

THE SHANKS FAMILY CHRONICLE

Rarely is one given the opportunity of knowing his ancestors, except by name or hearsay, unless they are of great historical importance. The descendants of John and Sarah Jane Shanks, Kentuckians who emigrated to Texas in 1851, are privileged to know them more intimately through a collection of family letters that have been lovingly preserved over the years. These letters are presently the property of Eva Jane Morgan (Mrs. Minor Morgan), nee Potter, of Dallas, Texas, a great-great-granddaughter.

Some of the letters are so faded with age as to be almost unreadable. Others are torn or creased. Some words, even though clear, can't be deciphered due to the handwriting. Words are sometimes repeated unnecessarily ("and and"). Many of the letters have but a single paragraph containing many lines of thought. Many have sentences undisturbed by punctuation. Words are frequently misspelled. Sentences are often ungrammatical. There is a good deal of phonetic spelling, especially of names. Some of the handwriting is classical and some little better than a childish scrawl. There is no shortage of slang. They were, in short, not all easy to read.

Deciphering these letters was a time-consuming, but highly pleasurable and rewarding, task, involving untold hundreds of hours of squinting, re-reading, and puzzling. My purpose in undertaking the project was primarily to perpetuate the thoughts and personalities of the writers. I wanted them to be available to their descendants and to historians. To facilitate reading them, I have taken the liberty of editing them to some extent. I saw no point in inflicting the difficulties and frustrations of translation on my readers. I have deemed it more important to preserve their ideas rather than their mistakes in grammar and penmanship. Purists, whether historians or puzzle-fans, may scoff, but it is a decision that I do not regret.

A few common threads run through all the letters. One is a preoccupation with health. Nearly every letter commences with a statement about the health of the sender and family. "This leaves us all well" is a common salutation. Illnesses which today have either been totally eradicated or held in check by medical science were rampant in those days. If a disease struck, it was likely to ravage the population before it burned itself out. The spectre of death was always present and was no respecter of age or youth. Nearly every family experienced the death of many children. It is no wonder that sickness, or the fear of sickness, was so often the subject-matter of their letters.

Another common thread is the almost equally-present exhortation to write. "Write as soon as you get this" is an almost constant plea. Or they chastise because no letter has been received. We think our mail service poor today, but delivery in those days really was uncertain. The mailman didn't deliver to the home; mail was addressed to the recipient in care of the nearest post office. Delivery was disrupted by high water, Indians, war, and other calamities.

It is my fond hope that this compilation of the Shanks family letters will survive, to be read and enjoyed by future

generations. Few families possess such a treasure.

I hope that you will be as stimulated and excited by reading the letters as I have been. If so, my efforts will be amply rewarded.

John R. Nelms

JOHN R. NELMS
Dallas, Texas
Sept. 4, 1980

THE FAMILY

John Shanks was born in Virginia, probably in what is now Washington County, in about 1803. His father was German-born. The family name was probably Schenck, meaning wine-taster, cup-bearer, or butler. His family emigrated to Kentucky when he was quite young.

Sarah Jane Craig, daughter of John A. Craig and Juliet Montgomery, who were married in Abingdon, Virginia, on April 3, 1811, was born in Virginia about 1813. Her family too emigrated to Kentucky when she was young.

John and Sarah met in Kentucky and were married in Bowling Green in 1829. Her father had died about 1814; her mother had married Henry Shanks, who was John's brother. They were, then, uncle and niece-by-marriage.

John and Sarah had at least seven children: John Craig, George Henry, Juliet Ann, Catherine Henry, Sarah Jane, Hettie E., and Mary Elizabeth.

John's brother, Henry, and Sarah Jane's mother, Juliet, had at least three children of their own: Ben T. Shanks, Hettie Shanks, and Andrew M. "Dick" Shanks. They were half-brothers and sisters to Sarah Jane and nephews and nieces to John.

Of John and Sarah Jane Shanks' children only three were to survive and marry: Juliet married Nicholas George Varnum Henderson in Kentucky in 1850; Sarah Jane married Dan Cornwell in Kentucky in the same year; and Hettie married Thomas Halsell in Texas.

This brief outline of kinship will, hopefully, sufficiently identify the most important relationships and facilitate reading the letters.

1-3

"GONE TO TEXAS"

On or about December 11, 1851, John Shanks, 48, a Virginia-born farmer, and fifteen others pulled up stakes in Allen Springs, Allen County, Kentucky, and departed for what many called "the promised land," Texas.

In the party were his wife, Sarah Jane, ³⁶38; their children: Sarah Jane "Puss" Cornwell, about 20, John Craig Shanks, about 17, Hetty Shanks, about 13, George Henry "Hen" Shanks, about 11, and Mary Elizabeth "Molly" Shanks, about 10; Sarah Jane Shanks' mother (and widow of John Shanks' brother, Henry), Juliet Ann Shanks, in her late 50's or early 60's; "Puss's" husband, Dan Cornwell, about 26; Dan's sister, Eliza, and her husband, Tom Coleman; John's nephews (and Sarah Jane's half-brothers), Benjamin T. Shanks, about 35, and Andrew M. "Dick" Shanks, about 21; and two slaves: "Aunt Milly," who belonged to Juliet Shanks, and "Europe," about 15, who belonged to John Shanks.

