 14. In his diary, Bush gave a lengthy description of Houston at this time:

At two o'clock I proceeded to the courthouse and after a few moments a large rather polite and fine looking man about sixty years old calmly and carelessly walked into the courthouse and deliberately proceeded to the Judges stand. He wore a large soft white hat, checked linen coat, nankin pants made after the old narrow flap style, straight-breasted buff vest, a large black fan suspended to his side by a red ribbon, altogether wearing an eccentric air.

Bush's summary of the speech follows closely the report in the Nacogdoches Chronicle. The senator's subject was the building of the railroad to the Pacific. Houston said that Texas should do everything in its power to see that the route would go through Texas. He was critical of the state government for the way in which it had granted charters to a number of railroad companies who had not complied with the terms of their charters and urged that these charters be revoked.

On this second trip Bush also became a book dealer of sorts. The slavery controversy was raging throughout the nation at this time, and Bush had brought with him from Tennessee a number of copies of one of the popular scriptural defenses of slavery written by Josiah Priest. Bush does not record how many copies he sold, but he does mention that he won "subscribers." The book sold for two dollars and fifty cents.

Possibly in no other period than in the middle years of the nineteenth century has Independence Day been so festively celebrated by Americans. Whether East Texans observed July 4 in a different manner than in the states east of the Mississippi is an unanswered question. At any rate Bush thought the celebration at Melrose merited a lengthy description. The celebration actually took place at Sand Hill, a small church community three miles from Melrose. It consisted of a barbecue and dance.

Upon arriving my attention was attracted by something resembling a pavilion. Circus of course entered my head immediately. I summoned courage sufficient to draw nigh unto it when I found that it was only awning from a platform that had been erected for the "unterrified" to dance on. The platform was made of pine flooring plank and was in lengths about thirty feet and in width about twenty feet. The awning was made of cotton baleing (this being a cotton county). A little farther I observed a prospect to add to the comforts of the inner man through long tables and the pit in which the barbecuing was done forming a hollow square and a table in the center on which the meats and other provisions were to be deposited and furnished as the necessity of the case required, around which quite a number of the good women of the vicinity were engaged in "fixing things." I returned to the crowd to pass off time and see what was to be seen. Read a chapter in human nature etc. as there was to be no reading of the Declaration nor anything of the kind except a manifestation of freedom by a free use of shake
of the foot. This was the only plan to pursue, but all being anxious for the merry dance to commence and equally inclined to partake of the repast, dinner was announced quite early and they pitched in seeming to say it ain't deep, and with the help of a gentle shower it passed off without any fainting. I acted quite modestly. Stood off but was finally kindly provided fare and one thing that I never met with at an occasion of the kind before was coffee "or corse." I took a cup hot as fire could make it and the sun coming down on me almost as hot, but I got through.

In a short time music was brought to bare and those strictly untirritated pitched in two for a dime. The thing was fairly up and in a short time many were anxious but unable to get into the excitement and will here state that it was the most complete mixed crowd I ever saw. After a few sets the favorite perfume was [sic] brought to bare, that is, cinnamon drops, all getting so happy that they who could not get in the dance hummed after the fiddle and patted their feet. Some calling on others to hold their babies, hats, bonnets, etc. whilst they danced a set with a man with store clothes etc. etc.

Bush said that he left toward the evening but learned the next day that the celebration went on until the morning hours.

Good health was indeed a hard-won prize a century ago. One needs only to read some accounts of the great cholera epidemics of the 1830's and 1840's to realize the toll that all but forgotten diseases of today cost our ancestors. But at a time when the germ theory was largely unknown, when pharmacology was speculative if not sheer quackery, the rather common ailments of our own day could bring long illnesses. Bush was a young man at the time. He spent a great deal of time out-of-doors, and if he abused his health in some way it is not apparent in his diary. Yet, from the middle of July until his return to Tennessee the following May, there are constant references in his journal to his bad state of health. From Bush's symptoms—fever, chills, and an upset stomach—one would diagnose his malady as malaria. It was a common enough ailment in East Texas, and the sovereign remedy was quinine. Bush also tried emetics, but his physician counseled against them. For his upset stomach, Bush took Seidlitz powders, effervescent salts which acted as a mild cathartic. His first bout with malaria seems to have been the worst. He first complained of being unwell on July 12, and it was not until July 22 that he felt well enough to walk about town. The illness never left him entirely while he was in Texas. He continued to complain of chills and fever through the winter, and a week's sickness in early April may have been decisive in persuading him to return to Tennessee.

