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FANNIE MARCHMAN'S JOURNEY FROM ATLANTA, GEORGIA TO JEFFERSON, TEXAS—BY RAILROAD, STEAMBOAT, AND HORSE AND WAGON, IN 1869 AND BEYOND

by Ellen Pearson



Fannie Franks was born to Amanda and George Fowler on Amanda's mother's plantation, near Holly Springs, Mississippi, on the 19th day of September, 1851. One year after the family returned to their own home in Holly Springs, George Franks went to New York City to buy goods for his store. He died there of pneumonia. Fannie and her mother moved back to the plantation. Fannie's mother died when she was three years old. Fannie's only memories of her mother were, first, after the little girl had got into a hive of bees, looking up at a mirror and seeing her mother searching her "light curls" for the remaining bees and, second, of Amanda's sister taking Fannie to her mother's bed, when she was dying. Amanda's brother, Mitchell Fowler, and his wife took the girl to a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, and raised her graciously and generously.

Fannie met her husband-to-be, William Riley Marchman, at her school, called Pantherville, ten miles from Atlanta. "Mr. Marchman," as Fannie always referred to him, rode horseback to the school to visit his brother-in-law, James Harmon, who was principal of the school. Mr. Marchman asked the teacher to pick him a sweetheart, and Fannie was the one selected. When W. R. Marchman visited Fannie, he told her he was going to the Army and wanted to see her on his return. She refused to kiss him across the garden gate, and he left with her uncle to fight in the American Civil War. Her uncle never returned and was never accounted for. Fannie, her aunt, and the aunt's three children survived the burning of Atlanta and the incursion of the Yankees with remarkable ingenuity and stoicism. That is another story.

Fannie wrote her Life Story in the early 1940s, stating, "I will be 91 years old September, 1942." Fannie's account of her travel to Texas begins when Mr. Marchman returned from the War. The bulk of this account is in Fannie's own lucid and colorful words. Strangely, Fannie never mentions her husband's death in 1923:

The war is over, things are left sad and desolate, but Mr. Marchman had returned and was visiting me every opportunity, so we were married November 24, 1868. He had a mother and sister, with four children, this sister's husband came to Jefferson, Texas to locate a home for us. His name was James T. Harmon.

We left Atlanta February 6, 1869, Mr. Marchman's mother, a sister, the four children and Mr. Marchman and I, and a bird dog that belonged to the brother-in-law. We all boarded an emigrant train with well filled baskets of chicken, ham, and everything good to eat. The coach had a stove in it, and they gave us permission to make coffee. We rode this train to Mobile, Alabama, where we took a boat. We were not on this boat many hours until we boarded another train, and rode to Lake Pontchartrain. This boat took us to a six mile train that carried us into New Orleans. We had a letter from J. T. Harmon, Jefferson, Texas, telling us to leave New Orleans on the Mittie Stephens, a large side-wheel steamer. The Mittie Stephens was at the wharf, but one of the children was very sick. We had to call a doctor. He advised us not to move that child, so the Mittie Stephens left us in New Orleans.

As soon as we could leave we took a stern-wheel steamer, Era No. 9. When we arrived at Shreveport the hull of the Mittie Stephens was still burning, and there were sixty-five [*sic*] lives lost,

and they were dragging the dead bodies out of the lake, a sight that I shall never forget.

On February 8–14, 2004, Archie P. McDonald wrote a piece entitled “The Mittie Stephens Disaster” in his syndicated column, published in over 40 East Texas newspapers. The subtitle of the article reads, “On February 12, 1869, a fire burned her to the waterline in Caddo Lake.” McDonald writes:

Robert Fulton won the technological race to find a way to utilize steam power for transportation when he successfully sailed the *Clermont* on the Hudson River 1807. He did not solve another problem: how to make such travel safe.

When we remember steamboat accidents, most of us think about boiler explosions, which resulted from excessive pressure or faulty equipment, or both. But the boiler was working well on the sidewheeler “Mittie Stephens” on February 12, 1869, and did not explode: instead, a fire burned her to the waterline in Caddo Lake near the Texas-Louisiana border.

