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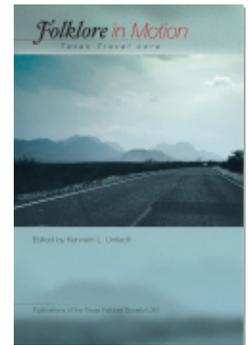
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# WALTER HENRY BURTON'S RIDE—BELL COUNTY TO JUAREZ, MEXICO IN 1888

by James Burton Kelly



Walter Henry Burton was the first of seven sons born to John Henry Martin Burton Jr. and Cynthia Priscilla Pass Burton. He was my maternal grandfather. He stood about 5' 7" tall and probably weighed 150 pounds—boots, hat, longjohns and all. But to me, he was a giant of a man, from my first recollection of him until the day he was buried in the Cleburne cemetery following a fatal automobile accident at age 76.

I could and hopefully will write a lot more about his life and the stories he told me when I was a young boy and spent all of my summers and holidays on the family farm and ranch six miles southwest of Cleburne in Johnson County, Texas. This story is about his two trips horseback from Bell County, Texas, to Juarez, Mexico, to visit and work for his maternal grandfather Lafayette Pass in 1888.

Walter Burton's children called him "Dad" and his grandchildren called him Daddy Burton. When I was very young, Daddy Burton had an old paint horse named Tony that he kept for his grandchildren, miscellaneous nieces and nephews, and friends' children to ride for amusement. I remember riding Tony when he was about 25 years old and I was about three years old. (My sister insists I was more like four years old, but who knows?)

One summer day when I was six (I remember it was the year I started to school), Daddy Burton and I drove some cows from the "back pasture" to the milking barn and I was riding old Tony. It was only about a mile but it seemed like a long ride at the time.

After we put the cows in the lot, we walked the horses over to the barn and horse lot to unsaddle them and give them some oats. Daddy Burton unsaddled old Greg (his big dapple-grey gelding) while I watched, and then he unsaddled Tony. I was not big

enough to reach the girth and pull the saddle off without help. While I was watching this unsaddling, I commented, "It sure was a long ride from the back pasture to the cow pens." I remember he stopped the unsaddling, looked at me with a smile and said, "Why son, that's a short ride. When I was a young man I rode a horse from my home in Bell County to see my grandfather in Mexico." I said, "How far was that, Daddy Burton?" to which he replied "About 600 miles as the crow flies."

"How old were you?" I asked. "Oh, I was 18 the first time. I went out there twice. I rode the train home the second time." I can't tell you the impression this made on me and how I was amazed at this revelation. To ride a horse by yourself for this distance was mind boggling to me at the time, and still is for that matter. The more I learned about this trip the more excited I became to learn more. It seemed that he had other things to do that afternoon and was not too interested in telling me the whole story at the time. I did ask him how he found the way and he said, "Oh, there were roads I could follow."

During the following nine years, before his death, we had a number of conversations about this great journey from his home in the Blackland Prairies of Central Texas, across the Edwards Plateau and into the Chihuahua Desert of West Texas and northern Mexico. In hindsight, there were dozens of questions I should have asked but didn't. A lot of the story I have had to flesh out from the history of that time and the area. You are certainly welcome to use your imagination and fill in the blanks of the questions I didn't ask.

Let's first go back to the mid-1800s and review a little history of the times and of our family just to set the stage for this story.

At the outbreak of hostilities that was to become the War Between the States in 1861, our branch of the Burtons lived in Benton County, Alabama, where they had moved from Chesterfield County, Virginia, in the late 1830s. Walter's father, John Henry Martin Burton Jr., joined the army of the Confederate States of America on December 5, 1863, at Talladega, Alabama. He was 15½ years old. He became a private in Company B, Lock-

hart's Battalion, Alabama Exempts, which later became the 1st Regiment, Alabama Infantry. He was captured by Union forces on April 9, 1865, at Blakely, Alabama, and sent to the Federal Prisoner of War Camp at Ship Island, Mississippi. He was repatriated from Ship Island, Mississippi, to Vicksburg, Mississippi, May 1, 1865, and paroled at Camp Townsend May 6, 1865. He was discharged from the Confederate Army in the summer of 1865.

Having lost everything in the war, the family moved to the Canehill community in Washington County, Arkansas. There he met and married Cynthia Priscilla Pass on March 23, 1869.