It is apparent from the entries in his diary, that Bush could lay claim to some education. His style of writing might seem stilted to readers today, even pretentious, but this is largely a matter of conventions. One may wince at his comment on seeing a friend at Melrose return home to his family from Nacogdoches drunk: "Oh folly! Folly! Where is your terminus? Oh intemperance, when will you cease to demolish the happiness of the family circle?" At worse, Bush may be accused of some carelessness in his
writing. But if his punctuation and spelling is at times faulty, this may be
ascribed to the nature of a diary that was meant only for the eyes of the
diarist and to the hurried jottings made at inconvenient times. Whatever the
level of his education, it was sufficient for him to take up the duties of an
East Texas schoolmaster. Bush opened school on August 1, 1853, at Melrose
with ten pupils. There are few comments in his diary concerning the school,
but it is apparent that his new work-a-day world was not entirely pleasing.
The former freedom that he had enjoyed in his movements about the country
was now replaced by the confining restraints imposed by the tasks of a
schoolmaster in a small East Texas town. Added to this was his continued
illness with malaria. His only comment on his employment came at the end
of his term on December 16: "This day ends my engagement at Melrose
and I cannot say that I regret it nor that I regret that I have taken the
lesson that I have just taken."

With his freedom restored, Bush continued his travels about the area. It
is impossible to determine from the diary itself the exact purpose of these
movements. The sale of books seems to have been only a side line. It seems
safer to assume that his principal occupation was that of acting as agent
for the family business in Gallatin. In a separate section of the journal,
under the heading of "Notes due Bush and Sons" he listed amounts owed
and by whom. The sums ranged from $3.30 to $98.03 and totaled $550.60.
However, he continued to show an interest in land. Wherever he traveled he
commented on the appearance of the surrounding countryside. Near Inde­
pendence in Washington County he found some large fields of cotton. Around
San Augustine he said that land was selling for two dollars an acre "im­
proved." Yet he made no mention of buying land at this time.

In April Bush resolved to return home to Gallatin. He had been spending
some time with friends near Brenham in Washington County and was ill a
week with malaria. On April 10 he wrote that he was becoming "very
anxious to leave this part of the country," and the following day he wrote
that he was "wearied with the sameness of the life I have been living for
some weeks." After receiving a letter from home which cheered him, he
noted on the twelfth that "Time drags more heavily, and I anxiously look
forward to Monday 17th when I intend to cut cable." He left Brenham
April 17 for San Augustine, but due to illness was forced to stop frequently
along the route and did not reach San Augustine until April 25. It was only
on May 4 that he left for Tennessee.

The Bush diary ends with its author's return to Gallatin. Though there
is no mention of a subsequent trip to Texas, Bush returned within two years
and settled permanently at Rusk. In 1856 he was elected mayor of Rusk, and
there are indications that he practiced law there. He died at Linn Flat in
Nacogdoches County in 1898.

It is regrettable that Bush did not continue his journal into the politically
crucial years following 1854. Indeed, it is curious how few comments there
are concerning political issues. However, the diary is primarily a travel
journal, and it is possible that Bush did not consider the issues important
enough to enter in his diary. The great fault of the diary is its brevity. Most
of the entries merely indicate when and where he stopped on his travels. Nowhere does he mention his primary business in East Texas, and there are all too few entries which give us clear impressions of the many facets of East Texas society a century ago. However, Bush can hardly be blamed for not satisfying the probing curiosity of historians who were never meant to see his small notebook. With all these shortcomings the Bush diary is another document of East Texas history which contributes to our understanding of this important period of history.

NOTES

1George Teet was a pioneer settler in the San Augustine area. He was a member of the Stephen F. Austin colony and was enrolled among the “Old Three Hundred” colonists. The Handbook of Texas, Walter Prescott Webb, et. al. ed. (Austin, 1952), 11, 719.

2Louis C. Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers (Cambridge 1949), 143.

3See the issue of June 21, 1853, Stephen F. Austin State College Newspaper Collection.

4In an aside on Houston’s speech, the Chronicle pointed an accusing finger at Jefferson Davis, who was Secretary of War in the Pierce cabinet, charging Davis with thwarting the effort to get the railroad through Texas. This, it said, would serve his “disunionist” plans. By seeing that the North won the railroad, he could then “turn around and cry out that the North gets everything; and thus by creating an unhallowed excitement, he hopes to forward his cherished project of dissolving the union.” Ibid.

5Bible Defense of Slavery, or the Origin, History and Fortunes of the Negro Race (Louisville, 1851).

“Or Corse” is undoubtedly a corruption of au corse, literally strong or rich coffee. In this case it was coffee laced with brandy.