THE HIGHSMITH MEN, TEXAS RANGERS

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The Highsmith Men is a general historical narrative of four prominent men who happened to be Texas Rangers. The story begins in Texas in 1830 and traces the lives of Samuel Highsmith, his nephew, Benjamin Franklin Highsmith, and Samuel’s sons, Malcijah and Henry Albert Highsmith, who was the last of the four to pass away, in 1930. During this century the four Highsmiths participated in nearly every landmark event significant to the history of Texas. The Highsmith men also participated in numerous other engagements as well. Within this framework the intent of The Highsmith Men is to scrutinize the contemporary scholarly conceptions of the early Texas Rangers as an institution by following the lives of these four men, who can largely be considered common folk settlers. This thesis takes a bottom up approach to the history of Texas, which already maintains innumerable accounts of the sometimes true and, sometimes not, larger than life figures that Texas boasts. For students pursuing studies in the Texas, the American West, the Mexican American War, or Civil War history, this regional history may be of some use.

The early Texas Rangers were generally referred to as “Minute Men” or “Volunteer Militia” until 1874. In this role, the Highsmith men participated in many historic Texas engagements including but not limited to the Siege of Béxar, the battle of the Alamo, San Jacinto, the Cordova Rebellion, Plum Creek, the Mexican Invasions of 1842, the Mexican War, the Civil War, Salado Creek, Brushy Creek, and the capture of Sam Bass. Not only did people like the Highsmiths, who were largely considered “common folk,” participate in these battles, they were also Texas Rangers. None of the Highsmith men were full time Texas Rangers, which discredits prominent stereotypes. The Highsmith Men shows that the Texas Ranger institution
and the history of Texas itself was not dominated by larger than life historical characters, rather those noted figures maintained their widespread fame by building their successes on the backs of these men.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: THE HIGHSMITH MEN, TEXAS RANGERS

Since their unofficial inception by Stephen F. Austin in 1823, the Texas Rangers have become something of an institution, while at the same time they have created quite a legacy. Their exploits along the western frontier of Texas, on the Rio Grande border, and in early American wars have set them apart as an institution with a storied, if sometimes infamous, history. As a result, the Rangers have a varied reputation abroad and especially at home. Some characterize them as raucous thrill seekers who came to Texas seeking only fame and fortune despite cost or implication. Others see them as the noble defenders of Anglo civilization and progress, the vanguard which kept settlers safe from savage Native Americans and inveterate Mexicans. Yet because the Texas Rangers occupy such a lofty position in both popular and academic history, the truth can be quite hard to decipher. In order to save true Texas Ranger history from becoming simple dime store fiction and to preserve the legacies of many proud men, modern historians have drawn a hard line between romanticism and reality. In this process, the stories of some hard-working individual Rangers have been lost either due to the too narrow focus on a few outstanding characters, or the too broad generalizing histories of the era. This thesis discusses the careers of four members of the Highsmith family whose service in the nineteenth-century will help to clarify the boundary between myth and history concerning the Texas Rangers.

The venerable Walter Prescott Webb laid the foundation of modern Texas Ranger historiography more than seventy-five years ago with his pioneering work, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, which became the first of several scholarly books that have attempted to place the Rangers within the history of Texas and the United States. Since Webb’s
time, Ranger scholarship has evolved from a one-dimensional Anglo-centric purview to one that tends to focus more on Texas’s other notable cultural communities, including the Mexican, Tejano, and Native American populations. Because contemporary scholarship has moved in this direction, a somewhat darker shadow has been cast on the men and institution that were once considered untouchable. Recent scholars have held the Rangers accountable for their sometimes inexcusable actions against non-Anglo populations on the frontier and along the border. Consequently, a more dynamic multi-faceted academic history of the Texas Rangers has emerged. Webb’s attempt at a more balanced realistic approach, while it had its flaws, thus effectively initiated a removal of the mythology and lore that heretofore had been a significant force in the arena of Texas Ranger history. Hopefully future scholars will follow the “academic” path more closely by adhering to the analysis of primary resource documentation instead of relying heavily on antiquated and frequently questionable secondary source material.

While Webb virtually ignored the Highsmith men, his balanced approach to the history of the Texas Rangers was utilized to give an accurate portrayal of their lives and services to Texas. As a result of Webb’s traditionalist, albeit pioneering work, Texas history enthusiasts and scholars alike were, and continue to be, better able to conceptualize what life was really like in nineteenth-century Texas. Instead of seeing only a sanitized view that takes just the dominant cultures into consideration, later generations of fans of Texas history and students were better able to visualize and understand the sometimes devastating effects that westward progress had on dissident populations. Because of Webb’s contribution, subsequent generations of enthusiasts and students have been able to study the past with increasing clarity.1

Writing while keeping the perspective of minority populations in mind is commonplace now in most historical genres; however, this technique has been underutilized in Texas Ranger historiography. With this approach, authors attempt to provide balance to the field by giving accounts of Anglo, Mexican, and later Tejano actions. These, among other depictions, focus upon the various depredations committed by, in many instances, the Rangers upon Native Americans or, as is more commonly found in primary resource documentation, Mexicans and later Tejanos. Citing tense relations and various atrocities is inevitable in any comparative study of people from differing cultural populations, which in this case are those of Anglo and Mexican descent. Arnoldo de Leon’s *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans, 1821-1900* is one of the first works that utilizes this perspective. De Leon investigates Anglo attitudes and racial prejudices towards Mexicans in nineteenth-century Texas. While the work can be considered rather one-dimensional--De Leon focuses on one aspect of social relations, namely the negative, between Anglos and Mexicans, not to mention economic biases based on race--it does prove that Anglo racial biases existed and that social injustices did indeed occur. In many instances racial depredations committed on Mexicans were by the Texas Rangers, who De Leon argues associated Mexicans with “Redskins” and “Niggers.” He goes so far as to argue that the Texas Rangers “enjoyed the tacit sanction of the white community to do to Mexicans in the name of the law what others did extralegally…” His accounts of racial injustices are solid and well-researched. Thus, *They Called them Greasers* is arguably a solid rebuttal to Webb’s more traditionalist view, and thus should be considered in writing modern Ranger history.\(^2\)

David Montejano’s gentler, yet still pioneering work, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* utilizes a balanced technique well, arguably better than De Leon. Montejano

acknowledges the fact that there exists a popular and romanticized view of southwestern history, a history which he depicts as “Indians and Mexicans [who] were subdued, ranches fenced, railroads built, and so on until the West was completely won.” Montejano offers a historical and sociological interpretation in Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas. From the historical perspective, he maintains his “book can be described as a southwestern history about nation building, economic development, and ethnic relations.” From the sociological purview, which he argues is more complex, he states that his “history points to the familiar experience of conflict and accommodation between distinct societies and peoples throughout the world.” While not a direct analysis of relations between Mexicans and Anglo Texas Rangers, and subsequently the four Highsmith men, their attitudes and race relations can actually be fit into such a perspective. The sociological questions addressed by Montejano—ethnicity, social change, and society itself—can be successfully utilized in any particular work detailing ethnic relations between Anglos, including Texas Rangers, and Mexicans (again, later Tejanos).³

Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers by historian Robert Utley is one of the newer post-revisionist histories that gives an accurate, if favorable, account of the frontier men that became Texas Rangers. Lone Star Justice traces the Rangers' first century of existence from their unofficial beginnings protecting the Old Three Hundred in 1823 to roughly 1910, a period that saw the institution change into something more akin to modern law enforcement agencies. Utley presents two differing views of the Texas Rangers that have emerged in recent years. Citing first the view held predominantly by Texas exceptionalists, Utley states that the “Rangers were fearless men of sterling character and unswerving dedication to mission.” The other view that he brings to the fore is one that many descendants of Native

Americans and Mexicans may take more seriously: he admits “the Texas Rangers were ruthless, brutal, and more lawless than the criminals that they pursued.” Utley manages to place the famous pre-1910 ranger captains—including but not limited to, John Coffee "Jack" Hays, John S. “Rip” Ford, and Edward Burleson, to name a few-- in their frontier and borderland landscapes, and he largely lets their actions speak for themselves. Each of the aforementioned captains was familiar with the services rendered by at least one, if not two or three, of the Highsmith men. Utley concludes by noting that “as legendary heroes and legendary knaves, they left an indelible mark on human minds the world over.” With *Lone Star Justice*, Utley made great strides in setting the record straight, effectively bridging the gap between popular and academic history.4

In *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land 1820-1875*, Gary Clayton Anderson uses the technique Montejano pioneered in Texas historiography to offer an explanation for the bloody violence that he maintains was commonplace on the western frontier and southern borderlands of Texas. Anderson argues that the westward bound Anglos practiced “ethnic cleansing” in efforts to remove Native Americans and Mexicans (and later Tejanos) in order to “extend the nineteenth-century doctrine of American liberal ideology that forced people [especially Native Americans and Mexicans] to conform to the land settlement patterns created by the U.S. government, which emphasized small farms rather than large communal holdings.” In essence, Anderson asserts that if Native Americans and Mexicans could not, or rather would not, conform to Anglo-American patterns of settlement, then they would be forcibly removed from Texas. While his argument is well founded, it is buttressed by the rather one-sided claim that the Rangers, whom he refers to as the “enforcement arm of Texas policy,” killed, robbed, and raped Native Americans and later Mexicans in order to carry out this agenda. He states

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further that “the Texas Rangers were mostly adventurers rather than settlers, seeing the rather aimless, mobile life of a ranger as more glamorous than picking cotton.”

Anderson eventually concedes that there were varying degrees of professionalism among the Rangers, ranging from the elite and well trained units to the reckless and foolhardy who only wished to use the title of “Texas Ranger” for fame or fortune. He fails to even mention the repeated depredations committed upon Anglo Americans by Native Americans or Mexicans, which created a perennially tense environment in Texas. Anderson’s claim, however, is concrete; Anglo Americans did encroach onto Native American lands (as did the Spanish) with little to no concern for the first inhabitants. Further, Anglo Americans did come to dominate a Texas that was governed by the sovereign nation of Mexico. In his book, Anderson relegates one of the Highsmith men, Samuel, to the group of Rangers whom he would say were seeking only glory. In detailing Samuel Highsmith’s engagements with Native Americans at his 1847-1848 post in the Hill Country, near Enchanted Rock, he cites that “the only explanations for Highsmith’s attack(s) were plunder and fame.” This pioneering work has certainly paved the way for future scholars to produce more evenly composed works.

A more comparative work, that better details Ranger activities, is Andrew R. Graybill’s *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910*. Graybill provides a side-by-side comparison of the Texas Rangers and the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, or Mounties. He analyzes the two group’s organization as state police forces and how they displaced indigenous groups and poorer classes. While *Policing the Great Plains* is an excellent counter to older Texas Ranger scholarship—a style of scholarship that embraced

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frontier exceptionalism--his comparison is lacking in regard to the Texas Rangers. As Graybill wishes to demonstrate, it is true that the majority of men who called themselves Texas Rangers embraced a distinct American ideology. It is further true that this unique American notion of superiority, or exceptionalism, at times led lawmen, including possibly the Highsmiths and various other Rangers, to dehumanize their Native American counterparts, which in turn led some to commit rather unsavory acts of aggression towards the incumbent populations. But Graybill is incorrect in his assertion that “the two forces policed nearly identical populations.” He fails to fully take into account the extent of the depredations caused by Native Americans in Texas. He underestimates the true power of the Comanche and, more importantly, he does not consider the political turmoil and resultant backlash that occurred between Mexican authorities and the citizens of Coahuila y Texas.

While Anglo-Texan relations with Native Americans may be difficult to conceptualize, understanding Anglo-Mexican relations in nineteenth-century Texas is just as complex, if not more so. The inevitability of westward progress should be understood. Mexico in an attempt to populate and defend its borders from the United States provided an attractive opportunity for any upwardly mobile individual in the nineteenth-century United States willing to pay for cheap land in Texas, like the Highsmith family did. It should be further understood that the same Anglo-Texans revolted due to drastic changes in policy by a constantly vacillating and quarrelsome Mexican political machine, which outlawed widely accepted Anglo practices. It is important to note here that the United States, unlike Canada, was born out of war, a war that still resonated in the minds of many westward bound colonists. Mexican political turmoil also created a climate of hate, which the Texans unfortunately transferred to the general Mexican/Tejano populace. While retaliatory attacks led by some Rangers were indeed harsh, if not extreme, the average citizen
soldier was likely more concerned with the safety and well-being of his family, friends, and property, than with committing racist atrocities on hapless Native Americans and Mexicans.  

Another work that stands on the other side of the metaphorical fence is Michael Collins’s *Texas Devils: Rangers & Regulars on the Lower Rio Grande, 1846-1861*. Collins follows a path similar to that of Anderson’s in that he does not provide a one-sided ubiquitous history deifying the Rangers. Instead, ever the social historian, Collins focuses on the emotion of revenge, which Texas Rangers along the border exacted regularly and apparently to wide-ranging degrees. With this work Collins hopes to provoke debate among historians and Texas history aficionados as to the rightful place of the Texas Rangers in history. While this is a general history of the Texas Rangers along the border from 1846 to the outset of the Civil War, Collins does not provide an abundance of remarks extolling Ranger virtue (besides those directed to John Salmon Ford). Rather, Collins exposes the human nature inherent in the Anglo Rangers. He does so admirably, stating that “this story is not about the Rangers of legend who bravely defended the border from lawlessness and savagery but about the Rangers of historical record who tortured and even lynched prisoners, who joined in filibustering expeditions to the Rio Grande and beyond, and who wrought terrible vengeance upon their enemies.” While not all Rangers tortured or lynched prisoners, Collins acknowledges that these unfortunate events did happen. He separates fact from fiction by exposing vengeful human nature as it related to the Rangers along the Texas-Mexico border. But Malcijah B. Highsmith serves as an example that Collins's *Texas Devils* is not a diatribe against the Texas Rangers. Recalling Malcijah’s enlistment in Ford’s company of

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7 Andrew Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 1-4. The bloody manner in which Mexican Dictator Santa Anna handled the “Texas problem” galvanized the will of the Texans and reinforced their notions of superiority. Battles like the Alamo, the Massacre at Goliad, and later the Black Bean Episode, to name a few, resonated so poorly with Texans that hatred grew between the two cultures, which offers an explanation for atrocities committed towards Mexicans by a few overzealous Rangers. Canadian Mounties were most certainly not confronted with such issues.
Rangers on the Rio Grande in the summer of 1850, Collins accurately portrays Highsmith’s involvement as a commissary lieutenant stationed at San Antonio Viejo.8 In *Fighting Stock: John S. “Rip” Ford of Texas*, Richard B. McCaslin effectively demonstrates the breadth of the human condition by narrowing his focus to one famous Ranger captain. He provides a well-balanced account of Ford that characterizes the man well beyond his tenure as a Texas Ranger. McCaslin argues that while Ford represented the “typical” Texan, he was actually far from it. In popular culture, like the Highsmiths, Ford is remembered for fighting Native Americans and Mexicans in the interests of slave owning Anglo farmers and ranchers. While Ford did do these things, he never actually owned much land, or herded cattle, and he did not own any slaves. The Highsmiths followed a different albeit similar path in that they were not farmers and did not herd cattle successfully; between the four men, only one slave was ever owned. In fact, Ford and the Highsmiths did not conform neatly to any one label. McCaslin asserts that Ford spent more time doing editorial work for various newspapers than he ever did on any one military assignment. Ford claimed to be a doctor, lawyer, and among other things, a historian. By providing a broad account of Ford’s life, McCaslin ably demonstrates that the early Rangers were more than just foolhardy thrill seekers who sought only to ride the plains in search of battle, fame, and glory. By providing a more well-rounded depiction of the men that were Texas Rangers, authors like McCaslin effectively separate fact from fiction and provide a template, and opportunity, for other studies of "typical" Rangers, such as the Highsmiths.9

Before they were revered as an institution, the Texas Rangers were citizen-soldiers that were created to keep the frontier safe for settlers. What does that mean? Where they right or

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wrong? From the historians’ vantage point, it does not necessarily matter that their actions were justifiable or not; they just happened. Like the ensuing story of the Highsmith men, the voices of the past should guide the writing of subsequent generations. It is the responsibility of historians to properly document and disseminate this information to educate future generations. The Texas Rangers, as Anderson asserts, were nation builders--whether they knew it or not--who stayed a step ahead of the ever encroaching Anglo civilization until they became institutionalized as law officers after 1874. Rather than be redirected like an arrow deflected by a Ranger’s hardened leather chaps, the expansionist ideology of western civilization, engrained for centuries, evolved only slightly in Texas due to the physical environment and human interaction. To argue that the Texas Rangers, or the Mounties for that fact, were wrong is to grapple with the ideological issue of western imperialism and global expansion, which can be traced back to European origins.10

Some Texas Rangers were in fact adventurers seeking a good fight and the spoils that came with it, but many were like the Highsmiths, who were simply looking to safeguard their livelihoods. Frontiersmen that took risks to move their families west for better opportunities were likely reluctant to back down in the face of adversity. Frontier settlers’, and thus the Rangers’, only real incentive for moving west was the hope for a better standard of living than what they perceived that they had. However the Rangers' actions are to be interpreted, as either right or wrong, or racist or even handed, their story is a part of a broader United States history, more specifically a history of the Southwest and Texas, which is integral to the larger story of Texas, the United States, and their ideologies. The Rangers were integral to the success of this larger scheme because they were also men with dreams, families, and aspirations. Ford represented this very type of determined settler who came to Texas, though he actually achieved what he set out

10 Ibid. 3.
to do. Many were not so fortunate. As McCaslin points out, while “Ford became a fixture in a violent frontier culture celebrated by nostalgic Texans” he was multidimensional, and like many Rangers he was much more than a range riding frontiersman.\textsuperscript{11}

Contemporary Texas Ranger historiography is intended to separate fact from fiction, but it often fails to take into account the motivating factor behind the Texas Rangers. To explore the issue of intent, one group of Rangers should be rescued from their curious omission from Texas Ranger historiography. Save for sporadic and sometimes inaccurate mention by recent scholars, the Highsmith family of Rangers has been relegated to nineteenth century newspapers, almanacs, and personal reminiscences. When duty called Samuel, Benjamin Franklin, Malcijah Benjamin, and Henry Albert Highsmith left their respective civilian occupations and served Texas as Rangers, the catchall term for military and paramilitary volunteers prior to 1874. The Highsmiths typify the less well-known Texas Rangers, ones that sought to protect the frontier and Texas in efforts to raise their standard of living. Combined, the four Highsmith men--Benjamin Franklin, nephew of Samuel, and Samuel's two sons Malcijah and Henry--served the cause of Texas from the days of its infancy in 1836 to the outset of the Spanish-American War in 1898. They thus fought for the Anglo future they embodied, but they did so with family and community in mind.

Like many Anglo settlers that came to Texas, the Highsmiths moved from Kentucky to Missouri, then to Texas. Samuel was born in Boone County, Kentucky, in 1804 and moved with his family to the St. Charles district of Missouri, what is today Lincoln County, during the war of 1812. In September 1817 Benjamin Franklin Highsmith, known to some as “Beef Eatin’ Ben,” was born to Ahijah M. Highsmith and Deborah Turner Highsmith in the St. Charles district of Missouri where his parents had recently moved. The Highsmiths that lived in Missouri moved

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 8.
yet again, eventually crossing the Red River and settling in the western reaches of Stephen F. Austin’s Colony in December 1823. Samuel returned to Missouri to marry Theresa Williams, the stepdaughter of Winslow Turner. The two returned to Texas in 1826, settling first with Aylett Buckner and his family in Columbus, near Old Caney, before settling in Green DeWitt’s Colony west of Gonzales in what is now Guadalupe County in 1829. Once in DeWitt’s colony, Samuel received a league and labor. Around this time Malcijah, one of seven children that Theresa bore her husband, was born in 1827 at Old Caney. The family was staying at this location while waiting for the threat of Indian depredations to subside before moving to their future home in Guadalupe County. Henry was born in Bastrop in 1843 where the family finally located, perhaps to be closer to Benjamin, who had moved there in 1832. In sum, the Highsmiths had deep roots in Anglo Texas.12

Like Ford, the Highsmith men that came to Texas were not inclined to become farmers and ranchers, yet they were not adventurers. Unlike Ford, the Highsmiths had varying degrees of success outside of Ranger life. The Highsmith family was called repeatedly to Ranger service, a service that they performed well. Benjamin spent his entire life soldiering as a Ranger and in the Republic of Texas Army. While not an active Ranger, Samuel served as a sergeant at arms for the Texas House of Representatives at Washington-on-the-Brazos during the 1843 and 1844 terms. In August 1845 he was even authorized to carry mail between Bastrop and La Grange. Samuel even tried his hand at livestock-raising with his cousin, Abram Clare. The endeavor appeared successful until the Republic of Texas Army, which was stationed at nearby Camp

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Independence, commandeered their stock. The men were never repaid. Malcijah, the oldest son of Samuel, appeared to be a bit more successful outside of the Ranger realm, albeit minutely. He served as a tax assessor, and after the Civil War he worked as a traveling salesman for a clothing manufacturer in Galveston, Bernstein and Company. Henry, Samuel’s youngest son, may have achieved the greatest level of outside success; he owned and operated a feed store and livery stable in Hutto, Texas, until his death in 1930.\footnote{Thomas Cutrer, “MALCIJAH BENJAMIN HIGHSIMTH,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhi10, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed May 18, 2012; Thomas Cutrer, “HENRY ALBERT HIGHSIMTH,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhi09, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed on May 21, 2012.}

The Highsmith family earned a rightful place in Texas Ranger historiography by serving the Republic of Texas, Texas as a state in the Confederacy, and Texas again as a state in the Union. The Highsmith men served in campaigns with legendary Rangers like Jack Hays, Rip Ford, Edward Burleson, Ben and Henry McCulloch, Adjutant General John B. Jones, and others. In describing such Texans, Ford offers them high praise, noting that “energy, bravery, a practical view of all matters, self-reliance, moderation, and a disposition to act in concert with their fellow citizens were the characteristics of the early settlers.” The Highsmith men displayed all of these characteristics and more when called upon to do so, as evidenced by their unflinching dedication and service with the Ranger captains of Texas. Their story deserves to be told. This thesis will detail as fully and accurately as possible the lives of Samuel, Benjamin, Malcijah, and Henry Highsmith, and their service to Texas as Rangers within the fuller context of their lives as early settlers.\footnote{Ibid, 8.}
CHAPTER II
RANGERS IN A REVOLUTION, 1830-1836

Mexico had been an independent nation for nine years when Samuel and Benjamin F. Highsmith joined their fellow settlers on a trip to San Antonio in 1830. Samuel, then twenty-six years old, escorted his nephew Benjamin, who was only thirteen at the time. It was the youth’s first trip to San Antonio de Béxar. The two departed from Gonzales, the seat of DeWitt’s Colony, and were in good company. The other notable travelers were Sam’s father-in-law, Winslow Turner, and several other men who were destined to play prominent roles in Texas history: William B. Travis, James Bowie, Benjamin McCulloch, and George C. Kimbell. Each of these men, including the Highsmiths, would leave their own mark on the state’s history in later years.¹


Coahuila y Texas stood on the far edge of the Mexican frontier, so the members of the expedition had to travel in large numbers to ensure safety from the constant threat of Native Americans. Like Mexico City, this frontier state was also a politically unstable and dangerous place with many different competing ideologies. In The Texas Indians, David La Vere explains that: “most of these incoming American settlers brought with them a racial ideology that put white men at the top of the social pyramid and Indians and blacks at the bottom.” With this kind of racial ideology and a strong desire for land, conflict between Native Americans and Mexicans...
in Coahuila y Texas was only a matter of time. At the same time, while the Highsmith men were young in 1830, the political events transpiring in Béxar would also shape the rest of their lives.\(^2\)

While journeying to Béxar, the older, more experienced, men on the trek indoctrinated Samuel and Benjamin, telling them about the social and political climate in Coahuila y Texas. There were many issues that the Highsmiths may not have known were occurring at the time. Despite having penned this line in a message during his visit to Coahuila y Texas nearly two years prior, in 1828, General Manuel Mier y Terán summed up the volatile political situation in Coahuila y Texas quite well when he wrote that “between the Mexicans and the foreigners there is a most evident unity of opinion on one point, namely the separation of Texas from Coahuila.” The impact of this information on Samuel, and young Benjamin, cannot be underestimated. The trip was a learning experience for both of them, and it may have even influenced their decision to become Rangers in the future. At the very minimum, these men prompted Samuel and Benjamin to support future Anglo causes, and to fight for them.\(^3\)

Nineteenth-century travelers did not often make long treks. Thus, the members of the excursion to Béxar had multiple errands to attend to upon arrival. The men with whom Samuel and Benjamin traveled had set out for Béxar with the intention of making known to the town’s politicians the grievances of frontier settlers, among other issues. Perhaps they were travelling to Béxar to vie for the separation of Texas from Coahuila. Another of the likely topics of inquiry that Travis, Bowie, McCulloch, and Turner hoped to address was the Law of April 6, 1830,

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\(^2\) David La Vere, *The Texas Indians* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 167-168. According to La Vere there were at least eight distinct bands of Native American tribes in Texas. The tribes in the vicinity of DeWitt’s Colony and San Antonio were the Tonkawas and the feared Comanche, who could mount an attack from quite a distance. It should be understood that Mexico had just become an independent nation in 1821. Political instability here is a given, all young nations experience formational turbulence in varying degrees, even the United States.

considered by many to be the harbinger of the Texas Revolution. The Law of April 6, 1830, was implemented to stop the flood of Anglo immigration from the United States into Texas. Later, each of Samuel and Benjamin’s travel partners would have a significant impact on the history of Texas. Indeed, after their Béxar trip, the Highsmith men themselves became active in the Anglo-Mexican cultural rift which had widened significantly after the passage of the April 6 law.  

The worsening relations between Anglo-Texans and sympathetic Tejanos that had been simmering since Mier y Terán’s visit reached a boiling point in the spring and early summer of 1832. The catalyst which brought this political situation to a head was the Mexican government’s attempt to enforce the Law of April 6, 1830. The regulations imposed by the law were based upon Mier y Terán’s 1828 observations. The law, which banned the further importation of slaves into Texas from the United States and suspended Texas’s empresario contracts, raised the ire of many colonists. Among the fourteen points contained within the law was a provision for the establishment of customs houses. Such customs houses, usually always accompanied by local garrisons, were strategically erected at Anahuac and Velasco and at other points along the Texas coast. Their specific mission was to enforce customs duties on the burgeoning and increasingly belligerent Anglo population. Though the law was fair from the perspective of the Mexican government, Anglo and sympathetic Tejano colonists resented having to pay customs and were openly hostile, especially when confronted with the ban on the importation of slaves.

