A Cannon for Gonzales

Not every tale of the Texas Revolution is epic. As in any conflict, there were moments of high drama that punctuated what the distance of history often reveals as comic opera. So it was, when a useless old cannon became the trigger for the Texas Revolution. It all began nearly five years before the revolution, in a sleepy outpost colony of farmers and stockmen in the low rolling hills about 90 miles east of San Antonio. This is the strange saga of how one old bronze cannon and a single rifle volley produced exactly one minor wound, one bloody nose, and the revolution that became a Republic:

Green DeWitt, the head of the DeWitt Colony, rang in the New Year of 1831 by writing Ramón Músquiz, the political chief of Béxar (San Antonio), asking him to make arrangements for a cannon to be furnished to the Gonzales colonists for protection against hostile Indians. Eventually, a disused old cannon was allotted to the walled colony and swivel mounted in one of the two log blockhouses that guarded its gates. It was ineffective for mounting any real defense since it had been "spiked", probably by Spanish crown forces after capture from the Mexican Army in an earlier conflict. Typically, captured cannon could be quickly rendered unusable by driving an iron spike into the touchhole near the rear of the gun, preventing it from being fired normally. This practice reduced the cannon to little more than a noisemaker that could be fired only by laying a long fuse into the bore from the muzzle. The cannon was primarily used as a threatening display (although it was occasionally fired) to signal nearby Indians that their presence was noted and to think seriously before attempting some thievery or vandalism.

Throughout the long summer of 1835, the Texian Colonists, the majority of whom were loyal Federalist Mexican citizens, followed closely with increasing alarm the assumption of dictatorial powers by Santa Anna, the *presidente* of Mexico. His annulment of the liberal Constitution of 1824, dissolution of the state legislature of Coahuila y Texas and particularly reports of his brutal tyranny, rape and pillaging of anyone who opposed him were causes for mounting concern. Alarm spread when the brutality of the Mexican troops came to DeWitt Colony territory. Without provocation, a Mexican soldier attacked Jesse McCoy in Adam Zumwalt's store with the butt of his rifle – and news of the altercation spread rapidly among the outlying farms and ranches of the colony.

It was becoming obvious to the Mexican government that to prevent a serious outbreak of violence, the Texians had to be disarmed. Word had just come of a serious problem at Gonzales: the colonists there were organizing their forces and shining up a cannon – an old brass 6-pounder the Mexican governor had given them years ago to ward off Indians. Colonel Ugartechea, acting under the decree

disarming citizens of the province, sent a file of cavalrymen riding to Gonzales with an order for the surrender of the gun. Andrew Ponton, *alcalde* (mayor) of Gonzales, received the order and stalled for time, returning a message stating he was absent. When this ruse failed, Ponton demanded a written order from the political chief of the Department of the Brazos before releasing the cannon to the Mexicans. The noncommissioned officer in charge of the Mexican detachment at Gonzales – a Corporal DeLeon, left his men in camp and rode back to San Antonio de Béxar for further instructions from Colonel Ugartechea.

By the time the corporal returned on September 25, a poll taken by *alcalde* Ponton indicated that all but three of his constituents were against giving up the cannon. Gonzales and its surrounding Colonists prepared for trouble, moving families together for safety, consolidating weapons and supplies and dispatching messengers to spread word of the developing crisis through the countryside and surrounding settlements. For safety, the cannon was buried in G.W. Davis' peach orchard to the west of Gonzales. Eighteen men of Gonzales began to organize into a defensive force, removing all boats from the Guadalupe River, and hiding the ferry in a bayou north of town. Next, they captured Corporal DeLeon's guard unit, but one man escaped, and rode hallooing back to Béxar, with the message of trouble brewing at Gonzales.

Meanwhile, volunteers responding to the call to arms rushed to the scene, and the little Texian force of 18 mushroomed to 150 on September 30, and reached 167 by October 1. The Colonists knew that the cannon was inadequate for military defense without an extensive overhaul. Determined that the Mexican government would not deprive them of their only heavy weapon, John Sowell, Jacob Darst, and Richard Chisholm dug up the cannon from the Davis peach orchard and mounted it on a pair of wooden wheels from a cotton wagon owned by Eli Mitchell. Darst carefully bored out the cannon touchhole while he and blacksmiths Chisholm, Sowell, and others cut every piece of loose metal they could find (horseshoes, chains, trace rings, etc.) into scrap shot that would fit into the barrel of the cannon.

