

*A. C. Greene*

# A PERSONAL COUNTRY

I L L U S T R A T E D B Y

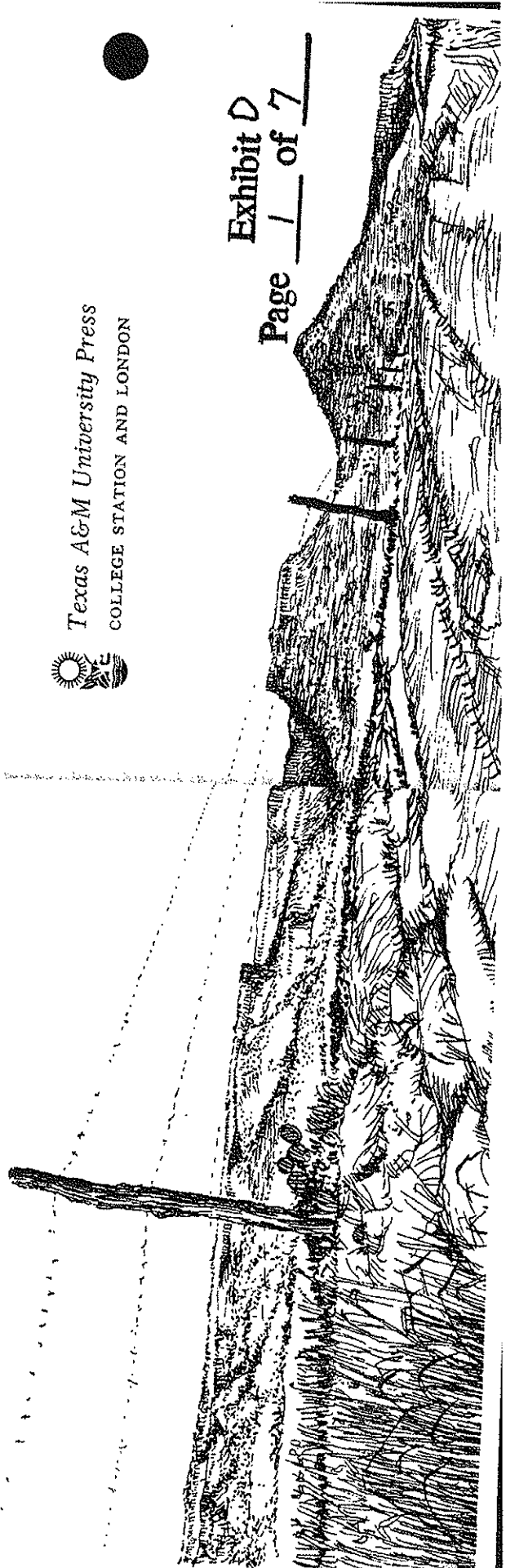
A N C E L N U N N

Foreword by LARRY L. KING



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passes through almost featureless country—that is, nothing in the way of a natural rock formation might qualify as looking like a chimney. So whence the name? Another of the mysterious coincidences of history in West Texas. I call them coincidences as though human understanding were the only standard of history. It could be that legend, or folklore, or myth is more accurate, or more persistent, than historical records. Possibly there was someone who had come to this unbelievably remote spot earlier and built a cabin, erecting a rock chimney (flat, easily handled limestone is abundant along the very banks of Chimney Creek, already cubed “as if prepared by some great Natural Mason,” as Captain Randolph Marcy noted in passing through the area in 1849). History has dropped that pioneer’s identity, but presuming his chimney was still standing in 1857, the name sticks.

Or it could be another mysterious West Texan, one Jesse Stem, an Indian agent from Ohio who farmed, in 1852, rather near Chimney Creek. Stem was one of those rare white men who seemed able to live in peace with the most notorious Indians, and his farm was set up for experimental purposes. He was determined that West Texas could grow crops; vegetables, melons, corn, and the like, and that its Comanches and other tribes could thus make their own living on adequate reservation lands. And he spent over two years with his wife and four daughters out there, isolated and remote to all white traffic in proving his contention. (One account says he had eight men putting in crops for him and one year made \$4,300 “on the ground,” which implies someone came and hauled his produce away.) The location of Stem’s farm and store are hazy. A writer who is quoted most often says his location was six miles “below” present-day Lueders (a little Jones County town) “on the right bank of the Clear Fork.” Most of the few historians who have paid much

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attention to Jesse Stem have interpreted "below" as being south. However, I feel the description was via the river itself, and since the Clear Fork runs south to north, "below" Lueders would be over in Shackelford County. I am supported indirectly in this conclusion by Sallie Matthews who tells about her husband buying land from Stem's widow and how fertile the fields were, without even so much as a stump to hinder the plow.

But wherever he was located, Stem made a simple discovery which thousands of other West Texans to follow made for themselves, and often to their sorrow. If it rains in West Texas, almost any kind of produce thrives; if it doesn't rain, it dies. Even hauling water from the river, as he is said to have done, won't keep things alive. Unfortunately, Stem turned out to be the victim of the Indians he understood so well. But not necessarily from a malicious act so much as a casual one, a characteristic of both fate and the American Indians. Two young Kickapoo bucks—and the tribe was never so inimical to Texans and other white men as most plains Indians—disgruntled or perhaps intoxicated, or maybe, as West Texans still describe certain undefined but mean attitudes, just "ornery," chanced across him and a companion and killed them. His wife, who could never quite understand what motivated her husband, took his death philosophically, for she had foreseen it for years, and on their last trip back to Ohio she had extracted a promise from him of a change of occupation.

