

Texas Bachelors Beamed At Widow's Welcome

By Marie Beth Jones

First In A Series

Its white paint peeling and worn away by time and winds and rain, the Underwood house at East Columbia has assumed that forlorn appearance usually seen only in elderly, childless aunts, whose once loving nieces and nephews no longer care. But now "aunt's" future is

looking up.

Several generations down the line, some of her nieces have decided to show that they still remember her. The first protestation of affection -- and indication that something is going to be done to help the old girl -- came from the West Columbia Garden Club. That group has made restoration of the Underwood home its main project for

the year.

It is an ambitious scheme. Even though several of the county's historical groups appear interested in the idea, and the general public seems sympathetic, it will be expensive. But the club members have already faced that fact, and have set to work with that spirit which can be mustered only by a group of women engrossed in a "cause."

The first real step toward their goal was a silver tea held in West Columbia several weeks ago. It was considered highly successful, but is only the beginning of what must, of necessity, be a long campaign.

The very fact that it still stands -- possibly the oldest residence still in existence in Brazoria County -- is a tribute, both to the men who built the house 130 years ago, and to the women who made it a home during most of that period.

Something of an anachronism, it was a town house, built and occupied in a time and place where plantation economy was supreme. It represents others of its type built in this area during that fast moving period when Texas was an independent republic.

Since the first liveoak timbers were erected for its frame, the house has been threatened three times with extinction. Each time, the threat came from the river which had given the town life, with the swirling red waters of the Brazos creeping uncomfortably close, crumbling the clay banks and sending fissures beneath the foundations.

Somehow, each time, the house was moved to safety. Now the danger from the river seems past, as dams upstream have tamed the Brazos' cannibalistic tendency to eat away at its own banks, leaving it still sullen and swift flowing, but apparently impotent.

It is simple old age which is the ailment now to be feared for the house. Without tender loving care of the sort which the garden club is proposing, there is



word of the good accommodations she offered.

It was a time of growth and change, with each hoarse steamboat whistle a warning to prepare for more newcomers, who would need meals and a place to stay until they could settle on their own land.

Columbia was a handy stopping point for colonists who kept the trails worn between Velasco, Brazoria and San Felipe. As word of Mrs. Carson's establishment spread, more and more of them made it a point to find themselves near Columbia when night fell.

Among the newcomers who stopped in Columbia was Ammon Underwood, a bookish young man from Lowell, Mass. Lonely for his family and friends, he turned his hand to a variety of chores before finally settling in Columbia, where he established a mercantile business.

He was to become Mrs. Carson's star boarder -- and eventually, her son-in-law.

(To Be Continued)

Next Week:

"AMMON GOES TO WAR"

Tender Loving Care Needed

The Underwood house at East Columbia has stood for 130 years, but is destined to succumb to old age unless the West Columbia Garden Club and other interested organizations and individuals are successful in their efforts to finance its restoration. Believed to be the oldest house still standing in Brazoria County, it is of that little known genus, the "Town House". Boosters of the restoration project hope to repair and refurbish the house, furnish it with household

items typical of those used in Texas during the early and mid-19th century, and open it for public view on a regular basis. Since the Varner-Hogg State Park -- with the plantation house open for tours -- is located only a few miles away, this would provide a double incentive for out-of-county visitors to come to the area, as well as giving county residents the historical benefits of touring such old residences.

(Photo Courtesy of Dave Toney)

no hope of its recovery.

Such a demise would be an ignoble end to a building which has witnessed a great deal of history, and which could do much to impress county residents and visitors alike with the importance of Brazoria County's part in that history.

That she would reign in such a house could hardly have occurred to Catherine Jane

Carson as she loaded her invalid husband and three small children into a covered wagon in Louisiana in 1824. Settling her family as comfortably as possible among the household items inside, she climbed into the wagon seat and tucked down her ample skirts -- a move designed to preserve both decorum and fabric from harm by vagrant breezes of their passage.

Then, picking up the reins and clucking to the team, she began a trip that can hardly have been less than unalloyed horror. Added to worries about her husband's health, the tensions heightened by high spirits of her children and the wear of travel, she faced the dangers of the trek through Indian country, of passage across swollen streams and deserted miles where she could look to no one but herself for help should trouble arise.

Somehow she shepherded her brood to its destination -- the cedar brakes along the San Bernard River. They built a little cabin, and were beginning to become accustomed to the loneliness of their new surroundings, and to send out tendrils of hope for the future, when her husband died.

Suddenly the cabin and the vacant countryside which surrounded it were unbearable. She was alone except for her children, with no solution to the problems of how to feed and clothe them, alone in the wilderness.

The sound of the last prayer offered up for her husband's soul had hardly died away when she loaded up her youngsters and their belongings and moved to Columbia.

She could support them there, by doing the same things she had always done. She could make people comfortable, provide them with food and a nice clean, comfortable place to live. She opened a boarding house, catering at first mainly to the children who attended Thomas J. Pilgrim's school, providing warming pans and cold remedies; snacks and hot meals; affection and scolding, singly or in combination, as needed.

Travelers, too weary to do more than collapse after their long rides, stopped off at Mrs. Carson's place, to continue their trips later and spread

This Old House

Ammon And His Friends Fight Might of Mexico On Land, Sea

Second In A Series
By Marie Beth Jones

The storm of gossip which raged daily inside stores operating in early Texas was apt to be accompanied by clouds of pipe smoke and showers of tobacco juice, as well as the thunder of words, both true and questionable.

As proprietor of such an establishment, located at "Columbia Landing", Ammon Underwood was in a position to hear every conceivable tale, retold in half a hundred different versions.

Although the primary purpose of those early stores was to dispense items ranging from

patterns and calico to coffee and snuff, they were also used as rest stops by weary travelers, as gathering places by local residents, and as general headquarters for that portion of the male population which happened to find itself in the vicinity during store hours.

