

Martin Parmer, Some History and Some Stories
of the Ring-Tailed Panther

It is ironic that we are gathered here in the Palmer Events Center and I am speaking to you about a man named Martin Parmer, or Palmer, as some of his descendants use. I may be related to the man for whom this center was named. If so, he may have been a character like Martin.

#1 (Power point of Martin painting by Charles Shaw.)

Old Creed Taylor in *Tall Men with Long Rifles* has this to say about our subject for the evening—Martin Parmer—at the battle of Gonzales:

“One man in the throng was especially conspicuous . . . he seemed more eager for the fray than any other. This was old Martin Parmer, ‘the ring-tailed panther’—a soubriquet he acquired while serving as a member of the territorial legislature of Missouri, during a free-for-all fight among members. . . . ‘The Panther’ . . . was a Virginian . . . who had spent most of his life along the frontiers of Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas, and had much notoriety throughout the southwest as a fighter and a hunter. But some of his wonderful exploits must have been exaggerated, if not pure fabrications. . . . Though illiterate and rough mannered, Parmer was a man of . . . most extraordinary strength of mind and body and brave as a lion. He was of large

stature and bronzed of feature, always dressed in buckskin hunting shirt and leather trousers, with a panther skin cap, wore his hair long and platted in Indian style, . . . a most extraordinary character.ⁱ

Charles Shaw had probably read Creed Taylor's account of Martin Parmer when he painted the picture shown here. This painting is hanging at the Center for East Texas Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University.

It is all lovely and romantic and I do hope most of it is true. Maybe Martin was at the Battle of Gonzales. He was reportedly at Gonzales at some time, but that may have been when he was on the run after the Fredonian Rebellion fell apart and he was a hunted man. One of my cousins thinks our ancestor may well have been illiterate, as Old Creed Taylor says. And he may have been. That he could sign his name is attested to on the Texas Declaration of Independence. Note that Martin Parmer spelled his name Parmer, not Palmer. He was a Virginian and the Virginians seem to substitute "r's" for "l's".

#2 (Show power point of Martin Parmer's signature on Declaration.)

One thing for sure, he could spin a yarn and so could his son, Thomas, who wrote a pamphlet about the days before the family came to Texas and of Martin's adventures with the Osage Indians. In one story Martin saved the neighboring McElwees little red-headed daughter from the Osage Indians, who had kidnapped her thinking she had powerful medicine and would keep their

lodges warm. According to Thomas, the stock of Martin's gun was shot off but he leaped toward the Indians and with the "naked barrel in his hands in a giant's grip, his eyes blazing as a wounded tiger, and with one bound as a wild beast, and an unearthly scream, his gun-barrel high lifted in the air, proclaimed "I'm the Ringtail Panther of Missouri," and set about killing several of the Osages and giving one more story of the founding of the sobriquet by which he would be known the rest of his life.ⁱⁱ

Martin was famous for having called a preacher to come preach the funeral of his favorite bear dog, the preacher not knowing the funeral was for a dog until he had ridden horseback fifty miles. J. Frank Dobie was particularly fond of this story, writing: "Parmer wanted to pay the respects he considered due his old hunting companion and fellow-conqueror of so many bears. . . . He said, 'I've taken shots at men not near so deserving of a Christian burial as old Bear Meat.'" Dobie was also fond of the tale about Parmer killing Two-Heart, a Sioux chief, so named because he had ripped open a white man and eaten his heart. In retaliation Parmer force-fed Two-Heart until he died.ⁱⁱⁱ The stories go on and on but let's get to one of Martin's more famous escapades in Texas— The Fredonian Rebellion.

That he was there and participated in that one is well known and documented. Stephen F. Austin, who was clearly out-of-sorts with his fellow Missourian, wrote, "a small party of infatuated madmen at Nacogdoches have declared independence and invited the Indians from the Sabine to the Rio

Grande to join them and wage a war of Murder, plunder and desolation on the innocent inhabitants of the frontier. The leader of this party is Martin Parmer."^{iv} That would be in keeping with what Gregg Cantrell calls, "the rowdy" Martin,^v and Edmund Morris Parsons calls "impetuous and irascible."^{vi} James Haley calls him "incorrigible."^{vii} It seems that all the epithets fit.

But back to the Fredonian—Hayden Edwards had received a grant that would allow him to locate 800 families, but he also agreed to honor the grants and claims from prior times made by Spanish or Mexican officials. In 1825 Edwards posted notices that potential claimants needed to show proof of their claims or the land would be considered Edwards'. This stirred up the older settlers and they managed to get the Edwards grant revoked. The Edwards grantees were supportive of Edwards, Martin being one of them. On November 22, 1825, a group of these men rode into Nacogdoches, arrested the Alcalde, Samuel Norris, and the rest of his faction, secured the Old Stone Fort and held a kangaroo court, returning guilty verdicts against those arrested.^{viii} Edwards had promised the Cherokees, through their Chief Richard Fields, that he would give them lands if they threw in with the Fredonians. Thus Austin's distress at the war drums beating in East Texas. Martin again rode back to Nacogdoches on December 16, bearing a flag of two red and white stripes with the legend "Independence, Freedom and Justice."^{ix}

#3 (Power Point of this flag to show here.)

