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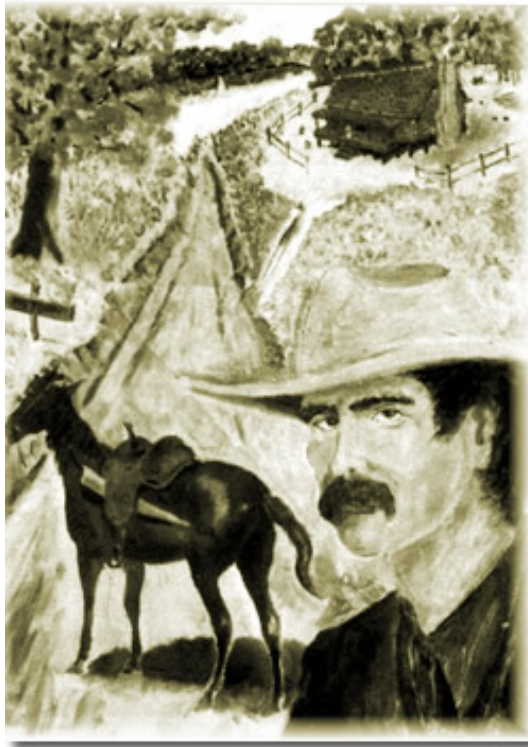
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19th CENTURY SHINING STAR:

Elisha Clapp

By Stephen Moore

Painting of Elisha Clapp courtesy of his great-grandson Wilfred Clapp.

The modern Texas Ranger is as literate as he is well versed in the handling of his firearms. For the Ranger of the 1830s, however, courage and natural leadership far outweighed book smarts.

Such was the case with farmer, fighter, and tavern owner Elisha Clapp, who was unable to read or write but had a burning desire to fight foes of the Republic of Texas. Oddly enough, he helped organize and became one of the first eleven trustees of Trinity College in 1841.

Born in 1792, Clapp first visited Texas in 1822. By 1834, he had secured an entrance certificate for his wife Rebecca Elizabeth (Robbins) and their first four children. He joined Captain Henry Wax Karnes' cavalry company on April 7, 1836, during the great Runaway Scrape. At the battle of San Jacinto, Clapp fought valiantly and helped pursue Mexican cavalrymen fleeing from the battleground. Fellow cavalryman William S. Taylor later wrote:

Elisha Clapp, having a very fleet horse, started in pursuit of them, and soon coming up with them, fired his rifle, killing one of them. The others, seeing that his rifle was discharged, turned to give him battle, when Clapp was compelled to retreat, not being able to cope with three Mexicans with an empty gun. The one nearest to him discharged his escopet at him, but the ball missed him, though, judging from the whistling, Clapp afterward told me though it passed within six inches of his head.

Following San Jacinto, Clapp left the Army on May 28, 1836. He returned to his home in present Houston County, Texas. (Clapp was among the petitioners who helped create Houston County from Nacogdoches County in 1837.)

Under orders from President Sam Houston, Major James Smith was authorized to establish companies of Rangers for East Texas to help keep the Indians in check. The first of Smith's three companies to organize was that of Captain Elisha Clapp.

Fifty-eight men gathered at Clapp's Blockhouse on September 10, 1836, and Clapp was duly elected as their commander. Each man was required to furnish his own provisions, arms, ammunition, and horse. Clapp's Rangers were authorized by Houston to "range from any point on the Brazos to Mr. Hall's Trading House on the Trinity." Clapp was also ordered to give eight of his Rangers to Daniel Parker Sr., who had been directed to oversee the construction of a new blockhouse on the Trinity River in the vicinity of Fort Houston.

Clapp commanded his Rangers for three months, conducting expeditions to scout for Ioni Indians who had reportedly stolen from local settlers. His men also secured the upper crossing of the Trinity River with a new blockhouse. They built this structure at the Robbins' Ferry crossing of the Trinity where Highway 21 presently enters the western border of Houston County. Captain Clapp's new fort, southwest of his own fortified home, became known as the Trinity River Fort.

Clapp's Rangers were disbanded at his "Headquarters, Mustang Prairie" on December 12, 1836. This was due to Sam Houston's limiting of service to three months.

In 1837, a new regiment of Rangers was authorized by the Second Congress of the Republic of Texas to combat a rise in Indian violence. Houston nominated Elisha Clapp to command the Nacogdoches County company of Rangers. (In his instructions to the auditor, President Houston noted that Clapp was illiterate and that his muster roll must be monitored carefully.) There is little evidence, however, that Clapp's company ever found action during 1837.

Increased depredations and the rise of the Cordova Rebellion in 1838 brought new prominence to the Texas Militia, ably led by Major General Thomas Jefferson Rusk. Although President Houston had allowed the Texas Rangers to lapse in early 1838, Rusk approved the use of regional "ranging companies" that continued to operate even when the militia was not in the field. Elisha Clapp was elected major of the Third Regiment of the Texas Militia.

Major Clapp was key in recruiting men for the Ranger service. Rusk authorized him on October 1 to raise 150 men to protect the frontier and fight Indians. At San Augustine on October 5, Clapp had 36 out of 40 men present at his meeting to volunteer for service. Corresponding with Rusk this day via his adjutant, Clapp reported:

I have no doubt that the Indians and Mexicans are embodied near Kickapoo Village and in all probability we can get a fight near home . . . Your order to raise men for our protection, I must inform you, met with universal hallelujahs and hurrahs, it being the first legal order of the kind ever sent forth officially to our country.

Major Clapp's volunteers rendezvoused at Fort Houston with other Rangers and militiamen under Tom Rusk and General Kelsey Douglass. They marched to the old Kickapoo Village in present Anderson County and fought a heated battle on October 16, 1838. Many Texans had their horses and mules killed in this struggle. Clapp helped serve as an appraiser for their losses after the fight.

Clapp continued to serve as a major for the militia's ranging corps into 1839.

During the Cherokee War of 1839, he was major of Rusk's 2nd Regiment of the 3rd Militia Brigade staff. After peace negotiations crumbled with the Cherokee and their associated tribes, two days of battle ensued west of present Tyler on July 15-16, 1839. In this conflict, Cherokee leader Chief Bowles was slain, and the majority of the surviving Cherokees were driven from Texas into present Oklahoma.

In the ensuing years, Clapp left his blockhouse behind and moved from Mustang Prairie to the little Houston County community of Alabama, where he helped organize Trinity College in 1841. He operated a tavern for some time, and in 1847, he acquired Robbins' Ferry at the Old San Antonio Road crossing of the Trinity River, where his 1836 Rangers had constructed the Trinity River Fort. By 1849, he had relocated to Leon County, where he died on March 1, leaving behind his wife and eight children.

In his short life, Elisha Clapp never learned to read or write. He did, however, make his mark on Texas history as a soldier of the Texas Revolution, a Texas Ranger Captain, and a senior militia officer during the height of the Indian wars in East Texas.

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