

Chapter 8

The Battle of Concepción

Tío Erastus was called *el Sordo* by the Tejanos, for in his youth, a fever had left him with hearing loss in one ear. He would always have to turn his head to better understand what people were saying to him. To the Texians, he was known as *Deaf Smith* (usually pronounced *Deef Smith*). He and *tía* Lupe and their houseful of children (the older ones having been sired by *tío* Vicente) lived at the corner of Presa and Nueva Streets, about six blocks from Hostería Ballardo. *Tío* Erastus was in the cattle business, but not on the same scale as the De Leóns and the Seguíns. Nor did he raise longhorns, as they did. His were muley cattle brought over from Louisiana.

Another Smith, who is shortly to figure in this narrative, was William John Smith, who sometimes called himself *John William Smith*. In the Tejano community, he was known as *el Colorado*, the reason being that he had red hair and a red beard. He had come to Tejas from Hannibal, Missouri, where he had been Sheriff of Ralls County. Like *tío* Erastus, Colorado Smith had married into a well-established Tejano family. He was an occasional visitor to our tavern and reading room, and he was never disagreeable or disruptive. And yet, because of his later scheming to bring harm to Juan Seguín, I should eventually come to regard him as an enemy. In the late summer of 1835, however, that bit of wickedness was still in the future and not yet dreamed of, leastwise not by me. Nor was I ever to know what motivated Colorado Smith's hatred of *don* Juan.

When Stephen F Austin was finally allowed to leave Ciudad México, he came first to San Antonio de Béxar, where he spent two nights at our inn before traveling on to his home in San Felipe. I was immediately struck by how much older he appeared than when I had last seen him two years before. He seemed to have aged at least a decade. In the tavern, I had frequently served him food and drink, but we had never been formally introduced. I had no idea that he even knew my name. As I turned the guest register to him and offered him pen and ink with which to sign his name, he surprised me.

"Thank you, Manuela. Do you think you could get a message to Ramón Músquiz for me?"

"Of course, *señor* Austin. I'll go myself right now."

"Just let him know that I am here and that I'd very much like to see him. Offer him my apologies for not calling on him at his home. Tell him, please, that I am simply too weary from my journey."

"I'm sure he'll understand, sir."

I have no doubt that you already know who Stephen F Austin was. His name is synonymous with Tejas. I am also quite sure you are aware that he was highly regarded by the Texians. What you may not know is that he was equally esteemed by Tejanos. In 1835, Stephen F Austin was easily the most-influential man in Tejas. He possessed considerable power to sway public opinion. He had always remained loyal to México and to the Constitution of 1824. Never once had he suggested that Tejas should be free from México. In 1827, he had even sent Rangers to assist federal troops in suppressing the Fredonia Rebellion. It is my firm belief that, before his incarceration, independence for Texas had never crossed Austin's mind.

Now, I cannot say with authority what transpired between Músquiz and Austin that evening—their two-hour meeting was held behind closed doors—but I have my suspicions. The following night, an even longer meeting took place between Austin, Bowie, Travis, and the two Seguíns (father and son). A clue to what was discussed might be found, I think, in this letter dated the fifth of October, 1835, from Austin to David Burnet:

My friend—

All goes well and gloriously for Texas—the whole country is in arms and moved by one spirit, which is to take Béxar and drive all the military out of Texas. This is as it should be—no half way measures now—war in full. I hope you will enter ardently and warmly in the cause. Now is the time—no more doubts—no submission. I hope to see Texas forever free from

Mexican domination of any kind. It is yet too soon to say this publically, but that is the point we shall aim at; and it is the one I am aiming at. But we must arrive at it by steps, and not all at one jump.

Seamstresses in every town and settlement in Tejas had suddenly become military tailors. Carmen and Luz both had as many orders for new officer uniforms as they could possibly complete by year's end. Money rolled in. The getting ready for war is a huge boost to any economy. On the other hand, there is always the risk that the war itself will later destroy that economy. Mars giveth and Mars taketh away.