The Mexican government appointed George Fisher as customs collector, and he began enforcing customs laws with the support of the Anahuac garrison commandant, Juan Davis Bradburn. A native of Virginia who later moved to Mexico, where he became an officer in the

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Mexican Army, Bradburn, like other garrison commanders in Mexico’s far north, also attempted to block Anglo smuggling and further immigration from the United States.⁵

Anglo Texans were none too happy to have these new restrictions imposed upon them. To complicate matters, Travis and Patrick C. Jack, a colleague from Louisiana, were hired as legal counsels by a Louisiana slave catcher to recover three runaway slaves who had applied for and been granted asylum at Bradburn’s Anahuac fort. The actions of Travis and Jack provided the spark that caused militant actions between the colonists and Mexican troops. Because the April 6 law effectively banned slavery, Travis and Jack, who also commanded an illegally formed company of militia, had to resort to trickery in order to get the slaves from Bradburn. The two were unsuccessful and both were subsequently arrested by Bradburn on the grounds of providing false information and for parading an illegally formed militia. What resulted was a call to bolster the numbers of this illegally formed militia, whose intent was to procure the release of Travis and Jack.⁶

In the early 1800s calls for militia produced much excitement, which lured in many adventurers. At fifteen years of age, Benjamin Highsmith ran away from his home in La Grange to answer the call. He joined a company that his neighbor, Aylett C. Buckner, was forming at

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⁵ Margaret Swett Henson, “ANAHUAC DISTURBANCES,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jca01, *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed May, 30 2012. Juan Davis Bradburn was a centralista who commanded the garrison at Liberty before it moved to Anahuac, while Coahuila y Texas’s land commissioner, José Francisco Madero, supported the federalista’s cause. This made for an awkward situation for Bradburn, whose interpretation of the April 6 law meant banning further immigration into Texas by Americans, whereas Madero believed that it encouraged European and non-American immigration into Coahuila y Texas, not the outright banning of further Anglo-American immigration into the state. Travis actually delivered a note purportedly from an acquaintance of the commander warning that a force of Louisianans was on the march to recover the fugitives he was harboring, which led to Travis’s arrest. It is estimated that around 200 men responded to the subsequent call for troops. The matter was resolved however, when Col. José de las Piedras, Bradburn’s superior arrived from Nacogdoches and, thinking he was outnumbered, acquiesced to the insurgents’ Turtle Bayou Resolutions.

Buckner’s Creek in what is now Fayette County. Soon thereafter a party of some two-hundred men surrounded Bradburn’s garrison. Responding to the potentially violent militia, Bradburn threatened to open fire upon the town, which forced the Anglo militia to retreat. In response, the colonial militia waited for two men, Henry Smith and John Austin, to arrive with artillery, which they had procured from Brazoria for use against Bradburn.\footnote{Bill Groneman, \textit{Alamo Defenders A Genealogy: The People and Their Words} (Austin: Eakin Press, 1990), 60-61; Andrew Jackson Sowell, \textit{Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas: Facts Gathered from Survivors of Frontier Days}, (Austin: Ben C. Jones & Co., 1900), 1-3. When Sowell recorded the recollections of Benjamin Franklin Highsmith, the latter was very advanced in years.}

Smith and Austin knew the consequences that bringing up cannon could bring. Blatant defiance to the Mexican government would only worsen relations between the Anglo settlers and the government. Disregarding the consequences, open hostilities began officially between Anglo settlers and the Mexican government at Velasco in June of 1832. Benjamin, under the command of Captain Buckner, joined Smith and Austin’s party that had gone to Brazoria to secure the field pieces for use against the Mexican forces that were holding Travis and Jack at Anahuac. With the cannon from Brazoria, the party, numbering somewhere between one to two hundred-fifty men, was stopped by Domingo de Ugartechea, commander of the Mexican fort at Velasco, while en route to Anahuac. The group defied Ugartechea’s order to give up the cannon, precipitating a fight. Ugartechea’s Velasco garrison was estimated at ninety-one to two hundred men. Most of these men were likely poorly trained and ill-equipped convicts or peons who were forced into military service. The Texan forces, which were better equipped, quickly surrounded the fort and forced it to surrender after a skirmish. Casualty estimates for the Texans were approximately seven killed and fourteen wounded--three of the fourteen later died of their wounds. One of the
men killed in the fight was Ben’s company commander, Buckner. Mexican casualties were estimated at five killed and sixteen wounded.8

The two parties agreed on terms that allowed Ugartechea to surrender with honor and return to Mexico aboard a ship furnished by the colonists. The July 23, 1832, edition of the local newspaper, the Texas Gazette and Brazoria Commercial Advertiser, was entirely dedicated to the Velasco confrontation. A portion of page two even contained an obituary dedicated to the fallen captain, Buckner. The majority of the newspaper, though, spoke out against Mexican authority under the guise of a protest directed toward General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna’s centralist regime. John Austin provided an editorial that conveyed the mood of the area Anglos. He wrote that “since 1830, we have pretty much been governed militarily, and in so despotic a manner, that we were finally driven to arms to restrain within their limits the military subalters of the general Government.” Tensions between Anglo-Texan settlers and Mexican authorities would only continue to worsen in the ensuing years after this clash at Velasco, which is considered by many to be the first battle of the Texas Revolution. After the excitement subsided, Benjamin returned home to La Grange for a short time. Ahijah M. Highsmith, Benjamin’s father and Samuel’s older brother, moved his family to Bastrop shortly after Benjamin’s return. Benjamin would call Bastrop home for the next fifty years. The proximity of Samuel and his nephew to the hotbed of resistance meant that each of them—Samuel in Dewitt’s Colony near Gonzales, and Benjamin in Bastrop—heard repeated calls for manpower during the brewing revolution. In the

meantime, uncle and nephew continued to work as teamsters. Records indicate that transporting cattle was their chief occupation in early Texas.9

After the Velasco affair, leaders in Mexico City would not have been able to address the issues on their far-flung frontier even if they had wanted to. Beyond mustering a few poorly armed and ill-equipped troops into service, nothing could realistically be done to dissuade the increasingly militant Anglo-Texan colonists. Mexico City itself, the heart of the Mexican nation, was rife with revolution. Santa Anna, believing that Mexico was “not ready” for democracy, was in the midst of transforming the newly formed country from a federalist, largely state-governed nation to one that espoused centralism. This change sparked violent opposition throughout the country. As a result, federalist rebels waged war in many Mexican states. The citizens of Gonzales were not ignorant of Santa Anna’s outrages. One such attack resonated with the Texan colonists: the federalist stronghold, Zacatecas, was raped and pillaged in May 1835. When the military commandant of Coahuila y Texas, Domingo de Ugartechea—who had returned to Texas after the Velasco fiasco—recalled the small brass cannon at Gonzales given to the DeWitt Colony settlers for frontier defense, colonists flatly refused to surrender it.10

In an attempt to handle the unsettled situation in Texas with the resources that he had, Ugartechea dispatched Francisco de Castañeda and a hundred dragoons to retrieve the Gonzales cannon in late September 1835. Castañeda arrived at Gonzales from Béxar on September 29. Upon his arrival at the west bank of the Guadalupe River, across from the town, he found the waterway rain-swollen and guarded. A group of men that came to be known as the Old Eighteen were lying in wait. Among them was Winslow Turner, Samuel Highsmith’s father-in-law.


Castañeda had orders to convey a message to the town alcalde, Andrew Ponton. Because the Gonzales citizens would not let him cross, he was forced to shout his orders to the Old Eighteen across the rain-swollen stream. The ferry had been removed by the men, and Castañeda was not willing to risk the safety of his dragoons in an attempt to ford the guarded waterway. Castañeda’s demand was simple: he wanted the cannon. Captain Albert Martin, leader of the Old Eighteen, had other plans. His tactic to delay Castañeda’s crossing had worked, which meant that Martin was able to gather reinforcements without the threat of attack. Castañeda, who was unable to meet with Ponton—he was out-of-town—decided to make camp on the west bank of the river, giving the Texans more time for much needed reinforcements to arrive. Until a sufficient number of men arrived, though, three members of the Eighteen decided to bury the cannon as a security measure. These men were determined to defy Santa Anna’s centralist authority.11

Among the local reinforcements that Captain Martin had successfully stalled for were Samuel and Benjamin Highsmith. Benjamin, now eighteen years old, came a short distance from Bastrop, arriving with Captain John Alley’s company. The company had formed on a league of land, in portions of what is now Jackson and LaVaca counties, where Alley and his family had settled in 1827. Samuel’s labor of land was located in the Burkett-Zumwalt-Dewitt town site cluster. Since this was within the Gonzales town site, he also did not have far to travel. In fact, his labor was located just a few miles due east from where the engagement, then known simply

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referred to as “the fight at the Williams Place,” occurred. Ezekiel Williams’s property was where the Old Eighteen established their defenses and subsequently rallied their reinforcements.12

Because the Guadalupe River crossing was guarded, Castañeda, who received orders to avoid any unnecessary confrontation by Ugartechea, moved his forces approximately seven miles upriver in order to “cross without any embarrassment.” At dusk on October 1 he ordered his dragoons to make camp. The following morning, Texan forces, under no such orders to avoid confrontation, made their move before Castañeda could attempt to cross the river. During the night the Texans, under the command of John Henry Moore of La Grange had dug up the buried cannon, crossed the Guadalupe, and marched upriver. They confronted Castañeda’s forces by dawn. The Texans carried with them a peculiar banner with a picture of the cannon emblazoned with the phrase “Come and Take it” inscribed below the picture. This was reportedly designed by Moore, who was an outspoken critic of the Mexican government and a fervent advocate of Texan independence. One of Austin’s Old Three Hundred, Moore had come to Texas in 1821. In September 1835 the Gonzales Committee of Safety asked him for reinforcements; he agreed and with an unknown number of men marched to Gonzales and took command of the Texas forces. Samuel and Benjamin were but two of one hundred-eighty men that joined Moore, as both were present for the battle. They were likely informed of Castañeda’s movements by Turner, Samuel’s father-in-law.13

On the morning of October 2 Castañeda, upon finding out that Moore had crossed the river during the night, did his best to avoid engaging the Texans by immediately falling back to a


defensive position. During a lull in the ineffective gunfire, Castañeda arranged a parley with the Texan commander. The negotiations were arranged by the justifiably incensed Castañeda, who questioned Moore, asking why he and his men had been attacked without provocation. Moore replied that “the Texans were fighting to keep their cannon and to uphold the Constitution of 1824.” In so doing Moore implied that Santa Anna had ignored the constitution which the Texans had agreed to abide by during his bloody rise to power. Castañeda subsequently declined Moore’s offer to join the Texan cause in fighting the centralist Santa Anna regime.14

Castañeda, finding that he was outnumbered and outgunned, obeyed his original orders and withdrew to Béxar “without compromising the honor of Mexican arms.” While Castañeda and Moore avoided major bloodshed--reports vary, there were one or two Mexican casualties and one Texian militiaman suffered a bloody nose--the damage had been done. Stephen Miller, author of the Savage Frontier series, aptly describes the implications of the engagement at Gonzales, stating “Although the whole affair was little more than a skirmish, the movement to drive Mexican forces from Texas was well under way.” The “Come and Take It” Banner would thereafter achieve legendary status. As well, subsequent generations of Texans would compare the skirmish at Gonzales with the Battle of Lexington. Samuel and Benjamin Highsmith were thus present for what is considered the first engagement in the Texas revolution.15

15 Texas State Library and Archives, "Republic of Texas Claims," https://tslac.tsl.state.tx.us/repclaims/220/22000437.pdf (Accessed May 30, 2012). This archive verifies Benjamin Franklin Highsmith's participation in the Texas Revolution from the Battle of Gonzales to the first of January 1837. During this time he was a member of Captain John Alley’s Company. He also served with a "Captain Hill." By November Alley had been appointed as a captain in the Texan "Army of the People," in which capacity he served on General Stephen F. Austin's headquarters staff. It is assumed that the Republic of Texas Claims document is referring to a Captain William Green Hill, who participated in the major engagements of the Siege of Bexar. After Hill moved on to sign the Texas Declaration of Independence (and to become a logistics officer), there is no further documentation of who Highsmith served under, though his specific participation is verified.
The Highsmith men, along with an increasing number of militant Texans, may have known that they had reached the point of no return after the Battle of Gonzales. Texas’s level minded figurehead, Stephen F. Austin, had himself become embittered with the Mexican political situation after being arrested and forced to stay in Mexico City shortly after his arrival in 1833. While in the capital city Austin encountered much that likely changed his mind. He witnessed a devastating cholera epidemic—which he suffered through as well—while also becoming acquainted with the brutality used by Santa Anna to quell rebellions in far flung provinces. In a letter to the ayuntamiento in San Antonio, Austin wrote that: “The happenings of the civil war also have frustrated all the public business, so that until now nothing has been done, and … in my opinion nothing will be done.”

By this time a frustrated Austin knew that the Texans had only two real options. They could await a bloody suppression from Mexican forces, or the Texans could attempt to expel the remaining Mexican troops in Texas, which would buy time for them to form an independent government. Knowing the latter of the two choices was their best option, Austin—after his release and subsequent return to Texas—immediately called for the volunteer forces to gather at Béxar in the winter of 1835. Samuel and Benjamin along with many other Texans made their way from Gonzales to Béxar in response to Austin’s call. During that time, the burgeoning force of near three hundred men officially elected Austin as their commander in hopes that he could bring an element of organization the growing number of volunteers. That is just what he did, forming his command out of the quarrelsome cadre of Texans while en route to Béxar from his home at San Felipe.


In early October 1835, General Martín Perfecto de Cos was sent to Texas by his brother-in-law, Santa Anna, to investigate issues further. News of Castañeda’s debacle in Gonzales prompted Cos to concentrate the remaining Mexican forces in Texas, numbering some six-hundred-fifty men, at Béxar. Anticipating an attack of some sort, he fortified the town’s plazas west of the San Antonio River and the old Alamo mission east of the river. Cos also forced the legislature of Coahuila y Texas, then in session in Monclova, to disband and began attempts to arrest the leading Texan instigators. The search, however, was resisted by the Texan forces commanded by Austin. By October 12, Austin had successfully laid siege to Cos’s stronghold at Béxar. The arriving Texans encamped themselves near the Alamo along Salado Creek just east of Béxar, where their numbers grew to over four hundred men, including the Highsmith's former traveling compatriot, James Bowie.\(^{18}\)

The main body of Austin’s army was located at San Francisco de la Espada Mission. On October 27, in order to effectively surround the town, Austin sent Bowie, James Fannin, and approximately ninety men to the Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Acuña Mission to locate a position nearer the town for the Texian army. Captain Alley’s company, to which Benjamin was still attached, was a part of this reconnaissance force. The next day Cos, having been informed of the detachment’s movement, sent Col. Domingo de Ugartechea and two hundred-seventy-five men to attack the force commanded by Bowie and Fannin. In later years Benjamin, despite his old age, provided an accurate account of the battle to Andrew Jackson Sowell. He recalled that his ninety-two man outfit camped in a pecan grove in a bend of the San Antonio River and put out guards on the evening of October 27. The next morning Highsmith, who according to Sowell overestimated the force, remembered that at “about the break of day; as

some of the men had arisen and were kindling fires, 400 Mexican Morales [Morelos Infantry Battalion] troops attacked them.” Benjamin noted that Fannin and Bowie did not react rashly when they received the attack. He stated that they “were cool, brave men, and soon had their small force well in hand and to some extent protected by the bank of the river.”

Because the Texans were protected by the forested river bank, the volleys of Mexican musket and cannon fire directed towards them inflicted no casualties. Later, one man did fall mortally wounded after Bowie moved Captain Robert Coleman's company to meet a Mexican advance on their position. The Texans responded with more accurate rifle fire and drove back three Mexican charges, killing or wounding many of the advancing infantry and artillerymen in about thirty minutes. The Texans then counterattacked, drove the remaining forces back, and despite their smaller numbers captured one of the cannons. Mexican cavalry covered the retreat of the infantry and artillerymen who survived the onslaught.

The Texan who did fall mortally wounded, Richard Andrews, was fighting alongside young Benjamin under the same hackberry tree along the riverbank. Andrews, apparently going to great measures to get off an accurate shot, was warned by Highsmith that he might get shot. Shortly thereafter private Andrews was in fact hit, the shot going in at the right and coming out at his left side, lacerating his bowels in the progress. He died later that day. Benjamin recalled that the Mexican losses were much heavier. After the cannon was captured, the Mexicans left the field and retreated back to their garrison. Their losses included approximately sixty, either killed

19 Andrew Jackson Sowell, Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas: Facts Gathered from Survivors of Frontier Days, (Austin: Ben C. Jones & Co., 1900), 1-19; Alwyn Barr, “BATTLE OF CONCEPCION,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qec02, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed May, 31 2012. Sowell produced the work changing very little about the accounts that were given him. Despite his advanced age and overestimation of the Mexican forces, Highsmith's account checks out. Samuel Highsmith also participated in the Siege of Béxar, but since he came directly from his home in Gonzales there is no supporting documentation nor is it clear if he joined his nephew who was serving with Captain Alley.

or wounded, some of whom would later die. Texan losses included one killed and one wounded. Cos resumed his defensive position in San Antonio and the Alamo while the Texans established camps on the river above and below the town. During late October and early November the Texan army’s numbers steadily grow to nearly six hundred men, with reinforcements under Thomas J. Rusk arriving from East Texas.21

After the battle at Mission Concepción, the next major engagement did not occur until mid-November, which left the Texans with little to do. Idle time with volunteer soldiers does not bode well for discipline and order, and it did not take long for the men to grow restless. After discussions among the Texan officers produced little support for an attack, many volunteers decided to go home for winter clothes and equipment. Rusk’s arrival in early November apparently offset the departures. By late November the Texans had grown in number and Edward Burleson, with whom all of the Highsmiths would serve at some point, had been elected in place of Austin, who had gone to the United States on a diplomatic mission. The men, however, were still growing restless, and morale was dropping. The Texans who were eager for action jumped at the opportunity that presented itself on the morning of November 26. Erastus “Deaf” Smith reported that morning that Mexican cavalry with pack animals was approaching San Antonio. Rumors quickly spread through the camps that the pack mules were loaded with pay for the besieged Mexican soldiers.22

Burleson had no problems gathering a force to intercept the supposed money-laden supply train. He ordered Bowie and forty cavalry—including Benjamin, and likely Samuel—to delay the Mexicans' progress so that a hundred Texas infantry under the command of William H.


Jack could catch up to and seize the train. The force that Bowie confronted was commanded by Colonel Ugartechea. The two cavalry forces, which were relatively equal in size, engaged in a running battle west of town and soon dismounted and began fighting on foot from ravines near Alazan Creek when Jack’s infantry arrived. General Cos sent about fifty infantry with an artillery piece to help oppose the Texan infantrymen, which trapped Jack and his men between Mexican units. Despite his bad position Jack broke out of the cross-firing Mexicans and pushed them back. Mexican troops then counterattacked several times until Texas reinforcements under James Swisher forced them back into town. Texan losses included four wounded; Mexican losses numbered three dead and fourteen wounded, mostly among the cavalry. When the Texans brought in the forty pack animals that they managed to capture, they discovered their prizes carried only grass that had been cut that morning to feed the besieged army’s animals. The engagement became known as the Grass Fight, a testament to restless forces craving action.23

The Grass Fight was the last engagement before the climactic battle of the siege of San Antonio in 1835. After the fight at Alazan Creek, General Burleson, unable to maintain his forces any better than Austin had, considered going into winter quarters. Days, perhaps hours, before he would have made the final decision to do so, a Mexican officer surrendered to the Texan army with news of declining Mexican morale. After receiving this piece of intelligence, Benjamin R. Milam and William Gordon Cooke sprang into action. Recruiting forces without permission from Burleson, their superior officer, bordered on mutiny. Disregarding the possible consequences, the pair managed to gather more than three hundred volunteers to attack the

fortified town. Benjamin Highsmith eagerly volunteered to go with old Ben Milam into San Antonio on that early December day in 1835.\textsuperscript{24}

The young Highsmith went into the city to break the siege with Milam on December 5 and saw gruesome things that he had never encountered. There is no report that his uncle, Samuel, went with him. Perhaps the older Highsmith stayed with Burleson’s forces. While Benjamin stormed the city with Milam, General Burleson held another four hundred men in reserve and scouted, protecting his camp and supplies. This forced General Cos to keep his five-hundred-seventy soldiers divided between the town and the Alamo. Benjamin remembered the opening attack, cannon shots fired by Col. James C. Neill, who feigned an attack against the Alamo with artillery. The opening barrage drew the attention of the Mexican forces from Milam and his invaders, in effect allowing his forces to enter on the other end of town without taking heavy fire. Though Benjamin entered the city with Milam he was not with him when he was shot at the Veramendi house on December 7, after two days of close-quarters, house-to-house combat. Benjamin was with another party fighting on the west side of Soledad Street. Regardless, Benjamin did see the bloody toll that the fighting had upon on his comrades. Two casualties that he specifically remembered in the bloody struggle were men that fought alongside him. One was his friend Sam Evitts, who was shot in the mouth. According to Benjamin, the musket ball came out under Evitts’s right ear. Another one of his friends, James Belden, had his right eye shot out. The two men, however, recovered from their grievous injuries.\textsuperscript{25}

By December 8, both the Texan and Mexican forces had been reinforced. Fortune would favor the Texans though. When Cos sought to concentrate his troops at the Alamo, four of his

\textsuperscript{24} Andrew Jackson Sowell, \textit{Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas: Facts Gathered from Survivors of Frontier Days} (Austin: Ben C. Jones & Co., 1900), 1-19.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 1-19.
cavalry companies rode away rather than continue the struggle. The following day Cos, who believing that he had no other options relented and asked for surrender terms. Texas now belonged to the rebellious Anglo dominated army. For such gruesome close-quarters combat the Texans remained fortunate, casualties were relatively light. Their total losses numbered thirty to thirty-five. Mexican losses, primarily in the Morelos Infantry Battalion that defended San Antonio, totaled about one hundred-fifty. The difference in casualties between the two forces can be attributed to the greater accuracy of the Texans' rifles and relative inexperience of the poorly equipped and trained Mexican reinforcements. The Mexican units at the time generally carried un rifled muskets, which were far less accurate than the Texan rifles. Unlike the two Highsmiths, most of the volunteers went home after the battle. They left knowing that San Antonio and all of Texas was under the control of General Burleson and his victorious army.26

Samuel Highsmith returned first to his home at Gonzales and eventually joined Sam Houston’s rag tag army. The older Highsmith’s motive for returning to Gonzales was twofold. By returning home he could check on his family and remain close to them, while at the same time he could join Houston’s growing yet still fledgling army. Samuel, unlike his young nephew Benjamin, was a husband and father with young children to look after. Many of the men that saw combat in the Texan Revolution had to answer the very same question that Sam did: stay and fight, or tend to your family?

Because he had nothing tying him down, Benjamin remained in Béxar after the siege, moving into the Alamo with the Texan forces that remained in mid-December 1835 under the command of Neill. Shortly afterward, Neill was forced to leave to attend to his family, all of whom had fallen ill. Before he left, Neill placed William Barret Travis in command of the post.

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His command consisted of Texan Regulars. During Neill’s long absence, the garrison became rife with opinionated and hotheaded Texans and split in leadership between Travis and an increasingly ill Bowie, who commanded the volunteers. Young Benjamin, being a member of the Regulars, was likely inclined to follow the leadership of Travis but may have been torn between his two traveling companions. Little did Travis or Bowie know but Santa Anna was not yet ready to give up his frontier buffer zone, at least not without a fight. While the threat of war had subsided somewhat after the surrender of Cos, the Highsmiths would be forced to return to action in March of 1836. The two would leave their mark in a turn of events, which would define Texas forever.27

Despite Texas being free from the Mexican Army the situation at the Alamo garrison was anything but positive. Before Colonel Neill left the Alamo garrison in the hands of Travis and Bowie, he had begged the embattled Mexican Governor Henry Smith for cavalry units to bolster the garrison’s thinly stretched defenses—fellow revolutionaries Francis W. Johnson and James Grant had removed a large majority of the Alamo’s supplies as well as men for the ill-fated Matamoros Expedition. Only Benjamin Highsmith and twenty-nine other horsemen responded to the call for cavalry reinforcements. The commander of the Texian Army, Houston, must have been unhappy with the call to reinforce the Alamo because he asked that the garrison be razed, with all men—including Travis and his cavalry unit—and replete with munitions to report to Gonzales to await further orders. Governor Smith, who was convinced by Bowie and others that the Alamo could be held, had other things in mind for the garrison. Subsequently from December to nearly March Alamo defenders filtering in in increasing, but marginal, numbers. Bowie was one of the early arrivals, moving in to the garrison on January 17. Many of the newly arrived

Texans may have begun to question their commitments to the Texan cause when they learned that Santa Anna had arrived at the Rio Grande on February 12 with a significantly larger and better trained and equipped force than the one that they had defeated under Cos just a few short weeks earlier.28

The Alamo defenders must have been awestruck by the red flag signifying no quarter when it was hoisted atop the San Fernando Church in Béxar on February 24, 1836. For the defenders this signal apparently galvanized their resolve to maintain the fight. In parley their adversaries only offered them these meager terms:

The Mexican Army cannot come to terms under any conditions with rebellious foreigners to whom there is no other recourse left, if they wish to save their lives, than to place themselves immediately at the disposal of the Supreme Government from whom alone they may expect clemency after some considerations are taken up.

Travis’s legendary response, a single shot from the garrison’s eighteen pound cannon, marked the opening of hostilities at the Alamo. Benjamin, however, was not inside the Alamo. Instead, his commander decided to use him as a messenger. He was sent by Travis, whom he had known for years now, to relay an urgent message to Colonel Fannin at Goliad requesting reinforcements. When Benjamin returned from the trip--some ninety miles one way--he saw the red flag and the imperiled garrison atop Powder House Hill before being detected by Mexican pickets. Once he was detected, he immediately fled his perch on the hill and rode for Gonzales, where Houston’s army was forming. He arrived there on the first day of March and immediately told Houston about the state of the Alamo. Benjamin would never see his commander or comrades from the Alamo again.29


29 Ibid, 18.
After the Alamo’s fall, Benjamin and his garrison comrade, David Kent, served General Houston as couriers. Houston immediately put the two to work. Their first assignment was to relay yet another message to Fannin ordering him to abandon Goliad, destroy the defenses if any were erected, and fall back to the Guadalupe River to await further orders. Fannin did not heed Houston’s order, and as a result his command was massacred. The number of dead exceeded three hundred individuals, including Francis White Johnson and many others who were present at the Siege of Béxar. This again must have been a sobering moment for young Highsmith.30

The defeat at the Alamo on March 6, 1836 sparked widespread panic among the Texans. Many men, including Samuel Highsmith, soon thereafter sought honorable discharge, which Houston granted to the overwhelming majority, in order to ensure the safety of their families. The time of fleeing and panic that occurred after the fall of the Alamo came to be known as the “Runaway Scrape.” When word began to circulate that Santa Anna was in search of Houston’s much smaller army, evacuations began en masse, beginning in South and Central Texas near San Antonio, which was closest to the Rio Grande and Mexican forces. Among the first communities to be abandoned was San Patricio, followed by Refugio and other settlements surrounding San Antonio. Later evacuations from destinations further east began in earnest. The majority of the settlers fled in the general direction of Louisiana and Galveston. By Houston’s orders many of the area’s settlers accompanied his army eastward toward the Colorado River. In a bold move, Houston placed his army between the settlers and the interim Texan government. While keeping his army between Mexican forces and the fleeing settlers appeared courageous, it slowed him down, which put him in perilous proximity to Santa Anna’s larger army.31


31 Carolyn Callaway, “The ‘Runaway Scrape’: An Episode of the Texas Revolution” (Master’s Thesis, University of Texas, 1942), 1-42.
At this time, Houston had to deal with three major issues: a disintegrating army, terrible weather, and settlers following his army and slowing his retreat. He tried desperately to keep his army from falling apart completely by issuing an order on March 21, 1836, that stated: “families moving for safety will be entitled to one armed man for their protection.” He hoped this order would limit the loss of soldiers to fathers, or heads of households. Despite these debilitating issues, Houston somehow managed to keep his army in front of Santa Anna’s numerically superior force affording the settlers and Texian government an additional element of safety. Because Santa Anna’s army was larger, common sense dictated that Houston would avoid a confrontation. He did this despite protest from many in his army and the new government, who argued that Houston could not attack without risking the loss of his army and the Texan cause.32

Houston’s retreat from Gonzales, which he razed before fleeing around March 11, marked the true start of the Runaway Scrape. When he officially evacuated Gonzales, heading eastward for the Colorado River, he sent couriers to the towns that he approached. In so doing, he set off a flurry of correspondence between the settlements. Couriers were sent in all directions, some by Houston himself, and some by other officers and settlers. They were sending warnings to the areas inhabitants that Santa Anna’s army was in pursuit and seeking to destroy the Texan force. Houston had thrust upon him an increasing number of settlers the further east he moved. Even his assistant quartermaster begged leave to help his family. The area's settlements were not the only establishments forced to move. The newly formed Republic of Texas government, which had signed the Texas Declaration of Independence just days earlier on March 2, was also forced to stay one step ahead of Santa Anna’s army. The interim government relocated to Harrisburg on March 17. At this time Houston was in an exceedingly precarious situation, which had the clear

potential to go from extremely bad to catastrophic. Unfortunately this is exactly what happened; Fannin by deciding not to obey orders—several of which were brought by Benjamin Highsmith and David Kent—brought about the massacre at Goliad, sparking even more terror amongst the colonists, many of whom began to believe that all was lost.\footnote{Carolyn Callaway Covington “RUNAWAY SCRAPE,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/Articles/pfr01, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed June, 4 2012.}

By this point Samuel had begged leave from Houston’s army to attend to his family. Like most, he and his family were headed east with the other refugees. Sam’s father-in-law Winslow Turner was sick and feeble, which made traveling extremely difficult. With the chaotic situation, Turner unfortunately died en route east in what was considered some of the worst traveling weather imaginable. John Holland Jenkins recorded an accurate yet vivid description of the conditions that spring, stating,

> When we reached the families, at old Washington on the Brazos, with our cattle we found them in great alarm and confusion, having heard that the Mexicans were at Bastrop. Immediately the work of moving commenced, and such moving! That spring of 36 was the wettest I ever knew. First, after crossing the Brazos, we had to raft across two or three bayous, and all along we worked to our knees in mud and water. It was pitiful and distressing to behold the extremity of the families, as some times a team would bog down, and women with their babes in their arms, surrounded by little children, had to wade almost waist deep in places. One very large lady, Mrs. Wilson, bogged completely down and could not move until pulled out by others. It took us a whole day to traverse that Brazos Bottom a distance of only four miles!

