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Robert McAlpin Williamson



By James D. Gray

The Texas Revolution of 1836 conjures visions of the Alamo, Goliad and San Jacinto. It also brings to mind such heroes as Travis, Fannin and Sam Houston. The Texas Rangers conjure visions of brave and heroic figures such as Jack Hays, Rip Ford and others. Very little has been written about the combination of the Texas Rangers and in the Texas Revolution, but much is known about the Rangers' commanding officer during 1836, Robert McAlpin Williamson. A heroic figure, Williamson is best known by his nickname: "Three Legged Willie." To understand how this nickname came to be, one must look at his background. [1]

Robert McAlpin Williamson was born in 1804 into a well-to-do, distinguished and cultured home in Georgia. He was given every advantage money could buy, but at the age of fifteen he contracted what was probably polio which left him bedridden. He eventually recovered but was left with his right lower leg bent straight back at the knee. Out of school he was tutored and was well grounded in the classics and mathematics. He also had a working knowledge of Latin and several other languages. Williamson's handicap did not hold him back; he had a lust for life. Young Williamson threw away his crutches, had a peg leg attached at the knee, and always had his pants made with the trousers covering his artificial limb. Eventually he could walk, run, dance, ride and shoot. By age nineteen, he was a lawyer.

Williamson had it all with his family connections, money and profession. So why did he leave and go to Mexican Colonial Texas? It was because of a woman. She was a proud Georgia beauty for whom he killed a man in a duel and by whom he was then spurned. As a result of this rejection, he packed up and left for Texas in 1826.

In 1827 Williamson rode into San Felipe, Texas, and presented a letter of introduction to Empresario Stephen F. Austin. Williamson's education and zest for life soon brought him into the mainstream of the frontier people. Williamson was not a snob. He participated in the community and quickly adapted to the frontier lifestyle that matched his passion for life. He became an excellent horseman and rifleman and was just as adept in a barroom brawl as a legal debate. [2] The colonists, with typical frontier humor, gave him the nickname "Three-Legged Willie" and Williamson was accepted as one of their own.

While living in San Felipe, Williamson made friends with another lawyer, William B. Travis. Their friendship would cause them to be on the forefront of events leading up to the Texas Revolution. On July 4, 1835, Williamson published a speech that would eventually label him the "Patrick Henry of the Texas Revolution," [3] At the time, however, it made him unpopular with the colonists who wanted peace and with the Mexican government who wanted him arrested.

In mid-July, Williamson left San Felipe and moved to the outer edge of the frontier: Bastrop County and the town of Mina. It was here that he made his name as an Indian fighter and a leader of the "Ranging Corps." Bastrop County was on the outer edge of colonized Texas, and there Williamson learned the craft of being a Ranger from the best in Texas. He made friends and associates like Edward Burleson, John H. Moore, R. M. Coleman, John J. Tumlinson, Jesse Billingsly, Rueben Hornsby and many others. Here he would also learn the horrors of innocent families murdered by various Indian tribes. He knew Josiah Wilbarger, who was shot, scalped and left for dead but survived and lived with the terrible wound that would not heal till the day he died years later.

Shortly after July 1835, John H. Moore arrived and raised three companies of mounted militia for an expedition against some hostile Indians who had mauled Captain R. M. Coleman's company. In those days, companies elected their captains, and Williamson was elected to lead the Mina Company. They spent fifty days in the field [4] chasing Tonkawa and Waco Indians, living off the land, hunting their own food, and sleeping under the open sky. This kind of lifestyle made a frontiersman out of a man or he didn't last long in command. Captain Williamson, despite his peg leg, proved he was just as natural in buckskins as a suit and tie.

Not long after the company's return to Mina, word came of trouble in Gonzales, Texas. Texians in that town had refused to surrender an old cannon that the Mexican soldiers were sent to confiscate. The Texians had constructed a homemade flag with the inscription, "Come and Take It." The conflict resulted in a Texas victory and fueled the fire for a revolution.

By this time, Stephen Austin and others who had advocated peace realized that war was the only course left because it was Mexico's intention to put an end to the colonization of ex-United States citizens. Texian forces then moved on San Antonio to drive out the Mexican general Martín Perfecto de Cos and his soldiers. In reality, the revolution against Mexico had begun.

