

MIRABEAU LAMAR'S BUFFALO

In the fall of 1838, the tiny hamlet of Waterloo, Texas welcomed the most important visitor in its brief history. At the time, the town had not yet even been incorporated, Congress not taking that step until the following January. Lying farther up the Colorado River than any other Anglo settlement, Waterloo presented a humble appearance to the dignitary and his entourage. Only a few log cabins scattered around the mouth of Shoal Creek greeted Willis Avery, James C. Rice, and four other Texas Rangers along as guardians against Indian attack. The Reverend Edward Fontaine, friend of the important man, accompanied the group, and may have had his slave Jacob with him. Commanding the greatest attention, however, was the Georgia native, San Jacinto hero, and highest ranking member of the entourage, Mirabeau B. Lamar, Vice-President of the Republic of Texas.

Lamar coveted the presidency. He seemed fated to get it. His most formidable political opponent, President Sam Houston, was constitutionally barred from succeeding himself. Two other leading challengers, Peter Grayson and James Collinworth, had incredibly committed suicide within two days of each other. On July 9th, while traveling through Tennessee, the unstable Grayson wrote a note begging his landlord to "pardon the frightful scene I have made in your house" and "blew his brains out with a pistol." After Supreme Court Chief Justice James Collinworth publicly announced his candidacy June 30th, he went on a drinking spree that culminated July 11th in his jumping or falling off of a boat into Galveston Bay. Most people believed his drowning death was suicide.

Lamar thus seemed a guaranteed victor in the coming election. His friends, however, urged him to take nothing for granted. In June Senator Albert C. Horton, a vice-presidential candidate, advised a trip west to court the frontier vote. Judge James Webb also saw political advantage in a western journey:

It is the opinion of several of your friends with whom I have conversed, that a trip up the Country would be serviceable to you. I think so too-There is no telling what impression may be made on the minds of the people on the eve of the Election-you know by whom the effort will be made, if made at all, & you therefore know in what section of the Country to expect it-In Houston & all the lower part of the Country, there is no danger.

Lamar evidently saw wisdom in his friends' advice, for he made the risky journey. Once at Bastrop he was well into dangerous frontier territory. After leaving the town and crossing the Colorado River, the vice-president and his companions meandered through a lush landscape of tall grass and scattered woods before fording the river again and stopping at Josiah Wilbarger's place on Wilbarger Creek. The party then traversed Webber's Prairie, passed

Hornsby's Bend, and paused to rest at Fort Coleman on Walnut Creek. The stockade most likely offered little protection. After its abandonment the preceding April, local residents had quickly begun dismantling its walls and blockhouses to make use of the lumber in other construction projects. Once beyond the remains of the fort, the party waded through several more miles of grassland before reaching Waterloo.

Although Edward Burleson laid out the town of Waterloo early in 1838, Tennessee native Jacob Harrell had been the first Anglo to occupy the site. Harrell and his wife Mary brought their four children to Texas in 1833, settling among Reuben Hornsby's clan at Hornsby's Bend. Two years later Harrell erected a tent several miles upriver on the Colorado's north shore near the mouth of Shoal Creek. Because this spot in the river formed a natural low-water crossing, he likely knew that it lay along an ancient Indian trail long used by travelers heading north and west through the hills.

By 1838 Jacob Harrell had constructed a split-log stockade to replace the tent and moved his family to their new home. Several families followed suit. No Anglo community lay upriver from Harrell and his immediate neighbors; the tiny settlement defined the frontier's extreme edge.

As any good political campaigner must, Mirabeau Lamar quickly joined in local custom upon his arrival in Waterloo. For Jacob Harrell and other frontiersmen, this meant hunting. One morning as Lamar, Harrell, and the others breakfasted in Harrell's cabin, one of Harrell's sons burst into the room with the exciting news that the prairie was "full of buffalo." Quickly astride their mounts, the men rode the short distance to a ravine which intersected the Colorado River. To their delight they encountered great numbers of the mammoth beasts and wasted no time in shooting as many as they could.

With the right weapon a buffalo is easy to kill. Because of very poor vision, it relies primarily on its sense of smell to detect danger. Thus, if a hunter stays upwind and possesses a rifle powerful enough to send a ball through the animal's thick hide, it is possible to pick off large numbers one by one without the surrounding members of the herd sensing danger. When he hunted for food or hides, the Anglo settler preferred this method.

For sport the hunter chose a more thrilling technique. Armed with one or more single-shot pistols, he charged on horseback through the herd while blazing away at the fleeing beasts. At the bottom of the ravine bisecting the prairie near Waterloo, Mirabeau Lamar chased and shot "with his holster pistol" the largest buffalo bull one of his companions had ever seen.

Later, one of the hunters blew a bugle to gather the men atop a hill at the head of the ravine. From the summit stretched a view "which would give delight to every painter and lover

of extended landscape.” A German traveler later described the scenery as idyllic, while an 1840 immigrant called it “a fairy land.” A year after Lamar’s visit Thomas Bell wrote home to his brother: “I must consider this the most beautiful country I ever saw what I have yet seen. There is some of the most beautiful lands I ever beheld or ever expect to”. James Jones, in an 1839 letter to Lamar, expressed equal enthusiasm: “We are marching through a beautiful country-Its face presents a scene of grandeur and magnificence rarely if ever witnessed I imagine in any other part of the American Continent.”

Mirabeau Lamar, politician, farmer, adventurer, and military hero, was also a poet. One imagines him regarding with awe the stunning beauty before him as he looked down the hill toward the Colorado River. Perhaps he composed inner verse as he gazed upon the “woodlands and luxuriant Prairies” straddling the waterway. Small hills in the foreground wore crowns of post-oak, blackjack, elm, and live oak trees. Thickets of dogwood, hackberry, elm, and live oak blanketed the river bottom. Framing Lamar’s view to either side were two “beautiful streams of clear water.”

In the short span of three years Mirabeau Lamar had escaped personal despair, obscurity, and political humiliation to attain a position of prestige and power. Barring disaster, he would soon command an embryonic nation destined for greatness. He had just finished a thrilling buffalo hunt in which he had distinguished himself by bringing down an enormous animal, the largest at least one companion had ever seen. He now admired with his poetic eye natural beauty which had consistently stunned far cruder and less imaginative men than himself. Faced with this awe-inspiring vista, Vice-President Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar announced that day an ambitious dream to fellow hunters Jacob Harrell, Willis Avery, Edward Fontaine, James Rice, four Texas Rangers, and maybe the slave Jacob when he cried from the hilltop, “This should be the seat of future empire!”