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SCENES FROM A SMALL TOWN: EARLY TIMES IN CHIRENO, TEXAS

By Daniel Williams

EDITOR'S NOTE

One of the most unique aspects of Texas history is its capacity to enchant generation after generation. The stories with which young Texans grow up – stories of the Alamo, of Texas Rangers, of Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston and San Jacinto – often lead them to investigate their own pasts and kindle an interest in history that lasts a lifetime. One young East Texan, Daniel Williams, followed such a path. Curiosity about his hometown of Chireno led him, as a high school student, to write this collection of anecdotes and brief synopses of local history. Readers of the *East Texas Historical Journal* are regularly treated to the finished product of mature scholars, many of whom became fascinated with Texas history as young men and women and who then went on to make it their life's work, whether as a profession or as an avocation. But through Mr. Williams' writings we are privileged to glimpse the beginning of the process, the first and sometimes tentative investigations of a young man just embarking on his lifelong quest to learn about himself and his family, as well as about the community, state, and nation to which he belongs. We hope that by publishing his work we will encourage other young historians to pursue their interests; we also hope to remind readers of the importance of inculcating a love of history in our children and our students, for the future of East Texas' history truly lies with them.

Chireno

Chireno is located in Nacogdoches County on *El Camino Real* (King's Highway), much of which is now State Highway 21. Chireno is sixteen miles west of San Augustine and eighteen miles southeast of Nacogdoches, and lies between the Angelina and the Attoyac rivers.

The settlement was originally part of a Spanish land grant owned by Jose Antonio Chirino, for whom the town was later named. Jose Antonio Chirino was born May 2, 1755 in Los Adaes, Spain. He married his first wife, Maria Antonia de Mora, in 1792 and his second wife, Maria Antonia de lo Santos, in 1803. Chirino received this grant of nine-and-one-eighth leagues of land, about 4,428 acres, from the Spanish king on May 21, 1792. In 1810 the Mexican government challenged his title to the land. For the next twenty years he protested until, on March 9, 1830, the Mexican government surveyed Chirino's land and gave him clear title. In the meantime, sometime before 1824, the town eventually known as Chireno was established. Jose Antonio Chirino's estate was listed on the tax roll of 1837 as owning 3,250 acres of land valued at \$2,965.

The first settlement was two-and-one-half miles southwest of the present town. It was founded by a Spaniard, Peter Y'Barbo, around 1810. He may have been a son or a relative of Antonio Gil Y'Barbo, who founded Nacogdoches in

1779. A later Spanish settlement was located three-and-one-half miles north-west of the present town. There were about twelve families in the area including those living in the Y'Barbo settlement.

Another community, the Little settlement, was located three miles north-west of present-day Chireno. Named for an old land grant to John Duff Little in about 1835, these colonists were here before the days of the Republic.

Jose Antonio Chirino died in October 1833, leaving his heirs the land presently occupied by the town of Chireno. The land was later sold off in tracts to colonists seeking homes in Texas, including the Fall, Y'Barbo, Atkinson, Flournoy, Smith, Vail, Little, Wilson, and Metteauer families. Jose Antonio Chirino is possibly buried at Chireno Catholic Cemetery at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church.

White Settlers

One of the earliest white settlers in the Chireno area was Dr. John Newton Fall, a physician from Georgia. Dr. Fall was born January 28, 1810 and attended both the University of Georgia and Emory University. He began practicing medicine in Melrose before moving to Chireno around 1836. He secured several thousand acres of land from Jose Antonio Chirino's heirs, and in 1837 brought his family and built his home nearby. His house had a well inside, which was very unusual for the time. Fall was active for many years in land transactions in the area. On August 11, 1841, he posted a bond of \$1,000.00 to be used as security in the transfer of a tract of land (1/2 square mile) from Antonio Gillett to Samuel M. Flournoy. Flournoy later sold 800 acres on November 1, 1851, to Dr. Fall.

Dr. Fall is typically credited with being the founder of Chireno and with making the town what it is today. He was a prominent physician who also built the first general merchandise store – which was very large – a drug store, and a consulting office for his patients. Fall also built a cotton gin and a sawmill in Chireno and maintained stores in Melrose as well. In the Nacogdoches County Census of 1850 John N. Fall is listed as being thirty-eight years old and a merchant.