Writing in a cardboard bound account book, Ammon duly recorded much of the information so freely given in his store, as well as adding a few disapproving comments, giving vent to his homesickness, and mentioning a bit about his own doings.

Unhappily for posterity, he apparently thought better of some of his entries, and neatly cut several portions from his journal.

A multitude of political jottings remain, however, and Ammon's opinion about current events ran the gamut from criticism of self-seeking politicians and disgust at both quality and quantity of "public meetings" to horror at the news of Fannin's fate and pride in action of the Texian Navy.

"The affairs of this country are now in a very alarming situation and a thousand speculative rumors are afloat," he wrote in June, 1835. "What will be the final result no one can predict to any degree of certainty. People in anticipation of a coming conflict begin to talk of removing their families out of the country."

In this and subsequent entries, Ammon wrote of the rumor that Santa Anna "is now marching an army of some thousands of men to drive the colonists out of the country," but adds that such a thing "is hardly to be credited" even though "the people are alarmed and much excitement exists." He jotted down major historical happenings with that feeling of immediacy which no formal history can give, telling of the "warmer politicians" who wanted to arm and rescue Stephen F. Austin from a prison cell in Mexico City, and of the conduct of unauthorized band of Texas hotheads at Anahuac, about which "the public are still highly excited."

In August, the call was issued for a third public meeting, to be held in Columbia. According to Ammon's journal, "The avowed purpose" of the gathering "was to ascertain by the voice of the people of this jurisdiction whether they were or were not in favour of a convention of all Texas."

He goes on to say that the proceedings "were conducted with much intregue and deception knowing that a majority of the people were opposed to that measure for many

pertinent reasons."

Rumors were spread that three Mexican vessels, armed and with soldiers onboard, were anchored at the mouth of the Brazos. According to Ammon, this was a political maneuver of the war party, and the "news operated like an electric shock on some." Even though the rumor was not fully believed, news that the vessels were only merchant ships from New Orleans came too late to counteract the harm already caused by the tale, Ammon explained.

Less than a month later, however, there was real trouble, not just rumor of it, and Ammon wrote in his journal the story of a brig, loaded with lumber, and putting out from Velasco when "a Mexican schooner under command of Capt. (Thomas M.) Thompson an englishman" captured the ship. The steamer Laura chugged to the rescue, and was "fired upon a number of times but sustained no injury."

A Mexican warship, the Correo de Mejico, was standing by outside the Brazos River Bar at Velasco, still hoping that she might recapture the brig Tremont, when the merchant ship San Felipe arrived on the scene in a manner as dramatic as a cavalry entrance in a Saturday movie.

Loaded with "a rich and heavy freight from N. Orleans" which belonged mainly to Ammon's close friend James Cochrane, the San Felipe may at first have appeared tempting rather than menacing. As Capt. Thompson soon discovered, however, the San Felipe was armed. The ship "immediately opened her ports" upon the Mexican ship, and Capt. Thompson "attempted to effect escape but could not succeed but was taken and brought safe to anchor at the mouth of the Brazos and subsequently sent to New Orleans for trial," Ammon wrote.

Among the passengers on board the San Felipe were Stephen F. Austin, returning from his prison cell in Mexico City; and another Texas patriot, Lorenzo de Zavala.

Ammon's feeling about the need for violent action underwent an abrupt change between the time of his journal entry of Aug. 3 and that of Sept. 25, 1835. In August he had written, "Public meetings upon public meetings are continually called, for what purpose; whether called by self interest or patriotism may be, to each reflecting mind, quite apparent."

Less than two months later, however, he wrote, "The war cry is raised. The sword (sword) is Gerded on, the war horse prepared and ready to be mounted. Much unanimity of feeling prevails at present. The volunteer list opened in this place (Columbia) yesterday and nearly all the young folks have subscribed as volunteers to meet Gen. Coss who is reported to have arrived at Copono with four hundred armed troops.

"There are about the same number at San Antonio with which corps he intends uniting and then make a descent upon



AMMON UNDERWOOD

in the thick of the action during the latter battle, where the Mexicans "commenced and kept up for some time a canonading upon us but without effect."

On Nov. 3, the Texian forces made an attack "upon the town this night in 3 divisions but nothing effected."

The following day, in company with Gen. W.D.C. Hall, Peter W. Grayson, W. H. Secres, McLen Bracey, William Hall and others, Ammon rode to San Felipe on furlough, his first combat duty behind him.

(To Be Continued)

Next Week:

THE RUNAWAY SCRAPE

decided "that the voice of his adopted country called for his aid and . . . I have resolved to accompany him."

On Nov. 10, in company with several of his friends and acquaintances, Ammon took his departure for "head quarters of the American volunteer Army". The first night, they camped near the San Bernard River, then rode some 20 miles daily, camping out each night until they reached "Gonsales on the Warlupe", where they were told that the Texian army had begun the march to San Antonio.

Overtaking them the sixth day after their departure, they joined the army, which was moving toward "Sea Willy".

Ammon tells of their adventures, including an encounter near Mission Espada, when about 200 Mexicans began firing upon the forces in the Mission. The Mexicans "soon retreated" after surprising from ambush a division of some 150 Texans, including Ammon's company and two others.

An hour-long battle followed, during which "more than 500 guns were discharged upon us and the balls whistled around us in every direction but no one was injured," though Ammon heard reports that "3 or 4 Mexicans" had been killed, and two horses were "left dead upon the field."

He continued his account of battles in the same personalized style, telling of men he knew well scoring victories against the might of Mexico, in encounters later to be known as the battles of Concepcion and the Old Mill. Ammon was again

This Old House

Ammon, Carsons Join Fearful Texans In Runaway Scrape

Third Of A Series

By Marie Beth Jones

War may have seemed remote to some residents of Columbia until the last day of February, 1836. For any who had already failed to realize the dangerous situation which the colonists faced, that day marked a dramatic change.