Realizing the magnitude of the task they were taking on, the Texians established a provisional government called the Consultation. With his law background, Williamson was selected as a member representing Mina and he played a leading role in drafting statements of the Consultation. [5] Texians had gained easy victories thus far, but the growing hostilities with the Indians was perceived as a very real threat. In haste and confusion several

documents concerning the formation of the Texas Rangers were produced. Finally the ordinance and degree establishing a corps of Rangers was finalized and the Texas Rangers become a government of the revolutionary Texas-sanctioned official force. [6]

The Consultation held an election of officers for the Ranging Corps and on November 28, 1835, Three-Legged Willie became a major and commanding officer of the Ranging Corps. The Ranger companies were to be First Company out of Mina, Second Company out of Gonzales, and Third Company out of Milam. Captains of the three companies that made the Battalion of Rangers were John J. Tumlinson, William Arrington and Isaac W. Burton. [7] All the while the provisional government squabbled, most Texian militia were involved in the siege of San Antonio. That was where Tumlinson was fighting as a first lieutenant in the militia when he was elected.

In late November 1835, Major Williamson was ordered to Mina by General Sam Houston to guard and protect the frontier. Most men from Mina, however, didn't return from the San Antonio campaign until mid-December when Christmas holidays were observed. In early January, Williamson began recruiting with his first company commander, John J. Tumlinson. No one in Mina contested the choice of the respected Indian fighters for the command positions, but recruitment was slow. Captain Tumlinson moved out to the frontier with eighteen or so Rangers. His second company from Milam started forming on January 17 under Captain Sterling C. Robertson.

Texas defense policy had not changed much from that of pioneer Tennessee and Kentucky in the 1790s. A series of interlinked outposts or forts were built with patrols of Rangers to "range" along the frontier. Captain Tumlinson, who was going to use his men to build outposts, stopped at Hornsby's farm and made camp. Shortly after, a half-naked, abused, bruised and heartbroken Sarah Hibbons stumbled into the farm of Jacob Harrell, a neighbor of Hornsby. Harrell brought her to the Rangers' attention. Mrs. Hibbons had escaped a Comanche raiding party that had killed her husband, brother and infant child. She had escaped at night, leaving behind her young son. Because she had walked and her trail was fresh and relatively close by, the Rangers knew that the Indians were near.

The Rangers immediately shifted their primary mission from fort building to protecting the settlers. The eighteen-odd Tumlinson Rangers mounted up and hit the trail. The next morning, in a lightning-strike raid, the Rangers caught the Comanches by surprise. Tumlinson's Rangers defeated the Comanche party and rescued the Hibbons boy. [8] This was a highly praised accomplishment among the Texians because, sadly, many kidnapped children were never rescued. Back at Hornsby's, more Ranger recruits arrived and Captain Tumlinson then went with his men into the frontier and built his blockhouse.

Major Williamson, having recruited approximately thirty-four out of fifty-six men for Captain Tumlinson's company, returned to San Felipe to directly voice his concern over the problems of the fledgling corps. The Consultation was already aware of the problems: low pay and disorganization. The Rangers traditionally elected their own captains, and in Gonzales there was a problem. The Consultation, on February 4, advised Governor Robertson of the situations in Gonzales and Milam, where the other companies were to be formed. [9] As a result, the Consultation, under Williamson's urging, wrote specific orders and duties for the Commander of the Ranging Corps (printed as written):

**ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO J. W. ROBINSON
Council Hall San Felipe de Austin Feb.14 1836**

The advisory committee to the Executive appointed by the General Council to act in the capacity in the absence of a quorum of said Council. Having learned with regret of Indian depredations and murders committed on our frontiers, and deeming it of the greatest importance that prompt and efficient measures should be taken to organized and put into active service the Ranging Corps, for this purpose the committee advise that the acting Governor issue the following orders to the Major of the Ranging Corps.

1st. That he continue his Head Quarters at Mina (present Bastrop), Stationing one of the Subaltern Officers at the place to act as aid or secretary.

2d. That he proceed to the frontier and make arrangements for the building blockhouses and fortifications and at such points as he deem best calculated for the protection of the frontiers and also adopt prompt measures for enlisting and organizing the full number of men contemplated by the law creating the Ranging Corps, Reporting to the Governor and Council any vacancies there may occur in officers of said Corps.

