

## Chapter 5

# The San Sabá Expedition

**T**he San Sabá expedition eventually got underway in early November of 1831. We were twelve in number. Colonel Bowie in his official report to the Political Chief of Béxar—that is to say, the administrator of the Department of Béxar, which covered a very large part of Tejas—referred to me as “a boy.” You can read the report for yourself if you understand Spanish; it is to be found in the San Antonio Archives. The account begins:

*I left this city on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November last in company with my brother, Rezin P Bowie, nine men, and a boy.*

The nine men were Robert Armstrong, Mathew Doyle, Thomas McCaslin, Daniel Buchanan, James Coryell, Mateo Dias (whom the other men called *Portuguese*), Cephas Ham, Jesse Wallace, and a *señor* Gonzales, whose given name I never learned. I was initially introduced to them as *Kóshkya*. No doubt, I had waited on all or most of them in the *taberna*, but I had no specific memory of any of them. Nor did any of them seem to recognize me.

“Gosh what?” asked James Coryell.

Robert Armstrong and Mathew Doyle too exclaimed at the oddness of my name.

“Don’t he have no Christian name we can call him?” asked Cephas Ham.

Concerned that my voice might give me away as female, I had meant to remain as silent as possible during this entire expedition. But this issue had to be resolved. “Charley,” I said. “You can call me *Charley*.”

“*Charley* it is,” Reason agreed. “Now let’s get moving.”

Incidentally, another account of this expedition written by Reason [Rezin Pleasant Bowie] appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* the following year and was later included in an anthology work *Atkinson’s Casket, or Gems of Literature, Wit and Sentiment*. I have only ever purchased a few books in my life, but one of those is *Atkinson’s Casket*.

By the second or third day out of Béxar, it had become apparent that the men had figured out that I was a girl. They continued to call me *Charley*, and they pretended not to know my secret, but they gave themselves away in small ways. They made it unexpectedly easy for me to find the privacy I required, and they always cut off their ribald stories in mid-sentence the moment I came within earshot. Nor was I ever asked (or even allowed) to do any heavy lifting. This would be the way of things in the future too. If I happened to be signed on to scout for an army or Ranger unit, then the men in the unit, having initially accepted me as a boy, would be somehow unwilling to call attention to my charade.

In any case, we traveled slowly. Colonel Bowie was surveying as we went, drawing maps, and making notes about the lay of the land. Apparently, this expedition was as much about exploration as about prospecting. It did not matter to me, but the men soon began grumbling about the "waste of time." Two weeks into our journey, we had got no further than, afoot, I might have progressed in only a few days.

On the nineteenth, traveling generally northwest, we crossed the Río Llano. We were on the road known as *la Bandera* when we encountered a party of Comanches driving a herd of horses. Three of their number rode out to parlay with us.

"Kóshkeya—I mean Charley—you're with me," said Colonel Bowie. "Reason, you stay here and take charge if anything goes wrong."