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Rebellious Ranger

Rip Ford and the Old Southwest

By W. J. Hughes

Foreword by Walter L. Buenger



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Some years ago J. Frank Dobie wrote the comment that Texas has had three types of occupants: "Texians," the "Old Rock," who came to found a nation and a state; Texans, descended from the original settlers; and "people who live in Texas," Johnnies-come-(relatively) lately. Consistent with his definitions, this account of a Texian is dedicated to Texans by one who has lived in Texas.

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Foreword

By Walter L. Buenger

With time most histories and biographies fade into oblivion, or onto the shelves of libraries to be consulted only by anxious aspirants for Ph.D.'s and bone-digging genealogists. Occasionally, as in this instance, scholarly presses elect to bring out a new printing and put it before the public for a second chance at a wider readership.

Such a second chance is warranted for William J. Hughes's story of John Salmon Ford. This work, first published in 1964, serves as an historiographic benchmark and reminds us that history changes as society changes. It is a rousing tale, a book for teenagers dreaming of adventure and for those seeking to escape ambiguity. But this is not simply a romantic tale of high adventure. For almost sixty years Ford was closely associated with the most dramatic events in the history of the state. His life is an intimate portrait of the state's history.

Hughes must have been one of those teenagers dreaming of adventure. His daughter recounts: "Dad had a life-long interest in things western. As a boy in Colorado he subscribed to western magazines and read western stories whenever he could (his parents took him to the Cheyenne Rodeo and he spent his time in their lodgings reading westerns rather than witnessing the real thing they couldn't understand it)."¹

He continued his interest in books and things western, receiv-

¹Katherine Hughes to John N. Drayton, December 12, 1989, in possession of the author.

ing a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University in 1959, after specializing in frontier and western history. He first taught at Dakota Wesleyan University, in Mitchell, South Dakota, and then, in 1962, joined the faculty at Mankato State University, in Mankato, Minnesota. Students and colleagues admired his ability as a teacher and especially remembered his artful storytelling. After achieving the rank of professor at Mankato, Hughes retired in 1978. He died in 1986. *Rebellious Ranger* was his only book.

While at Texas Tech, Hughes was heavily influenced by Ernest Wallace and, through him, by Walter Prescott Webb and J. Frank Dobie. It is not surprising then that *Rebellious Ranger* glorifies the Texas Rangers. The book also accepts or downplays Ford's racism and violence, ignores women, and treats Indians, Mexicans, and blacks paternalistically, if at all. For some this is reason enough to let the book continue to reside on the back shelf. In another sense, however, the work is useful exactly because of these characteristics. Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the onslaught of New Social history all swept away this kind of history. This gives the book a certain antique quality that reminds us of the extent and rapidity of change in the study of American history. It also should remind historians that in another twenty-five years their well-honed work and up-to-date attitudes will probably be regarded as having antique characteristics.

What is more timeless about Hughes's life of Ford is that it is a well-written tale of adventure. Most descriptions of Ford use adjectives such as colorful, versatile, zestful, and so forth.² Trained as a physician in Tennessee, Ford moved to Texas in the summer of 1836. He was probably drawn by the possibility of upward economic mobility and the excitement of the recent revolution. He was also pushed by a failed marriage. Settling first in East Texas among fellow Tennesseans, Ford taught school, worked as a physician, tried his hand at editing a newspaper, fought In-

²See, for example, John H. Jenkins, *Basic Texas Books: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Works for a Research Library*, rev. ed. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1983), 165-68.

dians, and, in the mid-1840s, organized popular support for annexation. After Texas became a state, Ford moved to Austin and continued to edit a newspaper. He fought with the Texas Rangers during the Mexican War and was part of the detachment led by Jack Hayes that protected Winfield Scott's supply lines from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. While there his outfit earned the sobriquet "Los Diablos Tejanos" for their bloody methods of dealing with Mexican partisans. After the war Ford was mayor of Austin for a time and continued his efforts as a newspaperman. He could not leave the life of a Ranger behind him, however. Throughout the decade of the 1850s he blazed trails westward, led attacks on Comanches, and fought what Anglo Texans called Mexican bandits. Along the Rio Grande his most famous skirmishes were with Juan Cortina, who matched him in charisma and dramatic appeal. In fact, if this were a work of fiction Cortina would be the perfect protagonist, a chivalrous but complex individual driven by his own set of demons.