3d. That he appoint a contractor for supplying said Corps with provisions who shall be appointed from the subalterns of the line. The Paymaster & Commissary shall be subject to the same rules and regulations as are prescribed by law for same Officers in the Regular Army.

4th. In cases of emergency, or prospect of general engagement, he shall have the power to call on the mounted volunteers, to call out the militia of the county, and to concentrate his command at such points as may be necessary for the protection of the frontier.

5th. The Major shall report his proceeding to the Governor and Council for the present, as often as may be convenient

D. C. Barret Chairman
Alexr Thomson
G. A. Pattillo
J. D. Clements

With these orders in hand, Major Williamson traveled to Gonzales to form his Third Company and to gather intelligence that had been filtering in for weeks about a Mexican Army coming north. The first portion of the Gonzales Ranging Company consisted of twenty-eight men with Lieutenant George C. Kimble in command and was officially formed on February 24, 1836. [10] William Arrington was not elected as captain of the company and therefore would not serve in the Rangers. On February 25, 1836, messengers arrived from Bexar reporting that the Mexican Army vanguard had arrived and Willie's old friend "Buck" Travis and one hundred fifty men had "forted" up in the Alamo. Travis asked for help. Williamson wrote a plea to all Texians to come to the aid of Travis. He also wrote to the Council and the Governor of his intentions. Major Williamson ordered Captain J. J. Tumlinson to leave the frontier and come to reinforce the Alamo. [11] Copies of the order were sent

with messengers to San Felipe and to Mina. On February 27, Williamson dispatched the Gonzales Ranging Company to reinforce the Alamo. He could not have known at the time that this group would be the last Texian unit to arrive at the Alamo and would be doomed to share the same fate of the defenders already there. On March 1, 1836, Williamson passed a personal letter to James Butler Bonham to give to Travis at the Alamo. Bonham arrived at the Alamo and told Travis that reinforcements were on the way and to "Hold out for God's sake."

Williamson continued to organize the Gonzales relief forces and gather supplies. Colonel Edward Burleson arrived with Captain Jesse Billingsly's Mina Militia and relieved Williamson by order of General Houston. Captain Tumlinson's Ranger company was to remain in Mina and Major Williamson was to carry out his original orders: protect the frontier.

Williamson had now lost his entire Second Command and his friend Travis. On March 10, he arrived back in Mina and took command of the Rangers. In Bastrop County, the Runaway Scrape began when news of the Alamo's fall reached the area. Families fled the anticipated Mexican invasion, fearing the savage attack of General Santa Anna. Williamson ordered his First and Third Companies to protect the families remaining in Mina. He then broke up Tumlinson's Rangers into detachments. Some would go to protect the fleeing families, others were sent to gather cattle to keep food out of the Mexican Army's hands. Other Rangers would be assigned as spies (scouts) and as a rear guard to monitor Mexican movements. [12]

Without the Rangers, fleeing families were at the mercy of the hazards of the Texas frontier. There was a fear of attacks from Indians and from Tejanos, who were Texans of Mexican descent. The Tejanos sided with the Mexican army and spied and raided for Mexican general Genoa, who was in charge of the northern flank of the Mexican invasion force. In addition, there were the settlers' own Texian outlaws who robbed and raped throughout the frontier. Families fled in different directions and the Rangers scattered. Upon completion of moving the families to safety, the Rangers returned to Williamson or to General Houston's army.

In early April 1836, Williamson set up headquarters in Washington, Houston was at Groce's Plantation, and Santa Anna encamped in San Felipe. Williamson was in communication with General Houston and discussed the spies out on assignments. [13] Williamson again followed his original orders and organized a company called the Washington Guards under Captain J. B. Chance and sent them to Houston's army. In Washington, he dealt with looters and hung two Mexican Army deserters. On April 13, Williamson was recalled to Houston's Army but ordered to keep his spies out. Williamson served as a messenger until the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, where he served in the cavalry. Having completed their tasks on detachment, other Rangers returned to the Army, integrated into various Army companies, and also fought in the famous battle.