On April 7, the Texan army arrived in San Felipe only to leave it in flames as well. Houston did not want to leave anything behind that Santa Anna could conceivably use. Despite the weather and Houston hindering Santa Anna’s pursuit, the situation was growing more desperate by the day. Still, Houston and his disintegrating army remained between the enemy and Texas.\footnote{John Holland Jenkins, Recollections of Early Texas: The Memoirs of John Holland Jenkins (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 26-27.}
Around April 15, Santa Anna arrived at Harrisburg. Just days previously he had made the decision to split his army to pursue Houston more effectively. Samuel Highsmith and his family were at Harrisburg just before Santa Anna’s army arrived. They were burying Turner. Santa Anna’s objective at Harrisburg, which he burned, was to take possession of the Texas coast and seaports to keep Houston and his Texans from escaping to the United States. Santa Anna wanted an immediate end to the rebellion. Allowing Houston to escape would only add to the amount of time he was forced to stay in Texas. By the time that Santa Anna was at Harrisburg, Houston was under extreme pressure by interim President David G. Burnet and others to turn and confront Santa Anna’s army. From Harrisburg, Santa Anna started in pursuit of the Texas government at New Washington or Morgan's Point. When he finally arrived on April 19, he found that the Texas government had fled to Galveston.35

Just days earlier, on April 17, Houston, who was acting on information that he received from his scouts, took the road to Harrisburg instead of retreating to Louisiana, much to the gratification of his men and the government. The tables had been turned, and Houston began pursuing the detachment of the Mexican Army that was nearest him. On April 18, Houston and his troops reached White Oak Bayou at a site within the present city limits of Houston. While there he learned that Santa Anna had divided his army to more effectively pursue the Texans. In efforts to corner Houston’s forces, a seven hundred man detachment under the command of Santa Anna himself moved down the west side of White Oak Bayou, followed the San Jacinto River, and crossed a bridge over Vince's Bayou. Knowing that the Mexican army would have to cross the same bridge if they were to retreat, Houston made an eloquent move. He had found his

location and decided to make a stand! Instead of being chased by the Mexican army, he would turn and fight them.

Because the fleeing colonists were in proximity to Houston’s army, many such as Samuel Highsmith were able to rejoin the ranks and fight the divided Mexican army. Having just buried Turner at Harrisburg, Sam, as well as the Turner family men, overtook and rejoined Houston’s army. Sam was with Turner’s sons, Winslow Jr., Edwin, and Stephen, when he rejoined General Houston’s army. Samuel and his cousins may have been acting on rumors that, as Lack points out in the Revolutionary Experience, were spread rampantly via the fleeing colonists. However, he and his cousins may have been close enough to receive official communications dispatched by Houston’s couriers. Meanwhile, the Highsmith and Turner women and children were left with other refugees nearby San Jacinto to continue their trek east. Even Samuel’s fifty-nine year old brother joined the fight. Ahijah M. Highsmith, the young Benjamin’s father, joined a company that formed near his home on the lower Colorado River. The elder Highsmith was considered by most to be one of the oldest men to join the revolutionary army—there was one other man who was sixty at the time. He joined the “Mina Volunteers” under the command of Jesse Billingsley, who also enrolled the youngest recorded enlistee that fought at the battle of San Jacinto: John Holland Jenkins, who at thirteen years of age was about five years younger than Benjamin Highsmith. The Mina Volunteers thus bear the distinction of having the oldest and youngest participants present at the Battle of San Jacinto.36

At about 9:00 AM on April 21, Houston learned that Martín Perfecto de Cos had crossed Vince's Bayou with about five hundred-forty troops, reinforcing the enemy ranks to about twelve hundred. In order to prevent Santa Anna from being reinforced further, Houston ordered Erastus “Deaf” Smith to burn the only bridge across the bayou. A council of war was held around noon and by 3:30 PM the Mexican front fell silent—and undefended—for the afternoon siesta. The siesta greatly helped Houston conceal his movements, giving the Texans an opportunity for a surprise attack from a tree line.

The engagement lasted roughly eighteen minutes and is considered a complete rout. The battle cries of “Remember the Alamo!” and “Remember Goliad!” were heard by the Mexican soldiers as many of them were chased down and either captured or shot on the spot. Samuel Highsmith was reportedly one of the sixteen soldiers who were dispatched to find Santa Anna, whom Houston had been told was the commanding officer. According to a Highsmith family legend, Sam captured Santa Anna's saddle, and a cache of silver—which he had melted and cast into spoons for his family—and the Mexican dictator's uniform coat, in which he had himself photographed.37

What resulted from the overwhelming victory at San Jacinto were the treaties of Velasco, which were signed by interim president Burnet and General Santa Anna on May 14, 1836. One segment of the treaty was public; the other was secret, kept between Texas’s governing officials and Santa Anna and his Mexican entourage in Texas. The public treaty, which contained ten articles, provided that hostilities would immediately cease, that Santa Anna would not take up arms against Texas in the future, that Mexican forces would withdraw beyond the Rio Grande, that restoration would be made of property confiscated by Mexicans, that prisoners would be

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37 Ibid., Traylor, “Captain Samuel Highsmith, Ranger,” 17. The cover of the Frontier Times Magazine which mentions the Highsmith men is a picture with Samuel Highsmith wearing Santa Anna’s accoutrements.
exchanged on an equal basis, that Santa Anna would be sent to Mexico as soon as possible, and that the Texas army would not approach closer than five leagues to the retreating Mexicans. The secret agreement, which contained six articles, stipulated that the Texas government would immediately free Santa Anna on the condition that he would use his influence to secure from Mexico acknowledgment of Texas’s independence. Santa Anna was forced to promise not to take up arms against Texas, to give orders for withdrawal from Texas of Mexican troops, to have the Mexican cabinet receive a Texas mission favorably, and to work for a treaty of commerce and limits specifying that the Texas boundary not lie south of the Rio Grande. Unfortunately for Houston, this treaty was nullified by the Mexican Congress, which declared that its stipulations had been compromised by both the Texans and Mexicans.

While the Treaty of Velasco that was signed in May of 1836 was in effect nullified by the Mexican government, the Texans had achieved one of their primary objectives, to defeat the Mexican army in order for Texan officials to govern their new nation with autonomy. While the treaty was never recognized, Texas did govern itself with relative success until annexation in December 1845. After Texas’s war for independence, the role of its defenders became one of frontier defense. This meant that mounted militia units like those that the Highsmiths were a part of evolved into a more traditional perception of the Texas Rangers. Texas in this era struggled to defend its frontier. Vacillating political policies reflected the chaotic situation, namely between Houston and his chief adversary, Mirabeau B. Lamar. Despite defeating Santa Anna, Texans had to deal with repeated Mexican incursions into Texas, which forced the new Republic’s defenders to be constantly on guard. After the Treaty of Velasco, the Republic of Texas had time to further organize itself and to prepare for the future, which for many settlers simply meant survival. After 1836, Benjamin and Samuel Highsmith would continue to serve Texas, though in differing
capacities. Samuel, who had a family, found it easy to leave his civilian duties and respond to the
calls of Texas leaders for defense, whereas Benjamin, who was single until 1853, remained a
member of the Texan army until roughly 1845.38

Samuel and Benjamin Highsmith served Texas against Mexico before and during the
Texas Revolution. The two men were present at engagements all the way through the rebellious
province’s struggle for independence to the final battle of the Texas Revolution, San Jacinto. In
the process these two witnessed the birth of an independent nation. Benjamin, the younger of the
two, would continue to serve Texas, becoming a veteran of even more clashes with Mexican
troops and Native Americans. Samuel continued on in his own way, returning to service when
duty called. These two were common men who responded to the call. Neither Samuel nor
Benjamin produced prodigious memoirs or rose to legendary status; they simply did what was
expected of them and returned home. They typified a large portion of the Anglo population by
going about their duties and returning quietly to civilian life. The pair would continue to do this
throughout the years of the Republic of Texas.

38 Texas State Historical Association “TREATIES OF VELASCO,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/
online/articles/mgt05, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed June, 4 2012.
Anglos and Tejanos established the Republic of Texas after the Battle of San Jacinto, despite Mexico’s refusal to acknowledge the new nation. Formation of the Republic brought little security from the fear that plagued Texans during the Revolution. With the establishment of this nascent nation-state came the need for a mobile force to cope with Native Americans and the threat of Mexican raids, both of which would become more acute. The Texas Rangers, who at this time were referred to as volunteer mounted militia, became an official fighting force of the Lone Star Republic. Though the mounted units that would become the Texas Rangers had begun officially on November 24, 1835, the confusion of the war largely inhibited their use. The few Rangers that were, in fact, used during the Revolution mostly saw action as couriers, much like Benjamin Highsmith, or as forward scouts for the army. Some of the men who would become Rangers, like the Highsmiths, volunteered for service in the Texan Army or with independently raised volunteer militia companies. Some, like Samuel Highsmith, briefly left military service in order to care for their families. It was not until after 1836 that the Rangers were used to protect the Republic’s surveyors—many of them, like John C. "Jack" Hays, served in the dual capacity as both Ranger and surveyor—from Native Americans, on whose lands the Anglos encroached. From these duties the Rangers evolved into the fighting force that modern Texans so frequently boast about. Functioning in what was considered their official capacity at the time; the Texas Rangers were, as Gary Clayton Anderson notes in *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land 1820-1875*, in essence, nation builders. The riders of the range stayed one step ahead of Anglo settlers’ progress. The Highsmiths served as Rangers during this time of
transition and expansion, and their experience offers useful perspectives which are oftentimes overshadowed by more famous figures.¹

In the opening volume of the *Savage Frontier* series, Stephen L. Moore correctly asserts that 1835 was a pivotal year for the Rangers as an institutional fighting force. He states that, “the Texas Rangers were formally and legally organized during 1835 and the first true ranger expedition was carried out that summer.” This expedition can be considered an official start for the mounted militiamen who became Texas Rangers. It was not until 1838, however, that the Rangers began to fulfill their roles as soldiers more fully. The first elected President of Texas, Sam Houston, after succeeding interim President David G. Burnet, favored a strict regulation of the government’s economy. He also pursued a policy of peace and friendship with Texas’ Native Americans. With little money to spend and no enemy to fight, the Rangers and their advocates found it difficult to organize under the new president. The winds of change, however, would shift in favor of the Rangers with the Republic’s next president and Houston’s chief rival, Mirabeau B. Lamar, who became president in 1838. Upon his election, the Republic’s Congress allowed Lamar to recruit additional Ranger companies. Lamar’s initial allotment, a company of fifty-six Rangers, would be used by the president in a freehanded manner. Shortly thereafter Congress allowed Lamar to raise five additional companies. These five companies along with eight other volunteer outfits were located in Central and South Texas, close to Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, and other Native American tribes, and Mexicans. During Lamar’s presidency, the Rangers joined in a war of extermination against Native Americans, so the Republic’s use of the Texas Rangers thus

¹ Ben H. Procter, “TEXAS RANGERS,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/met04, *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed June, 5 2012. From this point forward the term “Texas Rangers” will be used when referring to mounted militiamen or civilian soldiers. The men that served during this time may have called themselves “Rangers” and even been referred to as such, however, the term was not used in officially by the state of Texas government until September 21, 1866.
evolved significantly. The Rangers transitioned into what was intended to be a fighting force intended to confront Native Americans and the Mexican army if it happened to return to Texas.2

The Highsmiths’ involvement as mounted militiamen is the quintessential example of how the early Rangers served the Republic of Texas. The Rangers at this time were primarily a volunteer force, and the Highsmiths typified this. At this time, the Rangers were simply called to combat only to return home a short time later after the immediate threat subsided. Though the trend in Ranger studies is changing, many modern scholars who study the Rangers fail to fully acknowledge the many aspects of the men’s lives outside of volunteer service. Even the noted Texas Ranger scholar, Robert Utley, falls into this trap in his work, Lone Star Justice. Utley, while providing a solid work on the institution as a whole, neglects to portray the dual nature of the early Texas Ranger as a man. Richard B. McCaslin addresses this in his most current work, Fighting Stock: John S. “Rip” Ford of Texas. McCaslin notes that Utley, in his work, ranked John Salmon Ford as “the best captain of the decade prior to the Civil War.” McCaslin accepts Utley’s assertion of Ford but adds that during that same decade “Ford spent more time as a newspaper editor and politician than he did as a Ranger.” By proving that Ford was more than just a Texas Ranger, McCaslin adds a completely new element to the field’s historiography. The careers of lesser known Rangers such as the Highsmiths reinforce the importance of considering the dual archetype that was their lives in this period. Samuel, Benjamin, and Samuel's sons, like Ford, had many other occupations outside of Ranger service.3

Because Gonzales had been razed by Houston during the Revolution, Samuel moved his family to the town of Texana, in what is now Jackson County, to start anew. While living there

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2 Stephen Moore, Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas. Volume 1 1835-1837 (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), vii. The first expedition that Moore mentions in his prologue is known as the Battle on the Rio Blanco, which occurred in April of 1835.

on his newly acquired land grant, Samuel and his brother-in-law, Abram Clare, went into the cattle business, raising hogs and various other animals. Many of Texas’s farmers and stock raisers had fought in the Revolution, which meant that they were unable to tend to their farming and ranching duties. As a result of this, Samuel’s entrepreneurial endeavor showed great promise. Livestock and farm produce were in extremely high demand just after the war. His effort may have proven more successful if it were not for the Republic of Texas Army, which was stationed at nearby Camp Independence. Unfortunately, the high demand coupled with a standing body of soldiers meant that Sam did not fare well in his venture with Clare. The Texan Army in 1836 and 1837 commandeered and ate nearly their entire stock of pigs. Accepting the unfortunate situation, Samuel submitted a claim for the value of his stock; however, there is no record of his being paid for his animals. At this point the rather unlucky Samuel had to search for another form of income in order to support his family. In hopes of recovering economically from his lack of payment from the Republic of Texas, Samuel sought to return to Ranger service.4

He did not have to wait long. Troubles with Native Americans and Tejanos in East Texas pulled Samuel back into service during what came to be known as the Córdova Rebellion of 1838. At this time he and his family were living in Texana, which is likely where he received Thomas J. Rusk’s call to arms. Rusk intended to quell the mounting insurrection in Nacogdoches that stemmed from Tejano angst as the influx of Anglo settlers created conflict over land claims and governance. The Córdova Rebellion, which turned out to be an exceedingly complex conspiracy hatched by the established Nacogdoches citizen, Vicente Córdova, and the area's

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Native Americans—mainly the Cherokees—was meant to stem the flood of Anglo settlers in the area. Córdova, a former *alcalde*, primary judge, *regidor*, and militia captain in Nacogdoches, claimed to be the spokesman for East Texas’s increasingly discontented Tejano inhabitants. In this capacity, he asserted that the Anglo majority under the new Republic failed to protect the property and acknowledge the disenchanted Tejanos’ political voice. Because of this, Córdova sought to expel the Anglos from Texas by inciting a rebellion. He planned to do this with the assistance of Chief Bowl and his band of Cherokees and their allies, which were living in the area. The plan appealed to the Cherokees, who had since given up trying to acquire title to their lands in East Texas. Bowl knew that since Lamar had ascended to the presidency, their chances at receiving title by legal means were slim. The acted on the promises of Córdova, who claimed to have supported the Texas Revolution so long as it was “dedicated to a return to the Mexican Constitution of 1824,” hoped to bring Texas back in to the Mexican fold once the Anglo settlers were successfully driven out.5

Córdova’s plot to overthrow the Anglo-governed Republic of Texas was uncovered in late August 1838 by a group of Anglos from Nacogdoches who were searching for their stolen horses. This group was fired upon by a small number of their fellow Nacogdoches citizens, who were presumably Tejanos serving under Córdova. After the attackers fled the scene, the fired-upon party investigated, uncovering evidence that suggested the presence of a large body of people. This large body of people turned out to be a number of Tejanos, former slaves, and Native Americans led by Córdova. A short time later, Rusk, who was informed of this by the

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5 "Republic of Texas Claims," https://tslarc.tsl.state.tx.us/replclaims/249/24900150.pdf (Accessed June 5, 2012); Stephen L. Moore, *Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas. Volume II 1838-1839* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 16-17; Robert Bruce Blake, “VICENTE CÓRDOVA,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fco71, *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed June, 6 2012. In his work *Early Settlers and Indian Fighters*, Sowell mistakenly places Benjamin Franklin Highsmith in this campaign. It is not certain if Sowell himself made the mistake or if Benjamin mis-remembered, as the interview that went into Sowell’s book was taken from an elderly Benjamin. Samuel was the only Highsmith present for the operation, as is indicated in the Republic of Texas Claims submitted by Edward Burleson.
infuriated Anglo party, called up the Nacogdoches squadron—the area’s militia. Rusk then sent out a call to nearby settlements requesting additional reinforcements—Samuel responded as a member of Edward Burleson’s command. Meantime, Rusk was looking for Córdova and found him encamped on the Angelina River with roughly one hundred men from Nacogdoches. This force would eventually increase in numbers to a purported four hundred, once his rebels were joined by Chief Bowl’s Cherokees and their allies. Córdova, who allegedly kept in contact with politicos in Mexico after Texas’s separation, claimed that he was authorized by that government to distribute land grants to the Cherokees and their allies once he wrested control of Texas from Anglo hands. This was a significant offer for the Cherokees, who believed that their chances for a land grant had long since passed. The agents of the Mexican government that Córdova was in contact with assured him that a Mexican force would aid the insurrectionists, so Bowl, counting on their assistance, decided to wait for the Mexican Army to arrive in Nacogdoches before committing his men. Bowl thus initially balked on committing his fighting tribesmen, but he ended up doing so. Unfortunately for Bowl, the Mexican army failed to materialize. Shortly after the failure of the Mexicans to arrive, Córdova’s plan fell into terrible disarray when he attempted to move forward with his unsupported and ill-conceived scheme.6

What resulted was a battle that became a series of skirmishes rather than one pitched fight when the Anglo forces brought together by Rusk actually did materialize. When Córdova’s insurrectionists received word that Rusk had sent Henry W. Karnes and one hundred-fifty well-armed and mounted Anglos after them, they began to flee into the East Texas wilderness.

David La Vere, *The Texas Indians* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 171-176; Joseph Milton Nance, *After San Jacinto: The Texas-Mexican Frontier, 1836–1841* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 113-141; Rebecca J. Herring, “CÓRDOVA REBELLION,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jc003. *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed June, 5 2012. After the Cordova Rebellion came the long process of convicting the alleged conspirators that had not successfully escaped. Also The Cherokees and their allies in Texas became increasingly discontented when the Texan Congress rejected Houston’s Cherokee Treaty of 1836, which would have given them title to the lands they had been occupying. When Cordova offered the Cherokees the opportunity for title to their lands in exchange for an alliance, they took it.
Córdova, who had earlier stated that he could no longer bear usurpations of his people’s rights, was overtaken near Seguin by forces raised in Bastrop commanded by Burleson. Burleson’s Colorado Volunteers easily defeated Córdova’s insurrectionists, scattering them in a skirmish at Mill Creek on March 29, 1839. Burleson and the Colorado Volunteers—which included Samuel Highsmith—were en route to Nacogdoches when they encountered Córdova and his motley band of insurrectionists. In the mayhem, many of the defeated rebels escaped to Mexico, including Córdova, who received an injury during the engagement. Others—mainly the Cherokees—fled to the northwestern plains of Texas, while other Natives Americans fled into Indian Territory, north of the Red River. The deciding engagement at Mill Creek ended Córdova’s immediate threat, however, he would return later to aggravate the Texans once more.\(^7\)

Soon after, the Mexican conspiracy became yet more complex when incriminating documents were found in a separate skirmish between a combined force of Native Americans and Mexicans led by Manuel Flores—a cohort of Córdova—and a company of Texas Rangers. The recovered documents included correspondence between Flores and Córdova that contained instructions from superior officers in Mexico outlining the whole of the Córdova rebellion. The skirmish, which took place near Seguin, was led by Lieutenant James O. Rice and his company of Rangers. Rice and his men had been stalking a pack train laden with supplies that was led by Flores. This train, which contained supplies from Mexico, was bound for Nacogdoches to aid Córdova in his plot. Just days before the May 15 engagement, Flores and his party encountered and killed four Texan land surveyors, which drew the attention of Rice. The Córdova conspiracy was finally completely uncovered when incriminating documents were found on the body of Flores.\(^7\)

Flores, a supposed Mexican Indian Agent. The exposed plans conceived by Córdova and the Mexican government confirmed that they intended to utilize Native American manpower in the ousting of Anglo-Texan settlers, which cast a guilty shadow on Chief Bowl and his Cherokees, who had disavowed participation in the matter. Because of Rice and his men, Flores, who was killed at what became known as the Battle of the San Gabriel (River), was clearly linked with Córdova and his attempt at insurrection. But Flores would have met with disaster even if he had reached his destination. His party was completely unaware that Córdova had been defeated just a short time earlier.8

Burleson and Rice’s victorious forces recovered a substantial amount of goods from Flores’s thwarted expedition. Predictably, a disagreement quickly developed over how the prizes of war would be divided. Samuel Highsmith, who was among Burleson’s party sent to relieve Rice, was one of three men—the other two being Logan Vandeaver and Burleson himself—elected to distribute the booty captured from the pack train among the Texan volunteers. The 1873 Emigrants Guide to Texas produced a brief biographical sketch of Samuel, which makes it clear why he would be an optimal choice for such a task. The author of the sketch must have seen in Highsmith what those who elected him an arbiter of the spoils did. He characterized him in a compassionate light, noting that Samuel “held his heart in his hand, and that the benevolence of his nature was ever active.” In the 1800s, long term conflicts regarding a man’s honor could develop over issues as simple as distributing recovered goods, so having a fair handed distributor was quite necessary. Because Córdova was not captured at Mill Creek, he continued to stir the area’s Native Americans, attempting to foment further rebellion. Samuel, however, went home to

his family in Texana. Like many Rangers in that era, he hoped to find a means of support so that he could provide for his growing family.\(^9\)

On about February 18, 1839, just a few short months after Córdova’s initial attempt at an insurrection, the fearsome plains tribe, the Comanches, returned to the political scene in Texas. Their appearance shifted the focus of Texans away from East Texas to the areas of the Republic nearest the western plains. The Comanches consisted of several separate bands, which made negotiations with them extremely difficult, if not impossible. Further, they had no intention of incorporating themselves with the Anglo and Mexican populations like the Cherokees had attempted to do. The Comanches, who were more ferocious than the more amicable Cherokees, would raid Texas indiscriminately until after the Civil War. In early 1839 they raided Central Texas, sweeping through Travis and Bastrop Counties. At Webber’s Prairie, about twelve miles north of Bastrop, the raiders killed the wife of Robert M. Coleman, one of the men who signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, and one of her sons. The marauding tribe also captured her other son, five-year-old Tommy, and made off with seven slaves belonging to Dr. James W. Robertson. In response, on or around February 24, Jacob Burleson—son of Edward Burleson—was elected captain of a group of twenty-five mounted men from the area surrounding Austin and Bastrop whose objective it was to find and punish the Comanche raiders. Captain James Rogers—Jacob’s brother-in-law—joined Burleson with another twenty-seven men, bringing the combined total of men to fifty-two. The day after being elected captain, Burleson sent his men to scout the area most recently attacked by the raiding party.\(^{10}\)

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Being Bastrop men, the Highsmiths again joined this volunteer host. Once the Rangers led by Burleson and Rogers caught up to the Comanches at Post Oak Island, approximately three miles north of Brushy Creek, near present day Taylor in Williamson County, the men attempted to gain retribution for the Comanches' depredations. Their vengeance, however, did not come without a cost. The young captain, Jacob—one of the four Burleson brothers present for the battle—was shot in the back of the head while ordering an attack on the Comanche position. Burleson had issued the command to the twelve men nearest him. While issuing this order he was simultaneously trying to help a young compatriot untie his horse, and just before his ordered charge, he was hit by Comanche gunfire. Benjamin Highsmith, along with Winslow Turner Jr., was involved in this engagement and saw the events transpire. Turner and Highsmith apparently were the only two men that followed Burleson’s orders to attack. According to Sowell, the other men “flinched,” which put Burleson in serious jeopardy.¹¹

Later that day two old veterans, General Edward Burleson and Captain Jesse Billingsley, arrived with additional reinforcements numbering thirty-two men. Upon their arrival, the two veterans took command and ordered a pursuit of the Comanches. The Texans overtook their foes at Brushy Creek, shortly after noon. The elder Burleson sought vengeance for the spilt blood of his son, Jacob. Despite the emotional state of the elder veteran, he remained level headed and rational, not falling prey to acting rashly when confronting the Comanches. Upon overtaking them, Burleson and Billingsley found a number of braves in a strong defensive position in the creek bottom. The Rangers soon realized that they were outnumbered, but commenced their attack regardless. The initial charge spooked the Comanche braves and a running battle ensued until the latter retreated down into the creek bottoms. After the attack the Rangers recovered one

slave—probably belonging to Robertson—who said that the Indians lost at least thirty dead and wounded. Besides Jacob Burleson, the Texians lost two men killed, Edward Blakey and John Walters. Reverend James Gilleland, who was injured in the battle, died ten days later.\textsuperscript{12}

Participation by either of the two Highsmith men in the Brushy Creek engagement is extremely likely, though just which one remains in question. Benjamin lived in close proximity to the location where the attack occurred, which is also where the Rangers would be recruited. Further, Samuel and Benjamin were both veterans at the time, and the two had developed a tradition of fighting alongside the Burlesons. However, confusion as to which Highsmith participated in the battle still remains. Was it Benjamin or Samuel? The accounts of John Holland Jenkins and Benjamin Highsmith, via Andrew Jackson Sowell, provide conflicting information as to which Highsmith actually participated in the battle. What complicates the historiography even further is that according to the \textit{Handbook of Texas}, Texas Ranger and militia units both participated in the battle. Samuel generally volunteered for Ranger service, but Benjamin Highsmith was reportedly a member of the Texan Army until 1845. In \textit{Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas}, Stephen Moore contributes to this confusion by stating that “Jenkins (the third, editor of his great grandfather’s memoirs) in his editorial names ‘Samuel Highsmith’ as the participant who narrowly avoided death when Captain Burleson was shot in the head.” Moore then credits Benjamin, stating that, “A. J. Sowell, however, in his \textit{Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas} names Benjamin Franklin Highsmith as the man actually present.” Jenkins and Sowell were the only chroniclers of the Brushy Creek battle that indicated the Highsmiths were even involved in the engagement. A

\textsuperscript{12} Stephen Moore, \textit{Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas. Volume III 1838-1839} (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 171-178; "Benjamin Franklin Highsmith" Vertical File, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin. In these specific files is a letter written by Winslow Turner Jr. stating that Benjamin Highsmith was present for the Battle of Brushy Creek. Further perspective on the situation is provided in the next footnote.
Highsmith was definitely involved, but it is uncertain which one. What is certain is that neither Samuel nor Benjamin had much time to relax after the battle. The new president, Lamar, would not rest until all of the Native Americans in Texas were exterminated or removed. Because of Lamar’s policies, Samuel and Benjamin Highsmith would have ample opportunity to serve in the near future.13

The Córdova Rebellion was only the beginning of Lamar’s ambitious policies aimed at eradicating the Native American presence in Texas. During Córdova’s 1838 insurrection, Rusk routinely spoke to Vice President Lamar, bypassing President Houston. Rusk, who was aligned with Lamar, would do this to receive permissions that would allow him to aggressively pursue the Cherokees. This type of dissension in the government was common. When he succeeded Houston, Lamar openly pursued the same policies towards Texas’ Native Americans that he had as vice-president. This allowed men such as Rusk even more latitude to operate.