Now I have to stop here and give a little background on Martin's marriages, or lack of them, as the case may be, because of their possible importance in the aftermath of the Fredonian Rebellion. Martin arrived in Texas in the spring of 1825 with his wife Sarah and some of their children, intending to settle in Austin's colony. However, Sarah's illness and death soon after their arrival in Texas changed those plans and they were "stuck" in the neighborhood of Peter Ellis Bean's house, shortly after Bean left for Mexico.^x

One thing led to another as these things are prone to do, and upon hearing that Peter Ellis Bean had died in Mexico, Candace Bean and Martin Parmer married sometime around Christmas Day 1826.^{xi} Soon after this, word reached the newlywed couple that Bean was very much alive and on his way home. Parmer left immediately, but there is no doubt that Bean would have had high on his list of crimes committed by Martin Parmer, that of "marrying" Bean's wife.^{xii} So it is no wonder that Martin would not be pardoned along with the rest of the Fredonian rebels. Just to add confusion to all this marrying business, however, Peter Ellis himself was a bigamist, having a wife in Mexico, so I consider this a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

After the rebellion was put down, Martin had a price on his head. He first headed west with his son Isom, for Gonzales, to stay with friends until the excitement died down. Word soon came that he had better get out of Texas so he headed East, with Bean hot on his heels.^{xiii} "Frank W. Johnson in his memoirs

said: 'Colonel Martin Parmer, a prominent actor in the Fredonian affair, who had left the country in consequence, returned and, as if to beard the lion in his den, in company with James Bowie visited San Antonio. Popular as was Bowie at that time with the Mexicans, he could not disabuse them of the jealousy and fear of Mr. Parmer. Parmer finding his situation unpleasant, if not dangerous, soon retired.'" He crossed the Sabine below Nacogdoches to avoid coming in contact with Bean and the Mexican government.^{xiv}

According to Charles B. Stewart, First Secretary of State of Texas, and another Delegate to the Convention at Washington, "Mr. Parmer gave an interesting account . . . of his escape from San Antonio. He was a wonderfully fascinating talker and his recital . . . greatly amused those who heard him. He was a man absolutely without fear."^{xv} Notice how reports of Parmer's bravery keep popping up in these different accounts of him.

In 1827 Parmer married Margaret Griffin Neal and they had one daughter. After Margaret's death, he married Louisa Lout and they had one son before her death.^{xvi}

Martin moved to Tenaha prior to the summer of 1835 as he was elected from that municipality a member of the Consultation, which met at (San FuLEEP) San Felipe in November of that year.

#4 (Power point of the drawing of the whole convention, Martin is the mustashed man on the left, sitting on the bench with his leg crossed.)

And he was elected a member of the convention, which met at Washington, March 1, 1836, and adopted the Declaration of Independence from Mexico.^{xvii}

My cousin Kameron Searle writes that Martin Parmer probably preferred telling his Indian stories when time allowed, even during those very chaotic days in March of 1836. But here is a synopsis of what Martin was doing besides telling stories. He was:

#5 (Power Point of sketch of Martin Parmer)

- Chairman of the Committee that approved the credentials of the delegates to the Convention at Washington
- Chairman of the Committee assigned the task of “firing” the Governor, Lt. Governor and General Council of the Provisional Government of Texas
- Signed the Texas Declaration of Independence from Mexico
- Member of the Committee that prepared the final five original copies of the Texas Declaration of Independence

- Chairman of the Committee that prepared the draft of the Constitution of the Republic of Texas

- After news reached the Convention about the fall of the Alamo, He was Authorized by the Convention to press into service any property both public and private for the use of the military. Martin Parmer was the only citizen of the Republic given this extraordinary power by the Convention. My cousin Taylor Pendley always says that Martin Parmer was thus the only duly appointed horse thief in Texas.

- Martin's son, Isom Parmer, was elected the Sergeant-at-Arms of the convention and sold Sam Houston the gray horse, Saracen, that was shot out from under him at San Jacinto,^{xviii} but that is another great story to be told by Kameron Searle.

Martin Parmer, The Ring Tailed Panther, was 58 years old at the time of the Convention. He was one of the oldest delegates to the Convention. After the war, Martin returned home to manage his land holdings. He married once again, Zina Kelley, and had 5 more children with her while living in Jasper County.^{xix}

#6 (Power point photo of Elizabeth Parmer Chandler, daughter of Zina Kelley and Martin and my great, great grandmother, born in 1842.)

Martin had 17 children altogether and a lot of descendants.