The start of the Civil War brought a new series of problems and a continued foe in Juan Cortina. A supporter of secession and member of the secession convention, Ford commanded troops along the Rio Grande during the war. He helped organize the important export of cotton through Matamoros, Mexico, and took part in several small battles with Mexican as well as U.S. troops. The multilateral diplomacy required to deal with the various Mexican governments, the state of Texas, the Confederate government, and Union forces, not to mention the British and the French, taxed Ford's patience and abilities to the limit. It must have been with some relief that he learned that his victory at Palmetto Ranch on May 13, 1865, was the last battle of the Civil War.

On through Reconstruction, Ford continued as an editor and an occasional participant in border strife along the Rio Grande. With the restoration of the Democrats to power in the mid-1870s, Ford resumed a more prominent role in public life. Even after retiring to San Antonio, in 1883, to write his memoirs, he continued to attract attention from those interested in the ro-

romantic past. A knight errant, a man of letters, an active politician, and a physician, few had so varied and so exciting a career.

It was a career that encompassed most of the significant events of nineteenth-century Texas events in which Ford took a firsthand role. Again and again he was on the scene. Along with Oran M. Roberts he organized a popular move for annexation. Fifteen years later the same two issued a call for a secession convention. His newspaper was a major organ of the early Democratic party. Then in the mid-1850s he was one of the leaders of the Know Nothing movement that convulsed the state. Accepted back into the fold of the Democratic party, he voted in the secession convention to dissolve the Union and then helped organize the seizure of the federal army's men and material in Texas.

Ford spent the war primarily within the borders of his state, and his duties were always political and diplomatic, as well as military. When it looked as if blood would be shed when Republican governor Edmund J. Davis balked at surrendering his office to Democrat Richard Coke, Ford was in Austin and, as a special sergeant-at-arms, helped quell the threat of violence. In 1875, when the redeemer Democrats wrote a new constitution for the state, he was a member of the convention. When Roberts and John H. Reagan, along with Professor George P. Garrison, organized the Texas State Historical Association in 1897, Ford was again present. Over and over again he played a direct role in the most significant political, military, and cultural events in the state. From 1836 to 1897 he not only had a ringside seat, he played a part in every major event within the state of Texas. Thus it is fitting that his story be brought back on center stage by the University of Oklahoma Press.

By Way of Explanation

Characteristically has Texas delighted in honoring the sturdy men who carved out her history. It is, then, with surprise that one notes an absence of the story of possibly the most "Texian" of them all "Rip" Ford. One reason may be that in the broad expanse which is Texas there is regional pride of the kind which elsewhere exists in various parts of certain national states; thus, a tendency persists to grant credit to the local figures. The prestige of John S. Ford undoubtedly suffered through some such circumstance. As an illustration in point, early in this century, a veteran of the Comanche campaign of 1858 attended a Ranger reunion and complained over his plate of barbecue, "If you live in Waco, you have the idea that Shapley Ross was responsible for the Canadian River campaign; in San Antonio, folks believe Captain Tobin won the Cortina War. 'Old Rip' doesn't get any credit." It sounds as if the old Ranger had encountered that collection of Texas biographies which in its article on Ross lauds him for his notable raid into Comanche territory with the assistance of "Capt. Salmon Ford of the U.S. Army." Modern scholarship does only slightly better. In a recent (1959) study of army exploration in the West, the Ford-Neighbors trail is established by Major Robert Neighbors "of the Texas Rangers" and John S. Ford, "the federal Indian agent for Texas." While there is always the danger that any account may create as many errors as it rectifies, the purpose of the present one is to remedy the more obvious mis-

takes where John S. Ford's career is concerned and to attempt to extend to his memory the credit his services rightfully won.

Since no Texas author has undertaken the Ford biography, it is in apologetic fashion that a non-Texan has attempted it. It would have been better had the narrative been dealt with by any one of three Texans: Ernest Wallace of Texas Technological College, who knows not only the big roads but the little trails of Texas history; the late Walter Prescott Webb, who was all the historian the Rangers ever will need; and J. Frank Dobie, who better than anyone else imparts to the outlander the peculiar Texas "flavor." But these gentlemen had, in the old phrase, "other fish to fry."

To three people, specifically, is the writer deeply obligated for assistance in exhuming and organizing the varied materials concerning John Ford. Professor Wallace, in the best scholarly tradition, surrendered his own intention to investigate Ford and likewise gave up time he could ill spare from his own significant research to counsel me. Mr. Frank M. Temple, catalog librarian at Texas Technological College, and Professor John C. McGraw, head of the Social Sciences Division at William Carey College, not only interrupted major projects of their own to turn up important Ford data but also lent constant encouragement.