A message, five days from San Antonio, gave Columbians their first news of the tragedy which was taking place at the Alamo.

"The small garrison of Americans amounting to 150 men were attacked by the Mexicans amounting to 2000 with Santa Anna at their head," wrote Ammon Underwood in his journal the following day.

"A general and immediate turnout of a great majority of our citizens will be the result," he predicted. "A spirit to afford the most prompt possible aid to the few gallant citizens who are now in the field contending against twenty times their number is every where manifest."

In his next entry, however, Ammon ends the story of the men -- many of them his own friends and acquaintances -- who had fought at the Alamo. His own service in the Texian Army still fresh in his mind, Ammon could not have escaped

the knowledge that these men's fate might well have been his own.

He wrote first of the attacks successfully repelled by the Texans on March 3, 4 and 5, with losses reported of 500 Mexicans killed and 600 to 700 wounded.

He set down the facts concerning arrival of reinforcements which had brought the Mexican troops to a strength of 5,000 men.

"The fort was again attacked about daylight," he wrote. "The works after a desperate engagement was carried and the whole garrison amounting to 180 men slaughtered. The number of the enemy killed and wounded in this last engagement amounted to more than a thousand men."

"The only persons who escaped to tell the horrid tale was a woman, a Mrs. Dickerson, whose husband fell in the fort. A horse was given her and she in company with two negroes who were likewise set at liberty arrived safely at the American head quarters at Gonzales."

Ammon wrote too of Sam Houston's retreat and of James Fannin's plans to join Houston at the Colorado River, plans which changed abruptly when Fannin met a force of 2,700 cavalry and managed to "regain the fort" he had just left.

A later entry tells the sad ending of that story. "Col. Fannin surrendered his force amounting to 450 men to about 1,500 of the enemy. According to the terms stipulated they were to remain eight days prisoners of war and then to leave on parole to serve no more against Mexico."

"After they had laid down their arms, (and) before the time they were to have left, they were marched out in different divisions and directions and attempted to massacre the whole. Only about 15 men made their escape. Others landing in ports that had fallen into the hands of the enemy were massacred without being able to make opposition," Ammon wrote.

As though they weren't having enough trouble with the Mexicans, the Texans were troubled with reports of Indian depredations to the east of Columbia. On March 27 Ammon wrote that he crossed the Brazos in company with seven others, riding about six miles on what proved to be a false alarm.

On their return, as Ammon crossed the Brazos River, "the horses got scared and knocked me into the river over the stern of the boat just as the boat struck shore."

Despite his heavy clothing, ammunition, and the rifle he was carrying, Ammon managed to swim ashore, "not even losing my rifle."

His feat had not gone unnoticed. "I came dripping up the bank amid the acclamations of a large number of women & men who had assembled on the bank," he wrote.

It was about this same time that San Felipe was burned "by the inhabitants who had deserted" the town. Ammon noted in his journal that the blaze had consumed "much property of value."

Women and children had been left in cabins along the Brazos and Oyster Creek, along Caney and the San Bernard, while their menfolk were fighting. Natural nervousness at being alone in a relative wilderness, combined with the tensions caused by war and the constant round of rumors which were everywhere repeated, to leave them easy prey to panic at the reports of what had happened at the Alamo and at Goliad.

In an entry dated March 11, Ammon wrote, "Intelligence has just arrived by a man taken prisoner at Labaha, that the

enemy amounting to about 1500 men are crossing the Colorado."

In the area around Columbia, this report was the signal for that exodus of settlers which would later be known as "The Runaway Scrape."

Ammon recorded the scene in his journal. "The whole country that have not already gone, having remained until the enemy are almost upon them, and men women and children are obliged to fly with scarcely sufficient food and other necessities of life to support human nature. In one word, the whole country are in a state of great distress," he wrote.

It was April 13 when Ammon crossed the Brazos and spent the night at the deserted house of C. D. Sayer near the east bank. Arising early, he joined two acquaintances, and despite a warning that "we could not cross the country to the eastward without falling into the hands of the Mexicans as they had already reached Harrisburg" the three men "concluded to try our chance to escape across the country" anyway.

Unhampered by excess baggage or by the presence of women and children in their own party, they passed dozens of struggling little family groups making use of every conceivable conveyance from wagons to sleds, and sometimes struggling along taking turns at riding one or two horses or mules.



RACHEL CARSON UNDERWOOD

An atmosphere of terror pervaded the air. The colonists had heard of the Alamo's fall and the death of all its defenders. They knew of the fate suffered by Fannin's men, who had surrendered. There was no doubt in most minds of what Santa Anna might do should he catch the colonists.

The results of this fear were apparent to Ammon and his friends as they joined the exodus toward Louisiana. Some of the settlers had left home in such haste that they had neglected to bring even food for the journey. Others had tried to haul away personal belongings too precious to leave to the mercy of the Mexican army.

As the settlers tired from the rough trip in rainy, cold weather, the possessions they had saved seemed less important -- escape more vital.

The items they had discarded formed a trail to mark their passage -- extra clothing, Ma's best china, and furniture were tossed aside to lighten the load.

On April 17, Ammon and his friends arrived at the Trinity River to find "large numbers of people waiting to cross and before we got over news arrived at the ferry that the Mexican Cavalry had arrived at Lynch's ferry and was endeavouring to cross."

This meant the enemy was only 25 miles away, and the terrified settlers were thrown into a state of even greater confusion. Women and children were hurried across the river without either baggage or provisions.

Ammon and his companions crossed that evening, encamping some five miles to the east. They had ridden as far as Sabine Lake before receiving "the intelligence of the splendid victory obtained on the 21st by the American arms over Santa Anna and his army."

For Ammon, the return trip was made with as much haste as his flight. He had "resolved to reach" Columbia as soon as possible "for fear that whatever goods or merchandise had been left by the Mexicans would be plundered by the Americans."