Steamboats became pervasive on America’s inland waters during the first half of the nineteenth century. Moving passengers and cargo over water was also slower. But with only animal powered wagons, and after 1837 the “iron horse” railroads as competitors, steamboats proliferated and their owners prospered. Still, there was danger on the water.

“Mittie Stephens” came out of a shipyard in Madison, Indiana, in 1863, in time to be a part of the effort to preserve the Union. She served as a naval packet for a year, but after the failure of the Red River Campaign in 1864 she was sold. Civilian owners used her on the Missouri River and then

stationed her in New Orleans. In 1866, “Mittie Stephens” began regular roundtrips between New Orleans and Jefferson, Texas, via the Mississippi and Red rivers and Cypress Bayou. Her last voyage began on February 5, 1869. Seven nights later, “Mittie Stephens” steamed on Caddo Lake near her destination with 107 passengers and crew, plus cargo, which included hay stacked on deck. Sparks from a torch basket located on the bow to illuminate the ship blew in the wind to the dry hay, ignited, and a conflagration resulted.

The helmsmen steered for shore but the ship “grounded.” That meant that passengers might have saved themselves by jumping overboard and wading to shore. But the side-mounted paddle-wheel kept turning in an effort to force the ship on to shore, and many who leapt overboard were sucked into the wheel. Sixty-one people perished.

“Mittie Stephens” burned to the water line, though parts of her, including the bell, and some machinery, were salvaged. Her remains reminded those who visit the lake of the danger that await those who move upon the waters well into the twentieth century.¹

Archie McDonald refers to the “failure of the Red River Campaign.” This Union Campaign had two major goals: to secure cotton for northern textile mills, and to end any hope of the French intervening through Texas. Textile mills in many northern states were closing for lack of cotton, causing widespread unemployment. Northwest Louisiana and East Texas were believed to be teeming with stockpiled cotton. President Lincoln believed it was imperative that the Union regain control of Texas to discourage the French from making inroads. The campaign, focused near Shreveport, involved Union land forces, as well as a fifty-eight-ship flotilla, including twenty-three gunboats, thirteen of them iron-

clads. The Confederates had been expecting an invasion but, unbeknownst to them, were tactically unprepared to face it. Nevertheless, the South claimed a major victory, in great part because the Red River was at a twenty-year low, and Union boats constantly ran aground on sandbars.²

The *Mittie Stephens*, during this time, had been illegally seized by Union forces, which used her to carry dispatches, troops, and supplies for the Red River Campaign. During peacetime, she was used on the Mississippi and later became a New Orleans to Jefferson packet. In fact, on her ill-fated voyage in February 1869, she was carrying, in addition to passengers, "a government consignment of hay, gunpowder, and a \$100,000 payroll for troops in Jefferson."³ These provisions, notably the hay but also the gunpowder and paper money, surely added flame to the fire, which burned her to the waterline.

Fannie Marchman, eighteen years of age and mercifully unaware of the stormy history of the steamboat whose unhappy misadventures led to her fiery end, continues with her account:

We finally arrived at Jefferson after a ten days journey. Mr. Harmon had rented a large farm with cabins on it from emigrants, and a large two-story hewed log house, situated sixteen miles from Jefferson. Mr. Harmon met us with a large carriage, with two fine horses hitched to it, and a wagon to take trunks, baggage, etc. We rode this sixteen miles in a short time. This house had a large fireplace. The men put rocks in this fireplace for andirons, to lay the wood on, built a fire, and we made coffee, broiled meat, etc., were enjoying a very good meal: when those rocks got real hot they began to explode like they were loaded with powder, and threw pieces all over the room.

Mr. Harmon remained on this farm for several years, but Mr. Marchman got work in a shoe store in Jefferson, so we moved there, bought a half acre

lot and built a nice cottage home, set out a fine orchard of different kinds of fruit.

We lived on this place until after all three of the boys, Riley, Oscar and Orville, were born.

About four years after we moved into our new home the Texas & Pacific Railroad was built. Jefferson had many stores fronting on the wharf, and I have seen as many as ten steamboats at that wharf at one time to carry off cattle, cotton, hides, and tallow, and all kinds of produce that was raised in Texas, and they were there to bring goods to the merchants in Jefferson. Jefferson is situated on a bayou that was made navigable by the aid of a dredge boat run by the Government.