From unexpected places have come useful facts, such as that which shows "Old Rip" as a dime-novel figure, provided by a most stimulating colleague, J. Leonard Jennewein, in a gratifying deviation from his preoccupation with northern plains history. Certain relatives of John S. Ford, librarians, archivists, and others who assisted will recognize their contributions and will know of my gratitude to them.

W. J. HUGHES
MANKATO, MINNESOTA
JANUARY 20, 1964

1

"Known To Everyone"

Texians that folk which built a nation and created a state came from the far-flung corners of the old Union, but the most of them had origin in the Old South. Of Stephen Austin, T. J. Rusk, Edward Burleson, Sam Houston, and other illustrious names this is true. It is also true of one who, while never achieving higher than the second plateau of eminence, was the most versatile performer of them all John Salmon Ford, "Old Rip."

John Salmon Ford was born in the Greenville District of South Carolina on May 26, 1815. His ancestry was Virginian, his paternal great-grandparents having left the Old Dominion before the Revolutionary War to take up land against the Appalachian foothills farther south. Their son, Major John Ford, returned home after war service to practice law and manage the family acres. When he died at the age of forty-five of a lung infection acquired by exposure during the war, supervision of the plantation passed into the hands of his son William.

William Ford, the father of John Salmon, was born in 1785. In early manhood he married Harriet Salmon, daughter of George Salmon, Greenville planter and Revolutionary War veteran, also of Virginia stock. Harriet Salmon's union with William Ford resulted in several children, of whom only John Salmon and an older sister, Elizabeth, survived the vicissitudes of infancy and adolescence.¹ In 1817, the Ford family cast themselves adrift into

¹ John Salmon Ford, "The Memoirs of John Salmon Ford" (unpublished MS, Barker History Center, University of Texas, Austin), I, 8. Hereafter cited as Ford,

(Footnote continued on next page)

the westward current of the Great Migration and eventually came aground in Lincoln County, Tennessee, where William Ford acquired land to which he gradually added more than two hundred acres during the following fifteen years.²

On his father's homestead, young John Ford flourished in typical western plantation fashion, learning, like Herodotus' youthful Persians, to ride, shoot, and speak the truth. His memoirs reveal an exuberant boyhood:

John S. Ford, at an early period of existence, exhibited some marked and rather positive traits of character. He possessed the capacity to get into fights with the boys, to fall in love with the girls, and to take a hand in the deviltry set on foot by his playmates. The old ladies of his neighborhood looked upon him as a kind of prodigy, and predicted he would be killed for his general "cussed-ness" before reaching the age of maturity, or hung [*sic*] for some infernal mischief he might commit.³

With a mind hungry for knowledge and quick in perception, he rapidly exhausted the curriculum of his country school; by the age of sixteen he was, it is said, qualified to teach school himself.⁴ An avid reader, he early became familiar with good literature, and his study of the Bible, on which his mother insisted, implemented the vocabulary which later supported his trenchant editorial pen.

Ford's alert mind was not to be permitted to vegetate in plantation life. North of his Lincoln County home lay Bedford County and its small county seat, Shelbyville. At the age of nineteen, Ford was there reading medicine under Dr. James G. Barksdale, following a process of training not unusual for students remote

(Footnote continued from previous page)

"Memoirs." Volume and page numbers refer to those of typescript in Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin. The 1820 census for Lincoln County, Tennessee, shows William Ford as having two children, one male in age group 1-10, one female in age group 10-16.

² A list of land grants, Archives Division, Tennessee State Library, Nashville, shows for William Ford, Lincoln County: Grant No. 4440, November 14, 1826, 44 acres; No. 5012, January 4, 1827, 50 acres; Nos. 11,666 and 11, 696, December 20, 1832, 47 and 70 acres respectively.

³ Ford, "Memoirs," I, 8.

⁴ Tom Lea, *The King Ranch*, I, 429-30.

from the few medical colleges of the day. He soon attracted his first public mention. One of his friends, Wilkins Blanton, was attacked by smallpox. Frontier residents were terror-stricken by the disease, and victims usually were quickly isolated. As a matter of course, Blanton, with a pair of Negro slaves, was sent to a cabin beyond the town limits to stay until he died or recovered. Fully aware of the dangers of the situation, Ford accompanied his friend to the pesthouse, remaining until he had nursed Blanton back to health. The act was noted: "The young pill-peddler got his name in the newspapers."