What would motivate a man like John Shanks to sell his home and treasured possessions, to say farewell (possibly forever) to beloved family and dear friends, to uproot himself and his family, and to travel to a distant and unfamiliar country in search of a new home, subjecting all to hardship, danger, and uncertainty? The most likely answer would appear to be that the grass looked greener on the other side of the fence. In other words, he went to make his fortune, to improve his economic prospects. Life in Allen Springs was good, probably as good as one might expect of rural life in those days, but there was little opportunity for a man to get ahead, or so he believed. The best

1-24
land was already owned by others, and one couldn't buy land without capital. In those days of self-sufficiency and bartering, cash money was hard to come by. But in Texas, land as rich as any in Kentucky lay vacant, awaiting ambitious men willing to claim it. In this new country a man's horizons were limited only by his willingness to work, his courage, and perhaps luck. The sky was the limit. Like a magnet, it drew John Shanks and men like him.

What motivated him did not necessarily motivate the others. Juliet Shanks, for instance, in the twilight of her life, would have been content to stay in familiar surroundings. But the people she cared most about in the world were going; she would not be left behind. The young married men, not yet fathers, Dan and Tom, and the two bachelors, Ben and Dick, not yet weighted down by responsibilities and with their whole lives before them, were probably drawn as much by the prospect of adventure as by the economic opportunity. The wives, who may not have been seriously consulted in those pre-liberation days, and the children went where their breadwinner led them. "Puss" Cornwell was about three months pregnant when they left and cannot have been too keen about embarking on such a difficult journey. And as for the slaves, they had nothing to say about where they were taken, of course.

Moving in 1851 wasn't as easy as it is today. One considering a move today can fly there for an inspection in just a few hours, or can write a Chamber of Commerce for information, or can pick up a telephone and call a realtor to have a home waiting. There is no need to dispose of one's possessions; a moving company will pack, transport, and unpack. A jet plane, a bus, or the family car can whisk one to his new home in comfort and safety in hours or, at the most, a few days.

1-5

If arrangements have not already been made for shelter, there is a wide choice of comfortable hotels and motels. Food is no problem; restaurants and grocery stores abound. One glance at the yellow pages will show where a hospital or a doctor may be found. Moving cross country today is, at worst, an inconvenience; then it was perilous. There must have been many sleepless, anguished nights before the decision to go was made. We can only guess at the feelings they had.

The first four or five days of the trip actually took them further from their final destination. They went a hundred miles overland to Evansville, Indiana, on the Ohio River, the nearest port city, and there boarded, along with at least two hundred other emigrants, a steamboat for New Orleans. The fare was ten dollars for each above the age of twelve.

The weather was unfavorable for the commencement of the journey. The Ohio River was very low and what water there was was frozen in many places. The boat was captive in the ice for more than two weeks and was detained several days on sandbars. Eventually, however, there was a thaw and the water rose. They were on their way!

They entered the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois, and passed, in succession, Memphis, Greenville, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Baton Rouge before arriving at New Orleans on or about January 12, 1852. There they were met by four inches of snow, a rare occurrence for that city. In spite of exhaustion and the inhospitable weather, it is probable that they enjoyed a tour of the city before making arrangements to leave it.

1-6

After a brief rest, they boarded another steamer, the St. Charles, and proceeded back up the Mississippi to its junction with the Red River, then up the Red River to Alexandria, Louisiana, where, because of low water, they were forced to change boats for Shreveport. This doubling back up the Mississippi was apparently required by the shipping company. Had the travelers disembarked earlier, they would not have been permitted to board another boat without paying an additional fare.

At Shreveport they hired wagons at four dollars each per day to take them into Texas. Before leaving, Dick Shanks sold his mother's slave, "Aunt Milly," and sent her to Baton Rouge, much to the disapproval of his half-sister, Sarah Jane. One can only attempt to imagine what Aunt Milly's feelings must have been.

Departing for Texas on or about January 25, 1852, they probably crossed into the state that, or the following, day, entering somewhere just south of present-day Caddo Lake. Their route probably took them along what is now State Highway 134 to Jefferson, then an important gateway city, then by what is now State Highway 49 through Daingerfield to Mount Vernon. They arrived at Veal's Store, Hopkins County, near present-day Weaver, on Sunday, February 1, 1852.

Tarrant, about four miles north of Sulphur Springs, was then the county seat of Hopkins County and the road between Jefferson and Tarrant was a busy one. Trading posts, like Veal's (later Lollar's), sprang up along the highway and became community centers. Veal's Store was twelve miles east of Tarrant. A post office, called White Oak, was opened there in 1847. Today, Weaver is just off Interstate Highway 30, twelve miles east of Sulphur Springs and five miles west of Saltillo.

1-7

Though the prairie there looked unpromising as farmland and was reported by the oldest settlers to be the poorest part of the state, they decided to stop and raise a crop before looking for a permanent home. They may have also been influenced by the condition of "Puss" Cornwell.

Their entire journey, taking into consideration the meandering of the rivers, was about 1500 miles, only about 250 miles of which was overland. Only about eleven days of the fifty-two day trip involved land travel. The expense for John, his family, and Juliet Shanks was between five and six hundred dollars. They believed that had they started a month later, the trip would have cost half as much and would have taken half as long.

"Puss" gave birth to a son, Thomas Calvin Cornwell, on June 12, 1852. This happy event was followed by tragedy. John and Sarah Jane lost ten-year-old Mary on September 1, Juliet Shanks on October 20, and eleven-year-old Henry on November 16. Three deaths in seventy-seven days.