While the menfolk were repairing the cannon, Cynthia Burns, Sara Seely DeWitt and her daughter Evaline set to work making a battle flag. Depicted on a white cloth (thought to be an old petticoat) was an unmounted black cannon with a lone star above it, and the defiant words "Come and Take It" painted beneath. It was Texas' first battle flag, and the first lone star flag – the star emblematic of Texas as the first breakaway state from the Mexican confederation.

By October 1, 1835, the situation was deteriorating rapidly. Captain Francisco Castañeda arrived from San Antonio with fewer than two hundred men. Ugartechea intended a show of force. Castañeda, blocked by the Guadalupe, demanded the ferry be restored, and the cannon returned to the Mexican military – a condition on which it had originally been loaned to DeWitt's Colony. The Texians simply pointed to the gun standing some 200 yards to their rear, beneath the battle flag that slowly flapped in the light autumn breeze, and shouted, "There it is – *Come and take it*!!"

Officers of the Texian force determined that the Castañeda's strategy was either to await reinforcements from San Antonio or to attempt a fording of the Guadalupe at an easy ford about 15 miles further north. In reality his orders were only to demand the cannon, await further orders, and to avoid any engagement with a superior force that would cause embarrassment to the Mexican government and its forces. Castañeda withdrew to his camp.

Not content with a standoff, at 7 PM, the Texian force retrieved the ferry and began to cross the Guadalupe. With 50 mounted men in the lead followed by the mounted cannon, flanked by men on foot, and followed by a small rear guard. The Texian force approached the Mexican position in a thick fog about 3 AM. A barking dog announced the approach of the Texians. A Mexican picket fired, wounding one Texian slightly. Neither force could determine the exact position of the other in the fog and darkness, so both held their positions and waited for the dawn.

As the fog began to lift with the sunrise, the Texians found themselves in the corn and watermelon fields of Ezekial Williams and maneuvered toward an open area within 350 yards of the main Mexican force, where they began firing on the Mexican position. A cavalry of 40 under Lt. Gregorio Perez charged the Texian position, which fell back to the riverbank under the protection of the woods lining the river. Out of the mist appeared Launcelot Smithers, a colonist who had earlier strayed across the Mexican lines and been captured. Smithers relayed Castañeda's desire for a meeting, but was in turn arrested by the Texians – who now suspected he was an agent of the Mexicans.

Captain Castañeda and Col. Moore met in full view of both forces in an open area. Stalemated, the commanders returned to their positions. Lt. Col. Wallace, in a show of defiance, ordered cannoneer J.C. Neill to fire the cannon, loaded with a heavy charge of 16 inches of powder and scrap shot. The old cannon and its makeshift carriage leapt under the massive recoil as a brilliant orange sheet of flame, white smoke and a thunderous roar were followed by a shriek of scrap iron that arced low over the heads of the Mexicans – the first shot of the Texas Revolution. As the echoes rolled across the autumn hills, the Texians fired a single rifle volley and Col. Moore led his small cavalry troop in a modest feint toward the Mexican position. Before the

Texians could even reload, Captain Castañeda had sounded the retreat, returning to San Antonio with a single casualty.

The first meeting of armed combatants in the Texas Revolution unbelievably produced only minor injuries. Castañeda had likely received new orders from Col. Ugartechea in San Antonio to retire at once if his interview with the *alcalde* were unsuccessful and in his judgment the Texian forces were superior to his. Considering that the rag-tag Texians faced an opponent of near-equal size, comprised of seasoned professional troops meeting on open ground, the men of Gonzales were lucky to have survived. The Texian irregulars sustained one minor gunshot wound and one bloody nose – received from a spooked horse when the shooting commenced. Thus ended the incident on Williams' farm that became known as the Battle of Gonzales – the "Lexington of Texas".

Epilogue-

As the winter of 1836 turned to spring, thirty-two of the Gonzales volunteers would march with their old cannon to San Antonio. Fighting their way into the besieged mission on March 1st, they were the last reinforcements to reach the Alamo – and five days later, step into legend. The men of Gonzales became heroes, but mystery surrounds the fate of their lone star battle flag and the "Come and Take It" cannon. The cannon was likely melted down by the victorious Mexican army after the fall of the Alamo – only 156 days after it fired the first shot of the Texas Revolution. The flag too was soon lost to history. Some sources say it was torn up for bandages at the Alamo, or suffered a less noble fate – but its bold lone star can still be seen in the flag that has since flown proudly over both the Republic and the State of Texas. Many a grim and bloody confrontation would follow before Santa Anna's surrender at San Jacinto, but on that soft autumn morning of 1835, as the Mexican army marched away toward the west, the defenders of Gonzales cheered their victory. They could not know what they had begun.

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