In February of 1850, Martin traveled to Walker County where his sons by his first marriage lived and where he intended to move and live in his old age. While there he was feted with a dinner given by his friend Sam Houston and other prominent citizens of Huntsville. Following the dinner, Houston proposed a toast recounting the part Martin had played in the Fredonian Rebellion, in helping to write the constitution for the Republic of Texas, and in becoming one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

#7 (Power point of grave at State Cemetery)

Martin rode home to Jasper in very inclement weather, contracted pneumonia and died on March 2, 1850, at 72 years of age—on the 14th anniversary of the Declaration of Texas Independence that he had signed.

He was born June 4, 1778, in Virginia. He is buried in the State Cemetery in Austin. Parmer County is named in his honor.^{xx} There is a Martin Parmer Scholarship in Texas History at the History Department of the University of Texas at Austin.

#8 (Power Point of Charles Shaw painting, again.)

Stephen Blount, a fellow East Texan and another delegate to the Convention at Washington, wrote a fitting epitaph for the Ring-Tailed Panther.

He wrote: "Mr. Parmer . . . was a unique character but with all, he was a man with the best of impulses—honest, brave and heroic."^{xxi} Of course, with him being my great-, great-, great- grandfather I find all of those traits in him and hope some of them—and the tales by and about him—are even true.

In keeping with our East Texas theme, notice that on each table is a book donated by the University of North Texas Press titled *Boarding in the Thicket: Recipes and Reminiscences of Early Big Thicket Boarding Houses* by Wanda Landry. Since we are eating Boarding House style tonight, we thought it appropriate that someone at your table take away a copy. Please look under your plate and the person with the dot on their plate will take away the book.

Thank you all so much for your patience and for being here and for your support of TSHA when it needed you most. I have loved being the president of this organization. It was another surprise and great honor for me and I thank you for it. I now leave it in the extremely capable hands of Walter Buenger.

ⁱ James T. DeShields, as told to him by Creed Taylor. *Tall Men with Long Rifles*, 1971, San Antonio, TX: The Naylor Company, 1314.

ⁱⁱ Tom Parmer, *Fifty-Five Years Ago in the Wilderness or the Old Ringtail Panther of Missouri*. Dallas, TX 1874; Dallas Daily Commercial Book and Job Rooms, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. Frank Dobie newspaper article, n.d., unidentified newspaper. See also DeShields, *Tall Men with Long Rifles*, 13.

^{iv} Edmund Morris Parsons, "The Fredonian Rebellion," *Texana*, Vol. V. No. 1, Spring 1967. Waco, TX: Texian Press, 29.

^v Gregg Cantrell, *Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas*. Yale University Press, 1999, 183

^{vi} Parsons, 26

^{vii} From <http://www.humanities-interactive.org/texas/signers/index.html?collectionVar=TexasHistoryStop&pageVar=3>

-
- viii Jack Jackson, *Indian Agent: Peter Ellis Bean in Mexican Texas*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005, 61. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. ", "<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/EE/fed4.html> (accessed February 8, 2009).
- ix Jackson, 63.
- x Jackson, 70.
- xi Jackson, 70.
- xii Jackson, 70-71.
- xiii Jackson, 79.
- xiv Sam Houston Dixon, 150–51.
- xv Sam Houston Dixon, *The Men Who Made Texas Free*, Houston, TX: Texas Historical Publishing Company, 1924 (facsimile), 151.
- xvi *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpa34.html> (accessed February 8, 2009).
- xvii Dixon, 151.
- xviii Kameron Searle, “Martin Parmer: A Texas Hero as Reported in the Journals of the Convention at Washington in March 1836,” paper presented at the 2001 Palmer/Parmer Family Reunion, Katy & E. Don Walker, Sr. Education Center, Huntsville, Texas, March 31, 2001. See <http://martinparmer.tripod.com/id9.html>.
- xix Kameron Searle. See <http://martinparmer.tripod.com/id9.html>.
- xx Joe E. and Carolyn R. Ericson, *Martin Parmer: The Man and the Legend*, Nacogdoches, TX: Ericson Books, 1999, 91. Pendley, 103.
- xxi Sam Houston Dixon, 154.

For the edification of my children and grandchildren:

Martin Parmer married Zina Kelly in 1840, or thereabout (my great-, great-, great-grandparents)

Their daughter Elizabeth (Betsy) married Rufus Chandler in 1857 (my great-, great-grandparents—she is the one buried in the Lufkin Cemetery)

Their daughter Sarah Cornelia Chandler married Joel Conway Moren in 1879 (my great-grandparents)

Their daughter Jennie Moren married Joseph Patrick Courtney in 1899 (my grandparents)

Their daughter Bess Courtney married Carl Andrew Brannen in 1924 (my parents)

Their daughter Frances Brannen married Ross Vick in 1956

(I have marriage certificates or copies thereof of all of the above except for Martin & Zina and Fran & Ross. Ironic, no?)