Because of the Cherokees’ suspected involvement with the Mexican government in the Córdova Rebellion, the new president targeted them first. Lamar provoked the Cherokee War of 1839, the culmination of friction between the Cherokees and other Native Americans and the Anglo settlers in East Texas. In July of 1839, Kelsey H. Douglass was put in charge of about 500 troops then under the command of Edward Burleson, Willis H. Landrum, and Rusk, with orders to remove the Cherokee and their allies from Texas to the Arkansas Territory. This time

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13 Todd Hansen ed., The Alamo Reader A Study in History (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2003), 172-174; Stephen Moore, Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas. Volume II 1838-1839 (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 376-377. Moore as well as the Handbook of Texas indicates that Winslow Turner Jr. fought alongside one of the Highsmith men. This leads the author to believe that Jenkins portrayal is correct as opposed to Sowell, and thus Moore’s view. Winslow Turner Sr. was Samuel Highsmith’s father-in-law which, of course, means that the Winslow Turner indicated here was one of his sons. By marriage Samuel had a closer bond to the Turner family, which leads the author to believe that Samuel was actually the one present for the battle. However, it cannot be ruled out that the two fought in the same battle, perhaps in different locations. Benjamin Highsmith’s vertical file at the Center for American History states otherwise, however, the accuracy of this information is also suspect.
Benjamin Highsmith responded to Lamar’s requests for Ranger companies by joining Captain Greenberry H. Harrison’s command.14

By 1839 the Cherokees and their allies under Bowl had become tired of negotiating with the Mexican and Texan governments. Many of Bowl’s men were not in favor of moving into yet another territory despite President Lamar’s ultimatum, which made the position of the Cherokees a precarious one. Before Lamar deployed his troops, three men were sent as emissaries in a final attempt at negotiation. The three men, Martin Lacy, William G. W. Jowers, and John H. Reagan along with their interpreter Cordray, made a final attempt to persuade Bowl and his people to move peacefully from Texas. Bowl, who knew what the future would hold for his men if they remained unwilling to move, told the Texan negotiators that, “he had no choice but to stand by his people’s wishes, for ‘if he fought, the whites would kill him; and if he refused to fight, his own people would kill him.’” With negotiations at a stalemate, both parties departed from Alto, Texas, in modern Cherokee County. The Anglo party returned to Fort Lacy, and Chief Bowl returned to a village near the Neches River in modern Smith County to prepare for war.15

In a last attempt to avoid bloodshed, the Texan army dispatched yet another peace commission from their camp at Council Creek, six miles south of the principal village of Chief Bowl. The ambassadors arrived on July 12, to negotiate the tribe’s removal. Much to the surprise of the envoy, the Cherokees and their allies agreed to the terms of removal. The terms, which were considered generous, guaranteed the Cherokees the profit from their planted crops and the

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15 Stephen Moore, Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas. Volume II 1838-1839 (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 235-280; Christopher Long, “LACYS FORT,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uel02, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed June, 18 2012. The unfortunate Cherokee had little luck with the American, Mexican, and Texan governments. Because of such a turbulent past, socially and politically speaking, the Cherokee were likely extremely resistant to being moved from Texas.
cost of the removal. Despite this initial acceptance—which was likely strongly encouraged and
advocated by Bowl—the position of the tribe’s war-hawks prevailed and the Cherokees did not
budge. By ignoring repeated orders to leave Texas, the final negotiation ended in a stalemate.
With peaceful removal a less than viable option, hostilities began on July 15, 1839.

Benjamin Highsmith arrived in East Texas with Captain Harrison, who himself was
recruited out of San Antonio by Henry W. Karnes. The brigade that included Highsmith’s unit
was in the First Regiment of the Third Militia Brigade, commanded by brigadier general Kelsey
Douglass. Kelsey’s force thus swelled to approximately nine hundred men under the individual
commands of Major Bailey Walters, Colonel Thomas J. Rusk, Colonel Willis H. Landrum, Lt.
Colonel Devereaux, Jerome Woodlief, and the familiar Colonel Edward Burleson. Chief Bowl
had a force of some seven hundred Cherokees, as well as a host of warriors from the Tonkawa,
Shawnee, Delaware, Kickapoo, Quawpaw, Choctaw, Biloxi, Ionie, Alabama, and Coushatta.

Benjamin’s unit saw action on the first evening that both forces were on the Neches
River. Here Highsmith was a part of Kelsey’s larger force that drove Chief Bowl and his stalwart
warriors from their perch on a high bank on Battle Creek. Among the Anglos killed in this
opening engagement was John C. Crane, one of the captains under Milam at the storming of San
Antonio in 1835. Highsmith, who knew Crane well, was near him when he fell from his rearing
horse with a gunshot through his heart. Along with the other members of the company, Benjamin
helped to bury him. Another man from his company, Henry P. Crowson, also fell mortally
wounded, dying later that evening. Kelsey’s brigade pursued Bowl’s retreating warriors north up
the Neches to a Delaware village, the location where the aging Bowl would make his last stand.
A brief cessation in the battle occurred that evening. The running battle, however, raged on into
the next morning when the eighty-three year old Chief was shot down trying to rally his braves,
who were beginning to flee the field. A scouting party under James Carter soon located a large number of the Cherokees near the headwaters of the Neches River, in modern Van Zandt County. Carter was quickly reinforced by Rusk and Burleson, and the fight continued. Reagan, who had attempted negotiations with Bowl a short time earlier, noted that the aged chief “was a magnificent picture of barbaric manhood and was very conspicuous during the whole battle.”

With his sorrel horse unable to continue—it had reportedly been shot seven times—the already wounded Bowl had dismounted and began walking from the field when he was shot in the back. He fell wearing a silk vest, military hat, a sword, and a sash presented to him by Sam Houston.

The Battle of the Neches thus effectively eradicated the Cherokees in Texas.¹⁶

Native American troubles were not yet over in that summer of 1839. After securing the removal of the majority of Native Americans in East Texas, Lamar again redirected his efforts to the plains tribes in the West. There, among the many other tribes, he would find the Comanches, who were still an intimidating force of Native Americans despite their loss at Brushy Creek. As a result of Lamar’s aggressive pursuit—combined with the settler’s westward movement—a band of Peneteka Comanches came to the bargaining table in March of 1840. In attempts to improve relations, perhaps to avoid fighting a multi-front war in Comancheria, Peneteka peace chief Muk-wah-ruh came to negotiate. With him he brought a number of children—mainly of Mexican descent—and one Anglo, Matilda Lockhart. The teenaged Lockhart informed Anglo negotiators that more prisoners were being held in Comancheria, the lands controlled by the Comanches. The delegation of commissioners attempted to obtain the prisoners, but to no avail. Muk-wah-ruh told them that the prisoners mentioned by the young Lockhart were held by Comanche bands beyond his authority. Not understanding the tribal structure of the Comanches, the delegation

attempted to hold the peace chief and his followers in the courthouse. Twenty-seven Comanche men and women were captured; the remaining few either escaped, or were killed, like their misunderstood peace chief, Muk-wah-ruh. The melee, which came to be known as the Council House Fight, would have a lasting impact on Anglo-Comanche relations in Texas.17

The Comanche response to the Council House debacle in March was a raid of epic proportions, which occurred during the summer of 1840. This time the Comanches responded in a fashion that the Anglos expected: depredations and warfare. In what became known as the Linnville/Victoria raid, the Comanches cut a wide swath of destruction from the Central Texas plains all the way to the Gulf Coast town of Linnville. What the Comanches did not burn was pillaged. The raiders seized more than 1,500 horses in Victoria before moving on to Linnville, forcing the citizens there to take refuge in boats while the intruders secured their booty at will. After Linnville was sacked and burned, the Comanches began their return to Comancheria laden with goods and other various trinkets. The Texan response was quick, and among the first responders were Samuel and Benjamin Highsmith.

Hastily gathered Texan forces led by Major General Felix Huston finally overtook the Comanches at Plum Creek, near present day Lockhart, on August 12, 1840. Benjamin once more served with the men of Bastrop under Colonel Edward Burleson. Samuel was also present for the engagement, though serving under Captain Jack Hays. Benjamin remembered the battle as a protracted, scattered engagement. In describing the scene, he told Sowell that the Comanches "had many pack animals besides squaws and warriors, and presented an imposing spectacle as

17 Jodye Lynn Dickson Schilz, “COUNCIL HOUSE FIGHT,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/btc01, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed June, 14 2012; Pekka Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 62-63. For further reading, Comanche Empire provides the latest interpretation of the Comanche social and political structures. Comancheria was a land with fluid, constantly changing borders, which was controlled by four distinct bands of the Comanche tribe, the Yamparika (Yap Eaters), Jupes (People of the Timber), Kotsotekas (Buffalo Eaters), and the Penetekas (Honey Eaters). The Texian negotiators did not understand this tribal structure, which became the source of much confrontation.
they moved along singing and exploiting on their horses, and altogether covering a mile in extent.” The Comanches were so laden with stolen loot that their progress back towards the plains was slowed to a crawl. Many of them were reluctant to leave their newly acquired goods or abandoned the loot too late, which gave the Texan volunteers ample time to mount a very successful offensive. Highsmith, via Sowell who served with him in this engagement, described the almost comical encounter quite well, stating that he found a Comanche wearing:

regular full dress, except the pants, having on a beegum hat, new calf boots over his naked legs, and a broadcloth long forked-tail coat, which was resplendent with a double row of brass buttons in front. This dusky dude, however, had no valet de chambre to put on his coat for him, and consequently got it on wrong, having the front behind and closely buttoned up to the back of his neck. He also had an umbrella hoisted, and was riding with head erect and a little thrown back, singing loudly, when the fight commenced.

The route was not nearly as funny for the Comanches. They lost a significant number of warriors, which prohibited them from launching raids of such magnitude in the future. After Plum Creek, the Republic experienced a brief time of tranquility. Benjamin remained in the army, but Samuel sought yet another civilian occupation in order to adequately support his ever growing family.18

Active men like the Highsmiths developed strong kinship bonds and networks during this era, which played key roles in their economic endeavors. Samuel, who had worked as a freighter, also known as a teamster, got an opportunity to supply an expeditionary force with mounts and mules. Apparently in addition to raising pigs with Abram Clare, Sam also had access to a number of horses and mules. He was contracted to supply a number of mounts and mules worth a total of

18 Stephen Moore, Savage Frontier: Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas. Volume II 1838-1839 (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 106-107; Andrew Jackson Sowell, Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas: Facts Gathered from Survivors of Frontier Days, (Austin: Ben C. Jones & Co., 1900), 1-19. There is no official record of Samuel Highsmith participation in this battle, though, that does not mean he did not participate. If he did not participate it can be concluded that he likely ran to the defense of his family. Benjamin Franklin Highsmith did not have a family at this point, which enabled him to take more risks.
6,280 dollars for an ill-fated expedition to Santa Fe which took place in 1841. He likely sold his
remaining stock before moving to Bastrop, acting as an intermediary to supply the expedition
with the rest of their needs. The Santa Fe Expedition, as it became known, was a pet project of
Lamar’s, whose desire it was to divert to Texas at least a part of the lucrative trade which flowed
up the Camino Real to Santa Fe then along the Santa Fe Trail to Missouri. Lamar’s secondary
objective was to establish Texas’ jurisdiction over Santa Fe. In 1841 New Mexico, which had
developed an identity closely linked to its mother country, was still solidly in Mexican hands.
This posed an interesting challenge for the Texans, who thought that the Mexican frontier state
would be easily liberated. The Santa Fe Expedition became an arduous journey, during which
their Mexican guide left them and they became lost, left to be arrested by the New Mexican
governor, Manuel Armijo. Armijo then had the men sent to Mexico City, where the Texans
stayed until released in 1842. The event sparked an international incident in which the United
States interceded on behalf of the Texans.¹⁹

Around the time of this endeavor, Samuel moved his wife and children from Texana to
Bastrop, which was initially settled by Stephen F. Austin years earlier. Perhaps he moved to be
closer to Benjamin and his extended family. Because of the apparent lack of success of his
agricultural endeavor with his brother-in-law, Abram Clare, Sam also needed to find a more
consistent means of employment. Contracting to sell horses and other various goods and
supplies, while occasionally fruitful, did not supply a constant stream of income, which made life
difficult for a man who ultimately had to provide for seven children. Returning to his teamster

¹⁹ Thomas Cutrer, “SAMUEL HIGHS

roots, Samuel took a year-long contract along with Myers F. Jones to carry mail from Austin to the city of Houston, formerly known as Harrisburg. Perhaps his service with Burleson paid off; Burleson was vice-president of the Republic in 1841 and may have helped Sam secure the mail position. Carrying the mail from Austin to Houston, though, was no easy task. Austin stood on the edges of the Texan frontier in 1841, and the trip from that city to Houston was a distance of over one hundred-fifty miles, one way. The March 2, 1842, edition of the *Telegraph and Texas Register* noted that Samuel Highsmith and Myers were contracted to carry the mail from April 1841 to January 1, 1842. It is unclear whether the duo received another contract to transport mail in 1842, however. Very little time would elapse before the expiration of Samuel’s mail-carrying contract and his next job, though. His next assignment would be as a captain with the mounted militia, a volunteer force of men popularly known as Rangers, recruited for short periods of time to protect the Republic.20

1842 was a turbulent year for Anglo Texans and Tejanos alike. Mexico launched a series of expeditions to subdue the territory which they still believed to be a rebellious colony. Tejanos like Juan Seguin and subsequent generations would suffer decades of harsh recrimination, partly due to the stereotypes reinforced here. Shortly after Samuel’s contract to transport mail expired, General Mariano Arista on January 9, 1842 issued an official statement from the Mexican city of Monterrey urging Texans to surrender. He did so promising amnesty and protection for those

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20 Republic of Texas Claim Files, https://tslarc.tsl.state.tx.us/repclaims/44/04400503.pdf (Accessed June 15, 2012). When the Texas Senate made the motion to pay Highsmith and Jones, Burleson was its president. The motion passed and the two men were paid a total sum of thirteen-hundred fifty-eight dollars and thirty-nine cents; *Telegraph and Texas Register* March 2, 1842; Robert Utley, *Lone Star Justice* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2002), 3-6.
that remained neutral during the Mexican occupation process. Arista’s proclamation set off a series of events that directly contributed to Texas’s annexation by the United States in 1845.  

By March 1842 Samuel was under the immediate command of legendary captain John Coffee Hays, who served under his superior, the also notable Robert Addison Gillespie. Samuel was serving when Rafael Vásquez, made good on Arista’s proclamation to enter San Antonio. Hays, who believed Vásquez’s seven hundred man contingent was a vanguard for an even larger force, evacuated the Alamo City, relocating to Seguin to await further reinforcements. Samuel was assigned the undesirable task of informing the area residents of the Mexican invasion. Mary A. Maverick, wife of the noted Samuel Maverick, corroborated this testimony in her memoirs, writing that on March 6, Highsmith approached the Maverick residence, knocking loudly on the door and spreading the grim news to Maverick and her guests by announcing that, “Ladies, San Antonio has fallen.” While Hays’s command was rendezvousing at Seguin, more militia under the command of Alexander Somervell was assembling; among them was Samuel’s nephew, Benjamin. The militia finally converged on San Antonio on March 15, only to find that Vásquez had evacuated the town six days earlier. Somervell, who had entrusted command of the volunteer forces to Burleson, did not have orders to engage the invaders. Thus, the old Texan warrior and his force remained in San Antonio until the unit was disbanded on April 2, 1842.

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21 Raúl Ramos, Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821-1861 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 185-186. Ramos asserts that the invading Mexican army did very little for the relations between Tejanos and Anglo-Texans during this time period. In fact, he argues that it did quite the contrary. It reinforced the developing negative stereotype held by an increasing number of Anglo-Texians. Beyond the Alamo provides a solid foundation for those wishing to understand the social and political relations between Tejanos and Anglos in San Antonio from 1821 to 1846.

While Vásquez left Texas relatively quietly, the damage had been done. Texian settlers were in a panic. Houston even went so far as to declare a national emergency and in so doing attempted to move the Republic archives from Austin to Houston, precipitating another altercation, this time between rival Anglo-Texan factions. Because of Vásquez’s foray into Texas, the already strained relations between Anglo-Texans and Tejanos worsened. One example of the worsening relations—one in which Benjamin became involved—was the pursuit of Juan Seguin. Seguin was ultimately forced to flee his San Antonio home with his family due to threats upon their lives, despite being one of Texas’ most prominent Tejano families. Benjamin, then under the immediate command of Captain Hugh M. Childress, joined a party of mounted militia to pursue Seguin, who they believed to be a traitor due to his alleged complicity in the Mexican attacks against San Antonio. According to Sowell, twenty-five men led by Childress acquired a useful bit piece of information from one of Seguin’s servants, Juan Cantu. Cantu told them the last known whereabouts of Seguin, who Cantu believed to be at his Calaveras ranch. Childress’s band went to the ranch to in hopes of finding the suspected traitor so that they could hang him; however, Seguin and his family were not there because they had already fled to Mexico.23

A June 7 skirmish between Antonio Canales Rosillo and the Adjutant General of the Texan army, James Davis, at Lipantitlán near Corpus Christi, was the only armed conflict that arose from Vásquez’s uninvited tour. Texas again appeared to be spared. Unfortunately this was not the case. In fact, in terms of casualties and battle engagements the worst was yet to come. Shortly after Vásquez evacuated the republic Adrián Woll was ordered to prepare yet another

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23 Andrew Jackson Sowell, Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas: Facts Gathered from Survivors of Frontier Days, (Austin: Ben C. Jones & Co., 1900), 14. Cultural differences between Anglos and Tejanos created friction between the two groups. The most common response to the resultant friction was Anglo initiated violence. Generally, Anglos believing themselves to be superior treated Tejanos and Mexicans as second class citizens. A Revolution Remembered: The Memoirs and Selected Correspondence of Juan N. Seguin, by Jesus de la Teja, discusses more fully the wedge that racism put between Anglos and Tejanos in Texas.
invasion into the fledgling Republic by Santa Anna via Isidro Reyes, then the commandant of Mexico’s Army of the North, located in Coahuila. By the end of the summer of 1842, Woll was ready to attack and, like Vásquez, he easily captured San Antonio. Woll’s army was larger than the one commanded by Vásquez. His 1,200 man army entered San Antonio on September 11.24

Undaunted, the Texans began gathering their forces—which numbered near two hundred by September 17—on Cibolo Creek, just above Seguin. The two hundred man force, which was still forming, marched to Salado Creek seven miles north of San Antonio under the command of Matthew (“Old Paint”) Caldwell. He took command despite just being released from Perote prison in Mexico shortly before their September 18 battle with Woll. Among the forces serving under Caldwell was the ever ready Benjamin Highsmith. Samuel also joined the forces led by Caldwell, who lived in close proximity to Samuel in Bastrop. This time, however, when Samuel ventured into San Antonio to heed the seemingly eternal call, he was not alone. His fifteen-year old son, Malcijah Benjamin Highsmith, stood by his side anxious to follow in the footsteps of his father. Sometime before the battle Samuel took command of Caldwell’s company as Old Paint was promoted to the rank of major, in command of the forces at Salado.25

On the morning of September 18, Caldwell sent Hays with thirty-eight mounted militia—fourteen of whom that had recently fled the city—back into San Antonio. Caldwell’s objective was to draw Woll’s larger force into the open so that his smaller force could have some sort of an advantage. Woll took the bait, letting Hays lure his forces into the open toward Salado Creek,


where the Texans held a strong defensive position. The Texans were protected, lying concealed among the cottonwoods, cedars, and live oaks of the creek bottom. Woll himself led the four- to five-hundred man cavalry force that chased Hays’s much smaller band of men. Neither Caldwell nor Hays expected Woll to respond in person and with such a large force. Woll’s cavalry gave chase on fresh mounts, which gave Hays’s men, who were riding worn mounts, a hard time. By roughly ten o’clock Woll’s entire force, which consisted of some fifteen-hundred men, had formed ranks and commenced firing on the Texan position in the creek. Knowing that he was outnumbered, Caldwell immediately dispatched couriers seeking reinforcements. Part of Caldwell’s message asking for reinforcements read: "The enemy are around me on every side, but I fear them not." By the end of the first day's fighting, Mexican casualties were reported at sixty men killed, with that number and more wounded. The unreinforced Texans suffered one killed and approximately nine to twelve wounded. The next day the weather played a deciding factor in the fighting. A hard rain began to fall, which lasted throughout the day, prohibiting any sort of attack. Woll, educated in French military tactics, knew better than to risk becoming mired Texan cannon fodder. During the night, he left his campfires burning to cover his retreat back into San Antonio. As dawn broke, Caldwell’s men were surprised to find out that Woll had left the battlefield. Soon after, the Texans mounted and gave chase. However, their hasty advance was hampered by the weather and an extremely rain swollen river crossing at the Medina.  

While the fight that Caldwell’s men participated in can be termed a success—they were not destroyed and attempted to give chase to a larger force—Captain Nicholas M. Dawson and his fifty-three-man company from Fayette County, which was raised to reinforce Caldwell at Salado, did not fare as well. By three or four on the afternoon of September 18, Dawson and his

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men were in close proximity to Caldwell’s line. Before Dawson and his militia reached the
creek, though, they were intercepted by a whole host of Mexican cavalry numbering some five
hundred. Neither Caldwell, nor the veteran captain Jesse Billingsley, was able to successfully
rescue the besieged company. After hours of hard fighting, which inflicted numerous casualties
on the Mexican cavalry, the wounded Dawson knew he could not hold out and attempted to
surrender. His effort was, however, in vain. The artillery fire that supported the cavalry was too
much. Whether or not the Mexican leaders could see the flag of truce through the smoke, they
refused to acknowledge the surrender, and subsequently, thirty-six men were killed. Two others
escaped while fifteen were taken prisoner and removed to Mexico. Benjamin remembered being
part of a small group led by Hays that attempted to free the prisoners. However, as Sowell
recorded, they were not successful. Caldwell had held a council of war earlier that day but, due
to the amount of time that elapsed during the meeting coupled with the inclement weather, the
effort to mount a pursuit never gained momentum. Only nine of the original fifteen prisoners
survived. Dawson’s massacre served as a grim reminder to the Texans that the fight for their
country was not over, while young Malcijah got to see first-hand just why he was fighting.27

Benjamin, because he was a career soldier, had ample time to recuperate between these
engagements. Samuel, on the other hand, like the majority of the Rangers of the time, did not
make his living from fighting. He did not have the luxury of an extended rest. With a house to
sustain and mouths to feed, he returned straight from battle to search for work again. Outside of
agricultural endeavors, with which Samuel apparently had little luck—he may have just given up
after the hog raising failure—finding work in Texas was no easy task. Despite this, in the years
leading up to annexation, Samuel found increasingly lucrative jobs, despite this. In 1843 and

27 Thomas Cutrer, “DAWSONS MASSACRE,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qfd01,
1844, he served as sergeant-at-arms for the Republic of Texas House of Representatives. He received around $250 dollars for each of the two consecutive years that he served. This paltry amount of money may not have added up to much, but for a man that desired to be near his family and away from danger, it would suffice. On the other hand, perhaps Samuel was trying to launch a career in politics. He once again went back to his teamster roots in 1845 when he was deputized to carry "special and extra mail" between Bastrop and La Grange. Many Texans were like Samuel in that they had—or attempted to find—gainful employment anywhere it could be found. But he is unique in that he did not pursue more traditional agricultural work. Benjamin was even more unlike the usual Texas Rangers of his time because he remained a professional soldier.28

Outside of Ranger service, Samuel remained active in civic matters, especially those concerning the safety of Texan citizens in regards to the threat of Mexicans from south of the Rio Grande and Native Americans on the western frontier. In 1843 he joined a committee whose purpose it was to elect a delegate to represent his county in an 1844 meeting to discuss these matters. The June 14, 1843, edition of the Texas Telegraph and Register detailed the objectives of this convention, which was formed

for the purpose of taking into consideration the dilapidated and exposed condition of the Western settlements of our Republic, and to concert the most efficient measures for their relief, and for the protection of the whole country against the inroads of the enemy.

28 Nielsen, “Mathew Caldwell,” ibid; Republic of Texas Claim Files, https://tslarc.tsl.state.tx.us/repclaims/44/04400536.pdf; https://tslarc.tsl.state.tx.us/repclaims/44/04400538.pdf Accessed June 15, 2012); Gary Clayton Anderson, The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 428. Anderson asserts that “Highsmith’s political ambitions seem obvious, given his career.” While this assertion is plausible, Sam may have wanted to enter politics, it does not necessarily mean that he had political ambitions. Many militiamen—later Rangers—actively served without giving as much as a thought to a political career. Further, his book casts an unnecessarily dark shadow on Sam portraying him solely as an “Indian killer” which does not mesh with this author’s research, and subsequent interpretation. Finally, Samuel Highsmith was born in Kentucky, not North Carolina, as Anderson asserts; he was a sergeant-at-arms in 1843 and 1844, not 1844 and 1845; and Sam did not fight in Mexico with Hays, rather, he maintained Hays’s company of Rangers based out of San Antonio (Enchanted Rock) while Hays himself fought in the Mexican American War.
Highsmith appeared to be quite a well-rounded citizen. While he was never considered one of the legendary Texas Ranger captains, he was eager, if not zealous, in his desires to keep Texas and Texans safe from “the inroads of the enemy.” According to the Clarksville Northern Standard, the meeting failed to organize due to lack of attendance. Highsmith and Samuel Maverick, with whom Samuel would become better acquainted in later endeavors, were among those that did show up at the designated meeting place in La Grange. Perhaps negotiations regarding the impending annexation to the United States stalled the meeting. Whatever the case, Anglo Texas had endured its fair share of depredations by Mexicans and Native Americans. Annexation on December 29, 1845, would serve as the harbinger of change. The road to Texas’s annexation would precipitate a final war with Mexico, which still regarded Texas as colony. After 1845, Texans would become more financially stable. This enabled the former Republic to engage the Native Americans—namely the Comanches—more effectively.29

Many people believe that after the battle of San Jacinto the new and sovereign Texas was completely independent from Mexico. As the Mexican invasions of Vásquez and Woll suggest, this was clearly not the case. In fact, with their new “freedom” Teians, before annexation by the United States, were forced to cope with the Mexican army as an additional threat. Not only did the Republic of Texas have to face the Native American threat, along with many other issues related to the frontier, they had to deal with an added element of danger in the Mexican army. Thus, from their borders to the west and south, Texas was forced to cope with two different enemies along two very long fronts. A poorly trained and ill-equipped Mexican army was better than what the Texans had initially, which was no real army at all. The Republic of Texas, which was under a constant and very real threat from their enemies for its entire existence, was forced

29 Telegraph and Texas Register, June 14, 1843; Clarksville Northern Standard, September 21, 1843.
to call on men like Samuel, Benjamin, and Malcijah Highsmith in order to protect their borders. The fledgling Republic was forced to deal with these matters with an empty treasury. The only payment that the cash-poor nation had to offer its defenders was land which many men during this time—including the Highsmiths—used as currency.