Like Jose Antonio Chirino, Dr. Fall had two wives. His first wife was Susan T. Wilson, whom he married on March 11, 1831. He brought her and their two children with him when he moved to Chireno, and the couple later had another eight children. One of Dr. Fall's daughters, Mary, married a Dr. D.T. Taylor. Born in Georgia, she was one of the first graduates in classics and music at Montgomery College in LaGrange, Georgia. Dr. Fall's first son, John Calvin, was the first white child to be born in Chireno, entering the world on July 22, 1841. One story about Calvin, as he was known, said that the Indians were very curious; he was the first white baby they had ever seen. The Indians were allowed to rock the new baby's cradle. Calvin later married Laura Emma Hardeman on July 24, 1865 in San Augustine, and served two terms as Nacogdoches County treasurer. Fall married Minerva Hankla Atkinson on June 14, 1842. The widow of Joseph H. Atkinson, Minerva bore Fall one son, Randolph H. Fall, in 1866.

Sam Houston, traveling between his offices in Nacogdoches and San Augustine, was a frequent visitor to Chireno and a friend of Dr. Fall's. He often stayed at the S.M. Flournoy home, later called the Halfway House. Houston also regularly stayed with Dr. John Fall. One time he stayed with Dr. Fall for two weeks to have his wounds from the battle of San Jacinto treated. During his stays in Chireno he carved wooden spoons, crosses, and other trinkets that he then gave to locals.

Dr. John N. Fall was a very smart man and was prominent in early Texas. He served as a Justice of the Peace for Nacogdoches County from 1839 to 1841. Dr. Fall was made postmaster on December 3, 1851, succeeding Samuel M. Flournoy, who was the first postmaster in Chireno at the Halfway House. He was elected state senator from the 18th district in 1857 and served from 1858 to 1862. In February of 1861 Nacogdoches County sent Dr. Fall and William Clark to represent the county at the secession convention in Austin. They voted to secede from the Union against the wishes of John Fall's good friend, Sam Houston.

Dr. Fall was one of the largest landowners in the Chireno area, and also owned about one hundred slaves. Dr. Fall, and the other white settlers of the area, treated his slaves very well and kept them well fed. He had a smokehouse and he always had it full of meat. The slaves lived in little houses around the fields. Their beds were built into the walls in the quarters. Dr. Fall did not believe in whipping his slaves.

Lizzie Hughes was a slave belonging to Dr. John Fall. She was born December 25, 1848. From what I have read in Lizzie Hughes' slave narrative, Susan Fall liked to tell ghost stories and would try to scare the slaves.

"She liked to get killed at that business. She put a high chair on her shoulder and covered herself with a sheet and went out in the yard to scare my Uncle Allen. He was the blacksmith, and was going home from the shop carrying a big sledgehammer. When he seed that tall white thing he throwed a hammer at it, but missed and hit a big iron pot in the yard and busted it all to pieces. If he had hit my little Mistress he would have killed her."

Lizzie also remembered that Dr. Fall took good care of his slaves and of white people when they were sick. He was a very good physician. But on September 26, 1864 Susan T. Wilson Fall died. Here is Lizzie Hughes' account of her death.

"He had four doctors with my little Mistress, but God took her anyhow. It nearly kilt (killed) me when she died. She was allus so good to me and wouldn't let any of them whip me. Some time some of Master's folks would make like they was going to whip me and my little Mistress would take me in her arms and say, "This is the smartest little thing on this place and you ain't gwying to whip her. I layed cross her bed and cried all day when she died. I was big enuff to do things round the house when the War started."

Dr. Fall was very sad to see his slaves leave him and really did not want to let them go. So he didn't tell them that they were free. But they found out when two mill men and others came and told them. They showed the slaves a

paper saying they were free. Lizzie's mother was one of the former slaves that left and went to work at the mill as a cook. Lizzie Hughes stayed with Fall for two years and then got married

Dr. Fall had two children who went to fight in the Civil War. They came back to Chireno safe. One was Calvin Fall, who served in the 3rd Sgt. Co. K., 1st Texas Infantry also in the Co. A., 1st Texas Infantry as 1st Lieutenant. He was captured at Fort DeRussy in Louisiana on March 14, 1864 then paroled to New Orleans and exchanged July 22, 1864 at Red River Landing. Calvin enlisted on May 5, 1862 and was discharged in May of 1865. Calvin Fall died November 19, 1919, and is buried in the Chireno Lower Cemetery.