Ammon was the second person "belonging" at Columbia to return there, arriving on May 2 "in a half starved manner" after a 150-mile trip through a depopulated countryside.

Although he found "everything in the most glorious confusion" he "had got things pretty well righted" by May 12, when the steamship Laura arrived with W. C. White and Col. Knight aboard.

The preceding day, a number of women and children had arrived on the first boat, the Yellowstone. Many, including Mrs. Catherine Jane

Carson -- later to become his mother-in-law -- had experiences even more harrowing.

Hearing the news of Santa Anna's approach, Mrs. Carson had bolted the doors of her boarding house, and she and her daughter Rachel joined the Damon family at the mound.

The two Carson boys were in the army, but the younger was with his mother and sister, sick with measles.

This "childhood" disease swept through the ranks of the Texian Army, cutting down the volunteers with more speed and accuracy than Mexico's crack troops had yet been able to muster.

Nor was it a mild illness, in that day of primitive treatments. Relapse meant pneumonia, and that in turn too often meant death.

Catherine's concern for her son's health added to the worries about all her family's safety, during that wild flight from the advancing Mexican Army. There was little she could do for him except try to keep him warm and dry -- no easy task in the chill, wet world through which they traveled.

Telling of their experiences years later, in a letter to her granddaughter, Miss Laura Underwood, Rachel wrote, "We went by wagon to Richmond where there was a company stationed at Fort Ben to protect the families."

This company did not keep the Mexicans from crossing the river, however, so the family retreated back into the country. They had reached the lower part of Montgomery County when the battle began, and bullets began whizzing about their heads.

Mrs. Carson stood in the wagon to stow away what goods the others could salvage and give to her, and later held a mattress on its side in an effort to protect those inside.

They heard sounds of thunder -- and only later discovered that the booms had been cannon. Hearing the news of victory at San Jacinto, the Carson family hastened back to Columbia, where peace might have descended but quiet was not yet come.

(To Be Continued)

NEXT WEEK:

Ammon Takes A Wife

This Old House

Adventure, Romance Add Spice To Ammon Underwood's Days

By Marie Beth Jones

For a young man brought up in the stern traditions of New England in the early 19th century, residence in frontier Texas was a bit like living on a different planet.

It wasn't that the general population around Columbia was not law abiding, only that in order to survive in a time and place where necessities were sometimes impossible to secure, the people had to be tough. This meant mental toughness as well as the physical kind.

Many of the differences which he noticed were mentioned by Ammon Underwood of Lowell, Mass., in the journal he kept of his first four years' residence in Texas.

Homesick for family and friends, he found the general run of Texans in the 1830's to be good people, but without much education or interest in "finer things." Their whole lives centered -- often of necessity -- about their families and "plantations" they were carving from soil which had never before felt the bite of a plow.

The one exception for most Texans was their avid concern with politics -- of which the area had plentiful supply in those days.

In spite of all this, and of his own prim and proper upbringing, Ammon's journal reflects the fascination he sometimes felt for events which he seemed to think should have been more shocking than he actually found them.

On July 25, 1834, he "witnessed . . . the execution of Joseph Clayton, who was condemned and executed for the murder of an old man by the name of Abner Kuykingdol."

Without even starting a new paragraph in his journal, he goes on to relate his meeting with an old acquaintance who bore the unlikely name of "Rufus Right", and who had formerly clerked in his uncle's store, near where Ammon's father operated a business.

A week later he wrote of witnessing "for the first time

in my life the disgusting, disgraceful sight of seeing a young man by the name of L. H. Peters tared and feathered and afterwards promernaded about town upon an old white horse." Peters had been accused of "an attack upon the chastity of a married woman," Ammon explained.

In many of the adventures he related, Ammon was a player, not merely a spectator. He wrote in late October of procuring passage on board the schooner Dart, bound for New Orleans. Leaving from Brazoria, the ship proceeded down river to Velasco, taking on more passengers "on account of the Empress having been condemned as unseaworthy."

They put out from Velasco early one morning, almost immediately running upon the Brazos River Bar, "where we remained thumping for about 4 hours when we were so unfortunate as to get over," Ammon related.

Realizing that they were faced with the three-pronged problem of a drunken captain, a badly leaking boat and an impending storm, the passengers begged to be returned to shore. The captain ignored their pleas and continued to drown his troubles. By night it became apparent that the passengers would have to help man the pumps, as the water rose steadily from the open seams in the hull, despite full-time pump operation by the crew.

Finally succeeding in their demands to put to shore, the passengers barely had time to get bedding, provisions and baggage on deck before the cabin was flooded, Ammon wrote.

Undaunted by this experience, he set out a week later aboard another ship, managing this time to reach New Orleans without incident. His troubles had hardly begun. Forming a partnership with a friend, Ammon invested his money in merchandise, got sick, and discovered upon his recovery that he had been cheated of most of the investment.

In a strange city, "without

friends, acquaintances or money, without occupation, in rather a feeble state of health," Ammon sold his watch for less than half its value to get funds for passage back to Texas.

His return was equally ill starred, including a shipwreck near the mouth of the San Bernard River, Ammon's 20-mile walk to the home of Leander McNeel, and his eventual return home, on the back of a borrowed mule.

Another of his adventures, which is told in the calmest style imaginable, considering the circumstances involved, was Ammon's tangle with an armed thief.

Learning that "a man by the name of Bradley" had stolen a pair of cart wheels belonging to the firm for which he was working at that time, Ammon demanded the return of the wheels, but got no satisfaction. He persuaded a young man named Howell to accompany him, and set out to recover the wheels by force, if necessary.

The wheels had been left on the riverbank in plain view, as was customary in that day. They weren't chained down or enclosed in a fence or protected by a booby trap, or taken inside at night. Their protection -- and it had been adequate up to that time -- was the general honesty of the citizens.