Jefferson was a thriving city with street cars and horse drawn cabs, good schools and churches, and many factories manufacturing different articles. One was the first artificial ice that was ever invented and made in an ice factory, by Scott & Boyd. There were hundreds of wagons drawn by oxen that hauled produce to the boats to be shipped out of Texas.

Observations made by Fannie Marchman in her early twenties, recounted seventy years later, are corroborated by history. Her impeccable typing on two-holed, lined, (now yellowed) loose leaf notebook paper has almost no errors. She documented the life of the times in which she lived and, without realizing it, revealed her lively, practical approach to living in those times. She also understood the significance of the various modes of transportation essential to the growth and vitality of the state of Texas and the nation.

In his description of Jefferson, Texas, Christopher Long described efforts in the late 1840s to clear Big Cypress Swamp for navigation. According to Long, following the clearing of the swamp, steamboats were regularly traveling from Jefferson to Shreveport and New Orleans, transporting cotton, produce, manufactured goods, and other supplies, including the materials and

Aunt.

My mother had fifteen brothers and sisters, including three half brothers. She had a sister with two boys Wafer and Bud Boring. Bud married Fannie Whitlow, a school mate of mine, and they had a daughter, Bessie Boring Gardner, living in Decatur, Georgia, and I correspond with her. Wafer Boring had a son, Rev. Will Boring, a fine Methodist Preacher.

I am the only living first Cousin that I know anything about in the Fowler family. I will be 91 years old September, 1942.

The war is over, things are left sad and desolate, but Mr. Marchman had returned and was visiting me every opportunity, so we were married November 24th, 1868. He had a mother and sister, with four children, this sister's husband came to Jefferson, Texas, to locate a home for us. His name was James T. Harmon.

We left Atlanta February 6, 1869, Mr. Marchman's mother, a sister, the four children and Mr. Marchman and I, and a bird dog that belonged to the brother-in-law. We all boarded an emigrant train with well filled baskets of chicken, ham, and everything good to eat. The coach had a stove in it, and they gave us permission to make coffee. We rode this train to Mobile, Alabama, where we took a boat. We were not on this boat many

A page from Fannie Marchman's personal account

furnishings needed for the many new homes being constructed in the burgeoning Texas city. "By the late 1840s Jefferson had emerged as the leading commercial distribution center of North-east Texas and the state's leading inland port."⁴ Construction of a

railroad line, linking the town to Shreveport and Marshall, began in 1860, but it was disrupted by the Civil War. After the war, the town's economy quickly recovered. In 1867, Jefferson became the first town in Texas to use natural gas for artificial lighting purposes, and ice was first manufactured on a commercial scale there in 1868. By 1870, Jefferson had a population of 4,180 and was the sixth largest city in Texas. "Between 1867 and 1870 trade grew from \$3 million to \$8 million, and in the late 1860s more than 75,000 bales of cotton were being shipped annually."⁵

Long notes that in 1873 two events occurred that eventually ended Jefferson's significance as a transportation hub. "The first was the destruction of the Red River Raft, a natural dam on the river above Shreveport. In November of 1873, nitroglycerin charges were used to remove the last portion of the raft, which had previously made the upper section of the river unnavigable. The demolition of the raft reopened the main course of the river but significantly lowered the water level of the surrounding lakes and streams, making the trip to Jefferson difficult, particularly in times of drought."⁶ The Red River Raft was essentially a 100 mile log jam. The water backed up by the raft gradually formed Caddo Lake and wetlands on the border between Texas and Louisiana. These wetlands, referred to by Fannie Marchman as "a bayou," comprised three areas: the Little Cypress, Big Cypress, and Black Cypress bayous, which are said to be the largest cypress forest in the world.⁷

The alteration of the waterways was only part of Jefferson's problems. Long states, "Even more important to Jefferson's decline was the completion of the Texas and Pacific Railway from Texarkana to Marshall, which bypassed Jefferson. Although another line of the Texas and Pacific reached Jefferson the following year, the development of rail commerce and the rise of Marshall, Dallas, and other important rail cities brought an end to Jefferson's golden age as a commercial and shipping center."⁸

Geological and man-made hydrologic changes notwithstanding, Fannie Marchman continued to make note of the small moments and continuities of her life. It seems that her travels across the great expanse of Texas, and the years that passed one