In April of 1870 Walter Henry Burton was born. While we don't know what year the family moved from Arkansas to Texas, we do know that their second son, Arthur Thomas Burton, was born in August 1872, in Arkansas, and that their third son Charles was born in January 1875, in Texas.

When they got to Texas, my great-grandfather, John Henry Martin Burton Jr., traded two wagonloads of apples he had brought from Arkansas for a cotton farm in the Little River community of Bell County. The family no doubt ran a typical family farm of that era, and their seven sons were an important part of the labor required for such an operation.

In the meantime, back in Arkansas, Cynthia Priscilla Pass Burton's mother had died and her father, Lafayette Pass, moved to Juarez, Mexico, just across the Rio Grande River from El Paso, Texas, where he opened a mercantile store. He later married a Mexican woman. Probably at the invitation of his grandfather, Walter Burton decided to leave home and go to Juarez and work for his grandfather. I don't know how he came to decide this, but I presume his mother had been in touch with her father and there had been correspondence between them. Walter, being the oldest son, was probably the first to have inclinations to be out on his own. No doubt he was curious to know his grandfather and felt it would be a great adventure to make the trip and work and live in a foreign country. Surely a lot of preparations were necessary to make the trip, including the clothes to take and food and other

necessities to carry along, as well as how to find his way. The family probably didn't have a lot of cash money, but he probably didn't need much until he got to Juarez, either.

As I mentioned, in our first conversation, Daddy Burton told me that on his second trip he rode the train home. I have given a lot of thought to this in the last few years. I wondered if at the time of his first trip the railroad had not been "built through" between El Paso and Central Texas, if he didn't have the money for the fare, or if he just wanted to ride horseback to Juarez for the adventure.

I have researched the history of the railroad and learned that passenger service was available. Remember that his first trip was in 1888. I have found two dates. One report said the Texas and New Orleans Railroad had been built through from Houston to San Antonio in 1879 and from San Antonio to El Paso in 1881. Another report said the Southern Pacific Railroad completed the Sunset Limited route on January 12, 1883. It is obvious at the time of his trip in 1888, he had the option to ride the train. Why didn't he? I wish I had asked.

Another concern would have been hostile Indians. The Comanche Indians were still raiding to some extent across the route he had to follow. And he had to go through the heart of the Apache area of Texas to reach El Paso. He might have crossed the well-known Comanche Trail twice. That trail crossed the Pecos River at about Horsehead Crossing where it went south to Comanche Springs near Ft. Stockton. Here it forked and one trail went on south and crossed the Rio Grande at Boquillas and one at Presidio. Most of the Comanches were on reservations in the Oklahoma Territory by the late 1870s. However, Molly Nicholson Burton, Walter's wife and my grandmother, told me a story of the Comanches when she was a young woman in the mid to late 1880s. She said she was living with her parents and sisters on the northwest side of Austin. On a number of occasions in the evening her father would blow out all of the lamps and make everyone lie on the floor because he suspected Indians were around the house. She said on several occasions they could see the Indians walking by the windows backlit by the moon. None ever broke into their

house but some of the neighboring farms were robbed. She heard her father and other men say they were Comanches and a few were caught and sent to jail or the reservations. She said they were a sad-looking people that were poor, half-starved and desperate enough to beg or steal whatever they needed to exist. She remembered being terribly frightened, but felt sorry for them in many ways.

Most of the last large band of Apache Indians, the Lipans, were wiped out by Col. Ranald S. Mackenzie of the U.S. Army in 1873. The survivors were moved to the Mescalero Apache reservation in New Mexico. Apparently a few bands remained in southwest Texas until 1905 when the last of the Lipan Apaches wandered in to the Mescalero reservation, according to the *New Handbook of Texas*. I never thought to ask Daddy Burton about the Indian situation.

I have no idea of the route he took on these trips. While he told me there were roads he could follow, we can only speculate what route he took. At that time there were army forts and camps on routes across West Texas which offered travelers some protection from the Comanches and Apaches. One route he could have followed was to have gone northwest from Bell County and joined the fort-protected route from Fort Worth to Abilene, Pecos, Fort Stockton, and on to El Paso. The other army-protected route would have been to travel south to San Antonio and then turn west through Brackettville, Del Rio, Langtry, Fort Davis and El Paso. There were several more forts and outposts on both of these routes. All of these forts were active in 1888.