Now someone had stolen the cart wheels -- an action which just might ruin the whole system.

Ammon was unarmed. He was more at home leafing through a book of poetry or discussing history than engaging in fist-cuffs, but his ire had been thoroughly aroused. He was going to get those cart wheels back.

As he and his companion approached the man's house, Bradley came to meet them. Ammon "reprimanded him rather roughly" and Bradley ran toward his house with Ammon's scant steps behind. Turning a corner, Bradley snatched up a musket and leveled it at Ammon.

The young clerk managed to



CATHERINE JANE CARSON

jump behind a cart just as Bradley fired "at the distance of ten paces, his musket loaded with three balls which passed on both sides of me but none of them touched me."

There were two or three other men in the house, and not knowing whether he might again be attacked, Ammon "sprang forward to secure" four more guns which were lying at Bradley's feet.

This sort of behavior by an unarmed, bookish looking young man was too much for Bradley, who "dropped his musket and run."

Just in case of further trouble, Ammon discharged all the guns except one musket, which refused to fire, breaking that one "across a tree."

Hearing the sound of shots, which he thought were aimed at him, Bradley "took down the river bank into the river," sure that his day had come. "He swam down stream about one hundred yards, and then came out on the same side and took into a cane brake," Ammon wrote.

During all this commotion, news had somehow reached Columbia that Ammon had been shot in the head "and either killed or dangerously wounded" -- a fair assumption under the circumstances.

Four friends, including W. C. White, John Dinsmore, Gen. Brown and Stephen M. Hale rode into the area post haste, "to ascertain the truth and secure the villian. They appear-

tracted to her.

Certainly there were ample opportunities for Rachel to come to his attention. Ammon had built a large, two-storied house on the west bank of the Brazos -- a place considered quite grand in that day. In to this house Mrs. Catherine Jane Carson moved her family -- including Rachel -- and her boarders -- including Ammon.

Undisputed queen of that household, Mrs. Carson provided for the needs of her paying guests, saw to it that the negro "help" kept the house in the state of perfect cleanliness which she demanded, and that the meals included a variety of meats and vegetables, hot breads and desserts, as well as the assortment of preserves, pickles and condiments which was considered necessary to completion of any repast in that era.

Her bearing was erect, the white cap she wore unblemished by smudge or wrinkle. Catherine Carson was a successful business woman who had provided not only the necessities, but many of the luxuries for her children since her husband's death; but she was first of all a lady, and no one who knew her ever doubted that fact.

ed quite surprised at finding me in good health, and attending to business as usual," Ammon wrote with just a touch of pride.

Ammon and "a young man by the name of White, who had been deceived by Bradley" finally managed to relieve Bradley of the wheels. Ammon personally removed them from the cart behind which he had darted to dodge the hail of musket fire. Ferrying them across the river, he laid the wheels back in the precise spot from which they had been stolen, well satisfied with his day's work.

In between these adventures, Ammon was -- as young men are prone to do -- taking notice of the female contingent of the colony. He mentioned a ball which he attended "at the Tavern of Messrs. Gay & Adams, given in honor of the arrival at San Felipe of the steamer Cayuga," noting that "nothing is danced but Spanish reels."

Ammon never mentions the name of Rachel Carson in his journal, so presumably it was not until sometime after his last journal entry in February, 1838, that he began to be at-

Catherine watched her daughter Rachel bloom into young womanhood, and she saw the reaction of Ammon. Smiling a bit to herself as she noticed how much more frequently Ammon had begun to find urgent reasons for conversation with Rachel, Catherine could hardly have been more pleased at the turn events were taking.

Noted equally for high character and business acumen, Ammon was the sort of young man to bring joy to any girl's mother. His mercantile establishment was one of the most prosperous in the area, and he also owned a fine plantation and many slaves.

Catherine's blessing secured, plans were made for the

marriage. Rachel was radiant in a white satin gown fashioned with deep, wide décolletage, exposing her white shoulders. The skirt was of matching material, featuring elaborate quilting on the skirt.

Ammon stood in the parlor of the big white house he had built on the river bank, his hand holding Rachel's as they recited the vows which were to bind them together throughout the remainder of their lives.

Just as surely, they and their descendants were bound to the house, which was to shelter the family for more than a century to come.

(To Be Continued)

NEXT WEEK;

Politics And Pastimes

Politics Were Heated, Life Leisurely

By Marie Beth Jones

(Fifth In A Series)

Although his attitude toward politics and politicians may have been a bit cynical, Ammon Underwood was as interested in the affairs of Texas in those hectic days following San Jacinto as was any other citizen.

Certainly the climate around Columbia was stormy with important happenings. At nearby Velasco, officials had assembled to make plans for the future, but there were no adequate accommodations there. It was decided to move the seat of government to Columbia, which offered a hotel, as well as a large building which might be used for governmental offices.

Ammon wrote of the elections

to be held for president, vice president, senators and representatives, adding in his dry manner, "Much maneuvering is taking place. Electioneering is carried to a great length. Our congress met the first Monday in October at Columbia."

The entry was one of many in the old account book which served as his journal in the years between 1834 and 1839.

Some time later he added -- his New England upbringing evident -- "The election takes place on Monday. Scenes of drunkenness, dissipation, gambling &c &c may be expected to their full extent and grandeur."

Another event of note during that period was the imprisonment -- or perhaps entertainment might have been a better word, since he was apparently

treated more as guest than as prisoner -- of Mexican dictator Santa Anna at Orizimbo,

cussions of a permanent capital. One historian explains that Bell, who engaged in raising,

docks at Columbia in a single season. Ammon owned a large plantation in addition to his



In Better Days

The Underwood house at East Columbia looked like this in better days, while members of the family were still making it their home. Last to occupy the house was Miss Laura Underwood, who proudly showed visitors through the house built by Ammon

Underwood more than a century earlier. Restoration work which the West Columbia Garden Club and other organizations are hoping can be done, should bring the old house back to this general appearance. Rachel Underwood was its first chatelaine.

