

**ROBERT ORSON WILLIAM McMANUS
(1812 – 1885)**

By Kevin Ladd

The only resident of Liberty County to be buried in the Texas State Cemetery----at least so far as I can gather---is Robert Orson William McManus of Moss Bluff. He rests there today on "Republic Hill," the choicest section in that hallowed burial ground. What qualified Mr. McManus for such a resting place is the fact that he not only served in the Texas Revolution, but more particularly served in the select Spy Company commanded by Erastus "Deaf" Smith. Including Deaf Smith himself, only five men served in this company.

R. O. W. McManus was born in Troy, New York on December 28, 1812, one of three children to grace the household of U.S. Congressman William McManus and his wife Catherine Coons. Aside from service in the House from 1825 to 1827, the elder McManus was a practicing attorney of some distinction. His wife was likewise descended from the Old Dutch or Knickerbocker families of New York.

Robert, his sister Jane and his brother Philip, were all educated in local schools. He afterward moved on to the Rensselaer Institute, although his attendance there was punctuated with a dispute with the school president, which in turn prompted his early departure.

With his schooling behind him, R.O.W. entered into the field of surveying, a profession that would serve him well. In 1830 he worked as assistant engineer in surveying the Troy and Bennington Railroad. Over the next two years, he was engaged in city and land surveying in and around Troy. Extraordinary events in Texas, however, beckoned the young man and his older sister to this region.

TEXAS

Evidence suggests that the McManus family fortunes had waned in the early 1830, and former Vice President Aaron Burr convinced Jane and Robert to seek their fortunes in Texas. With a letter of introduction from Arch Austin, the pair set sail from New York on November 13, 1832 and landed on the Brazos in December. After obtaining land in Stephen F. Austin's Colony, they returned to New

York, gathered several hundred German colonists, and returned to Texas in 1833. The colony ultimately proved unsuccessful. Although Jane kept her land grant, she soon returned to New York to pursue an influential career in journalism. She would return to Texas a decade and a half later.

Robert, however, stayed and went to work surveying lands in the Burnet, de Zavala and Vehlein colonies. With cash in short supply, he was generally paid in land for his services, which allowed him to accumulate considerable acreage. He settled in 1835 near Moss Bluff in Liberty County.

THE FIELDS OF SAN JACINTO

McManus and several other young men in the Lake Charlotte and Moss Bluff communities were gathered at the home of William and Mary Johns in March 1836. Years later he wrote of the moment: "It was here that the first meeting was held after receiving that electrical appeal from the immortal Travis, calling on the colonies for help to stop the inroad of the invaders of our soul." McManus joined on March 6, the actual day that the Alamo fell.

"That settlement turned out a gallant band, under the command of the chivalrous Benjamin J. Harper. These men, actuated by the noblest patriotism, were willing to unite their command with those of Liberty under Capt. [William M.] Logan, and a company from the Hardin and Johnston settlement, commanded by [Frank] Hardin. They all formed one company of some eighty men . . . The three Captains were placed highest in command, viz: Wm. M. Logan, Captain; Franklin Hardin, First Lieutenant; and B. J. Harper, Second Lieutenant.

"We had but one tent in the company; it was the property of the writer, and was given up to the first soldier who was taken sick, and the owner never spent a night under it during the campaign. After partaking of a public dinner at Liberty, Capt. Logan and company turned their faces towards the seat of war. After crossing the San Jacinto, we met the people moving east. Before we reached San Felipe, we learned [of] the fall of the brave Travis, which cast a gloom over all. Some actually deserted under the panic. One man in particular I never can forget. He was the life of the company, being the best story teller in it. His campfire was always thronged. But poor human creature---he could not stand the idea of meeting the

terrible conquerors of the Alamo in a hand to hand conflict. His courage all oozed out at his finger's ends."

Another published account states that the Liberty company, after hearing of the Alamo, decided to join Houston's retreating army. "At this time many deserted from the company, and those that remained true passed on to join Houston's forces, meeting them at the Colorado. While here a part of the army crossed over to fight a division of the enemy under General Sesma. It was here that Deaf Smith was so pleased with the daring acts of McManus, in cutting out the horses and mules while under fire of the enemy, that he invited him to be one of his chosen band of five, who became so noted and who always met Santa Anna's scouts and kept them from knowing Houston's movements. The names of these five scouts were: Deaf Smith, Capt. Henry Wax Karnes, R.O.W. McManus, Washington Secrets and Fielding Secrets, the latter two being brothers."