Vail Fall was Dr. Fall's other boy that went to war. He was born December 4, 1844. He was a CSA soldier in Co. B, 3rd Brigade, Texas State Troops. Vail Fall died October 4, 1927.

Dr. John Newton Fall died November 13, 1866. He was fifty-six. He is buried in Chireno in the Lower Cemetery. His log cabin is preserved inside the structure of the Halbert House in Chireno, Texas. Minerva Hankla Atkinson Fall was born March 29, 1837 and died April 1, 1898.

How to Spell Chireno

When did the Spelling of Chireno change? In the *Handbook of Texas* the town is spelled Chireno like we spell it today. But the town was named for Jose Antonio Chirino, who spelled his name differently. General Land Office maps of the original grants spell the town's name Chirino as well. So when did the spelling of the name change? Some early census records spell Antonio's name as Chirino, but a few, including the 1850 census, spell it as Chireno. To complicate matters further, on the Tax Roll of 1837 a man named Santiago Cherano is listed as having property with a total valuation of \$200.00.

Dr. Fall, in a letter from to A.A. Nelson of Nacogdoches on February 6, 1851, spelled the town's name as Chirino. The *Texas Almanac* published lists of post offices and postmasters and spelled the name of the town as Cherino from 1857 to 1879 and Chireno from 1883 to 1964. In a schoolbook from 1911-1912 the name of the school is spelled Chireno High School. The Rev. George L. Crocket, in a letter to Mr. John Mettaufer, spelled it Chirino. Was he thinking of the man or was the town spelled that way at the time? Then in the 1967-1968 telephone books the name is spelled Chireno for both the man and the name of the town.

POWs

On the Chireno-Etoile road there was a World War II prisoner-of-war camp. It was located on the A.J. Waters place four miles southwest of Chireno. Some POWs worked for the Sutton sawmill that was near the camp. The German POWs were in Chireno from 1943 to 1946.

The POW camp at Chireno was one of twelve camps in the Pineywoods. The site in Chireno was chosen for many reasons. It was on an excellent transportation route, the Angelina and Neches River Railroad, and was located in the thick forest surrounding Chireno that the lumber companies owned.

The POW Camp was built in March of 1943 and the first German prisoners came in May. The camp covered thirty acres, with the central compound sitting on five acres. There were 250 German prisoners at the camp. Some worked for the Frost Lumber Company or Suttons Mill, and some might have been from General Rommel's Africa Corps. The POW's who did work for the lumber companies were in groups of twelve and were looked after by an American truck driver, a labor pusher, and a U.S. Army soldier.

In his book about German POW camps in East Texas, historian Mark Choate said "the Germans worked the forests for two years and were a valuable asset to the timber industry." The number of prisoners decreased between the last months of 1945 and the early part of 1946. The camp then closed in March of 1946. A bad tornado swept through Chireno on January 6, 1946, and some of the German prisoners-of-war helped in the cleanup. The people of Chireno then saw that the POWs were just boys who were lonely and no different from their own young friends and family.

American armed guards at Camp Chireno would leave the camp headquarters at night to visit young women in Nacogdoches at the Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College WAC School. Some of the prisoners liked East Texas so much that after the war they decided to stay here.

Chireno School

Daniel H. Vail gave the present school campus to Chireno. But the earliest, little-known schools were private. Some ministers doubled as teachers. Some of the earliest teachers were Henderson Pelmem and Bill Anderson.

Anderson taught in Chireno about 1845, while Pelmem taught near the Little Settlement, which is about five miles from Chireno, around the same time. An 1852 Nacogdoches newspaper mentions The Chireno Female Institute, located at the site of the present school building. A child attending the academy would have to take exams to obtain a certificate. In 1854 a reference to Chireno Academy, under President John N. Fall, appeared in the Nacogdoches newspaper. Other records show that a school known as the "The Old Academy" was open in 1861.