Old House. .

(Cont. from Page 4)

with dirt carried in dishpans atop the slaves' heads. Their progress could be marked by the sound of the spirituals they sang to accompany their efforts.

When the first train whistle echoed through the bottom lands, it signalled completion of a task which at times had seemed hopeless. From every house and store, saloon and office, the citizens poured forth in a mad scramble for the river.

Crossing the Brazos by ferry and by skiff, those from the west side of the river were joined by planters from all along the route, as they climbed over the smoking, puffing engine which was symbol of all the good things to come.

(To Be Continued)

NEXT WEEK:

The Good Days And The Bad

the plantation home of Dr. James A. E. Phelps, near Columbia.

Once the lawmakers had moved to Columbia for their official duties, there was some discussion of making the little town the permanent capitol. Perhaps there were other local citizens whose general opinion of politicians was no higher than Ammon's, or perhaps it was because of Josiah F. Bell, who had donated the site for the government's organization at Columbia, but at any rate, the town was passed over in dis-

prize-winning red hogs, refused to allow permanent location of the capitol in his building, fearing that the growth which would accompany permanent location of the government at Columbia would encroach on his hog raising operations.

In noting the results of the election, Ammon wrote that W. C. White, his close friend and business associate, had lost his race, and that William H. Wharton had been elected senator representing the Brazoria area.

As they studied the myriad problems facing their new republic, the lawmakers' voices -- heated in anger or soothed by syrup of oratory -- floated from the windows of the unlined, clapboard-covered log building which served as their hall of congress.

If it was an unprepossessing place, it was in keeping with the government represented. Not until the victory at San Jacinto had been won did the world take seriously the Texans' bid for independence -- and there seemed to be some disbelief, even then.

The store which Ammon operated had been founded in 1835, and was one of the gathering places of the community, where opinions were freely given on every question from annexation to abolition, which was already beginning to be discussed in the north.

One of his long-time friends was Dr. Anson Jones, who was destined to be elected as the last president of the Republic of Texas. Dr. Jones was one of the famous who put his feet under the table of Mrs. Catherine Jane Carson in the rooming and boarding house which Ammon had built for her to operate at Columbia.

Among the records of Ammon's business remains an entry showing a \$10 unpaid debt which Dr. Jones had incurred with Underwood's store.

Nor was Jones the only man of Ammon's acquaintance who was later to receive recognition for his part in the events of that day. A walk from the Underwood home to the store might reveal the thin, slightly stooped figure of Stephen F. Austin, whose health was becoming increasingly frail from overwork as Texas Secretary of State, combined with the results of months-long imprisonment in Mexico, and hardships suffered both while leading the Texian army and while serving as special minister to the United States.

There were bluff Sam Houston and his vice president, Mirabeau B. Lamar; the controversial Robert Potter, and many others.

Despite the move of the government to Houston, Columbia continued to prosper, and Ammon and his family with it.

The firm he operated occupied a large, two-story brick building with its own wharves on the banks of the Brazos, and Columbia served as the center of trade for much of the wealthy plantation area. There were two steamers per week from Galveston, and up to 17,000 bales of cotton were shipped from the

business holdings in the town.

After his marriage to Rachel Carson in 1839, Ammon settled down to the role of head of household, his "rambling about the country" behind him.

Into the big home on the riverbank were born the Underwood children, Laura, Joseph and John.

Sunday was the week's social high point, despite its strict observance as the Sabbath.

The Underwoods attended Bethel Presbyterian Church, which was built on land donated to the Presbytery of the Brazos by Mrs. Josiah Bell.

As the family drove down the river road to the church, they talked over events of the preceding days, and made plans for the week to come.

A roomy building with high-backed benches, the church had a special gallery built for the slaves who gathered to worship, adding their voices to the hymns with such fervor that some of the more strait-laced members wondered if the beauty of this melody might not be ungodly.

The communion table was placed in the center of the room, and was covered with a specially made cloth of white linen, measuring 12 yards in length.

The services were apt to be both lengthy and strongly worded, and a few of the less reverent worshippers were even heard to whisper privately that the Sunday messages were punctuated by the odor of brimstone.

Weather permitting, the congregation gathered outside under the liveoaks after the service was completed, visiting with friends, and hearing the latest news.

The women clustered together to discuss patterns and the problems posed by their children; the men gathered in another spot to talk over the prices of cotton and sugar, and the latest political occurrences.

Smiling shyly from beneath poke bonnets, young ladies fluttered their eyelashes toward unattached blades sporting the latest cut in side whiskers above choker collars.

The drive back to the big white house was a leisurely one, part and pattern of the day's activities. On their return, the Underwoods gathered in the dining room for a cold meal which had been prepared on Saturday -- for only emergency work could be done on Sunday.

High points and depressions punctuated the usual routine of the days. The announcement of plans to build a railroad brought a great deal of excitement late in the 1850's. Ammon was one of the Columbia area citizens most actively promoting the project, which was designed partially to provide better transportation for the people, but primarily to give faster, more dependable facilities for shipping crops grown in the rich bottom lands surrounding the little town.

The planters furnished their slaves and teams in an effort to cut expenses of building the railroad. The dump was built

(Cont. on Page 8)

Columbia's Golden Years End With War

Sixth In A Series

By Marie Beth Jones

The change from frontier to ante-bellum society came in Brazoria County sometime during the latter part of the 1840's and was mainly the result of the economic success which local planters were enjoying.

It was a society based upon the plantations, with more land in cultivation in this county than in all the rest of Texas.

Although Ammon Underwood had come to Columbia as a merchant, he also owned a rich plantation near the little town, so his dependence upon the land was both direct and indirect.