Assiduous attention to his medical studies did not diminish John Ford's capacity "to fall in love with the girls," as his marriage to Mary Davis reveals. Who she was, or exactly when the marriage took place, cannot now be determined. That they had two children, a son whose name cannot be ascertained, and a daughter, Fannie, is known, as is the fact that the marriage ended, probably through divorce, by early summer of 1836.⁵

A crisis in a series of events in Texas interrupted Ford's budding medical career in the spring of 1836. During the preceding fall and winter, Anglo-American colonists and a few courageous native citizens of that region stoutly had opposed the unconstitutional edicts and actions of the Mexican dictator-president, Antonio López de Santa Anna. News of a skirmish between colonists and Mexican troops on October 2, 1835, electrified citizens of the United States, particularly those of Tennessee. Tennesseans, crowded by a rapidly swelling population, had emigrated to Texas in large numbers to acquire broad acres and elbow room. Their letters, describing to friends and relatives the Mexico-Texas political situation, aligned the stay-at-homes with the cause of their kinsmen, and dormant sympathy for those resisting tyranny awoke.

As the "winter of defeat and death" for Texas colonists waned into spring, indignation mounted in Tennessee. Among the most vocally indignant was John Salmon Ford, who began recruiting

⁵ Frank Hamilton deCordova (Ford's grandson) to the author, September 17, 1958.

Shelbyville men for a volunteer military company to reinforce the beset Texans. News of the establishment of the Republic of Texas and of the Alamo disaster stirred Ford to prepare an ardent public address which, circulated in handbill form, brought in some forty recruits. Ford hoped to be chosen captain of the organization; however, upon hearing of the Texas victory at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, he withdrew from the company. But "Texas fever" had infected him, and a few weeks later he was on his way west, accompanied by his small daughter, Fannie, whose custody he had been awarded.

While their route to Texas is not recorded, it was probably that most frequently traveled: by post road to Memphis, thence by steamboat down the Mississippi past the Walnut Hills and Natchez to the mouth of Red River. From that junction a boat struggling up the meandering Red would have deposited them at the busy little port of Natchitoches. Then they would have toiled on through the humid June days by one of the roads which ran west by south to the Sabine and the Texas border. Dr. Ford and Fannie crossed the Sabine either by Patterson's Ferry or by the more congested Gaines' Ferry farther south, and in late June came through the broken hills of the Redlands to San Augustine, soon to be "the great legal and political centre of Eastern Texas."⁶

Ford arrived at a time when able-bodied men were welcome, for rumors were prevalent concerning a possible Indian uprising in support of a Mexican threat to reconquer Texas. The eastern counties raised companies and sent them to General Sam Houston at Nacogdoches. Ford, one of William Kimbro's San Augustine company, spent several days in camp. When the Cherokee leaders, Bowles and Big Mush, reassured Houston that their people had only peaceful intentions toward the Texans, the volunteers returned home before the end of June. Young John Ford, barely a month past his twenty-first birthday, then began the medical practice which he was to follow intermittently for the next fifteen or sixteen years.

⁶ Oran Milo Roberts, miscellaneous papers, Barker History Center, University of Texas, Austin (hereafter cited as Roberts Papers); Ford, "Memoirs," I, 10.

For a time, Ford was busy ministering to plague-stricken participants in the "Run-away Scrape" whom the panic of Santa Anna's invasion had swept into the San Augustine area, but, with their departure, undoubtedly he must have been relieved when other employment became available. In February, 1838, the government of the Republic opened a land office, where holders of land script, headright certificates, and other claims against the Republic might be satisfied. Richard Hooper, Shelby County surveyor, made Ford his deputy to survey lands comprising the present Harrison County, then attached to Shelby County. Ford and a small party spent several months at the task, laying out the area where the town of Marshall now stands. The group occasionally camped with the Caddo Indians at their Big Spring village, several miles northwest of the future site of Marshall. Ford was much impressed with the beauty and fertility of the region, thereafter remembering its straight-boled trees on the timbered uplands, the thicket-fringed creeks, and the small but pleasant prairies. He was later to regret that he had not claimed land there for himself, as the basis of a "moderate fortune."

