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Texas in 1836

William Mosby Eastland

by Steve Moore

William Mosby Eastland rarely passed up on an opportunity to join an expedition or to sign on with the Texas Rangers. The son of a veteran of the War of 1812, Eastland fought valiantly in the Texas Revolution and in every frontier expedition on which he embarked. In the end, two factors led to his demise: his willingness to defend Texas and an unlucky black bean.

William Eastland was born in 1806 in Woodford County, Kentucky. When still a child, he moved with his family to Tennessee, where he was educated. He entered the timber business as a young man but relocated his family to Texas in 1834 upon the advice of family friend Edward Burleson. Eastland settled in present Fayette, near what is now La Grange, with his wife; children; two brothers; and a cousin, Nicholas Mosby Dawson, who also became a Texas Ranger leader. Eastland opened a sawmill at his home, and he continued to engage in the lumber business when frontier service did not have him called away.

Eastland's first Ranger campaign was with Colonel John Henry Moore in the summer of 1835. He served as first lieutenant of Captain Michael R. Goheen's La Grange Ranger Company. The expedition gathered at Fort Parker and pursued Indians into the area of present Dallas-Fort Worth.

Once his unit was disbanded on September 13, Eastland quickly became involved in the Texas Revolution. He joined Captain Thomas Alley's company, a part of the Volunteer Army of Texas, on September 28, 1835. He served with this unit through December 12, when he was discharged at Bexar. During his time of service, Eastland lost his black mare at the Bexar siege, which was valued by Captain Alley at sixty dollars.

Once the Alamo had been engaged by Santa Anna's army in late February 1836, the call again went out for volunteers. Eastland enrolled in the Colorado River settlement's volunteer company of Captain Thomas Rabb and was

initially elected second lieutenant. He later advanced to first lieutenant when Captain William Heard took command for the departed Rabb. Eastland fought with Heard's company on April 21, 1836, at the historic battle of San Jacinto. After the initial eighteen minutes of fighting, the Texas Army had Santa Anna and his men on the run, and General Sam Houston passed the word to begin taking prisoners. One Texas soldier, Robert Hunter Hancock, later reported Lieutenant Eastland's version of this order: "Boys, you know how to take prisoners. Take them with the butt of your guns." Eastland encouraged his men to remember the Alamo and La Bahia while using their musket butts to "knock their brains out."

Following San Jacinto, William Eastland soon became engaged in the Ranger business again. He joined Captain John G. McGehee's Bastrop Rangers as a private on July 1, 1836. After four months along the Colorado River settlements without any major battles, McGehee's Rangers were discharged by Colonel Edward Burleson on November 20.

On December 14, 1836, Eastland was appointed to take command of a mounted rifleman company to be organized in Gonzales County. Following his first year of service, he was also paid from December 14, 1837 to March 2, 1838, as "Capt. Rangers."

During early 1837, Captain Eastland's Company D and Captain Micah Andrews' Company C were stationed at the Colorado River Fort, also known as Fort Houston for a time. Andrews had a casual command style, which did not suit Eastland well. When Andrews departed the service in summer 1837, Eastland took over. Ranger Noah Smithwick later wrote, "Captain Eastland was disgusted with the want of military discipline among the men and the easy familiarity with which they treated their [former] commander."

William Eastland stated, "If Captain Andrews can't control his men, I'll try and control mine." He soon found a near mutiny, however, when the Rangers stacked their arms, turned to him, and said that he might "go to hell and they would go home." Eastland reluctantly gave in to the recalcitrant Rangers and eased up on his command style. According to Smithwick, he "thereafter had no trouble with his men."

In October 1837, Eastland led a group of his Rangers out on what was later called the Eastland Expedition. They departed Fort Smith on the headwaters of the Little River in pursuit of Indians who had stolen horses. Eastland's men penetrated Indian country between the Colorado and Brazos Rivers, living off the wild game that they killed. He and Lieutenant A. B. Vanbenthuisen had a disagreement on November 1 and parted ways. Eastland's Rangers eventually returned to Fort Houston on the Colorado River after fighting a skirmish with Indians on Ruan Bayou. Vanbenthuisen's ill-fated detachment fought the Battle of Stone Houses on November 10 in present Archer County. Of his eighteen Rangers, ten were killed and three more were wounded.

Command of the rowdy 1837 Texas Rangers continued to be quite a chore for Captain Eastland. By December, he was the senior Ranger commander still in the field. He continued to serve until early March 1838, at which time he completed his service agreement and returned to his home in La Grange. Renewed Indian violence among the Colorado River settlements in January 1839 compelled him to return to the Ranger service, however.

On January 21, 1839, Colonel John Henry Moore organized forces in present Fayette County and William Eastland was elected captain of the La Grange Company Volunteers. They joined Captain Noah Smithwick's Bastrop-area

volunteer Rangers and departed the following day under Colonel Moore to pursue Comanches who had recently raided the settlements and kidnapped children. The expedition befell bitter cold and snow, and they were forced to endure a fierce winter storm into early February. Colonel Moore's Rangers attacked a Comanche encampment on February 15 in the valley of the San Saba River. Captain Eastland's men moved forward, driving the Comanches from the village toward the prairie. In the early minutes of fighting, Eastland escaped death but was slightly wounded by an Indian arrow that lacerated his nose. Moore's men inflicted at least forty-eight losses upon the Comanches, but the Texians lost all of their horses and mules during the course of the conflict. The Rangers turned for home on foot, managing to retrieve some replacement horses from allied Indian forces operating with Colonel Moore. During the battle, Moore considered Captain Eastland and his cousin, Lieutenant Dawson, to have performed admirably in commanding their men.

During 1840, Eastland served as one of three land commissioners for Fayette County. In 1842, he raised a company of men in response to the raid of Adrian Woll. His unit arrived too late to take part in the battle of Salado Creek, but they participated in the pursuit. Eastland's cousin, Nicholas Dawson, and nephew, Robert Moore Eastland, had been killed by Woll's men in the Dawson Massacre. Eastland and his men thus enrolled in the Somervell Expedition to seek revenge. When Somervell ultimately ordered his expedition to return, Captain Eastland remained on the Rio Grande and was elected captain of Company B of the Mier Expedition.

Led by Colonel William S. Fisher, the Mier Expedition marched into that Mexican town, located about 100 miles to the southeast of Laredo on the Rio Grande. The Texians were overwhelmed at Mier, and Captain Eastland and 300 others were forced to surrender. They were marched deeper into Mexico and imprisoned at the town of Saltillo, where Eastland and others tried in vain to escape. They managed to kill their guards and flee, but almost all of the Texians were recaptured as they fled through rough country without food or water.

President Santa Anna at first ordered all of the recaptured Texians to be executed. At the pleadings of the local Mexican governor, Santa Anna instead offered the men a "lottery of death" as their punishment. Each man would be blindfolded and forced to draw a bean from a jar. A white bean was safe; a black bean meant death to the unlucky recipient. William Mosby Eastland was the first man and only officer of the expedition to draw the deadly black bean. He and sixteen others were led blindfolded into a courtyard, where Mexican soldiers shot them from behind. Their bodies were thrown into a single trench and buried.

A loyal supporter of the frontier fights that helped open the settlement of Texas, William Mosby Eastland had not felt that he was to die in vain. Shortly before he drew the fatal black bean, he was interviewed by a Texas newspaper editor who was also being held prisoner. "For my country, I have offered all my earthly aspiration," stated Captain Eastland, "and for it, I now lay down my life."

In 1848, the remains of Captain Eastland and the other Mier victims were moved to Monument Hill, near La Grange, for reinterment. Eastland County is named in his honor.

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