JOSEPH P. UNDERWOOD

Becoming known as "Sugar Bowl of Texas," Brazoria County was also noted for the cotton which thrived in the rich black bottom lands.

"Richer than the valley of the River Nile," the planters would say as they told of their yields. In spite of some pride of accomplishment, the words held a touch of awe, for no one knew better than the planter himself that his own management of slaves, seed, land and time would all go for naught without God-given fertility and climate which allowed such fabulous growth.

Few of Brazoria County's planters were of the "absentee landlord" type, idling away hours on the gallery with a mint julep while an overseer took charge of their lands. Still, it was a time of more leisure than had been possible during

those first rugged years of American settlement in Texas, when raising a corn crop meant the difference in plenty and hunger.

Both the planters and the well-to-do townspeople -- and most of the townspeople endowed with this world's goods were also planters -- had begun to live the good life which included many of that day's luxuries.

Clothing was ordered from couturiers in New Orleans, New York and Philadelphia, and delivered by steamboat, along with new furniture, silver, books and newspapers.

Each plantation had its prized horses, and there was heated competition among the planters in the regularly scheduled races held at Columbia and Velasco.

The races were highlights of the social season, with the whole family driving into town to enjoy not only that entertainment, but the balls and parties which were an integral part of racing festivities.

Another of the favored entertainments among the men was that of riding to the hounds. The planters often gathered to chase deer, their wildly baying dogs close on the heels of the sleek animals, with the hunters giving chase behind them. The bloodlines and competence of a man's favorite hunting dog were sub-

jects of as much general interest among the planters as the ancestry of his best race horse.

Located in such a convenient spot beside the river, the Underwood house was site of constant coming and going by friends. A party or dance meant not only entertaining guests for a few hours in the evening, but usually included providing places for all of them to stay overnight, since transportation and roads had not reached the same stage of advancement as society.

Although rumor and rumblings abounded for years beforehand, the war which finally erupted seemed to put a sudden stop to life as it had been.

Columbia's men went to war in a company called The Columbia Blues, made up entirely of residents of that area. Others from the town and the nearby plantations enlisted in the Archer Grays, made up half of Gibson's Battery, and part of Mosley's Guards.

There was even an amateur company of boys, which was known as The Alamo Guards. This group served as a school of patriotism for youths too young for enlistment.

Among those who left Columbia to serve their new country--the Confederate States of America--was 17-year old Joseph P. Underwood, son of Ammon and Rachel Carson Underwood.

The war was almost over before Joseph got into it, and he never saw any fighting, though his own struggles against boredom and homesickness were painful enough wounds.

Ammon wrote his son "by every person going to your headquarters and regularly every Sunday" but it soon became apparent that Joe received few of the letters.

Although there were no real battles at Columbia, cannon boomed along the coast, with Federal ships blockading the area to keep the South from shipping out the cotton which was its only source of revenue -- and receiving the goods so desperately needed by an area which had no factories of its own.

During those waning days of the war, the Underwoods faced the strain of having a son away in the army, and of not knowing when or if he might be in danger. Added to this were the privations caused by the blockade and the constant threat posed by the blockaders, who might at any moment muster enough force to push past the defenders at Velasco and Quintana, to steam up the river into Columbia itself.

On July 3, 1834, Ammon wrote of "an excellent corn crop and the little cotton I have in, about 70 acres, is, most of it, as fine as I ever saw." He told Joseph that there were "but few goods on hand and unless we get them by Borden's train from the Rio Grande, shall probably soon close out what we have and discontinue business until after the war."

This was reference to the oxen-pulled wagons which were taking cotton from Columbia to Mexico in exchange for goods. The train was "waterbound with all his teams at Southerlands on the Navidad" on June 13 of that year, and Ammon hadn't heard from them since, when he wrote the letter.

"All blockade running out and into this river seems to be effectively ended. A steam blockader lies close into our bar which renders ingress and egress successfully almost an impossibility. There are now seven schooners laying up here

not thinking of getting out; a number of them having taken their cargoes of cotton out of them," Ammon wrote.

Ammon had loaned his "little no-top buggy" to Randen Borden for the trip to Mexico, and feared it would be "all used up" on the long journey, though he was obviously more concerned about the train than his buggy.

He wrote of the everyday happenings which his homesick son so longed to hear, news of a return from the plantation with a sudden shower drenching the entire family except for the baby, John, "whom your mother managed to keep dry." He even commented that much of the corn was "now too hard for roasting ears."

When the Union troops captured Galveston, they took over the cotton in warehouses there, including that belonging to Ammon. One source estimates the total amount he lost at \$1 million -- cotton for which ownership papers conveniently disappeared, so that no claim could ever be made.

He mentions in a letter to his son that he had "paid the government all the confiscated debt they would take of me amounting to \$30,000."

Despite the blockade, there seemed to be no dearth of news in Columbia during that time. On July 7, 1834, Ammon wrote of "the only matters of excitement in the past week."

He listed "the killing of a negro by Capt. Paine of the Mary Hill in a drunken fit; a negro hung for the attempted rape on a soldier's wife at Brazoria. . ." and a barbecue "in Bates' regiment."

The hanging was of the unorthodox variety, rather than a legal execution. Ammon related that a squad from the company of Capt. Bennett, "to which the soldier alluded to belonged, came up to Brazoria, took the negro out of the hands of the sheriff, and hung him."

To Be Concluded

NEXT WEEK:

"Picking Up The Pieces"

Through War, Reconstruction, Flood, It Still Stands By Brazos

Seventh In A Series
By Marie Beth Jones

"There is a most fearful weight of responsibility somewhere for all this slaughter," Ammon Underwood wrote to his son Joe, a Confederate soldier during the War Between the States.

Ammon felt that a recent act of the Confederate Congress -- passage of resolutions "that the Confederate States most ardently desire peace and ask in behalf of suffering humanity that the North cease her hopeless efforts to conquer the South" seemed to place the responsibility for the war "where it belongs before the world."