With summer came the Vicente Cordova *pronunciamento* against the Republic. Apprehensive of a Cherokee-Mexican coalition, East Texas again took up arms, and this time Ford turned out with a San Augustine company commanded by Captain H. W. Augustine. Upon the quick dispersal of Cordova's adherents, the troops were demobilized, their experience, judging by Ford's account, having been much that of a picnic-camping trip with just enough flavor of possible danger to make the affair interesting.⁷

During the winter of 1838-39, Ford was in the midst of community affairs. Not only did he teach a boys' class in the newly formed Union Sunday School, but he also busied himself in helping to organize a Thespian Corps, comparable to a modern Little Theater group. For the Corps, which included such jovial spirits as Lycurgus Griffith, Duncan Carrington, W. R. Scurry, W. B. Ochiltree, and Frank Sexton, Ford wrote two plays. His first, "The Stranger in Texas," was a comedy based on the treatment

⁷ Ford, "Memoirs," I, 205-208.

at Texan hands of an unprincipled acquirer of headrights from the "States." The community's enthusiastic reception of his effort spurred him to his next production, "The Loafer's Courtship." A large, delighted audience and the favorable comments of W. W. Parker, then editor of the San Augustine *Red-Lander*, increased the young doctor's "vanity to an alarming extent. He imagined the lightning had stricken him, and developed a genius of sublime proportions."⁸

More serious matters preoccupied San Augustine in the summer of 1839. Resentment caused by the proximity of the Cherokee settlements and the fact that Chief Bowles's people had been visited by Mexican emissaries had agitated Texans since the preceding summer. President Mirabeau B. Lamar had declared that the tribe had no legal rights to land in Texas, and the idea of Cherokee removal had been enunciated widely and vehemently by General Thomas J. Rusk. Popular sentiment supported such opinions, particularly because of the regular depredations against isolated frontier families, although the Cherokees steadfastly proclaimed their innocence in these affairs. When Bowles indicated that his people would migrate if compensated for the improvements on their farms, Lamar in turn asserted that if the Cherokees would make no agreement with Mexico, he would urge the Texas Congress to award the Cherokee Nation a liberal settlement. Secretary of War Albert Sidney Johnston was sent at the head of a commission to negotiate a settlement, and the Texas Army, two divisions totaling some nine hundred men, accompanied the commission as a precautionary measure. Bowles, apparently having changed his mind about leaving Texas, employed dilatory tactics in conferring with the commissioners, hoping to gain time for assembling his warriors. Johnston finally recognized the true situation and ordered the army to march against Bowles's town.

John Ford, meanwhile, had again mustered behind William Kimbro, and his company became part of a command sent to neutralize the Shawnees, camped at the Big Spring village. The Texans accomplished their mission by confiscating the locks of

⁸*Ibid.*, 199-201.

the Shawnee flintlock rifles, Linney, the Shawnee chief, apparently cooperating willingly in the business. It is doubtful, however, that the Indians complied with the reported alacrity; Ford's private opinion was that the tribe surrendered only the locks from useless weapons after concealing good firearms in the brush.⁹ At any rate, the Shawnees made no effort to aid Bowles's villagers, toward whom Kimbro now marched to join the main Texas force.

The San Augustine company arrived at Bowles's village a day too late for the two-day battle of July 15-16, which ended in the death of the chief and most of his warriors and in the expulsion of the Cherokees. Ford gazed admiringly on the dead Bowles, lying as he had fallen, in a small cornfield, while conducting a rear-guard action for his people, and mused that "Under other circumstances history would have classed him among heroes and martyrs." His admiration waned, however, when the young volunteer found in a Cherokee cabin a Bible inscribed with the names of the white family from whom it had been plundered; the discovery was, to Ford, irrefutable evidence of Cherokee complicity in the depredations of the preceding year.

Having gained no particular distinction in Texas military affairs, Ford perhaps felt that her politics might prove more gratifying to his ambitions. In the summer of 1840, he succumbed to political fever, a chronic Texas inflammation, and sought election to the House of Representatives. Of the two seats allotted San Augustine, one went to H. W. Augustine and the other to Sam Houston. Ford, by his own account, polled seventeen votes fewer than Houston, experiencing a defeat which better judgment might have prevented, for Ford carelessly repeated a story that Houston was on a spree in Nashville and would not return by election day. Houston's constituents, according to Ford, had been only mildly active, but, at the slur on their candidate, rallied indignantly to assure him of a place in Congress. It was, apparently, a typical frontier campaign.

⁹ Anna Muckleroy, "The Indian Policy of the Republic of Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXVI (July, 1922-April, 1923), 147; *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), July 31, 1839; Ford, "Memoirs," II, 212-14.