It is quite possible that he followed some of the routes of the stagecoaches that had been in existence. Most of the stagecoach companies had gone out of business by the time of his trips due to the railroads coming in. But there were a few still working and the old routes were well known. He could have gone west from his home on the Little River to Lampasas, Brady and San Angelo or Ft. Concho, all towns that were well established in 1888. From there a logical route would have been southwest to Ft. Stockton and hit the main fort road from San Antonio to El Paso. I am not sure the actual route is important to the story.

I asked him one time where he stayed and how he ate on the trip. He told me that usually he stayed at ranches. They were all hospitable and welcomed him to stay as long as he liked and they fed him very well. When he left they usually packed food for him to eat on the trail. He said they were all anxious to see someone from the central part of the state and to have the latest news. Many of them offered him a job if he would stay on, but he was intent on reaching his destination and seeing his grandfather whom he probably had not seen since he was two or three years old. I have a picture of him at this stage of his life and I can tell you without prejudice, he was a very attractive young man. Many people have said I look very much like him. Some of the ranchers would suggest friends further down the road where he might stop. As you can see, most of what I know about his trip is a mixture of what he told me and what I could find out about the history of those days. And I know even less of what went on while he was in Juarez with his grandfather. I do know he worked in the store and learned to speak pretty good Spanish. I heard him tell the story several times that at some point later in life, he could not get workers for the cotton harvest one year and he went to south Texas and hired Mexican laborers. They came from south Texas to Johnson County in wooden railroad boxcars. He was selected to go on this mission by other farmers in the community because he could speak Spanish. He also was the interpreter while they were in the area working.

When he returned from the first trip and made the second trip is also only guesswork on my part. It must have been fairly soon because he was back for good and married my grandmother, Molly Nicholson, on December 23, 1890. She also told me in later years how well he could speak Spanish. Some years after Daddy Burton's death my grandmother told me that Grandpa Pass had sent his Mexican wife back to Central Texas to stay with them for a while. She had her daughter with her. I can't remember why she came, but it seems it had to do some way with an illness in the family.

He never told me how the train ran from El Paso on his second trip home. One route could have been the Southern Pacific from El Paso to San Antonio and then from San Antonio north to Tem-

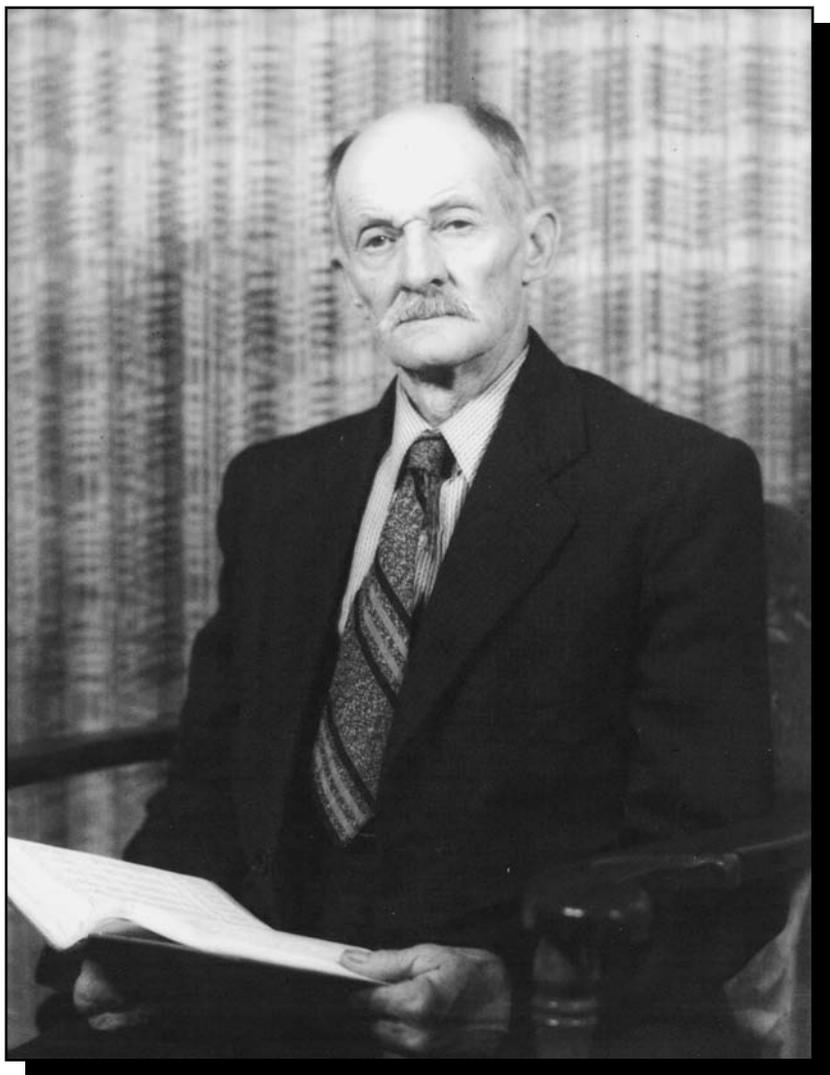
ple. The railroad was also open on the northern route that went from El Paso northeast through Ft. Stockton, Pecos, Abilene, and Ft. Worth. From there he would have gone south to Temple or Belton.