Fannie Marchman in 1891

after the other, could not sever the connections Fannie Marchman made during her lifetime:

Dr. O.M. Marchman, Jr. [Fannie's grandson] is Captain in the Army at Kelly Field and does special eye work in the Sam Houston Hospital. His wife is with the Red Cross, studying First Aid. They are a happy couple and doing fine. The teacher asked a member of her class to explain the circulation of blood through the body. Her answer was "The circulation of blood through the body, had to go down one leg and up the other." But she did not explain how the blood got from one foot to the other. Well, I am getting off of my subject, and I must go back to Jefferson.

There were thousands of long horn cattle in Texas and all kinds of wild game. In the Bend where Harmon lived there were deer, wild turkeys, streams full of fish and wild pigeons by the thousand, so many of them would light on one limb and break it off with their weight.

Mr. Marchman and I used to often visit his mother and sister on that large farm, where there were several cabins filled with emigrants from Alabama and Georgia. The brother-in-law, Mr. Harmon, would rig us up horses, and we would ride to Jim's Bayou, several miles, and catch Gog-eye perch as fast as we would drop our hook in. There were many wild hogs in that country, and a man and family named Stratford killed the hogs and made kegs of lard. Mrs. Stratford told us to bring the fish and she would fry them for us. Her children's names were Boots, Tildy, Sug, Hun and Towhead. We had a couple with us, and Mrs. Stratford filled her iron skillet with lard, mixed meal and salt together, rolled the fish in it and fried them whole. Let me tell you that we all enjoyed fresh fish.

Fannie goes on, jumping between the past and the present, always engaging, and always thoughtful of her family, its travels, and how they affected Texas' progress and prosperity:

When this T&P Railroad was built it carried the produce by Jefferson on to other points, so then people began moving, selling their houses for a song to Negroes or any one that would buy them. We sold our lovely little home, with flowers, fruits and every convenience that we could get at that time, for \$250.00. We followed the T&P Railroad to Mineola, where we lived until the boys were

grown. Riley, my oldest son, had a business in Lindale, Smith County, for years. Oscar, my second son, studied medicine, went to Grand Saline, practiced there a few years, then moved to Dallas, where has had an office since 1906. He had two children, Dr. O. M. Marchman, Jr., of Kelly Field, and Mrs. Horace Nash, of New York. He is still having more work than he can do, and is looking well after all these years.

R. G. Marchman moved to Waxahachie, has two children, a son, Laurens, and a daughter, Mrs. Gene Williams, and two grandchildren, and Dr. Marchman's daughter has a little girl, Martha Louise, so he too is a grandfather. My youngest son, Orville Marchman went to Wichita Falls about 1908. He built a hotel, and I named it "The Marchman." He passed away three years ago. His name is on a monument on the Capital grounds in Austin as one of the builders of Texas. His wife still runs the hotel with the help of a nephew, Morgan Gillum. That hotel is brimming full of people all the time.

My eldest son and family live in Waxahachie, forty miles from Dallas, a nice road, and they come over almost every Sunday afternoon.

Dr. Marchman and his wife live on Live Oak Street, so I am left without children in my home, but they all except two grandchildren that are too far away come to see me every Sunday eve.

I employ a lady to live with me, thought it best not to break up, as I cannot have many more years to live, as I have already lived on twenty-one years borrowed time, so I guess I will remain in my home, surrounded by flowers, shrubs, etc. I have two hundred rose bushes; all were in bloom and a



**Fannie Marchman's Queen's Wreath Vine,
November 1934**

perfect picture. We had a hail last Wednesday that knocked them all off the bushes, but they will bloom again.

Fannie Marchman died on January 1, 1943. Her epitaph in a cemetery in Ft. Worth, Texas, reads: "She was a kind and affectionate wife, a fond mother, and a friend to all."

ENDNOTES

1. Archie P. McDonald. "The Mittie Stephens Disaster." [http://www.texasscapes.com/AllThingsHistorical/Mittie-Stephens- . . .](http://www.texasscapes.com/AllThingsHistorical/Mittie-Stephens-...) Feb. 8–14, 2004.
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8. Long.



Walter Henry Burton—age 18, 1888