Many local residents believe that the earliest public school in Chireno appeared about 1859. In the fall of 1866 a man from Georgia, Professor G.M.L. Smith, came to Chireno and taught until 1872. He taught the higher level subjects. He was principal of the school there for about ten years, and was said to be a strict disciplinarian but an excellent teacher. The remainder of his life was spent as a merchant at Chireno, where he died on September 28, 1889. Matt Burke was the next teacher in Chireno. He taught from 1871 to 1875. A Professor Leonard was also here at this time. Educated in Oxford, England, Professor Leonard taught Latin, Greek, and trigonometry. Mr. Ed Matthews was an important educator and did a lot for education in Chireno. He taught between 1880 and 1892.

Teachers were paid poorly in the early years of the school. Some were paid with food or feed for their livestock. Mr. Callaway came from Georgia

and taught in Chireno for ten months in 1883 for \$1000, which was a lot in those days. P.E. Walton, George Adams, Miss Wratten taught in 1912 and got paid \$50 per month. A.W. Bell got paid \$30 per month.

When children would come from out of town they would stay with Mrs. Mary Wilson, who owned a boarding house that still stands in Chireno today. Mrs. Bonnie Gray also had a boarding house for children. Some say that school in Chireno was very hard and one of the best schools around. Some students normally walked to school while others rode a horse or wagon. In the springtime they would get out early to help with crops on the farm.

The children learned from books like *McGuffey's Readers*, *Webster's Spelling Book*, *Davies' Arithmetic*, and *Monteith's Geography*. They would write on slate boards.

Records show that in 1897 there were both white and black schools in Chireno with a hundred students total attending classes. In 1905 there were 102 students in the white school and in 1911 it was classified as a high school. In 1916 only ten grades were taught. There have been three Chireno School buildings on the same site, two of which were made of wood and both of which burned. Wood burning stoves were used to keep the classrooms warm and this may have played a role in the fires. No records exist for the school between 1918 and 1928, because in 1928 the building and the records burned. A new, brick school building was built. With a new building came higher standards and growth. In 1929 Little's Chapel School was consolidated with Chireno; in 1931 Long Ridge School was added and in 1936 Bethel School also consolidated. An eleventh grade was added in 1934.

Sawmills, Stores, and Other Industries

There were nine large sawmills and many smaller mills in Nacogdoches County. Chireno, like other small towns, was closely identified with the logging industry. Chireno was the eastern terminus and a logging camp of the Angelina and Neches River Railroad. The Tilford-Hunt was a sawmill in Chireno in 1915. The mill would cut 35,000 feet of pine, white oak, and red oak daily. The mill was used a circular saw and had a planer and dry kilns attached to the building. The sawmill produced sixty per cent boards or lumber and forty per cent large timbers. The Chireno sawmill could cut, plane, and kiln-dry timbers up to twenty-four-feet in length as well as cut crossties.

Oscar H. Buckner owned and operated a small sawmill and cotton gin in Chireno. In 1910 he operated a gristmill on the Mast Creek near Melrose. A sawmill owned by The Sutton Lumber Company of Chireno was located two miles southwest of town on New Camp road. It occupied land on both sides of the Angelina and Neches River Railroad. This sawmill was a big part of the community of Chireno from about 1937 to 1962. T.O. Sutton and Sons owned the company and the sawmill. They moved the mill to Chireno from Centerview, Texas, in 1937. Sons Willard and Harold Sutton moved with the sawmill and built homes in the town.

People who worked for the sawmill could make about \$17.50 per week.

The Suttons built houses all around the mill for people who worked there. The mill provided jobs for more than fifty Chireno families.

Chireno had two shoemakers, Uncle Jack Mast and Joe Stallings. They made their shoes on wooden lasts. Craig Wilson made saddle harness and other leather goods out of leather from the local tanning yard. There was also a dry goods store and a saloon at the beginning of the Civil War, both owned by a Mr. Buckner and a Mr. Farmer. Mr. Striver owned the furniture store in Chireno. By 1938 there was a bank, a drug store, two garages, a post office, three cafes, six grocery stores, two meat markets, two blacksmith shops, a barbershop, and a pressing shop.

There were two cotton gins in Chireno. Mr. Tucker operated the first, a small gin that was turned by hand. Around 1872 Jack Moss owned a watermill and gin near Cottingham Bridge.

In many ways, Chireno was a typical, rural small town. But, like all such places, it has its own unique past worthy of preservation.

A Note on Sources

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