I have told you most everything I know about how Daddy Burton got to Juarez and back, but what about the time he spent there?

Daddy Burton only told me that his Grandfather Lafayette owned a “mercantile” store. He did not elaborate on specifically what that meant or what the store specialized in, if anything. It could have been a general store that handled a lot of different things, but one day I did ask him what a mercantile store was and he said, “Oh, they sell a little of this and a little of that.” One can imagine that restrictions on crossing the border 100 years ago were somewhat less than today, and no doubt the store may have had customers on both sides of the Rio Grande.

Where did he live and what was his relationship with his grandfather? I assume that the relationship was good or he wouldn't have been permitted to return for the second trip. I also think if it had not been a pleasant experience he would not have told me or at least would have been more reluctant to talk about it, which he certainly wasn't. He returned to marry Molly Nicholson and start his own life as a farmer and rancher. His parents and younger brothers moved to Johnson County in November of 1891. In January 1892, he and his wife of just a year moved on to Johnson County to join the rest of the family. Here they bought a small farm and started their family.

From as early as I can remember, as soon as school was out in June, my mother drove me the 400 miles from our home in south Texas near Sinton to spend the entire summer with Mother and Daddy Burton on the ranch southwest of Cleburne. She came back and got me just before school started in September. As a little boy I thought this was wonderful and that Mom did this so I would get to know my grandparents. As I grew older and had my own children I wondered if it wasn't an easy way to get a free baby-sitter for the summer. I have so many great memories of living with them in



**Walter Henry Burton—age 74, circa 1944**

the summers. I followed Daddy Burton around the place like a puppy dog, either on foot, on horseback, or riding in his new 1937 Chevy pickup. In retrospect, he really put up with a lot just to accommodate me. As I got a little older he taught me how to drive a team of mules pulling a wagon, how to care for your horse and how to milk a cow—but never let me drive that new Chevy pickup.

We got up before daylight and before breakfast he tuned his old Philco radio in to station WBAP in Ft. Worth for the 6:00 A.M. news and farm report. Unlike most country men of his time, he didn't particularly like hot biscuits for breakfast, but preferred light bread toast. I remember when we finally got electricity at the ranch in about 1938 my grandmother tried to make toast in the new electric stove. She was never able to master this appliance and invariably would burn the toast. I can tell you it wasn't thrown out. She scraped the burn off with a knife and we ate it. I don't think she ever got used to making toast in that stove, but didn't give up. I never heard her use profanity but she said some pretty terrible things she would like to do with that stove. On several occasions Daddy Burton would say to me, "Come on Son, breakfast is ready. I hear your grandmother scraping the toast." My wife is still amazed that I can eat burned toast.

The first summer I missed going to the ranch was the summer of my fifteenth birthday. The oil company my dad worked for hired many of us as roustabout laborers to earn some money for school or whatever. That was the summer Daddy Burton was killed in a car wreck at age 76. He could still catch that big old dapple-grey gelding of his and ride him. That horse wouldn't let anybody else catch him let alone ride him—including me or any hands that worked on the place. About a year after Daddy Burton's death, my older brother who had taken over the ranch was able to catch the horse and ride him. I think that old horse understood the succession of rights. Three summers later when I had my eighteenth birthday, I thought a lot about Daddy Burton's ride to Juarez and I thought to myself, my god, I wouldn't think of trying that now in 1949 let alone in 1888.



*Photo courtesy of Skip Clark Collection*