After the Battle of San Jacinto, more Rangers filtered back to Houston's army. Among these were Noah Smithwick and some Rangers who came back with the families they escorted. Major Williamson was once again in charge of the Ranging Corps mission and began a reorganization of the Corps while his Rangers followed the retreating Mexican Army. He formed a Fourth Company under command of Captain Isaac W. Burton, who had fought as a private in Deaf Smith's Spy Company. [14] Burton was supposed to be the Third Company's commander according to the Consultation election in 1835.

On May 19, 1836, the massacre and kidnapping at Fort Parker by the Comanches occurred. News of the long-expected Indian raid reached the Army and a new Ranger command was formed consisting of three companies under Colonel Edward Burleson. The unit was mainly comprised of men from Bastrop, Robertson and Milam Counties and it was made up of militiamen and Rangers. Captain Calvin Boales now commanded the Milam Company (Third Company). Many Tumlinson Rangers joined these companies and in essence, Tumlinson's Rangers were disbanded.

While Colonel Burleson marched north for another four months of campaigning in the field, Captain Burton's command moved south along the coast and scored a major victory in early June. Using guile, the Rangers captured three ships bringing Mexican Army supplies and earned the title of "Horse Marines." On June 24, 1836, Williamson turned over command of the Ranging Corps to Major Isaac Watts Burton. Williamson went on to help organize the government of the newly won Republic of Texas. [15]

Upon reflection of the original organization and orders, "Three-Legged Willie" accomplished his mission the best he could in the middle of the Revolution. Robert McAlpin Williamson later became a famous judge and congressman of Texas. He married Mary Jane Edwards and they had seven children. He died on November 20, 1859. John S. "Rip" Ford said, "Robert McAlpin Williamson did more than any one man to nerve our people to strike for Liberty". [16]



James D. Gray

James D. Gray has co-authored the book *Maritime Terror* with Gary Stubblefield and Mark Monday, and published numerous articles in *Navy Special Warfare's Full Mission Profile* journal and in *Combat Craft*, the professional journal of waterborne operations. He retired in 1999 as a Master Chief Gunner's Mate from the

Naval Special Warfare Combatant Craft Community of the Navy.

Gray was born and raised in El Paso, Texas, and is a descendant of a member of Captain John J. Tumlinson's "ranging company" of 1836. His family came to Texas in 1831. Though he now lives in Covina, California he claims he has never stopped being a Texan.

He is a member of the Alamo Society and is currently working on a book on "Three-Legged Willie" and the Rangers of the Texas Revolution.

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Notes

[1] Duncan W. Robinson, *Judge Robert McAlpin Williamson* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1948).

[2] R. Henderson Shuffler, *Three-Legged Willie* (Bastrop Historical Society March 20, 1964).

[3] Duncan W. Robinson, *Judge Robert McAlpin Williamson* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1948).

[4] Audited Republic Claims, Texas State Archives, Austin.

[5] R. Henderson Shuffer, *Three-Legged Willy* (Bastrop Historical Society, March 20, 1964).

[6] *Ordinance Establishing a Corps of Rangers* (Austin: Texas State Archives, November 24, 1835).

[7] Fredrick Wilkins, *The Legend Begins: The Texas Rangers, 1823-1845* (Austin: State House Press, 1996).

[8] Noah Smithwick, *Evolution of a State: or Recollections of Old Texas Days* (Austin: Gammel, 1900. rpt., Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

[9] John Jenkins, ed., *Papers of the Texas Revolution 1835-1836*, vol. 4 (10 volumes. Austin: Presidial Press, 1973).

[10] *Republic Audited Claims* (Texas State Archives).

[11] John Jenkins, ed., *Papers of the Texas Revolution 1835-1836*, vol. 4 (10 volumes. Austin: Presidial Press, 1973).

[12] Noah Smithwick, *Evolution of a State: or Recollections of Old Texas Days* (Austin: Gammel, 1900. rpt., Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

[13] John Jenkins, ed., *Papers of the Texas Revolution 1835-1836*, vol. 4 (10 volumes. Austin: Presidial Press, 1973).

[14] Sam Houston Dixon and Louis Wiltz Kemp, *The Heroes of San Jacinto* (Houston: Anson Jones, 1932).

[15] Audited Republic Claims, Texas State Archives, Austin.

[16] Duncan W. Robinson, *Judge Robert McAlpin Williamson* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1948)

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