With its admission into the Union, Texas was better able to protect itself from the dual Native American/Mexican threat. The newfound security that the United States gave to Texas was, however, short-lived. The state would have to fight a war with its former mother country, Mexico. After the Mexican American war Texas experienced a time of tranquility, though, it was brief as the new state was drug into the war fought to uphold the peculiar institution. The Texas Rangers saw action on three different fronts from 1846 to 1865; they protected the frontier, fought courageously in the Mexican American War, and sought to uphold the rights that the southern man believed was being impinged upon by northern aggressors. Samuel and his son Malcijah would continue their tradition of service to Texas, seeing action on the frontier during the Mexican American War. Malcijah and his brother, Henry Albert Highsmith, would fight for the Confederacy in the Trans-Mississippi. The Highsmiths' fealty to Texas ensured their continued dedication to the Texas Rangers.
CHAPTER IV

RANGERS IN STATE SERVICE, 1845-1861

The annexation of the Republic of Texas to the United States in 1845 created a political
quandary in Washington D.C. Robert W. Merry characterizes the political climate in which
James K. Polk assumed the presidency as volatile, noting that the “Texas issue still loomed large
over the political landscape, generating acidic animosities within the party and country,” Texans
saw the situation quite differently. Anglos and certain Tejanos in the Republic simply hoped that
annexation would bring tranquility and prosperity. Unfortunately, the newly annexed state did
not immediately experience the peaceful success for which its citizens hoped. Mexico, despite
being mired in political and economic turmoil, was determined to keep Texas regardless of the
political maneuverings by authorities in Washington. In the minds of Mexican politicians, Texas
was simply another rebellious state within the Mexican nation. When Mexico rose to defend its
far flung northern frontier from the United States in 1846, Texans enlisted en masse to fight for
their new nation. Samuel, Benjamin F. and Malcijah B. Highsmith were among the thousands of
Texan volunteers that responded to the threat, which to established Texans was not a new issue.
The three Highsmiths thus participated in a war that played an integral role in the formation of
Texas Ranger identity. Relations between Texans and Mexicans was strained to say the least, but
confrontations between the mounted volunteers who called themselves Rangers and Mexicans
drew especially bad blood. After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Anglo Texans did
indeed experience a brief period of relative peace as Native Americans remained the sole threat
to the safety of the state along the western frontier. The uneasy peace along the Rio Grande in
the 1850s, however, would be interrupted sooner than they hoped. Comanche raiders and Juan Nepomuceno Cortina had different plans for the new international borderland.¹

After his stint carrying mail from Bastrop and La Grange, Samuel Highsmith again volunteered for Ranger service. In 1845, while living with his family near Austin, he was commissioned a captain in the Texas Rangers. This time he was charged with patrolling the area south of Austin along the Colorado River. Highsmith was familiar with this territory and had traversed its roadways many times as a teamster, or carrying mail. The land through which the Colorado flowed south of Austin, was, because of its fertility, a prime target for Anglo settlement, and thus encounters with Native Americans. Highsmith knew the Hill Country south of Austin just as well, or better, than most, because it was his home.

In May 1845, shortly after being commissioned, Highsmith met with one of his Delaware Scouts, Jim Shaw, to gather intelligence on the area’s Native American tribes. Shaw informed Highsmith that a band of Kickapoos had purchased a young man of Anglo descent from a band of Comanches. Santa Anna, chief of this specific band of Comanches, was notorious for taking captives—regardless of cultural affiliation or gender—to be used as slaves. Comanche captives began their lives as the lowest ranking citizens within the tribe’s social structure. Highsmith was able to identify the captive according to Shaw’s description. The young man was the son of Robert M. Coleman and had been captured prior to the battle at Brushy Creek in 1839. Being able to positively identify this youth must have struck a chord with Highsmith, as either he or Benjamin participated in that engagement. According to the December 17, 1845 edition of the Texas National Register, Samuel began negotiations to purchase young Thomas Coleman.²

² Texas National Register, December 17, 1845.
Highsmith must have been elated that the boy was found, especially after being with the Comanches for such a long period of time (over six years). Coleman’s family was, of course, delighted that he was returned to them safely after such an absence. According to John Holland Jenkins, however, the ending of this story was not so happy:

In the case of Thomas Coleman, who was captured at the time of the Battle of Brushy Creek in 1839, the power of association prevailed, and strange to say he grew up to love a life among the people who had murdered his own mother and brother (Albert). His family spared no effort to recover him, and securing the celebrated chief of the Delawares, John Connor, as guide, his cousin looked all through the Indian Nation till finding him, they almost forced him to come home. He could never, however, adapt himself to civilized life, and soon returned to his wild companions for good.3

The Comanches were unique among Native Americans in the manner which they cultivated familial kinship connections. Every member of the Comanches, including their captives, were incorporated into the upwardly mobile tribal social structure which, in the case of Coleman, proved to be stronger than the connection to his Anglo family.

Highsmith likely served continuously from 1845 to the outset of the war with Mexico in 1846. Texas Ranger service records are rather scarce during the transitory period between the Republic and statehood. Perhaps the captain spent the winter with his wife Theresa and his children, or maybe he attended the annexation ceremony which saw Texas join the United States that December. Regardless, with such a heated political situation brewing between the United States and Mexico, every able bodied Texan man had to stand at the ready. During the years of the Republic, Texans developed the ability to spring into action at a moment’s notice, because of the constant threat of Native Americans and Mexicans. Texas’s veterans, most of whom were volunteers, served the United States well as it fought with Mexico.

3 John Holland Jenkins, Recollections of Early Texas: The Memoirs of John Holland Jenkins (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 231. In his book, Comanche Empire, published by Yale University Press in 2008, Pekka Hämäläinen attributes the ability of the Comanches to break down the social bonds of their captives, which enabled them to rebuild them as distinctly Comanche, regardless of cultural affiliation, as one of the reasons for their large population and prolonged success on the plains.
Mexican politicos refused to negotiate the Texas issue with President Polk in the spring of 1846. As a result, Polk sent General Zachary Taylor, who had positioned a United States Army (the Army of Observation) contingent near Corpus Christi in January, to the Rio Grande. By doing this, Polk acknowledged that the United States recognized the boundaries set by the Treaty of Velasco, which to the Mexican nation, was an act of aggression. The army with Taylor was small, however, and he was forced to rely heavily on volunteer forces, many of whom were Texas Rangers. Samuel, Benjamin, and Malcijah Highsmith, like many of their Texas brethren, answered their new nation’s call to arms in 1846, mustering into federal service for the first time. Benjamin saw action under John C. “Jack” Hays in Mexico, while Samuel and Malcijah executed the equally important task of defending the Texas frontier while the majority of the state’s mounted militia was away fighting in Mexico.

Hostilities which marked the opening of the Mexican American War began north of what is now Brownsville on May 8, 1846. Benjamin participated in this first major engagement at Palo Alto. He fought under the command of Robert Addison “Ad” Gillespie, whose volunteer unit mustered into federal service in January 1846. Both the professional and volunteer forces at this battle were under the overall command of General Taylor. The Mexican troops opposing them, under General Mariano Arista, claimed to be fighting a “defensive war.” The American forces numbered approximately 2,200, while Arista fielded a significantly larger army, about 3,461 men. Benjamin remembered at Palo Alto: “the battle was not of long duration” and that “a good many cannon were used.” His observation was a good one; at Palo Alto General Taylor tested a new battlefield tactic developed by Maj. Samuel Ringgold. This tactic, which he dubbed "flying artillery," included the use of teams of cannoneers who were able to move their guns quickly and effectively throughout the battlefield with teams of specially trained horses. Retired army colonel
and author Lester Dillon Jr. attributes the success of Taylor, and later Gen. Winfield Scott, to such gunners, writing that “the most effective resource in the American arsenal, aside from the soldier himself, proved to be the magnificent corps of artillery.” This newly developed tactic may have helped reduce American casualties, which remained relatively low, numbering some five dead and forty-three wounded. Mexican forces, who fought valiantly despite having faulty gunpowder and antiquated weaponry, had a reported 102 dead, with an additional 129 wounded. By dusk—the battle began around two o’clock in the afternoon—the Mexican forces withdrew from the field, heading south toward the Rio Grande.4

American forces pursued the fleeing Mexicans the next day, catching them at Resaca de la Palma, a location just north of the Rio Grande across from Matamoros, Tamaulipas. By the time Taylor’s forces were in position for an attack—again near two o’clock that afternoon—Arista had established a network of solid defensive positions in a dry streambed or resaca. As the attack commenced, Taylor quickly found that the entrenched Mexicans were not going to be ousted out of the resaca by cannon fire alone. Mexican artillery, which Arista had placed in the middle and on each of his flanks in the resaca, proved effective in keeping the American flying artillery from securing an advantageous position. Taylor then sent light infantry and dragoons—many of whom were volunteers, like Benjamin. During the dragoon charge, Benjamin, who was supporting a cannon team, had his horse shot out from under him, which left the Ranger in an

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extremely precarious position. Andrew Jackson Sowell recorded Ben’s story, recalling that: “in order to keep from being run over by the dragoon[s] he stepped aside into a chaparral thicket.” Unbeknownst to the Mexican soldier who followed him, Ben escaped into the thicket relatively unscathed. Sowell that: “A Mexican officer saw him go in there and came to get him. The latter, however, did not know what it was to go into a thicket after an old Texas Ranger.” Ben was prepared to defend himself, and according to Sowell: “Highsmith killed him and got his horse, and rode the steed back into battle.”

Taylor’s men were eventually able to force the Mexicans from the resaca. After the American forces overwhelmed Arista, he ordered two counterattacks on the American line but failed both times. After the second charge failed, Arista’s Mexican forces hastily fled into the night, leaving a wide variety of goods and munitions behind as they attempted to cross the Rio Grande. Of the 1,700 Americans engaged in the battle, thirty-three were killed and eighty-nine were wounded. Of approximately 4,000 Mexican troops, 154 were killed and 205 were wounded, with an additional 156 missing, many of whom presumably drowned while attempting to cross the river. Within a week Taylor would have control of Matamoros, where the ravaged Mexican Army ran after their rout at Resaca de la Palma.

While Benjamin was busy fighting in South Texas, Capt. Samuel Highsmith took command of Company K of Col. William C. Young's Third Regiment, Texas Mounted Volunteers. Samuel mustered into federal service on June 2, 1846 and mustered out September 22. Musterling in with him was his son, Malcijah B. Highsmith—his close friends and relatives

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called him “Kige”—who served with his father until the company’s enlistments expired in September. Malcijah was now nearly nineteen years old, which according to the standard of the times, made him a full grown man capable of handling a wide range of duties. Perhaps because of his youthful vigor and the fact that his father was company commander, Malcijah was elected to the position of fourth sergeant on July 25, 1846. More than likely however, he got the job due to the resignation of first Lieutenant Z. P. Glasscock, which prompted a string of promotions that benefitted the younger Highsmith.⁷

Company K patrolled the frontier territory surrounding Austin, generally to the south and west. The area was familiar to Captain Highsmith and his company. The depredations of Native Americans—at this point namely the Comanchestat did not stop simply because the United States was at war with Mexico. Comanches continued to raid indiscriminately despite the fighting along the Rio Grande and points further south. The tribe did not work in conjunction with the Mexican nation; however, the war may have served as an impetus for some forward thinking tribal chiefs. One of the major trouble makers for Highsmith and his company was Buffalo Hump, who in spite of prior peaceful relations with Anglos resisted their encroachment onto his tribal lands which lay upon the Edwards Plateau. Under no conditions did Buffalo Hump's Penetekas want Anglos living near them. In 1844, in attempt to placate the violence-prone band of Comanches, the Republic of Texas President, Sam Houston, promised Buffalo Hump that the Anglos would stay away from his lands. He further demonstrated his good will by placating the Peneteka chief with gifts. Unfortunately, Houston gave Buffalo Hump a promise that he could not fulfill. At the outset of the Mexican War in 1846, Texas’s post-annexation land rush pushed Anglo settlements

⁷ William Hugh Robarts, Mexican War Veterans: a Complete Roster of the Regular and Volunteer Troops in the War between the United States and Mexico, from 1846 to 1848 (Washington D.C.: Brentano’s, 1887), 76-77; Charles D. Spurlin, Texas Volunteers in the Mexican War (Victoria, Texas: C.D. Spurlin, 1984), 180.
to the outer rim of the tribe’s hunting territory. As a result, Buffalo Hump resumed his attacks.8

Buffalo Hump’s forays proved to be quite troublesome for Samuel and Malcijah during their first term of enlistment. According to reports in the Texas Democrat, in June 1846, Buffalo Hump and his warriors paid a “friendly” visit to a man known only as Bryant, who lived in a settlement west of Austin near Little River. This visit apparently included a free meal, because the Comanche demanded food and proceeded to take a large portion of Bryant’s corn. Despite terrorizing Bryant and his family, the natives departed the scene after their meal without causing any bodily harm. Buffalo Hump’s men did not go far, however. The warriors returned the next day with even more men than had paid the visit in the previous day and requested more. When Bryant told Buffalo Hump, who was present this time, that he had no food to give, the chief took out what appeared to be a treaty—perhaps the one furnished to him by Houston in 1844—and threw it at Bryant’s feet. Fearing hostility, Bryant instructed his son to furnish them with corn in attempts to allay their anger and nervously returned Buffalo Hump’s papers to him. After the corn had been furnished them, the band left. Captain Highsmith, hearing of the depredation, was sent to investigate the scene. During his investigation, he and his Rangers encountered a boy by the name of Zepeda, who informed them that Buffalo Hump intended to leave the area, which according a newspaper writer at the Democrat was a good idea. According to the reporter, had the Comanches not left, the “Rangers under Capts. Highsmith and Cady, may furnish them with an additional impetus to their movements.” Suffice it to say, the majority of journalists in Texas likely had not encountered Comanche warriors face-to-face.9


9 Texas Democrat, June 10, 1846.
Much to the chagrin of Captain Highsmith, Buffalo Hump was not yet done with his malfeasance. He did not evacuate the area south and west of Austin as the Mexican captive Zepeda had indicated. On July 7, 1846, Buffalo Hump harassed a Caucasian male of German descent who was herding a number of beeves from the German area settlements into Austin. The July 29, 1846, edition of the Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register reported that: “Captain Highsmith attempted to pursue them a few hours but did not even find their trail, and returned to the City [Austin].” The German man was not injured in the attack. Killing him would have led to a bloody reprisal by the Texas Rangers, and Buffalo Hump knew it. The chief’s intention was to warn Anglo and German settlers who were encroaching upon Comanche lands. By making the settlers aware of their presence, Buffalo Hump hoped to keep for his tribe their traditional lands, while at the same time warning Anglo politicians of the repercussions that further encroachment onto their lands would bring. The threat of Native American depredations was still very real in the 1840s, and would continue to be a danger to the Texan settlers until well after the Civil War. As a result of Buffalo Hump’s intrusion, citizens began to clamor for frontier forts to be built for their protection. The Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register indicated that Texans had suggested that: “a line of posts should be established at least seventy miles above the present settlements, across the country from Red River to the Rio Grande.” Little did the frontier settlers know, their wish would soon be granted, but avail them little.10

Just before Highsmith’s Company K finished their first tour of duty, one of the men in his company, James H. Swisher, fell ill with the measles and died. Despite the roughshod demeanor which dominates the contemporary notion of a Texas Rangers’ character, Samuel showed his

10 Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register, July 29, 1846. Buffalo Hump was not characteristic of some Comanche war-chiefs. While he resented Anglo (and German) encroachments upon his land, he did not kill the Anglos nearly to the extent of some, at least not in his later years. According to a later edition of this paper, Buffalo Hump would go on to guide John S. Ford’s Austin to El Paso Expedition in 1849 and afterwards even attempted to settle into life on the Brazos Indian Reservation.
softer side. He allowed himself to be elected by his men to chair a committee whose task it was
to prepare a eulogy and service for Swisher. Because both men were Presbyterians, Samuel was
able to prepare a tasteful eulogy for the private. The eulogy and condolences to the family—his
father, also James Swisher, had fought in the battle of San Jacinto—appeared in the September 9,
1846 edition of the *Texas Democrat*.\(^{11}\)

While Captain Highsmith was busy tending to his men and keeping the frontier safe, his
nephew Benjamin was marching to Monterrey with Captain Gillespie, and General Taylor. With
his victories north of the Rio Grande, Taylor was hoping to bring a quick end to the war when he
marched on Monterrey, more than 200 miles to the southwest. After a long and arduous march
up the Rio Grande and south towards the Mexican bastion in northern Mexico, General Taylor’s
troops were impressed with the city of Monterrey when they arrived on September 19, 1846.
According to many Ranger accounts, the physical beauty of Monterrey was unparalleled. The
city stood on the picturesque Sierra Madre mountain range; two of its hills, Federation and
Independence, would play a key role in the battle for the locale that would ensue. Independence
Hill would be the gateway to taking the eastern portion of the city, while Federation Hill would
be paramount in the fighting in the western portion of town. The city itself was well built with
solid and impressive structures. The buildings within Monterrey that were suitable for defense
included a location that the Texans and other soldiers referred to as “Black Fort” and another
called the Bishop’s Palace. Both were utilized by the defending Mexican army.\(^{12}\)

Gillespie’s company, which served as forward scouts along with a number of American
dragoons, reconnoitered the Saltillo and Monclova roads, which connected Monterrey to other

\(^{11}\) *Texas Democrat* September 9, 1846.

\(^{12}\) Frederick Wilkins, *The Highly Irregular Irregulars: Texas Rangers in the Mexican War* (Austin: Eakin
York: Random House, 2000), 87-94; David A. Clary, *Eagles and Empire: The United States, Mexico, and the
outlying settlements. Benjamin with the men of his company also surveyed the city’s defensive positions before the battle, which lasted from September 19 to 21, commenced. Taylor’s force numbered some 6,220 men; the Texas unit in this engagement that saw the most action was the 1st Texas Mounted Rifles. The Mexican defenders under General Pedro de Ampudia had a much larger force, with an estimated 10,000 men at his disposal. Benjamin does not recount much of the battle fought at Monterrey where his captain, Gillespie, was mortally wounded by a Mexican sniper while trying to take Independence Hill. Highsmith did not see the revered Gillespie fall— he passed the next day—but it is the only aspect of that battle that he seemed to remember. The Americans won the battle. Their casualties were an estimated 120 killed with 368 wounded, and 43 missing. Mexican losses totaled around 367 killed and wounded.13

As Taylor had hoped, peace negotiations began after the battle. Unfortunately the peace negotiated here would eventually break down, which prompted General Scott to become more actively involved in the war at the urging of Polk, who feared Taylor’s political influence. An eight-week interlude in action meant that the occupying forces, which included Benjamin, had a considerable amount of time to spend in Monterrey. Because of the Texans’ past experiences with Mexicans, this break in action was not popular in Texas or among the volunteers. James M. McCaffrey details the emotions of the professional and volunteer soldier in his book, Army of Manifest Destiny. The bloodletting that ensued would define the future image of Texas Rangers, upon whom most of the raucous vengeance was blamed, almost as much as their revered fighting skills had since their informal inception about twenty years earlier. After Monterrey, Benjamin’s enlistment expired. He quickly reenlisted; perhaps Gillespie’s death convinced him to avenge his captain’s death. Despite his volunteer status, Highsmith had become, after all, a professional

soldier. Benjamin mustered back into service on September 30, 1847, with a company led by William G. Crump, though the next day he transferred to the company commanded by James Sutton, with whom he completed his service, mustering out on September 30, 1848.  

The break in the fighting after Monterrey, which Generals Scott and Taylor had hoped would bring an end to the war, unfortunately did not do so. Much to the dismay of the Texas forces in Mexico at this time, President Polk, in a plan which he hoped would end the conflict that his generals could not, sent the exiled Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna back to Mexico with the hope that he would return to power and convince his warring nation to formally surrender. Polk badly misjudged Santa Anna’s dubious motives, however, as this was not the case. Instead of trying to persuade his fellow Mexican politicians to negotiate a formal surrender, which is why Polk had him sent to Mexico City, Santa Anna disregarded what President Polk perceived as “the best interests of his nation” and prepared to fight. What ensued was a massive undertaking for the American forces under Scott, who planned an invasion aimed at taking Mexico City, which he intended to end the war once and for all.  

Benjamin was present for the final climactic battle in northern Mexico, at Buena Vista, near Saltillo, Mexico on February 22, 1847. After returning to power, Santa Anna quickly raised an army estimated at 20,000 from Pedro de Ampudia’s depleted units at Monterrey and Tampico, whose garrison units had not even seen battle. Santa Anna also incorporated units raised by the numerous impressment gangs that scoured the countryside. After his initial organization, Santa Anna decided to move towards Monterrey to crush the forces under General Taylor before

moving to his home state of Vera Cruz to blunt Scott’s waterborne invasion. Taylor learned of Santa Anna’s movements and, instead of heeding the orders given to him by Scott, who was with his landing force at Vera Cruz, “Old Rough and Ready,” as he was known to his men, prepared his army for battle. Taylor’s force consisted of some 5,000 men. Santa Anna outnumbered him nearly four to one. Despite this, Taylor advanced his army down the Saltillo Road led by their scouts, the now infamous Texas Rangers.

During the fighting, which raged on into the next day, Benjamin, whose company was in Maj. Ben McCulloch’s reconnaissance force, was shot in the leg. Sowell recorded Benjamin’s recollection of the battle, noting that during one of the many cavalry charges led by the Rangers and army dragoons; he was hit by a large musket ball in the leg. Highsmith, like many Rangers, carried with him a handkerchief—his happened to be silk—which he wore around his neck to protect himself from the elements. He used this handkerchief as a bandage to fix himself and began to ride back to his command. He was forced to stop, however, due to the extreme amount of pain. Sowell recorded that Benjamin was found, or somehow made it back to his command, and effectively treated by a doctor, which allowed him to recover from the wound. The wound was so bad, however, that Highsmith recalled: “when the doctor dressed the wound he pulled the handkerchief through it four times in order to cleanse it of clotted blood.” American forces, who were initially overwhelmed, were able to create a logjam along the Saltillo road, which contained many mountain passes. By controlling the road and utilizing the mountain ranges for cover, the Texas Rangers and American dragoons enabled Taylor to even the odds with his flying artillery and win the battle. Benjamin’s injury, however, prohibited him from continuing to fight. The war for him was over, and he returned home to Bastrop shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., Sowell, \textit{Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas: Facts Gathered from Survivors of Frontier Days}, 1-19; David Lavender, \textit{Climax At Buena Vista: The American Campaigns In Northeastern Mexico},
There is no indication that Samuel Highsmith took another job in the months between his enlistments. After he mustered out of federal service in September 1846, he may have spent his time recuperating with his family. It was not uncommon for Rangers at this time to campaign continuously between enlistment contracts which, according to many frontier defenders, were mere formalities. By 1847 Samuel was nearly forty-three years old. The fact that he remained in Ranger service at this age is a testament to his tenacity and dedication to Texas. According to figures produced by the Economic History Association, the life expectancy of Caucasians during this time period was only approximately forty years. Highsmith met and exceeded this, and he was not yet through with active service.\textsuperscript{17}

Without his son Malcijah by his side, Samuel mustered back into service in the spring of 1847, signing up for a twelve month stint as a captain for the 1st Regiment, Texas Mounted Volunteers, led by the revered Col. John C. Hays. Hays was the ranking officer among the Rangers in Mexico and commanded all ranger units in federal service that served south of the Rio Grande. Since he was fighting with the regulars in Mexico, Hays entrusted the immediate command of Texas’s frontier defenders to Lt. Col. Peter H. Bell in an order issued on August 11, 1847. Highsmith led Company D, which apparently became Company A when Hays detached Bell for service on the Texas frontier. Elements of this regiment began mustering into federal service on May 10, 1847, and served generally to May 14, 1848. Highsmith’s company remained detached from Hays’s regiment throughout the war and served under the command of Bell on the Texas frontier. The company, like Highsmith’s previous command, protected the area around the

Llano and San Saba Rivers. It headquartered at Enchanted Rock, an area that Colonel Hays had patrolled before joining the federals in Mexico.18

According to the *Texas Democrat*, Highsmith expected the Comanches of his region to begin hostilities anew at any time. Acting on information provided to him by John Conner, a famous Delaware Chief and Texas Ranger captain, Highsmith vigilantly patrolled his ranging area. The warring in northern Mexico was at an end and the area which Highsmith and his company patrolled—being able to return to some sort of normalcy in the winter and spring of 1847-1848—saw an influx of settlers. The people of the southwest plains, eager for land, were either returning to the area or establishing new settlements. Consequently, they began to push further west and into the lands traditionally controlled by the Comanches.19

In attempts to keep the continuing stream of settlers that came into his patrol area safe, Highsmith continually scoured his district looking for hostile Native Americans. In early April 1848, he found some. One of his Delaware scouts, possibly Connor, or another one of his two lead scouts, Jim Shaw or Jim Ned, notified the Captain of a party of Native Americans that were camped in a valley south of the Brazos River. Historian Gary Clayton Anderson argues that at this time Highsmith and his men attacked a peaceful band of Wichitas and Caddos, who were returning from a hunt. Anderson asserts that the attack was a massacre as none of the Rangers were hurt, though twenty-six Native Americans lost their lives. Highsmith was certainly capable of such a vengeful attack as he was a champion of Anglo settlers, but did he purposefully commit the atrocity knowing that the Caddos and Wichitas had only peaceful intentions? He undoubtedly

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18 Ibid, Spurlin, *Texas Volunteers in the Mexican War*, 191. Confusion exists among contemporary and older works that contain muster rolls for Texas Rangers in the Mexican War. It is not completely clear whether Samuel Highsmith actually captained Company A, or Company D, however, his service area remained unchanged.

wanted quarrelsome bands of Native Americans to leave Texas to the Anglos, but an attack as devastating as this does not fit his established character.\textsuperscript{20}

The \textit{Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register} offered a somewhat different account of the attack:

A large number of friendly Indians have recently visited Torrey’s Trading House, and among them were several Wacoes. They stated that the Indians that were killed on the Llano a few weeks since, by the Rangers under the command of Capt. Highsmith were not Wacoes, but were a renegade party from the Towiash village.

The newspaper added that:

They further stated, that those Indians were invited by the Lipans, with whom they were found encamped, to accompany them on an expedition to the towns west of Bexar to steal horses, and when the Rangers came upon them, the Lipans abandoned them to their fate.