The Indians took his death strongly. The tribal chief pronounced a death sentence on Stem's slayers and a contemporary account by a white man says one of the bucks was killed on sight by some of his tribesmen and the other was taken out and tomahawked to death by his own brother—on a sort of voluntary basis. But Jesse Stem was dead too soon, and not many of the white men who fol-

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lowed him to the West Texas frontier held his views or sympathies, as the Indians learned.

However (returning to Chimney Creek), if it was named for something Jesse Stem left in the wilderness, then it is possibly misnamed, for Stem's dwelling was a good many miles farther north, and Chimney Creek dumps its pitiful stream into the Clear Fork after running not nearly so far. I prefer to keep the vision of an even earlier, even more mysterious inhabitant as source for the name.

At Chimney Creek is one of the rare places where you may actually ride in the ruts of the old Butterfield stages. One summer day, a few years ago, I managed to do so in an old Chevrolet, accompanied by Robert Nail and Shackelford County rancher, Robert Green. We were driving through rather high pasture grass, trying unsuccessfully to discover some trace of Smith's station. We had already dismissed a nearby ranch house which was held to be "the old stage station" by some of the half dozen or so people living in a five-mile radius. The house, picturesque and old by frontier standards, looked like a perfect Butterfield station but the owner, showing the three of us around, smiled and said he didn't exactly discourage the Butterfield station legend for it seemed to please not only the neighbors but the ranch hands—but his house had been constructed in the 1870's and there wasn't much question about the date. The fact that this particular house had been built into the side of the hill that afforded a deep cellar, supposedly used for penning horses under the house, is probably the basis for the Butterfield affiliation. On the other hand there were other, later, stage lines through the country and the ranch house lies right on the direct route from Albany to Abilene, so it could have been a way-stop.

But all this aside, my two Robert friends and I were

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nervously nosing the old Chevrolet through the high grass, which completely hid anything and everything before us, when I felt the steering wheel give a jerk and the front wheels lock in on something. (Can you remember letting your car be guided on certain avenues by the old streetcar rails in the pavement? It was that sensation.) The next thing we knew we were being controlled by the ruts of the Butterfield trail. Not only that, but before many yards we had hit something too substantial to drive over, and when we got out to inspect the barrier we discovered a pile of dressed stone, a wide hearth still in place, and the discernible outlines of a building that had been Smith's station. And we had run into it to find it.

We recalled from reading that monumental work on the Butterfield trail written by Roscoe Conkling and his wife, that at the same time they visited (in the 1930's) they had found an old rock corral nearby. There was no evidence of it and by rights it should at least have left a great many piles of rock, even if thrown down from their former positions as walls. The mystery was cleared up a few weeks later quite by chance when I was buying gasoline twenty miles or more down the highway at a filling station on Deadman Creek near Hamby. The proprietor and I got to talking about how the creek got its unusual name (there's no mystery about it; a dead man was found floating in a pool along its length). One creek carried into another and I mentioned Chimney Creek and was surprised to hear the old man say he had been foreman of the ranch on whose acres the Smith's station ruins were found. I asked him if he recalled the rock pen and he said he certainly did, it had been there from the first day he ever rode the ranch. My heart sank a little because, as I told him, we hadn't been able to find the corral, therefore must not have found Smith's station.

"Oh, that?" he said, shooting a wad of tobacco spit

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out toward the highway. "Well, just before I quit there the Highway Department come by wantin' to know where they could dig out some rock to crush for new roadbed. I told 'em, 'Hell, don't need to dig. There's a long line of rocks down there in that Chimney Creek flat that you're welcome to.'"

So the Butterfield corral at Smith's station was scooped up, crushed, and put down as part of the roadbed for State Highway 351. Maybe it was appropriate, despite the injury to history. Using a Butterfield ruin to create a new road is gloriously just, as symbolism goes.

BEYOND CHIMNEY CREEK the countryside is remarkably unchallenging, although a few miles to the south or east lie some magnificent West Texas ranch vistas—and I shall presume a ranch imparts a different look to the landscape, if I may. However, another mysterious, or at least curiously unrecorded, site lies between Smith's station and the next Butterfield stop, which was at Fort Phantom Hill, about twelve miles southwest. This mysterious location was the site of the former town of Rising Sun. I lived within twenty miles of that site for many years (and in West Texas, twenty miles is almost next door) and I have never been able to find any but the scantiest information on the forgotten city of Rising Sun. Even though it was still shown on U. S. topographical maps of 1893, I have never met anyone who had lived there or was born there. Today where Rising Sun stood is a plowed field, not even reached by a highway or public road of any sort. I would suspect that in its heyday Rising Sun had the ubiquitous fortune of Jones County towns to have a cotton gin, a post office, some stores, maybe a bank, and certainly a Baptist and Methodist church. The

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