McManus took part in all the celebrated episodes of Deaf Smith's Spy Company, including the burning of Vince's bridge. The men also looked after the fleeing women and children of "The Runaway Scrape." Writer Houston Wade concludes that McManus, as a surveyor, proved an invaluable service to the fleeing residents.

MOSS BLUFF

After the war, McManus settled down to the life of a landholder. He received a league and a labor of land, as well as a bounty donation grant for his service in the war.

He was married on July 18, 1838 to Miss Sarah Isabella Spinks (1822- 1879), the daughter of early settler Baker M. Spinks and wife Joanna Johns. Records indicate that both of her parents died in 1843. Their burial place is unknown.

The couple had five children: Catherine, who married Alexander McCormick; Volney Robert, who married Sarah Worthy, daughter of John and Jane Worthy; Robert Cazneau, who married Sarah's sister, Martha Worthy; William P. T., who married Sarah Anderson; and Sarah Jane, who married C. C. Cox. After the death of his first wife, R.O.W. McManus married second on May 3, 1880 to Miss Mary E. Turner, a native of Waller. His third marriage, apparently after Mary's death, was to Sadie Sweetman. The burial places of his first two wives are not known, although some suspect they are buried in the

old "John's Cemetery," the location of which is subject to some disagreement.

The old McManus Survey is a most unusual tract of land, bordered on one side by the Trinity River and the other by Lakes Miller and Charlotte. The property follows the meanders of the river and is situated in both Liberty and Chambers counties. Some records state McManus lived at Moore's Bluff for many years, but eventually settled around 1855 on his survey. The war veteran operated a number of steamboats during this same period, running in the growing Trinity trade between Liberty, Wallisville and Galveston.

The 1860 census of Liberty County shows him as the owner of a steam powered sawmill. At the time the census taker appeared, the mill had some 100 logs on hand, valued at \$75. During the course of the past year, the mill had produced, according to the census, 50,000 board feet of lumber, which carried a value of \$1,200. The agricultural census of that year shows his farm to be a fair size, with three horses, twenty-five milk cows, sixteen working oxen, 130 cows, 300 swine, and 12 sheep. The farm, situated on a hundred acres, also produced corn, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, butter, beeswax, and honey. In addition to his farm, the records show McManus with another 30,000 acres in undeveloped land.

McManus may have served an even greater service to future historians by apparently authoring a series of letters to the Galveston News during the 1850s. In the fashion of that time, the writer of the letters never used his real name, preferring instead to use an alias or pen name. Signing himself as "Prairie Cabin," the letters deal with a number of events in Liberty and Chambers counties.

The Texas Legislature in 1870 provided pensions for veterans of the Mier Expedition, the Dawson Massacre and also members of Deaf Smith's Spy Company. McManus did not secure his pension until 1874, by which time the Legislature had extended the pensions to all veterans of the Texas Revolution. His application, dated June 1873, includes this telling statement: "I was detached with Deaf Smith as a scout or a spy as they called us...and remained in that capacity untill (sic) the enemy had left the country. . .I am the only one of the regular scouts still living. Smith, Carnes (sic) and the two brothers, Wash and Fielding Secrets are all dead. I will thank you for my Certificate as I wish to leave it to my children."

Robert Orson William McManus, an adventurer at heart and a patriot of the great Texas Revolution, passed away on September 11,

1885. He was laid to rest on Republic Hill in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin. He rests there today among some of his old comrades. Surrounded by the great men and women of Texas history, and only a few feet from the grave of Stephen F. Austin, he remains forever a hero of Liberty County and the State of Texas.

NEWS NOTES

JOE KIRKHAM – Funeral services for Ira Joe Kirkham, 80, were held last Wednesday at Pace-Stancil Funeral Home in Cleveland. Mr. Kirkham was born September 18, 1917 in Dolen, Texas and died May 11. A former member of the Tarkington ISD Board of Trustees, Kirkham was a lifelong member of the Oak Shade Baptist Church and a longtime member of the Tarkington Masonic Lodge No. 498. He was the father of Liberty County Judge Lloyd Kirkham.

READING CLUB – The Liberty Municipal Library's Adult Reading Club will be discussing John Berendt's best-seller "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" at 7 p.m. on Monday, May 25. Much like Berendt's book, the location is a bit of a mystery. Call Ellen Pickett at 336-8901 for details.