The author of the article finally noted that the Native Americans that visited Torrey’s Trading House after the attack believed Highsmith and his men were justified in killing the supposed renegades since the Rangers had reason to believe that raiders would commit depredations in the area. This single incident appears to have been the extent of Highsmith’s troubles with Native Americans. He did not know, however, that his days of frontier defense were numbered.\textsuperscript{21}

After his federal enlistment expired on May 14, 1848, Samuel re-enlisted in Bell’s 1\textsuperscript{st} Regiment, Texas Mounted Volunteers, and was once again elected as a captain. He mustered back into federal service on May 15, 1848. Shortly after his being elected—he, in effect, retained his previous command—Highsmith was detached by Bell to serve as an escort to Hays, who was preparing to lead a contingent to explore a route from San Antonio to El Paso. The Chihuahua-El

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Texas Democrat}, April 22, 1848, offers support to Gary Clayton Anderson’s character analysis of Samuel Highsmith. Acting on information provided by John Conner, Highsmith removed the families (presumably the families of the Rangers and other area settlers) from his station in case of Comanche raids. When the raids failed to materialize, Highsmith was berated by “A Citizen” who wrote a scathing editorial of his actions. This may have prompted the Captain to become somewhat over vigilant in his patrols of the area, in one of which his company attacked and killed a peaceful band of Caddos.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., Anderson, \textit{The Conquest of Texas}, 226-227; \textit{Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register}, May 4, 1848.
Paso Pioneering Expedition, as it became known, was concocted by the citizens of San Antonio. The expedition—long a dream of former Republic of Texas President Mirabeau B. Lamar—was intended to divert the lucrative trade route flowing north from Mexico to Santa Fe through El Paso. The citizens of San Antonio hoped to develop a strong commercial infrastructure by rerouting the trade east through their city. The proponents of this endeavor, especially Samuel Maverick, may have even had aspirations for a future rail line to run through this route.\textsuperscript{22}

Highsmith’s company was officially detached from the 1st Regiment, Texas Mounted Volunteers in August 1848 with the assignment to act as an escort to Hays on August 22. The expedition was slated to return by December 20, 1848, which would conclude Highsmith’s term of enlistment. His final adventure with his company of Texas Rangers had begun. Hays left San Antonio and arrived at Highsmith’s camp on the Llano River on September 1. Highsmith’s Llano station was a small post utilized by various scouts and frontier regiments and was located just north and slightly west of Fredericksburg. His Rangers provided a state-funded escort for Hays and his pioneers. Highsmith’s company numbered thirty-five men and included a number of Delawares led by Conner, with whom he was by now well acquainted.\textsuperscript{23}

The trip began well enough despite the blistering heat of the Texas summer. The Hays expedition followed the Llano River to its headwaters, advancing in a general westerly direction from there. Unfortunately, Hays did not use Captain Highsmith’s veteran scout, Connor. Instead Hays chose a Mexican by the name of Lorenzo, who claimed to know a route to El Paso. Hays himself was reported to be the only Anglo who knew territory past the Nueces River, so he also trusted his own judgment. Despite his knowledge of the territory, Hays’s expedition became lost

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., Spurlin, \textit{Texas Volunteers in the Mexican War}, 211.

shortly after passing the Nueces. To complicate matters further, the expedition guide, Lorenzo, became lost shortly after passing that river. This left the entire expedition in quite a quandary. The men were forced to follow the high-banked Pecos River to the Rio Grande, along which they rode until they encountered the Presidio del Norte, a Mexican outpost, where they arrived on October 22, 1848. If it were not for the kindness and hospitality of the Mexican townspeople—the Anglo troupe crossed illegally into Mexico to escape the arduous terrain just north of the river—the expedition would likely have perished for want of food and water.

A short time later, Hays and Highsmith began to ascend the river from the Presidio del Norte, crossing back over the Rio Grande when they encountered a local man by the name of Benjamin Leaton. A farmer and freighter, Leaton was the first American to settle near Fort Leaton. He purchased the property from Juan Bustillos in 1848 before the expedition arrived. On the grounds where Bustillos had built his residence was a Spanish fort founded in 1773 known as El Fortín de San José de La Junta (near modern Redford, in Presidio County). Leaton effectively resupplied the expedition, which allowed them to return home. The return to San Antonio from Fort Leaton was equally, if not more, important than the initial journey to Presidio del Norte. On November 25, 1848 Hays made the decision to separate Highsmith’s Ranger contingent from his own at the confluence of the Devils River—which Hays named for its difficulty in crossing—near the terminus of the Concho River in what today is Crockett County. The return expedition for Hays was forty-one days, but Highsmith returned with his contingent to Camp Llano a day later, on December 11, 1848.24

Captain Highsmith wrote an account of his journey which appeared in the January 27, 1849, edition of the Texas Democrat. In describing the terrain that the expedition encountered

after the crew became lost, he noted that: “Here we encountered an exceedingly rough and dry country, which caused great inconvenience to my men, and great injury to their horses.” Such an arduous expedition weakened many of the men, including Hays himself. Unfortunately, Samuel was not exempt from the toll that the ardors of expedition life took on his body. Soon after returning to San Antonio, he contracted a case of the flu—epidemics of this sort were common in cities during this era—and died in early January 1849. Highsmith was nearly forty-five years old when he died, outliving the life expectancy of the time by almost five years. With his passing the venerable Captain Samuel Highsmith left caring for his family in the capable hands of his son, Malcijah, who was forced to rise to the occasion.25

In 1849, more than a year after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought finality to the Mexican War; Texans finally saw the construction of the line of frontier forts that they had long wished for. Partially due to their ineffectiveness, and partially because no line of defense existed on the Rio Grande, Army Colonel George M. Brook requested that Gov. George T. Wood recruit Texas Rangers to help patrol the expansive frontier and international borderland. Among the commanders of the three companies that Colonel Brooke desired to be raised was John S. Ford, who left one of his many occupations to once again join the Texas Rangers. Ranger captains Ford, who was new to the rank, John J. Grumbles, and Henry Smock were each selected to raise a unit authorized to exceed no more than seventy-eight men. By the late winter of 1849, the six-month enlistment contracts of the men originally sworn in on August 23, 1849 were about to expire, and one of the new recruits that joined Ford’s company was Malcijah B. Highsmith.26

25 Texas Democrat, January 27, 1849.
Highsmith was commissioned a lieutenant in late February 1850 and joined Captain Ford’s company on Santa Gertrudis Creek shortly thereafter. Malcijah, now twenty-three years old, served as the acting quartermaster and commissary lieutenant for the company, whose task it was to patrol the strip of land between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers in South Texas. By the time Highsmith joined his new company, Captain Ford made the decision to split his command into three detachments: Lieutenant Andrew Walker’s squad of twenty men was assigned to patrol below Laredo, while Ford—who was transporting a Comanche captive, Carne Muerta—was travelling the road between his headquarters at Santa Gertrudis Creek and Fort McIntosh. Highsmith’s detachment of twenty-six Rangers was strategically positioned at San Antonio Viejo, which stood between the detachments of Walker and Ford. Ford positioned Malcijah at this point so that, in an emergency, he could respond effectively to either patrol. According to Michael Collins, *Texas Devils: Rangers & Regulars on the Lower Rio Grande, 1846-1861*, “Ford even left his personal field glasses with Highsmith so he could keep an eye out for Comanche raiding parties.”

Neither Ford nor Walker would have a problem during their patrols significant enough to warrant the mobilization of Highsmith’s detachment. Rather, it was young Malcijah who would be forced to call for help. Ford, who had successfully delivered his Comanche captive, learned that Highsmith’s men had been besieged by a band of Comanches, who outnumbered the men in his detachment. At this, Highsmith gathered his men and prepared his defenses. He also sent out couriers to inform Ford and the United States forces. Ford received the message and hastened to Highsmith’s aid, a distance of more than seventy miles. Regulars, however, under the command of Captain J.J. LaMotte beat Ford and his men to Highsmith’s location. Upon his arrival Ford,

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much to his relief, found Highsmith’s detachment safe and sound. Captain LaMotte went so far as to note that: “Much praise is due to Lieutenant Highsmith and his men for the coolness and bravery displayed in a situation surrounded by so many perils.” He added that: “Nothing but their undaunted bearing saved them from a death of torture and the camp supplies from utter destruction.”

Because no casualties were inflicted—besides a fat mule that was slaughtered by the Comanches—the only one to suffer a loss in the fiasco was Captain Ford. Highsmith, in efforts to keep the men under his command out of harm’s way, was not able to ensure the safety and security of all of the mounts and pack animals in the company’s possession. In the commotion that took place during the siege, Ford’s ornery horse Higgins, among a handful of other animals, was taken by the Comanche marauders. The remaining time that Highsmith spent with Ford’s company was mostly uneventful. It would not be until much later in the 1850s that Cortina would emerge as Ford’s chief adversary along the border. So, after Highsmith’s term of his enlistment was up in the fall of 1850, he returned home to Bastrop to care for his family.

It would not be long, however, before Highsmith would again consider becoming a Texas Ranger. He followed more closely in the footsteps of his father, Samuel, than perhaps he wished. In 1852 he wrote a letter to the now Governor Peter H. Bell—whom his father had known quite well—asking for permission to raise a company of Rangers in Bastrop County. In a letter dated August 11, 1852 he wrote:

The report in our county is that there is an order for five companys of Rangers. But nothing positive in regard to it. You will please grant me permission in case this is an order to that effect to raise a company if in your power to do so. You know me from boyhood and it is for you to judge as to my capability. I could raise one hundred men in

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three days in this County and it is with this respect that I take the liberty to write to you on this subject. I am kneedy [sic] and a Captaincy would help me much.

Highsmith closed his letter of request validating not only his need but the need of his people in Bastrop County. He noted: “Please answer this by return mail if possible as many of the boys are anxious to hear from you.” There is no indication that Governor Bell was able to offer him a company. Despite the fiercely independent nature of Texans, many men like Highsmith suffered for lack of money and sought assistance in various forms from the government. Between his enlistments, Highsmith worked his family farm, and much like his father had, sought jobs in civil service. In August 1852 he ran for sheriff of Bastrop County but was defeated by John Hearn. Two years later, in 1854, Highsmith was elected as tax assessor for his home county.30

By 1858 troubles on the Rio Grande again attracted attention in Texas, which sparked the efforts of the men of Bastrop County to try and raise Ranger companies again. On April 7 of that year R.H. Grimes wrote a request to Gov. Hardin Runnels on behalf of Highsmith to raise a company of Rangers, possibly to aid Ford who was actively campaigning and may have solicited the help of his former lieutenant. Recalling familiar faces to duty was much easier than training new members. Grimes’s letter to Governor Runnels noted the positive attributes that Highsmith had in relation to service on the Texas frontier. Grimes claimed that Highsmith was “competent and meritorious possessing a great amount of experience in frontier service.” He further noted that his subject was “well calculated to fill any position that may be assigned to him in that line.” Grimes perhaps knew Malcijah’s father, Samuel, or maybe the younger Highsmith remembered

30 Malcijah B. Highsmith to Peter H. Bell, August 11, 1852, Governors’ Papers: Peter Hansbrough Bell, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin; Thomas R. Cutrer, “MALCIJAH BENJAMIN HIGHSMITH,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhi10, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed July 6, 2012; Texas State Gazette, August 26, 1854.
his father frequently in the company of his long acquaintance with Grimes, who went so far as to declare in the letter that: “he is the son of an old Texas Ranger Captain and is a native Texian.”

Yet another letter from Bastrop was sent to Governor Runnels, this time by Highsmith himself on May 4, 1858, requesting a company of Rangers. In addition to the monetary needs of Highsmith and the men of his area, he described the need for an organized force to help patrol the frontier. Highsmith, not the type to request money without reciprocation in any capacity, stood ready to serve the public as a Texas Ranger or civil servant. In his May 4 appeal, he went so far as to include the names of men from Fayette, Burleson, and Bastrop Counties who, like him, were ready to volunteer at a moment’s notice. Men from several established families in the area stood in waiting to serve; among them were Jonathan and Edward Burleson Jr., Thomas McClenan, and Carroll Billingsley, son of the noted Texas Ranger, Jesse Billingsley. Highsmith closed his letter by offering the possible recommendations of several of his former commanders, stating that: “if the time would permit I could give you the recommendations of Col. P. H. Bell, Col John S. Ford [and] Captain H. E. McCulloch who are familiar with my past services and qualifications.” He added, rather confidently that: “I deem it unnecessary as I am well known & hope you will make inquiry satisfactory to your honor.” Despite Texas’s acquisition by the United States, funding at times did not permit the state’s governors to enlist the services of the Texas Rangers—or all of the men that wanted to serve as Texas Rangers—at will. Unfortunately for Highsmith and the men of his three county sub-region, it does not appear that Runnels was able to take any immediate action in formally organizing Ranger units for frontier service.

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31 R. H. Grimes to Hardin Runnels, April 7, 1858, Governors’ Papers: Hardin R. Runnels, Texas State Library and Archives. R.H. Grimes was very likely from the Grimes family, a lesser known, though extremely influential family in early Texas.

32 Malcijah B. Highsmith to Runnels, May 4, 1858, Governors’ Papers: Hardin R. Runnels, Texas State Library and Archives.
Malcijah, much like his father, was a servant and advocate for the people of his county. In February 1859 he wrote another letter to Governor Runnels, asking for clemency for a man by the name of E. Turner, who had been apparently sentenced for a crime in a way that Highsmith thought was unfair. Highsmith and a few other members of the jury that had sentenced Turner believed the final verdict to be unjust, which prompted his appeal for clemency on behalf of the guilty man. Highsmith vouched for Turner, noting that he was “an old soldier, was in the battle that gained the independence of the Republic, and none of our citizens wish him to suffer such a hardship.” He closes the letter by stating that it was his “duty to say this. I again ask for you to extend the clemency of the executive in this case if possible.” Though it is unclear if Malcijah was able to use his influence to effectively overturn the conviction, his intentions were noble. Outside of Ranger service, Highsmith actively pursued roles in public service just as his father had. Though not all men who were Texas Rangers would achieve such success, such as Ford, they were nonetheless productive members of society.33

The years between Texas’s annexation and the Civil War turned out to be anything but quiet. The Mexican War of 1846-1848 embroiled the Highsmiths and many other Texas Rangers in a conflict that they viewed as paramount to the safety and security of their nascent state. While the war ended quietly, and with fewer casualties than anticipated, it reshaped the Texas Rangers, Texans, and their politics. Brian DeLay, in his book, War of A Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War, attributes the relative ease of victory achieved by the United States over Mexico to the havoc created in that country’s frontier by Native Americans. Had Texas not been annexed by the United States, it may have shared the same fate. Regardless, the Rangers emerged from the war with a notoriety that would stigmatize their institution for generations.

33 Malcijah B. Highsmith to Runnels, February 1859, Governors’ Papers: Hardin R. Runnels, Texas State Library and Archives.
From the war, the Rangers were also able to clearly identify two very real threats which stood in front of them: Native Americans along the frontier and Mexican bandits along the Rio Grande. The Comanches of the frontier and bandits—like Juan Nepomuceno Cortina—along the Rio Grande continued to vie for superiority in the continuing ethnic struggle in the western and southern portions of the state. Through it all, the Highsmiths served as Texas Rangers with a diligence that also served them well outside of official service, and in a fashion that belied claims that the Texas Rangers were violent savages bent on eradication of all Mexicans and Indians.

Malcijah Highsmith and his comrades-in-arms would not have time sufficient enough to suppress the existing threats to Texas before they were forced to divert their time and energy to another cause. A new government in Richmond rose born out of the conflict caused by the peculiar institution, slavery. The Confederate States utilized the services of Highsmith and other battle hardened frontier settlers and Texas Rangers. Malcijah believed that he was continuing the legacy of his father Samuel and Cousin Benjamin by serving as a cavalry trooper in the Trans-Mississippi during the Civil War. This chapter in Texas’s history also marked a new beginning in the history of the Highsmith family. Malcijah would do for his brother, Henry Albert Highsmith, what their father, Samuel Highsmith, had done for him. He would indoctrinate his younger sibling into the family business during the war that raged between the Union and Confederacy.³⁴

³⁴ Brian DeLay, War of A Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), xiii-xxi. DeLay’s work provides a solid account of just the effect that the Native Americans had on the peoples of Mexico. Allowed to roam free from danger in the new American West Native American tribes like the Comanche could run north of the Rio Grande to safety after creating havoc on society in Northern Mexico. Once the United States Army concentrated on Native American removal many retreated south of the Rio Grande to Northern Mexico which resulted in a higher than average concentration of Native Americans in northern Mexico.
CHAPTER V

THE HIGHSMTIHGS IN THE CIVIL WAR AND POST-BELLUM YEARS, 1861-1898

By the summer of 1861 hostility between the North and the South was eminent. Throughout Texas and the South, calls for men to rally to the Confederate cause rang out. Texans occupied a unique position within the Confederacy in that the Civil War would rage along several very different fronts. Confederates along the eastern seaboard would only have the Union to worry about. John S. "Rip" Ford, a colonel and then state brigadier general during the war, remained in South Texas to defend the border from Mexican bandits, Native Americans, and Federals. Col. Henry E. McCulloch led defense forces along the expansive western frontier to ensure that Native Americans did not terrorize the families of Confederate soldiers. Finally, numerous commands from Texas would fight in the east with Gen. Robert E. Lee and other commanders. Texans were also well represented in the Trans-Mississippi. Here Malcijah B. Highsmith’s Bastrop Cavalry Company would see action. Despite Texas’s relatively sparse population, in comparison to other Southern states, Texans overwhelmingly supported the Confederacy. Former Texas Rangers, as well as numerous other veterans, would serve with distinction in all of these theaters. Despite being formally disbanded, the men who were Texas Rangers, including the Highsmiths, lent credibility to the bold claim that Texans were among the roughest and toughest fighters around.1

Texas did not enter into the new Confederate nation until February 1861. Gov. Sam Houston valiantly resisted secession attempts spearheaded by Supreme Court Chief Justice Oran Milo Roberts until the very end. Hoping to block the Secession Convention, Governor Houston

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1 Robert L. Kerby, *Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 14-16. Though the work is dated Kerby provides solid information regarding the emergence of Confederate leaders in Texas as well as the ambiguous status of the frontier and borderland defender during this time.
convened the legislature on January 28, 1861. But calling the legislature into action set the events in motion which ended with Texas’s formal secession from the Union on March 23. That March day, the Convention met for the last time and declared the office of governor vacant. The delegates then replaced the resistant Governor Houston with the more cooperative Lt. Gov. Edward Clark. Houston, the champion of the Republic of Texas and the Lone Star State, was physically removed from office that fateful day, leaving the capitol building with a Texas flag draped around him.²

By summer, Governor Clark was well into the task of organizing Texas’s militia and volunteer forces, most of which would join the Confederate military. Because the Confederate government was still actively forming, Clark authorized prominent Texas men to raise units to muster into Confederate service; one of these men was Malcijah Highsmith. Word had reached Bastrop County that companies were needed to join Brig. Gen. Henry Hopkins Sibley’s brigade, which was organizing in San Antonio for service on the distant southwestern frontier. Highsmith, in a letter to Governor Clark dated August 8, 1861, wrote concerning Sibley’s need for soldiers. He explained to Clark that, “Yesterday [August, 10] was a momentous day in Bastrop. All the companies in the County being called together for the purpose of forming a company for the war to join Genl. Sibley’s Brigade.” Despite Highsmith's Confederate spirit, he confessed to Clark that, “after several [approaches] by our citizens the call was made and resulted in a complete failure.” Support for Sibley’s brigade in Bastrop proved to be less than enthusiastic; however,

many of the county’s men, including Malecijah and his younger brother, remained eager to serve the Confederate cause.³

Malecijah, like his father Samuel, was an advocate for the people. In the August 8 letter to Governor Clark, Highsmith took upon himself the task of informing Clark that the residents of Bastrop did not favor joining Sibley, in whose brigade troops were expected serve in the recently claimed United States Southwest. Though the men of Bastrop did not know it, their reticence to join Brigadier General Sibley may have saved their lives. Sibley met with relative success in battle at Glorieta Pass but his brigade experienced countless logistical issues which cost the lives of many of the men serving under him. While in the hostile environment that is the Southwest, the Confederates at Glorieta Pass lost a number of men dead, with more captured, along with much of their supplies and ammunition. As a result Sibley and his men hastened back to San Antonio in 1862. His retreat across western Texas proved just as disastrous as his last weeks in New Mexico. Native Americans remained relentless, and the harsh environment claimed the lives of numerous soldiers.⁴

Despite the failure of Bastrop County to provide a company for Sibley’s Brigade, Highsmith's August 8 letter did indicate that he succeeded in later efforts at recruiting. The persistent Highsmith noted that, “I made a call for twelve month volunteers to take up the line of march for the northern border on Saturday morning.” He, rather positively, told the governor that, “I received in a few moments some eighty men, I think will reach one hundred, we are arousing and providing ourselves with provisions & transportation.” He also explained why it


was so difficult to enlist soldiers in Bastrop County. Many men were reluctant to join the
Confederate Army at first due to obligations to their families and crops, which came before
service for southern men. The Confederate states, including Texas, were not heavily populated,
and the populace was primarily composed of farmers and planters, thus the term of enlistment—
twelve months—interfered with their obligations. Texans especially worried about leaving their
families. Fighting for the Confederacy meant leaving them without protection from the area's
Native Americans. Highsmith underscored the apprehensions of his new recruits when he wrote:

   My company is composed principally of married men who cannot leave their families for
   longer than twelve months, if in your power to assign us a position in the five regiments
   being raised in northern Texas it will be greatfully [sic] received and promptly answered.

He concluded with, “You can rest assured if we get a chance for twelve months, and at the
expiration of the time danger threatens our country that we will be found at our post as long as
any body of men in the state.” The captain made his point clear; he supported the Confederate
cause and was willing to go to great lengths to organize the men of Bastrop to serve. Little did
the prophetic Highsmith know, he would end up fighting not to save Richmond but Texas.⁵

Among the one hundred men that Malcijah professed to gather was his brother, Henry,
the youngest son of Ranger Captain Samuel Highsmith. Henry was born in Bastrop on January
11, 1843, just five years before his father died. Being the youngest child in the family appears to
have benefitted him. It appears that he was afforded opportunities, namely a formal education,
that his older siblings were not. As a youth, Henry attended the Bastrop Military Institute, a
school modeled after the military academy at West Point. While at the Bastrop Military Institute,
he participated in a broad curriculum that offered coursework in mathematics, geography, the
natural sciences, Latin, and Greek, as well as surveying and civil engineering. The cost for

⁵ Malcijah B. Highsmith to Clark, August 8, 1861, Governor’s Papers: Edward Clark, Texas State Library
and Archives, Austin.
attending an academy of this rank stood at two-hundred-thirty dollars per term, a substantial amount of money in the 1850s. The ability of the Highsmith family to pay that sum indicates that under the direction of Malcijah, the family met with a certain degree of monetary success. With some degree of formal education, Henry followed in the footsteps of his father, cousin, and older brother. Like them, Henry became an advocate and defender of his people. But at the outset of the Civil War, the youngest serving Highsmith was just eighteen years old. Despite his young age, Henry performed well under the command of his older brother.6

Before the Bastrop Cavalry Company—also known as the Bishop Cavalry Company—departed to unite with the regimental command and muster into Confederate service, they held elections, officially installing Malcijah Highsmith as their captain. The new Captain Highsmith, being the experienced soldier that he was, drilled his company before leaving home. Because of experiences gained in service with his father and Ford, Malcijah knew that his company needed to train. By putting the Bastrop boys through drill practice, he prepared them for service with William H. Parsons. Highsmith did not know it at the time, but the colonel his company was to serve under was a stickler for discipline. The Bastrop Cavalry Company would arrive at their first station better prepared for the rigors that military service would bring than many of the other companies that would eventually comprise the heart of Parsons’s Brigade. The new captain must also have known that the bonds developed while training together would make his men a more efficient fighting force.7


An article written in 1930 by an eighty-two year old Henry appeared in the *Bastrop Advertiser*, which indicated that the company was sent off to war in good fashion. He recollected that after their last drill practice in Bastrop, the men were given a barbecue by the citizens of the town. It was here that the Bastrop Cavalry Company also received their company banner, made by the ladies of the county. Though Bastrop County voted against secession by a slim margin—the vote was three-hundred-fifty-two to three-hundred-thirty-five—the men were furnished with two hundred forty-seven dollars and ninety cents, which was used to purchase equipment. Fortunately for them, tents and other necessities were also procured from the Confederate military garrison at San Antonio. The men, who numbered between eighty and one hundred, left Bastrop on or around August 12, 1861, for the rendezvous point near Sherman, Texas, on the Red River. Captain Highsmith and his Bastrop Cavalry Company traveled north under the impression that they were destined for service in Missouri.8

In describing the elements of what would become the Twelfth Texas, one Confederate characterized them as “a healthy bunch of scrappers,” which they proved to be, thanks in part to their well-disciplined colonel. The Twelfth Texas Cavalry would need this discipline, or perhaps restraint, in the coming months. Because the political infrastructure of the Confederacy was being formed simultaneously with its armies, many military units had to wait to muster, which was the case for Parsons’ men. In order to remain functional, Parsons’ troops needed to be outfitted properly and provided with rations. Texas, like many other Confederate states, took the initial burden of providing volunteers with needed supplies until their units could be officially mustered into the Confederate Army. What would become Parson’s Twelfth Texas Cavalry

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mustered into state service at Rockett Springs on September 11, 1861. As a result of being
mustered into state service, Parson’s men were allowed to elect their own regimental officers. At
this time, Parsons was officially elected as colonel, followed by John W. Mullen as lieutenant
colonel. According to Bailey, “deaths and resignations changed the company officers during the
war, and of the ten men selected in the summer of 1861, only half persevered until the war’s
end.” Mullen resigned within a few months and was replaced as lieutenant colonel by Andrew
Bell Burleson of Bastrop, the regimental adjutant and the nephew of famed Texas vice president
and general, Edward Burleson.9

With officers formally elected, the freshly provisioned and equipped Twelfth Texas
Cavalry began to train. Lt. George Ingram recorded Parson’s rigorous drill schedule, writing that, “we rise at daybreak and drill from 7 oclock A.M. until 11 oclock A.M. and from 2 until 5
oclock P.M.” In her work, Between the Enemy and Texas: Parsons’s Cavalry in the Civil War,
Anne Bailey compliments Lieutenant Ingram but adds that, “the person immediately responsible
for the training was usually the company captain.” Highsmith’s Bastrop men had become
acquainted with drill practice already, so their participation in the process which the colonel used
to weed out raw recruits simply reinforced the Bastrop Cavalry Company’s basic training and
skills. Thanks in part to the bonds developed between the captain and his men at this time,
Highsmith served to the bitter end.10

Parsons’ regiment made the front page of the Navarro Express on November 21, 1861,
with a statement written by the regiment’s correspondent, which read “Col. Parsons requested

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10 Ibid., Bailey, Between the Enemy and Texas, 1-16; Navarro Express, November 21, 1861. Bailey’s narrative of Parsons Brigade remains the authority on Texas cavalry in the Trans-Mississippi Department during the Civil War.
those who were willing to go with him into Confederate service, to march to a point designated, while those who proffered to remain in the State service were to stay where they were.” Not one man in Highsmith’s Bastrop Cavalry Company opted to stay in state service. Only a handful of men from the entire regiment opted to stay: they seemed eager to fight for the Confederacy. Parsons’ troopers must have been elated to have a break from drill when their colonel relayed news to them that the regiment was ordered to Hempstead, near Houston, to await a Confederate officer to muster in their force. The Twelfth Texas Cavalry, designated as the Fourth Dragoons at the time, made their way to the Hempstead area of Houston, to Camp Clear Creek (in modern Waller County), along with other state units who would be mustered in to Confederate service. Upon reaching Camp Clear Creek, the regimental correspondent noted that, “we are a band of the most jovial boys mustered into any service.” Clear Creek was an ideal place to muster a large body of soldiers. The ample natural resources of this gulf coastal area and its location, which was close to the Houston and Texas Central Railroad, made the area an excellent intermediary for continually departing troops. At Clear Creek the Twelfth Texas Cavalry officially mustered into the Confederate Army on October 28, 1861.11

Unfortunately for Parsons’ troops, the waiting game that the regiment had played at Rockett Springs, near Waxahachie, would continue at their new encampment. The men would yet again commence training, preparing for the day when fighting would be necessary. While the regiment’s captains engaged their men in drill, among the various other camp duties, Colonel Parsons was busy trying to secure for his men an assignment that he believed warranted their skill level. Parsons wrote Governor Clark in October 1861, pleading with him to intercede for his

regiment with the commanding officer of the Department of Texas, Brig. Gen. Paul Octave Hébert. Parsons negotiated with the governor telling him that, “my troops are so thoroughly drilled that we are anxious to act as a regular organized body in a pitched battle on the island [Galveston].” Parsons worried that McCulloch’s frontier forces would, if the chance arose, receive the opportunity to fight on the continually besieged Galveston Island instead of his men. Parsons believed that “would be gross injustice for his [McCulloch’s] men enlisted for frontier defence, and ours did not.” Parsons lavished praise on his regiment, telling the governor that: “I have labored arduously and successfully to make my men qualified for regular engagement with disciplined troops, which McCullochs are not.” Parsons’ pleas were in vain, however, as he never received the opportunity to fight on Galveston Island. Instead, after a meeting with Hébert, Parsons was informed that he would either be sent to Kentucky or, as Captain Highsmith suspected, Missouri.¹²

Despite Parsons receiving news of a probable assignment in Missouri, his men waited, forced to spend the winter in camp. The joviality expressed in October soon turned into restlessness. Anxious men and bad weather combined to make a rather unhappy body of soldiers during the winter of 1861-1862. Out of boredom, Henry Orr, of Parsons Ellis County Rangers, wrote a letter to his brother, Lafayette, four days before Christmas expressing his discontent. He criticized his superior officers, complaining that:

The Colonel spends more of his time about Houston and seems to be taking but little interest in drilling his men. Capts. Veal, Hismith, [Highsmith] and Stokes’ wives are in the neighborhood, and them and the other captains like to put on their fine brass button coats and spree about entirely too much.

