

**LOCAL HISTORY
AND
PRIMARY SOURCES**

Life in Two Texas Colonies

CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION

The lives of the first settlers of Texas could be harsh. There were few towns and no well-developed cities. Many settlers arrived with few possessions or animals. Like all pioneers, they had to clear the land before they could plant any crops. A man named Noah Smithwick has given historians a detailed look at life in colonial Texas. He moved to Texas in 1827. He visited the DeWitt and Austin colonies. Late in his life, he wrote about his experiences in a book called *The Evolution of a State*. His story reveals a great deal about Texas in the 1820s.

In 1826, Noah Smithwick was 18 years old and living with his family in Kentucky. That year, Sterling Robertson visited his town. Robertson was trying to recruit settlers for Texas. Smithwick described Robertson's approach:

"The glowing terms in which he [described] the advantages to be gained by [moving to Texas] were well calculated to further his scheme. To every head of a family, if a farmer, was promised 177 acres of [good] farming land. . . . Colonists [would] be exempt from taxation six years from date of settlement . . . [There was] an abundance of game, wild horses, cattle, turkeys, buffalo, deer and antelope. . . . The climate was so mild that houses were not essential. . . . Mexican soldiers were stationed on the frontier to keep the Indians in check."

DIFFICULT EARLY YEARS

Smithwick's brothers thought about moving but decided not to. Smithwick did make the move. He set out in 1827. He traveled down the Mississippi and then took a boat to Texas. After he landed, he traveled up the Lavaca River to Green DeWitt's colony. Smithwick learned that the reality in Texas was different from what Robertson had described:

"The colonists, consisting of a dozen families, were living . . . huddled together for security against the Karankawas. . . . The rude log cabins [were] windowless and floorless. . . .

Save as a partial protection against rain and sun they were [without] comfort. . . .

Game was plenty the year round, so there was no need of starving. Men talked hopefully of the future; children reveled in the novelty of the present. . . . The women talked sadly of the old homes and friends left behind, so very far behind it seemed then, of the hardships and bitter privations they were undergoing and the dangers that surrounded them. They had not even the [comfort of being kept busy]. . . . There was no house to keep in order; the meager [food] was so simple as to require little time for its preparation. . . . It was July, and the heat was intense. The only water obtainable was that of the sluggish river. . . . Alligators, gaunt and grim, . . . lay in wait among the moss and drift for any unwary creature that might come down to drink."

Smithwick also talked about what the colonists had to eat:

"Newcomers were warmly welcomed and entertained with all the hospitality at the command of the colonists. . . . The . . . venison was fresh . . . and Colonel [Green] DeWitt, my host, had bread, though some families were without. Flour was \$10 a barrel. Trading vessels came in sometimes, but few people had money to buy anything more than coffee and tobacco. . . . Money was as scarce as bread. . . . [Animal skins] of any kind . . . constituted the principal medium of change."

(continued)

LOCAL HISTORY

AN ESTABLISHED COLONY

Smithwick also visited the Austin colony. It had been started earlier than DeWitt's. As a result, the colony had developed further. That was evident in Smithwick's description of the town of San Felipe de Austin:

"Twenty-five or perhaps thirty log cabins strung along the west bank of the Brazos River was all there was of [the town], while the whole human population . . . could not have exceeded 200. Men were largely in the majority, coming from every state in the Union and every walk of life."

Smithwick described the people of the town:

"Stephen F. Austin had established his headquarters something like half a mile back from the river on the west bank of a little creek . . . that ran into the Brazos just above the main village. . . . Austin's house was a double log cabin with a wide 'passage' through the center [and] a porch with dirt floor on the front with windows opening upon it. . . .

In this vicinity the Ingram brothers . . . had a store, [and nearby lived] . . . Hosea N. League, a lawyer by profession, . . . Going on down the town proper, which lay along

the west bank of the Brazos, . . . stood the [blacksmith shop]. . . . Then came the Peyton tavern. . . . The first house on the right as you entered the town from above was Dinsmore's store, and next [to] it the store of Walter C. White. The office of the 'Cotton Plant,' the first newspaper in the colonies, . . . filled the space between White's store and the Whiteside Hotel."

Smithwick explained the role that San Felipe played in early Texas:

"Austin's colony being the mother colony, and San Felipe being the seat of government, the empresarios of the surrounding colonies naturally assembled there to take counsel together."

Smithwick got to know Austin. He had high praise for the colony's leader:

"He was at that time about thirty-six years of age, though care had left an added weight of years to his appearance. . . . There was little in Austin's outward appearance to indicate the tremendous energy of which he was possessed. . . . [He showed] patience and perseverance under trials and difficulties that would have driven an ordinary man to despair."

COMPREHENSION CHECK

1. Identify three details showing that life in DeWitt's colony was difficult.

2. Contrast San Felipe with DeWitt's colony. What details in Smithwick's writing show that San Felipe was more developed?