¹² William H. Parsons to Edward Clark, October 14, 1861, Governors’ Papers: Edward Clark, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin. Parsons would maintain command of his brigade throughout most of the war, though other commanders sporadically controlled the regiment. The Confederate hierarchy of command appeared to be rather unpredictable west of the Mississippi.
While waiting out the winter in camp, the miserable men of Colonel Parsons’ regiment were brigaded with the Nineteenth Texas Cavalry from Dallas, the Twenty-first Texas Cavalry from South and Central Texas, and another command, Col. Charles Morgan’s Eighth Texas Cavalry, which Bailey refers to as a “hodgepodge” of companies gathered from around the state. Capt. Joseph H. Pratt’s Tenth Field Battery from Jefferson, Texas completed Parsons Brigade. Bailey noted that Parsons’ “amalgamation represented the best of Texas—men from the Piney Woods of East Texas, the Cross Timbers and blackland prairies of Central Texas, and the Gulf Coast of South Texas.” The new Texas brigade was, for now, complete. According to Colonel Parsons, all of his regiments were not as well trained and disciplined as the Twelfth Texas, but he noted that “they would all fight like Texans.”

In late February 1862 the brigade finally received orders. Parsons was instructed to move his brigade to Memphis, Tennessee. The majority of Parsons Brigade, including the Twelfth Texas, were rerouted from Memphis, however, and directed instead to rendezvous west of the Mississippi River at Little Rock. The reversal of Parsons's previous orders was due in large part to a string of Confederate defeats in Northern Arkansas coupled with the departure of Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, who had transferred his troops east, across the Mississippi River and out of the region. Van Dorn’s exit from Arkansas left the state completely open to Federal encroachment.

According to Bailey, the majority of Parsons’s troopers preferred to serve west of the Mississippi River. In a move meant to gain their confidence, Parsons allowed them to ride by their homes with instructions to rendezvous at the Red River in Northeast Texas before leaving the state for Memphis. The men were unaware that their orders were countermanded. Regardless

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13 Ibid., Bailey, Between the Enemy and Texas, 1-5; John Q. Anderson, Campaigning with Parsons’ Texas Cavalry Brigade, CSA: The War Journal and Letters of the Four Orr Brothers, 12th Texas Cavalry Regiment (Hillboro: Hill Junior College Press, 1967), 17, 19, 57, 73. Parsons Brigade remained separated for the most part during the war, rarely fighting as a complete unit.

14 Ibid., Bailey, Between the Enemy and Texas, 7.
of their ultimate destination, Parsons’s companies traveled toward the Red River in less than favorable weather conditions. Spring rains left roadways extremely wet and river crossings hazardously rain swollen. Captain Highsmith’s trip to Little Rock was not easy. As he and his men traveled, the continuously wet weather plagued them and the scattered elements of Parsons’ command. According to an April 10, 1862, letter to his friends back home, Henry Orr indicated that the inclement weather was not the only issue that some elements of the command had to cope with. Many of the men had begun to fall ill. When Orr and his company passed by the Bastrop Cavalry Company en route to the Red River where they would be redirected, he noted that: “A good many of Hismith’s men have the measles, the Kaufman Guards the mumps, also some of the Blues, and I expect they will go through the encampment though they are not hurting them much.” Orr also noted that Captain Highsmith and his men had an especially difficult time crossing the rain swollen creeks and rivers. Despite unfavorable weather and sickness, Captain Highsmith and the other men of Parsons Brigade began arriving at Little Rock in mid-May, 1862. It would not be long until the men would finally have their chance to fight.15

In Arkansas, Parsons Brigade would fulfill the traditional role of cavalrymen, albeit in a rather unorthodox fashion. Henry Orr proudly claimed that, “the Yankees ‘call us murders, the ‘Swamp Fox’ Regiment.’ He boasted about the latter moniker, stating that, ‘the latter I think tolerable appropriate for we lie in the swamps in the daylight and travel at night.” By July Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, commander of the Union Army of the Southwest, dispatched Maj. Gen. Samuel Curtis to northern Arkansas. Once Curtis established his command, he began preparing to put the state back into Federal hands. Colonel Parsons and his brigade, under the immediate command of Confederate Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman—Theophilus H. Holmes commanded

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15 Ibid., Bailey, Between the Enemy and Texas, 14-15; Anderson, Campaigning with Parsons’ Texas Cavalry Brigade, 35-37.
the Trans-Mississippi Department at the time—stood as one of the few units in Arkansas who could ensure that this did not happen.16

Captain Highsmith and his men soon began fighting to maintain Confederate control in southern Arkansas. Skirmishing, which characterized the majority of Union-Confederate engagements in the Trans-Mississippi, began in earnest in late June/early July. The Battle of White River, a prelude to the Battle of Whitney’s (or Searcy’s) Lane, would define the war for Parsons’ Brigade. The late June battle was also the first test for Captain Highsmith and the Bastrop Cavalry Company. It was here that they suffered their first casualties. Highsmith and his men were a part of a picket force that stretched along the White River from Brownsville to Helena, some one hundred-fifty miles south and east. Here Parsons’s pickets had the task of keeping Federal forces from gaining access to a railroad line, which led directly to the state capital at Little Rock, some sixty miles west. As the Federals inched closer to the picket lines, they began sending steamers and ironclads up the river in attempts to protect Union landing forces. Parsons effectively thwarted the Federal advance by not letting the Union forces move far beyond the White River and its tributaries. The defensive stand came with a cost, however. Union casualties were estimated at fifty-five killed or captured, while the Confederate losses numbered about fifteen killed and twenty-five wounded. In a letter to his mother, Henry Orr wrote, “I think Hismith’s and Neal’s companies suffered the worst; Hismith lost four men, Capt. Neal was shot through the thigh.”17

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16 Ibid., Anderson, *Campaigning with Parsons’ Texas Cavalry Brigade, CSA*, 35-37; Anne J. Bailey, *In the Saddle With The Texans: Day-By-Day With Parsons’s Cavalry Brigade, 1862-1865* (Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2004), 13-24. *In The Saddle With The Texans*, a serves as an excellent supplement to *Between the Enemy and Texas*. The work appears to be the only compilation of correspondence between officers in Parsons’s Brigade.

Parsons’ men did not have to wait long for their next engagement. The Battle of Cotton Plant on July 7, 1862 would quickly take center stage. The skirmish took place in the marshy lands between the White and Cache Rivers. Both sides claimed victory in what amounted to a short engagement near the town of Cotton Plant. Reports of the engagement differ. Confederates claimed victory because Federal forces, numbering some 2,000 under the command of Col. Charles E. Hovey, left the field, while Hovey’s men claimed the same of the Confederate forces. Parsons's cavalry composed the center line for the Confederates in this confused engagement, which Bailey believes was a Federal ambush. In *Between the Enemy and Texas*, she states that, “for the Confederates the engagement was a disaster; poor planning, inadequate reconnaissance, and faulty execution almost obliterated the small Southern army.” Despite arranging an ambush, the Federals did not come any closer to their objective of Little Rock at Cotton Plant. At the end of the day, their offensive was no better off than it was before the engagement. Parsons and his men still stood between the enemy and Little Rock. Orr, who was obviously prone to bragging, was not far from the truth when he wrote, “we have done more to keep the enemy out of this country than all the balance of the troops combined.” Parsons would affirm this statement time and again in the Trans-Mississippi. But the casualties of his brigade stood at seventeen killed and thirty-two wounded, out of four hundred participants.\(^\text{18}\)

For Parsons’ brigade, a defining moment came after the Battle of Cotton Plant. The Trans-Mississippi Department went through a thorough reorganization, in which a large number of cavalry units were dismounted. According to Stephen B. Oates in *Confederate Cavalry West of the River*, “General Hindman had a field army of 6,600 horsemen and 6,500 infantry.” He

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simply needed more infantry units. Despite having to dismount a number of men, Parsons Brigade survived the reorganization intact, and actually gained a four-company battalion led by Lt. Col. Francis Chrisman. The reorganization brought Parsons’ number of effective units to approximately 1,110. More importantly for Parsons, the men of the Twelfth Texas, the regiment he considered to be the nucleus of his command, were able to remain mounted. Bailey attributes Parsons’ ability to keep the regiment mounted to his political negotiations. Just a month before Cotton Plant, in May, Colonel Parsons met with Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard to discuss issues, and the subject of departmental reorganization most likely came to the fore. The men of the Twelfth Texas, however, proudly claimed that they remained mounted because of their “fine drill and fighting reputation” earned by hard campaigning. And change came with promotions: Henry Highsmith became a sergeant in July 1862 and, after the reorganization was official, Parsons commanded the First Brigade, First Division, Army of the West. It was a position worthy of a brigadier general, but he remained a colonel.19

Parsons’ Brigade did not generally fight as a complete unit, rather its various elements spent time spread throughout Arkansas and, for a short time, Southwest Missouri. The logistical experience Captain Highsmith gained while serving under his father and Captain Ford would serve his company well in the remaining years of the war. Malcijah’s father had been a teamster before he was a Ranger, and under Captain Ford Malcijah was a commissary lieutenant. These two valuable attributes were recognized by Parsons, who needed a competent leader to ensure that the logistical support of his brigade remained operational. Much to the chagrin of his men, Highsmith’s Company D functioned as logistical support for Parsons’ Brigade for much of the

19 Bailey, Between the Enemy and Texas, 71-74; Oates, Confederate Cavalry West of the River, 49; Harvey Hanna, “The Battle of Cotton Plant 7 July, 1862” (Paper presented at Arkansas State University, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, 2012); Anderson, Campaigning with Parsons’ Texas Cavalry Brigade, CSA, 56, 57; Cutrer, “HENRY ALBERT HIGHSMITH.”
war. After the skirmish at Cotton Plant, Highsmith found himself in command of the Confederate Hospital Camp at Brownsville, some thirty miles east of Little Rock. Captain Highsmith and his company remained at the hospital camps until August 23 when the company was directed to report personally to Colonel Parsons at Camp Cache, some sixty miles to the northeast. Parsons assigned the Bastrop Cavalry Company, among several others, to reconnaissance duty. If any of the companies encountered Federal units, they were authorized to use force in order to disrupt troop movements and supply lines, which were believed to be en route to Helena, on the Mississippi River. Highsmith and his men reconnoitered in far eastern Arkansas until they received further orders in December of 1862.\(^\text{20}\)

Just after the New Year, the Twelfth Texas undertook a march to the Confederate stronghold of Arkansas Post, near Milliken’s Bend (just east of modern Pine Bluff, Arkansas). Colonel Parsons needed as many men as could be found to relieve the beleaguered Confederates under Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Churchill. Unfortunately the relief forces, which included the Twenty-First and Twelfth Texas cavalry regiments, among various other elements, did not arrive in time to relieve Churchill and his men. According to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the rather infamous Maj. Gen. John McClernand commenced an attack on January 11, where he, according to historian Robert Kerby, “gobbled up 5,000 rebels trapped at Arkansas Post,” forcing the surrender of Churchill’s troops, who were primarily armed with pikes and squirrel guns. The Confederates in Arkansas, who were already outnumbered by Federals, lost an irreplaceable five thousand men at Arkansas Post. This defeat ensured that the Confederate forces in Arkansas would be unable to mount an effective counteroffensive to relieve Vicksburg, which General Grant was determined to take. John Truss of Highsmith’s company believed, “if we could have

\(^{20}\) Ibid., Bailey, *In The Saddle With The Texans*, 45, 78-81, 87
got there [Arkansas Post] we could have held the post in spite of all their efforts. Our forces was too much scattered." Morale after the stinging defeat was not helped by the cold wet winter weather to which Parsons's men were subjected. While posting pickets and light skirmishing, they had to sit and endure the miserable winter.21

By February of 1863 Highsmith, now the “captain commanding” the Twelfth Texas, received a special directive from Col. George W. Carter, temporarily in command of part of the brigade, which read:

Capt. Have two captains, four lieutenants, & one hundred privates, mounted, armed, equipped & with two days rations, in readiness to move under Command of Lt Col [DeWitt Clinton] Giddings to this point at 10 oclock AM tomorrow—These men are designed for special service and this order must be promptly executed.

For Highsmith's idle soldiers, a work detail was better than no action at all. In March, after the Bastrop men completed their task of establishing communication east of the Mississippi, their captain stayed busy policing the men of the regiment. Captain Highsmith was instructed by the high command to ensure that idleness did not translate into unrest. The Confederate command could not stand to lose the support of the local populace. As the senior captain, he was assigned to deal with the many minor issues that plague a standing army, especially one not consistently engaged with the enemy.22

As the spring months gave way to summer, Captain Highsmith and Henry Albert, along with the rest of the Twelfth Texas, continued their pattern of sporadically raiding Federal forts along the Mississippi (which was all that could be done to draw Grant away from Vicksburg). Captain Highsmith and Company D were fortunate to have duties to keep them from remaining

21 Ibid., Kerby, *Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865*, 26, 33, 44.

idle. In the capacity of regimental police officer, Captain Highsmith issued a March 2, order which stated that:

Capt [William G.] Veal Lieut [B. F.] Holder & Lieut Smith are appointed a committee of Investigations to examine into outrages committed—in breaking open School House, & Masonic Hall & to report immediately in writing the result of Investigations—

As a result of the investigation Captain Highsmith charged a private in the Twelfth Texas with theft. The diligent captain commanding kept busy with this assignment well into the summer months until he received further orders.23

By July 1863 Grant had finally achieved his objective: taking Vicksburg. The fall of the Mississippi River port served as a fateful harbinger, as the fall of Vicksburg effectively divided the Confederacy in half. The war was going dismally for the Confederacy, which forced the morale of the entire nation to plummet to immeasurable depths. In an effort to alleviate the misery being experienced by most Confederates, the San Antonio News produced a piece of wishful thinking in which Captain Highsmith reportedly came across a bundle of confiscated Federal papers given to him by a prisoner of war in Georgia. According to the San Antonio correspondent, a portion of the confiscated intelligence stated that, “England and France had actually recognized the Confederate Government and that the English were massing troops in Canada, and the French fleet [was] at the mouth of the Mississippi.” Captain Highsmith may have encountered this prisoner of war in his sojourns with the Twelfth in southern Arkansas and Louisiana; however, the English and French were not directly allied with the Confederacy. The rebel nation stood alone.24

On July 22, 1863, Captain Highsmith received yet another duty assignment. He was tasked with serving as acting quartermaster for the regiment. The captain was familiar with the

23 Ibid., Bailey, In The Saddle With The Texans, 151-152.
duties of a quartermaster, which consisted of furnishing the men of the company with wagon teams, commissary goods, and controlling the regiment's monies and properties. Highsmith was chosen for this duty because of his past experience, which he gained nearly twelve years earlier with Ford, on the Texas border. His men remained active by scouting and finding routes of travel for the quartermaster's goods. Highsmith's previous duties as a camp police officer apparently merged into his new assignment. In an order from Vienna, Louisiana, Colonel Parsons issued an order which stated, “Captain M. B. Highsmith commanding camps will release Guilford Byles private of Co. ‘C’ Capers Battalion and order him to report to his company commander for duty at once.” Unfortunately for Highsmith's men, who desired action on the front instead of serving at camp, they had no choice in the matter. Like their Ranger predecessors before them, however, Company D served the cavalry regiment in this oft overlooked capacity. On October 19, the men received another task, which may have appeased them somewhat. Their Bastrop comrade, Lt. Col. Andrew Bell Burleson, issued an order which stated, “Captain Hismith [M. B. Highsmith] Company (D) 12th Texas Drags will report to me tomorrow night 20th inst, on the most practible route towards Shreveport La, with Company Baggage &c.”

After the men transported the brigade's materials from Southeastern Arkansas to the Shreveport area, Highsmith's Company D appears to have wintered in Louisiana. Before the functions of the regiment slowed to a crawl—wintering was still relatively common during the Civil War—on November 6, Captain Highsmith received another order from Parsons which stated, “Capt. M B Highsmith Co D 12th Texas Dragoons will proceed at once to Shreveport on business for his command.” Highsmith’s last order, issued that same day, was a fortunate

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amendment to the previous directive. Colonel Parsons allowed him to return home in an order
which stated:

Capt. M. B. Highsmith of Co (D) 12th Texas Dragoons will proceed at once to Shreveport
La. on official business and by the consent of Lt. Genl. E Kirby Smith can go on to
Bastrop Tex to get a horse and return without delay to his Regiment wherever it may be.

Captain Highsmith was allowed to return home, albeit briefly, to procure a new mount. He was
able to see his wife and family, which must have been a great relief to them. During his brief stay
in Bastrop, he likely relieved the anxieties of his soldiers’ families, informing them as to their
wellbeing. The diligent captain probably returned to Camp Pisgah, Louisiana, with haste, only to
sit and wait. The spring and summer of 1864, though, would be a busy one for Parsons’ men.26

By April 1864 the hardest fighting for Colonel Parsons’s restless men—and others west
of the river—was just about to begin. Many of the Confederates in the Trans-Mississippi would
not necessarily be fighting for their nation, but their homeland, Texas. During the colonel’s
absence, on April 6, 1864, the men and officers, including Highsmith, discontented with the way
that the war was going, expressed their sentiments to the Twelfth Texas regiment’s temporary
commander, Major Lochlin J. Farrar, when he handed down an order for the regiment’s company
commanders to dismount a number of men. When Farrar, a Waxahachie lawyer, issued the
mandate requiring each company to dismount one man in order to fill the ranks of Pratt’s
depleted artillery battery, the men caused a ruckus. For many, including Captain Highsmith,
Farrar’s order was the last straw. Highsmith, along with fellow captains William G. Veal and J.
E. Hawkins drafted a reply which stated:

We the undersigned Captains of the 12th Texas Cav have used our influence with our
companies to fill above orders, but have failed to get them—Our men are volunteers, and
have fitted themselves out as Cavalry men at a great expense and we know of no legal

26 Ibid., Bailey, In The Saddle With The Texans, 258, 261, 263, 324.
way that we could force or compel them to take a different service. Therefore we respectfully decline obeying the above order.

Issuing a statement such as this was mutiny, and Highsmith knew it, but he would not stand for what he believed to be an injustice. Farrar, also a Texan Confederate, would not stand for such insubordination. Immediately upon receiving the mutinous reply from the group spearheaded by Highsmith, Farrar issued a follow-up order stating, “Captains Hismith [M B. Highsmith], [William G.] Veal and [J. Em.] Hawkins are placed under arrest for disobedience of orders until further orders—.” Subsequent communication does not indicate when the men were released, but Highsmith was back in action by June 4, when he and his company were assigned the task of collecting men thought to be deserters. Had the captains that issued the reply not been badly needed, their sentence might have remained, marring their professional military records. Though the men simply did not want to be artillerists they would later feel justified for having made the ruckus, which may have hastened Parsons’s return to command.27

The remaining elements of the Twelfth and Nineteenth Texas that were serving in Southeast Arkansas were soon transferred permanently to Louisiana in order to better harass the Federals there. Captain Highsmith’s Company D would not be present for the beginning of the action, however. It appears that Highsmith’s company remained in camp in Louisiana, perhaps as punishment for their captain’s temporary indiscretion, though he may have remained behind the lines because of his quartermaster’s duties, which required him to organize logistics for the regiment. The disparate regiments would soon unite again, however, in order to keep Maj. Gen.
Nathaniel P. Banks's Federals from moving up the Red River toward Shreveport, and thus Texas. When Banks initiated his ill-fated Red River Campaign, Parsons would be waiting.\(^{28}\)

After the fight at Blair’s Landing, skirmishing began and, with passing time, became increasingly intense. This led to the Battle of Yellow Bayou on May 18, 1864. Parsons and his men stood with a greatly outnumbered Confederate force—which contained a significant number of Texans—that was determined to keep Banks out of Texas at all costs. The May 18 battle near Alexandria, Louisiana, was a bloody affair, especially for Parsons Brigade. The colonel reported twelve killed, sixty-seven wounded, and two missing. Though the number of casualties is not shocking, according to Bailey the Twelfth suffered the most casualties. Parsons favored and trusted them, his coveted regiment, and as a result, the Twelfth received more of his orders. At Yellow Bayou the regiment sustained ten killed, sixty-one wounded, and two missing, which she asserts, “is a striking figure when compared with the rest of the brigade.” Though not present for the initial engagements in northern Louisiana, it appears that Captain Highsmith and his men were present for the battle at Yellow Bayou. One of Highsmith’s men, J. Sanford Turner, a corporal, went into battle believing, cryptically, that it would be his last day alive. The night before, Turner confided in a friend about a dream that he had. Sanford believed he would not survive the day, he said, because he dreamed that, “A dog bit me on the thigh.” Sanford’s friend Joseph Lafayette Estes had a hearty laugh over the matter, but the premonition turned out to be true. Turner was shot in the abdomen during the fight, and the Bastrop boy died from his injuries during the night. Yellow Bayou and related engagements left the Alexandria, Louisiana, region in desolation. After the battle, historian Robert Kerby quoted a private in General Banks’s army, who stated, “The Red River Campaign was over and nothing left to show for it but the great

\(^{28}\) Anne J. Bailey, “PARSONS’S BRIGADE,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qkp01, Handbook of Texas Online, accessed July 18, 2012. Other elements of Parsons’s Brigade would fight at Blair’s Landing where noted Texan General, Thomas Green was decapitated by grapeshot from a Union gunboat.
waste of men and money it had cost.” But the Confederate forces held their ground after their successes at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, which prohibited Banks from invading Texas.29

Yellow Bayou was the last major engagement for Parsons Brigade. The men, who briefly thought that they would be transferred to Texas under the command of General John Bankhead Magruder, instead spent the remainder of the war in the marshlands between the Red and Mississippi Rivers to ensure that Union forces would not attempt another invasion. Futile as their resistance may have been, the men stayed until word was received of Gen. Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox on May 2, 1865. The men of Parsons Brigade knew it would not be long before they would go home, although the Department of the Trans-Mississippi did not surrender when General Lee did. Sometime in early 1865, Parsons and his troopers, presumably under orders, went back to Texas. The men, who were encamped at a location in Robertson County, Texas, received the news of surrender sometime around May 20. It is said that Colonel Parsons came out of his tent and received a courier’s message, which he then read to his men. It stated, “‘Soldiers, from all the information I can gather, the Trans-Mississippi Department has been surrendered.’” Captain Malcijah B. Highsmith and regimental sergeant major Henry A. Highsmith, who had both achieved varying degrees of success, just assembled their gear and rode the short distance home to Bastrop County.30

The Highsmiths had once again served Texas when it needed soldiers. Malcijah and Henry missed the first opportunities of the Civil War to fight in New Mexico. Malcijah had worked hard to raise a company of men who were willing to serve closer to home, and his subsequent attempts were fruitful. Initially worried that his troops might be sent far away, Col.


William H. Parsons used his influence and successfully lobbied for service in the Trans-Mississippi. While that theater offered few chances for glory equal to that commonly found on the eastern battlefields, Captain Highsmith with Company D of the Twelfth Texas Cavalry, which included his youngest brother Henry, fought with distinction in Arkansas, Southwest Missouri, and Louisiana. Thanks to the valiant efforts of the men serving west of the Mississippi Texans were able to return to a home that was relatively undamaged in comparison to the other former Confederate states. Though Confederate Texans ultimately lost the war, they returned home with their records clear—there is no indication that they participated in the looting and other such behavior that erupted in some areas of the Trans-Mississippi at the end of the conflict. Instead, the Highsmiths simply went home, as they and their father had done before, and went back to work, waiting for the next call to service.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE HIGHSMITH LEGACY

Malcijah B. Highsmith lived for another twenty-eight years after the Civil War ended. Upon his return to civilian life, he worked as a travelling salesman for a clothing manufacturing firm, I. Bernstein and Company. He simultaneously operated a carriage and saddlery business with a partner by the name of Capt. James C. Gorham, a Confederate veteran and militia officer with a shop in Galveston. Highsmith worked with Gorham until 1873, when he posted a letter in the *Galveston Tri-Weekly News*, which read, “I have this day sold my entire interes[t] in the Carriage and Saddlery business o[f] Gorham & Highsmith to Capt. J. C. Gorham.” He further noted, concerning those who owed the two men debts, that, “He assumes all liabilities and collects all monies due the firm of Gorham & Highsmith.” Malcijah retired to his home in Bastrop shortly thereafter. The *Bastrop Advertiser* indicated that Captain Highsmith remained active in the civil affairs of Bastrop, spending time and donating money to his church until his death in 1893. The *Dallas Morning News* informed Texans of the death of the Civil War hero with an obituary that read, “Captain M. B. Highsmith more familiarly known as Captain ‘Kige’ Highsmith one of the old soldiers who fought for Texas in the early days of the republic, died at his home in Bastrop Thursday night, May 4. He was 66 years old.” Highsmith was more than just a soldier, he was a working man with a family, and he was a Texas Ranger.¹

Henry A. Highsmith returned to Ranger service once more after the Civil War. The youngest Highsmith continued the family tradition which, at the time of his older brother’s death, had spanned nearly six decades. The Rangers were not officially reestablished until after

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Presidential Reconstruction, so Henry would not serve as a Ranger again until after he was married in 1867. The postwar Texas frontier was hardly a place fit for man or beast. According to historian Robert Utley, the frontier, in addition to enduring depredations committed by Native Americans, was full of Confederate deserters, refugees, and various malcontents who wandered westward after the fall of the South. Utley noted that, “They congregated in the western counties, already ravaged by Indian raids, and overwhelmed county lawmen and courts.” When Gov. Edmund J. Davis, who had commanded the First Texas Cavalry (Union), was authorized to raise Ranger companies on June 13, 1870, Henry Highsmith, who had relocated from Bastrop to Lampasas with his new wife, was among the men ready to enlist. The legislation resurrected the Rangers, who had been disbanded immediately following the war, as an organization of twenty companies for the term of one year.²

Henry eventually attained the rank of captain like his father and older brother before him. The newest Captain Highsmith, like his father, saw the Texas Rangers undergo a significant transformation as an institution. In referring to the Frontier Forces of 1870-1871, which gave way to the Frontier Battalion three years later, Utley asserts that: “The Frontier Battalion institutionalized the Ranger service and ended the time of the citizen soldier. The Frontier Forces of 1870-1871 bridged the two eras, foreshadowing in law and practice the permanent unit created by the act of 1874.” The Texas Rangers, initially a force of mounted volunteers during the time of Captain Samuel Highsmith, had again changed. The Rangers of Henry Highsmith’s era became a professional body of law enforcement officials. In 1876, at thirty-three years of age, Captain Highsmith retired from Ranger service and moved to Round Rock, where he opened a

feed store and livery stable. He fought on the frontier for just six years, but the experience would
benefit him well in his later years. The Captain probably thought he had seen everything by
1876; he had fought in the bloodiest war in the young nation’s history and served as a Texas
Ranger during one of the more tumultuous periods of that institution's existence. He was not
done with his service, however; Highsmith would take part in an operation to collar one of the
most illustrious post-bellum fugitives in Texas’s history, Sam Bass.³

In 1878, Highsmith was pursuing honest work at his feed store and livery stable in Round
Rock when his cousin and deputy sheriff, Ahijah W. Grimes, tapped the veteran for service once
more. A member of the Bass Gang, Jim Murphy, had written to Maj. John B. Jones, commander
of the Frontier Battalion, telling him the whereabouts of Sam Bass. The Texas Rangers and local
law enforcement officials had become interested in the outlaw after he had raised the ire of the
citizens surrounding San Antonio. While in that town, Bass offered to drive a herd of longhorns
to sell in Dodge City, Kansas, and then broke the law by not returning to pay the owners for the
cattle. Bass and his men kept the stock raisers’ money and went to Deadwood, South Dakota,
where, with his outlaw band, he gambled it all away. Penniless, Bass and his men began robbing
stage coaches and trains in Nebraska before hitting the jackpot in the town of Big Springs. Their
target was a Union Pacific train laden with freshly minted gold pieces and an unsuspecting, yet
surprisingly wealthy host of passengers. The Bass gang knew that a heist of this magnitude
would attract the attention of United States Marshals, so, Bass concluded that only by splitting
up and running to different areas would the men have a chance of not getting caught. Shortly
after the heist Bass and a comrade fled back to the Denton area of North Texas, not knowing that
the others were all killed by local law enforcement officials led by Marshals. Upon his return to

Texas, Bass recruited a new band of brigands and continued robbing. It did not take long for him to draw the attention of Texas Rangers. Jones as commander of the Frontier Battalion recruited Junius Peak and a special force of his Frontier Battalion Company B, and in a matter of weeks Peak flushed Bass and his newly recruited gang out of the North Texas area.4

The July 26, 1878, edition of the Brenham Weekly Banner outlined the plan that Major Jones used to collar the notorious criminal, Bass. It stated that:

the credit of the capture of Bass and a portion of his men is given to sheriffs Johnson and Everhart who matured and urged the plan of arresting Murphy, releasing him on bail and spreading the report that he had jumped his bond.

By July Murphy had enough of dealing with law enforcement officials and Bass, so he agreed to the plan. Shortly thereafter Murphy:

went to Bass’ camp ostensibly for protection, and, as opportunity offered gave information to Johnson, Everhart, and [Junius] Peak. The plan to rob the Round Rock bank having been agreed upon, information was dispatched by Murphy, to Johnson, at Austin.

By the time the Bass Gang arrived at Round Rock, Major Jones had a pretty good idea of how the events surrounding his capture were going to transpire. The Rangers were going to take Bass by positioning themselves at strategic locations near the Round Rock Bank and lying in wait for the band of desperados to make the next move.5

On the afternoon of July 19, 1878 Bass, unaware that one of his cronies had betrayed him, went into Round Rock to reconnoiter the town with some of his men. En route to a store

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5 Brenham Weekly Banner, July 28, 1878.
where the bandits intended to buy provisions stood Deputy Sheriff Grimes, a cousin of Captain Highsmith. Grimes inadvertently initiated the conflagration that afternoon while stationed in the town waiting for Bass and his men to make their move. While waiting, a colleague of Grimes's—perhaps another deputy—spotted three suspicious looking characters carrying saddlebags into a store. He told Grimes that he believed the men had pistols concealed beneath their jackets. In a frank manner, Grimes approached the three individuals in a store and asked them blankly if they were carrying pistols. As it turns out, the men Grimes questioned in the store were Bass and two of his cohorts, Jackson and Barnes—the other four men were reconnoitering a section of Round Rock called “New Town”—and they did have guns. Before Grimes could utter another word, the men quickly responded with a “yes” and killed Highsmith’s cousin, who was gunned down on the spot, shot six times by Bass and his two cronies.6

Bass and his men immediately took flight after gunning down Deputy Grimes. The snare prepared by Major Jones and the Texas Rangers, however, worked perfectly. There were simply too many lawmen; Bass had no chance of fleeing Round Rock unscathed. In a gun battle that lasted just minutes, Bass realized that he was in the worst fight of his life. According to notes compiled by noted Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb, Highsmith became involved in the fight. Apparently he had a bead on Bass from a perch at the back of his livery stable and would have claimed the fame of taking down Bass had his gun not jammed before he attempted to fire it. Instead, the fatal would was inflicted by George Harrell, also a Texas Ranger. Despite the hail of gunfire, Bass made his escape. He fled Round Rock visibly injured, but the Rangers knew they had him. They were forced to conduct a search for him, and they found the nearly dead Bass the next day lying under a tree in a field just north of town. Because he knew the territory,

6 Ibid., *Life and adventures of Sam Bass*, 78-82. The service records of C. L. Nevill are online, like many Texas Rangers, but apparently not all as nothing can be found on the Highsmiths.
Highsmith was a part of an eight-man group led by Ranger sergeant C. L. Nevill. They set out at first light the next day, July 21, to find Bass. Their mortally wounded quarry was located easily and promptly loaded into an ambulance and sent back to the Hart Hotel in Round Rock, where Highsmith stood guard until he expired. Bass died on his twenty-seventh birthday, staying alive only long enough to answer a round of questions from Major Jones.7

After assisting with the capture of Sam Bass, Highsmith returned quietly to civilian life. He ran his livery stable in Round Rock for another seven years before retiring to Hutto, Texas, in Williamson County. While in Hutto, he lived in obscurity with his wife Sarah for a number of years before becoming embroiled in a murder case with another man—who was likely another of his cousins—by the name of John Highsmith, in 1897. Henry A. Highsmith was implicated in the crime with John Highsmith, who claimed that the shooting death of a man named Thomas Evans was in self-defense. Notice of the case appeared in the *Dallas Morning News*, which indicated that Henry posted a $1,000 dollar bond. Fortunately for Henry, who had already seen so much in his long life, nothing else came of the case and it faded from public memory.8

In 1898 the United States was becoming more involved in worldwide politics. The turn of the century saw aggressive and imperialistic European nations actively seeking to enlarge their borders in efforts to enhance their global prestige. The United States attempted to do the same. The nation became embroiled in a conflict with Spain over the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico and Cuba, as well as the Philippines and other Pacific islands, which American leaders sought to “liberate” with the hope of incorporating them into the democratic union. The sensationalist tendencies of American journalism at this time pushed the United States into a war with Spain

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8 *Dallas Morning News*, November 28, 1897.
after the sinking of a United States ship, the USS Maine, which sunk in Havana Harbor. Shortly thereafter the United States declared war. Captain Highsmith attempted to enter military service one last time at Elgin, Texas. The April 29, 1898, edition of the Galveston Daily News contained an article which noted that: “Captain H.A. Highsmith of Georgetown is here trying to enlist a volunteer company of cavalry, which he will tender to the governor, to be used in the war against Spain.” The decision of Highsmith to raise a company of men in this American conflict was not out of the ordinary for a man in his family, and it was definitely within the Ranger tradition. His father, Capt. Samuel Highsmith, and his older brother, Capt. Malcijah Highsmith, had done the same during many conflicts involving Texas. There is no indication that Henry successfully raised the company, however. That he did not participate in the Spanish American War can be attributed to a number of factors. When the article ran in the Galveston Daily News, Highsmith was fifty-five years old and had just emerged from a bitter lawsuit, which was undoubtedly still on the minds of many Texans.9

Henry was the last Highsmith to serve as a Texas Ranger. After this final attempt at public service in 1898, he returned to a quiet life. Like his father and brother, he did remain active in the civil affairs of his community, and he also remained active in veteran’s affairs. Henry took the task of gathering the veterans of Parsons Brigade for their annual reunions. Also, according to local Texas newspapers, Highsmith kept in communication with many of his former Civil War comrades and would produce articles in the newspapers to inform the men of reunions and other veterans’ affairs. The captain lived on well into the twentieth century, bearing witness to the rapid transformation that the Texas Rangers and his state and country was undergoing. Before his passing in 1930, Henry saw the likes of John A. Brooks, John R. Hughes, William J.

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9 Galveston Daily News, April 29, 1898.
McDonald, and John H. Rogers institutionalize the Texas Rangers, in effect securing the future of the organization as a law enforcement body in Texas. The days of the Rangers being mounted volunteers were over, but their legacy lived on. Capable men like Samuel, Benjamin, Malcijah, and Henry did as much to establish the image of the Texas Rangers as an institution as did the four great postwar captains and many other legendary leaders. The March 22, 1930, edition of the *Dallas Morning News* informed Texans of the passing of the last Captain Highsmith, noting only that, “H. A. Highsmith an old resident of the Hutto vicinity, died Wednesday at his home here.” The article added that, “His wife died only seventeen days ago. Three daughters and two sons survive.” The world had changed; unlike his older brother, who died more than a generation earlier, Henry was not memorialized as an "old soldier." Instead, he had stayed alive just long enough to ensure that his wife Sarah passed safely from one world into the next before he expired unheralded as the last living member of a long line of dedicated Rangers. And so concludes the story of the Highsmiths, ordinary men who served as Texas Rangers.10

When people from other states, or abroad, think about Texas, they generally recall two things unique to the Lone Star State. Thanks to the media and many a proud Texan, one is the Alamo, and the other is the Texas Rangers. Nothing else in the history of Texas garners as much attention as these two topics and, arguably, one could not exist without the other. The perennial debate is that if it were not for the fall of the Alamo, the hearts and minds of Texans would not have been galvanized, and thus the war with Mexico would have been lost. Still others point out that if it were not for the Texas Rangers, Texas would have remained part of the far northern Mexican frontier, which was later claimed by the United States. If this would have been the case then, the decade that Texas stood alone as a Republic, from 1836 to December 29, 1846, would

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10 *Dallas Morning News*, March 22, 1930.
not have happened, and the fiercely independent identity that Texans proudly, if sometimes incorrectly, boast, would be nonexistent. Texas would simply be another inconspicuous state in the Union, and the popular images of the Alamo and the Texas Rangers that Texans like to bring up when they “talk Texas” with curious outsiders would have no place in conversation.

The institution known as the Texas Rangers receives vast amounts of attention in popular media and literature. Their activities remain popular subjects for filmmakers and writers, who like to place the Texas Rangers in their works. Thanks to these authors and filmmakers, when people around the world hear the words “Texas Ranger” they think of the likes of John Wayne as Jake Cutter in the movie *Comancheros*, or Robert Duvall as Augustus “Gus” McCrae in Larry McMurtry’s book, *Lonesome Dove*, not as a body of mounted volunteers or law enforcement officials. By focusing on the Texas Rangers as larger-than-life figures that operated outside of the law, popular media outlets have encouraged an inaccurate perception of the Texas Ranger. Further, popular culture tends to neglect the human element of the men that served. As a result of these factors, two very different notions exist of who and what exactly the Texas Rangers are. There is the popular conception of what a Texas Ranger is, and then there is what he really is, the scholarly conception. Interestingly, the Highsmiths fit into both notions.

In popular memory, Texas Rangers are generally thought of as professionals who would shoot first and ask questions later. While there are elements of truth in this popular image that filmmakers and writers have embraced, it is not completely accurate. Scholars, on the other hand, tend to argue that, in actuality, the Texas Rangers were men who assembled in times of need to protect the westward moving Anglos from ideologically different peoples, especially Mexicans and Native Americans, whom many Anglos believed that they were superior to. Furthermore, the majority of Rangers—like the three Highsmith captains—were men with jobs and families who
came from different walks of life, and, who perhaps had dreams of providing a better way of life for their families. Whether the Rangers were right or wrong remains in the eye of the beholder. Regardless, it is the job of historians to differentiate between what is fact and what is fiction.\textsuperscript{11}

Due to their protracted years of service to Texas and the Rangers, the question must be asked: do the experiences of Benjamin F., Samuel, Malcijah B., and Henry A. Highsmith confirm the popular or scholarly image of Texas Rangers? The simple answer is both, though it requires explanation. Benjamin, who was a member of the Texian Army, can be considered the stereotypical Texas Ranger. Despite never becoming a captain like his uncle and two cousins, Benjamin more closely resembles the popular perception of the Texas Rangers because he had no other occupations during his years of service as a soldier and ranger. He was a professional soldier for Texas, which places him squarely in the traditional camp. On the other hand, Samuel and his sons, Malcijah and Henry, typify the scholarly view of the Rangers. Captain Samuel Highsmith and his sons periodically volunteered as Texas Rangers for four decades beginning in the 1830s. Despite the political turmoil endured by the early Rangers, the Highsmiths answered the call of the Republic and later the state of Texas. When the fighting was over, Samuel and his sons simply went back home to their secular lives, that is, until the next call rang out. This is the more typical Ranger, the ones focused upon by modern scholars.

Benjamin F. Highsmith died at his home in Utopia, Texas, in Val Verde County in 1905. He had fought bravely in the Texas Revolution and was one of at least fifteen couriers who served under William Barrett Travis at the Alamo where Highsmith, then only nineteen, was one of the last men to leave the garrison alive. From the Battle of Velasco in 1832 to the 1847 Battle of Buena Vista—where he was injured—Benjamin fought for Texas. His obituary was published

in the December 2, 1905 edition of the *Galveston Daily News*. Confirming Highsmith's status, part of the somberly written obituary reads:

> Few who read this notice know that it not only announced the death of a man who had survived more battles with the Mexicans and Indians than any man in Texas, but that it also announced the death of the intrepid soldier boy who bore through many dangers the last dispatch sent out from the doomed fortress of the Alamo, and that there who died, in old age, blindness and obscurity, at a lonely ranch house in the mountains of Uvalde County, one who prior to his death was the last man left among the living who saw and talked with Travis, Bowie, and Crockett in the Alamo.

Unlike his uncle, Samuel Highsmith, and his two sons, Benjamin stands as the quintessential example of the gun-toting range-riding Texas Ranger, which dominates the popular image of the men who called themselves Rangers.\(^{12}\)

The self-proclaimed historians of old like Andrew Jackson Sowell, John Henry Brown, John Holland Jenkins, J.W. Wilbarger, and James T. DeShields, to name a few, propagated the traditional (and at times fictional) conception of the Texas Rangers that the popular media has made famous. While the initial attempts of these amateur historians at preserving the history of Texas and the Rangers should be acknowledged, their germane research methodology and subsequent works provokes numerous questions. For instance, in 1897 when Sowell recorded Benjamin’s recollections for his work, *Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas*, Benjamin was nearly eighty years old. At that advanced age could Benjamin recount with clarity the exploits of his youth? Writers like Sowell often took these accounts and published them nearly verbatim despite their frequent inaccuracies. While Benjamin provided Sowell with a recollection of his many years of service as a soldier in the Texan Army and a Texas Ranger to the best of his memory, he listed several engagements which modern historians have not been able to verify. Highsmith via Sowell, for example, stated that he was present for engagements in

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\(^{12}\) *Galveston Daily News*, December 2, 1905.
1838 against the Comanches in Lampasas, in the 1839 Federation War with H.M. Childress, in 1840 at Bandera Pass with John C. Hays, and finally in 1848—after his serious Mexican War injury—in an engagement against a band of Wacos and Wichitas, in which he reportedly killed the noted Chief Big Water.13

Many other unproven firsthand accounts similar to Benjamin’s were produced; he is not unique in this regard. John Henry Brown in his 1880 work, Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas, stands as another example of questionable historical publication. Like Sowell, Brown actually participated in many engagements that he wrote about. While noble in his attempt at preserving the history of Texas, the bias and lack of official documentation such as government records, dated correspondence, and etc. in his work lead many to question his accuracy. Was it the lack of official documentation that forced these early historians to rely on the many personal accounts available at the time, or did they knowingly include the questionable material to enhance the aura of mystique—some might say notoriety—that shrouds the historical view of the Texas Rangers? Personal accounts, such as the one provided by Benjamin Highsmith to Sowell, that remain unverified by primary source documentation often provoke more questions than they provide answers, but they are romantic, and they confirm the image many Texans had of themselves.14

In his book, The Texas Rangers: Wearing the Cinco Peso 1821-1900, Mike Cox acknowledges that, “the reality and mythology of the Rangers in our popular culture are as
closely interwoven as a fine horse-hair quirt.” Cox could not come closer to the truth; discerning fact from fiction has never been an easy task, especially for Texas historians and their larger than life characters. Despite Sowell, who placed him in questionable engagements, enough proof exists to fit Benjamin into the popular conception of the Texas Ranger. There are aspects of his career that folklorists and the like generally neglect to mention, regardless that many government documents validate the majority of engagements that he claimed to have been involved in. At the same time, at fifty-four years of age, Benjamin lived on a meager pension that the state of Texas granted to all surviving soldiers of the Texas Revolution. Sowell never mentioned that Benjamin lived on a pension or that he could not read or write. Perhaps he wanted to cast a more romantic light on Benjamin’s image. Despite the unmentioned aspects of Benjamin’s life, he is indeed more closely identifiable with the popular conception of what people think of when the term Texas Ranger comes to mind than his uncle and cousins. Just because the vast majority of men who were Rangers did not fit this bill, however, does not take away from the fact that Benjamin patriotically served his country and state.15

Repositories such as the Texas State Library and Archives, the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, and the Texas General Land Office have given contemporary scholars and interested lay historians the opportunity to differentiate between the traditional and modern conceptions of the Texas Rangers. As a result, pioneering historians such as Walter Prescott Webb, using archival institutions such as these, have provided a solid foundation which modern historians may now build upon. Contemporary scholars, now more than ever, are increasingly

15 Texas State Library and Archives. 2012. Republic of Texas Claims https://tslarc.tsl.state.tx.us/repclaims/220/22000442.pdf, (Accessed July, 23, 2012); Mike Cox, The Texas Rangers: Wearing the Cinco Peso 1821-1900 (New York: Tom Dougherty Associates, 2008), 14-15. Despite, or perhaps, because of his revered status, John Salmon Ford serves as an excellent example of a typical early Texas Ranger, who generally had other occupations outside of Ranger service. Contemporary Texas Ranger scholars have grappled with the themes of race and ethnicity and various others, while some have introduced the notion of individualistic identity within the Ranger service as a whole.
able to provide a more accurate portrayal of the Texas Rangers due to increased accessibility to resources. Thus, a more encompassing picture of the men who were Rangers, and the institution as a whole, has emerged in the last twenty years.

Scholars including but not limited to Robert Utley, Richard B. McCaslin, Stephen Moore, and Michael Collins have built upon the foundation laid by Webb, and others, to include more genres within the field of study. In essence, these historians enhanced Ranger historiography, which until the middle to late 1980s had been neglected or, worse, romanticized. Until recently, the majority of scholarly work in this field consisted primarily of retold Anglo-centric accounts of popular Texas Ranger history. Other monothematic recounts focused upon the exploits of only the most famous Texas Rangers. In his books *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers*, and his follow-up, *Lone Star Lawmen: The Second Century of the Texas Rangers*, Utley provided a more comprehensive understanding of the Texas Rangers from their meager beginnings as mounted volunteers in the 1830s to their institutionalization as a body of law enforcement officials after 1935. In *Fighting Stock: John S. “Rip” Ford of Texas*, McCaslin gives one of the more famous Ranger captains, Ford, the depth of character that he rightly deserves. McCaslin breaks new ground by offering a narrative of Ford's life and achievements both in and outside of Ranger service. In so doing, McCaslin has restored forgotten elements of Ford's character, which made him a great Texas Ranger at times but had absolutely nothing to do with his service. Hopefully his work will inspire future scholars to detail the lives of the men that made the Texas Rangers what they were, and are.

Like Ford, Samuel, Malcijah, and Henry Highsmith can be considered the standard example of a true Texas Ranger. Samuel and his two sons conform to modern scholar’s conceptions of the early institution. For nearly five decades, the Highsmiths volunteered for
Ranger service only to return to their secular lives after their terms of enlistment expired. Contrary to popular belief, the early Texas Rangers, commonly referred to as mounted volunteers, were not able to subsist on the salary of a Texas Ranger alone. Excepting the higher echelons of command, most if not all early Rangers used their salaries to supplement their primary incomes. Or, the men who simply left their homes and jobs in search of adventure returned home to find another means of employment after their enlistments expired. Ford had many occupations throughout his life; he was reportedly a doctor, lawyer, and a newspaper editor. Samuel Highsmith also had numerous occupations; he began working as a teamster, took a later job as a mail carrier, and after that was a public servant. Outside of Ranger service, Malcijah occupied positions in public office, co-owned and operated a saddle and stage repair shop, and worked as a travelling salesman, while Henry owned and operated a livery stable. It is safe to say that the men who were Texas Rangers did not take up that service for the money. Some men, like Benjamin, were seeking a career, but most were like the later Highsmith trio: simple men who enlisted together as needed to protect their families and homesteads.

Not only does the traditional view of the Texas Rangers not include the outside occupations and other influences which made the Rangers ruggedly individualistic and unique, it also does not incorporate the less glorious tasks and duties that these range riders had to perform while in service. The early Rangers may have functioned in the capacity of land surveyor, like Hays, or as a courier, like Benjamin, or many other non-combative tasks. During the revolution especially, the Rangers were utilized heavily as couriers; they also aided those fleeing during the “Runaway Scrape.” Serving was indeed an adventure for many young Texan men, but fighting in protracted engagements like Brushy Creek in 1839, or against invading Mexican forces in 1842, was not exceedingly common. The Rangers, who generally served for three to six months, may
have been lucky to fight in one or two engagements per enlistment term, among the handful of times that they even took to the trail. During periods of inactivity, diligent Ranger captains like Hays or Ford would drill their men and keep them up to date with the newest fighting tactics and latest advances in weaponry, which brings to light another fact that romanticized Texas Ranger history neglects. Despite many who claimed to be experts, not all men who became Rangers knew how to “fight” when they showed up to enlist. What made Rangers like Hays and Ford, and the men that served under them, great was the fact that they adapted their fighting methods to the different enemies and changing physical environment. It was during this time, the infancy of the Texas Rangers, that Samuel Highsmith began serving. He, like other Ranger captains, learned how to fight on the fly. The service rendered by the Highsmith volunteers spanned the evolutionary phases of Texas Ranger history, making the story of these rather inconspicuous Texans even more pertinent to the continually evolving historiography of the field.16

The men who would become Texas Rangers functioned in an unofficial capacity from 1823 to the eve of the Texas Revolution in 1835—the year which scholars generally agree marked their official inception. From this time, according to Utley, “until 1874, [the] Texas Rangers were citizen soldiers, intermittently mobilized for temporary duty to fight Indians or Mexicans. It was within this time frame, from the Texas Revolution until just after 1874, that the Highsmith men were most active. Like Benjamin, Samuel and Malcijah went above and beyond simply fighting “Indians or Mexicans” during their years of service. Samuel and Benjamin both served in the Revolution. Samuel, Malcijah, and Benjamin fought in the Mexican American War from 1846 to 1848. Samuel served with his son along the frontier while the bulk of Texans and

Rangers—including Benjamin—volunteered for service with Colonel Hays and the First Texas Mounted Rifles in Mexico. After that war, Captain Samuel Highsmith served with Hays in the ill-fated Chihuahua El Paso Pioneering Expedition, which unfortunately left him in a weakened physical condition, and upon his return home he fell ill and died. Malcijah continued in his father’s footsteps, serving with Captain Ford and his Rangers. Later, Malcijah and Henry continued intermittently serving up to 1861, when the pair left Texas to fight with Colonel William H. Parsons as members of the Twelfth Texas Cavalry, the nucleus of Parsons Brigade. Though Texas Rangers also fought along the frontier during the Civil War, Utley argues that, “the Ranger renown faded in the turmoil of war and Reconstruction.” It would be nearly five years after the end of the war before the Rangers would return permanently.\footnote{17}{Robinson, *The Men Who Wear The Star: The Story of the Texas Rangers*; Robert Utley, *Lone Star Justice* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2002), ix-xiv; Robert Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen: The Second Century of the Texas Rangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), ix-xiii.}

After the Civil War, Texan men came home to see a troubled and lawless western frontier that had been pushed back significantly. Besides the Native Americans, who raided the frontier almost unchecked, was a new breed of trouble. Deserters from the Confederate Army, in efforts to avoid being captured and returned to the front lines, or shot or jailed, tended to drift west, and with them evolved a new type of criminal, the western outlaw. As a result of this post-bellum lawlessness, Texas politicians clamored for Rangers—they believed the Army was not effective in protecting their frontier—but the Rangers did not rise again until 1870-1871, under Governor Davis. The next era for the Texas Rangers came with the formation of the Frontier Battalion, which marked the beginning of the modern Texas Rangers who were considered lawmen, not volunteer soldiers. Henry A. Highsmith, like his Mexican War veteran father and brother before him, reentered Ranger service after fighting in the Civil War (Malcijah fought in the Civil War too, of course) to serve with the Texas Rangers during the second major phase of their evolution.
Samuel Highsmith had seen the Rangers emerge in the 1830s, and his son Henry would see Texans create “a new organization and concept to replace the intermittent service of the citizen soldiers,” in the Frontier Battalion. Henry, not one to shirk tradition, became a Ranger captain as well before he retired from service in 1876, ironically at the centennial of the birth of the American nation.\textsuperscript{18}

Henry Highsmith retired from an institutionalized force of professional Texas Rangers. Little did he know at the time, but his service would not be over. While the time of the citizen-soldier was over, a number of events transpired that ensured Captain Highsmith’s continued involvement with the Texas Rangers. He was living in Round Rock in 1878 and was taken into the confidence of Frontier Battalion Major John B. Jones, who informed him of the plans of the notorious outlaw, Sam Bass and his gang, who were planning to rob a bank in that community. Reverting back to his citizen-soldier roots, Highsmith agreed to do what he could to help collar the notorious fugitive. The younger Rangers that assisted in the capture of Bass were Texas Rangers by profession, but Henry Albert was a Texas Ranger by nature. The character of the Texas Rangers had changed, but not for the last Captain Highsmith. After assisting with the capture of Bass in 1878, Henry lived long enough to observe the next evolution of the Rangers, which became official in 1935 when the Rangers fell under the political jurisdiction of the Texas Department of Public Safety. He was alive to witness the final transformation of the professional lawman into the modern investigative police force, in which capacity they function to this day.

The Highsmith men would probably not recognize the modern Texas Rangers. According to historian Charles Robinson, the modern Rangers “assist local law enforcement agencies in criminal investigations, investigate public corruption, provide security for the governor when he

\textsuperscript{18} Utley, \textit{Lone Star Justice}, 146.
or she travels in the state, and oversee elections when the potential for fraud exists.” Despite the striking differences between the mounted volunteers and the professional Texas Rangers, there are several aspects of the modern force that the Highsmiths would recognize. When referring to Texas Ranger Capt. Barry Caver’s expert handling of the 1997 McLaren standoff in West Texas, Robinson in classic Ranger tradition, “made his own rules based on the immediate situation, [made] educated guesses, and [used] simple instinct.” More important, he acted fearlessly and decisively in the service of Texas and Texans. The Highsmiths would readily identify with these characteristics; they were after all Texas Rangers. The more some things change, the more they seem to stay the same, and so is the case for the Texas Rangers both past and present.19

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