In his letters to Joseph, Ammon wrote of the comings and goings of family and friends, indicating that the custom of long and leisurely visits was still much in favor around Columbia, with "Uncle Tom and Aunt Louisa" at the Underwood house and scheduled to "start home on Tuesday next" and other friends, especially the women and young ladies, spending time ranging from a week or two up to the entire summer in Galveston or at Velasco or Quintana.

Joe had entered the army in 1834, at the age of 17, and found homesickness his closest enemy, with no chance to help fight the Yankees before the war ended.

Though he was a private, Joe was accompanied by his body servant Bill, as befitted the son of a wealthy southern merchant and planter of that day. In one of Rachel Carson Underwood's letters to her son, she wrote that he and two friends "will get to be so lazy you cannot eat" if they continued to keep Bill and Polk, the servant of one of the other boys, just to wait on the three of them.

Joe's sister Laura wrote to him about a barbecue held for

the Confederate troops stationed at Velasco where there were "1500 men and they had plenty of things to eat. When the ladies all got down there, the Yankees waved a white flag at them to show them that they would not hurt them."

Whether Joe had -- in the manner of all youths away from home -- complained of lack of ready cash, or whether Ammon merely anticipated that his son might need extra money "for some little comforts that you could not procure without money" is not clear, but at any rate, Ammon wrote of sending \$300 to be delivered by a friend who was traveling in Joe's direction.

Kinship was still a mighty bond for the Underwoods and others like them. "I understand that Trinity where you are encamped is but 15 miles from Harrisburg where your great aunt, Mrs. M lives. Can you not get time and a furlough to go and see her? We wish you may. Should you do so, find out all about your relations at Bayou Sara -- Mrs. McDaniel, Mrs. Brewer and families," Ammon instructed in a letter to his son.

Wagon Train

By July 24, Ammon was becoming concerned about the wagon train of cotton sent to Mexico. Supplies were becoming desperately short in the area, and there seemed no way of successfully running the blockade which had been set up by Federal gunboats near the Brazos River bar.

Corn was so short during this time that Ammon was forced to watch sadly as his horses -- even his favorite, Dixie -- became thinner and thinner, until the new crop could be harvested for use. It had been so bad that he was clearly elated to report that the horses "did not get so thin as to lose their life."

Both Rachel and Ammon were a bit concerned about the effect of rough army life on their son, thrown in close contact with men twice his age and with considerable more than twice his worldly experience.

"You don't say whether you have any preaching or not," Rachel wrote. "I am afraid you will forget how to go to church and how preaching sounds. Mr. Somerville leaves us without preaching during the warmest part of the weather. I don't like it at all." She mentioned the preacher of another denomination, saying he is a poor excuse indeed. It almost amounts to having no preaching at all."

Ammon hinted, and then again came right out with his advice to his son.

In an early letter he wrote of one of Joe's friends, reporting that the youth had "rather disgraced himself" in an incident with "an Irish omnibus or ambulance driver" in which the boy "fired his revolver at him a number of times and then ran. The worst of it all is they say he was not at all justified."

Ammon felt the youth had "lost caste very much, I am sorry to say, and from all reports has behaved not only badly but disgracefully, therefore I hope you will not keep up a correspondence with him."

In a later letter, Ammon wrote, "God grant that you continue in a healthy physical and moral condition and avoid all the evil influences attending a camp life. You know, my dear son, in what detestation I hold dissipation and gambling and I have neither the least confidence or respect for those addicted to those reprehensible and criminal practices; and though I have all confidence not to believe for a moment that you will be led into either of those criminal practices I will again charge you by all you hold dear and sacred not to indulge in the slightest degree in either of these evil habits and ever determine to keep yourself morally pure and upright, adopting always as your rule of life a high, gentlemanly, conscientious, and upright line of conduct, never doing an act that you would be unwilling should be fully known to your parents and all your true friends."

Reconstruction

After Joe's safe return from the war, the family settled down to what was left of life for a Southerner during Reconstruction. The blight which had begun with war had spread during those years. Once productive fields grew up in weeds, with the machinery rusting from

lack of use, and the bony finger of want pointing toward many of those who had never before seen its shadow.

Business was almost entirely on credit. There could be no thought of payment with times as they were. The railroad engine of which the Brazoria County planters had been so proud rusted down, and since they had no money with which to replace it, they used oxen in its place.

Many families became discouraged, selling their land for whatever they could get, having it sold for taxes they could no longer afford to pay, or suffering the embarrassment of foreclosure by the big firms from whom they had borrowed more and more money in an effort to salvage what was left.

The Underwoods were affected by the changes all about them. No one could have failed to note the differences, both economic and social. But the big white house by the river continued to shelter them, and the store continued to struggle under the growing mountain of debts which friends and customers were unable to pay.

Their house had been built facing the river, in an ideal spot to allow the family to watch the steamboats as they passed with paddlewheels splashing and passengers waving. The grounds extended from the long front gallery to the river, with a second level of bank, like a terrace, covered with lawn and flowers.

Floods Came

The river rose often enough to be an accepted part of annual events, so it was with no great surprise that the family noted the swirling red waters covering the lower bank as they arose one morning soon after the end of the war.

They started breakfast, but had hardly finished passing the fried mush and milk toast when walls and a platter of bare feet heralded the approach of a small niece of Mrs. Underwood.

Rubbing at her eyes, the child explained that she had been coming across the back yard on an errand, and had stuck her bare toes in a crack in the ground falling headlong.

There was no doubt as to the import of her words. The family rushed to the yard to find a

deep fissure which ran from the river, across the yard, and beneath the house.

Ammon knew that if he was to save the house, he must work quickly. The contractors he consulted met his explanation with looks of astonishment and negative answers. It could not be done, they told him. The building was too big.

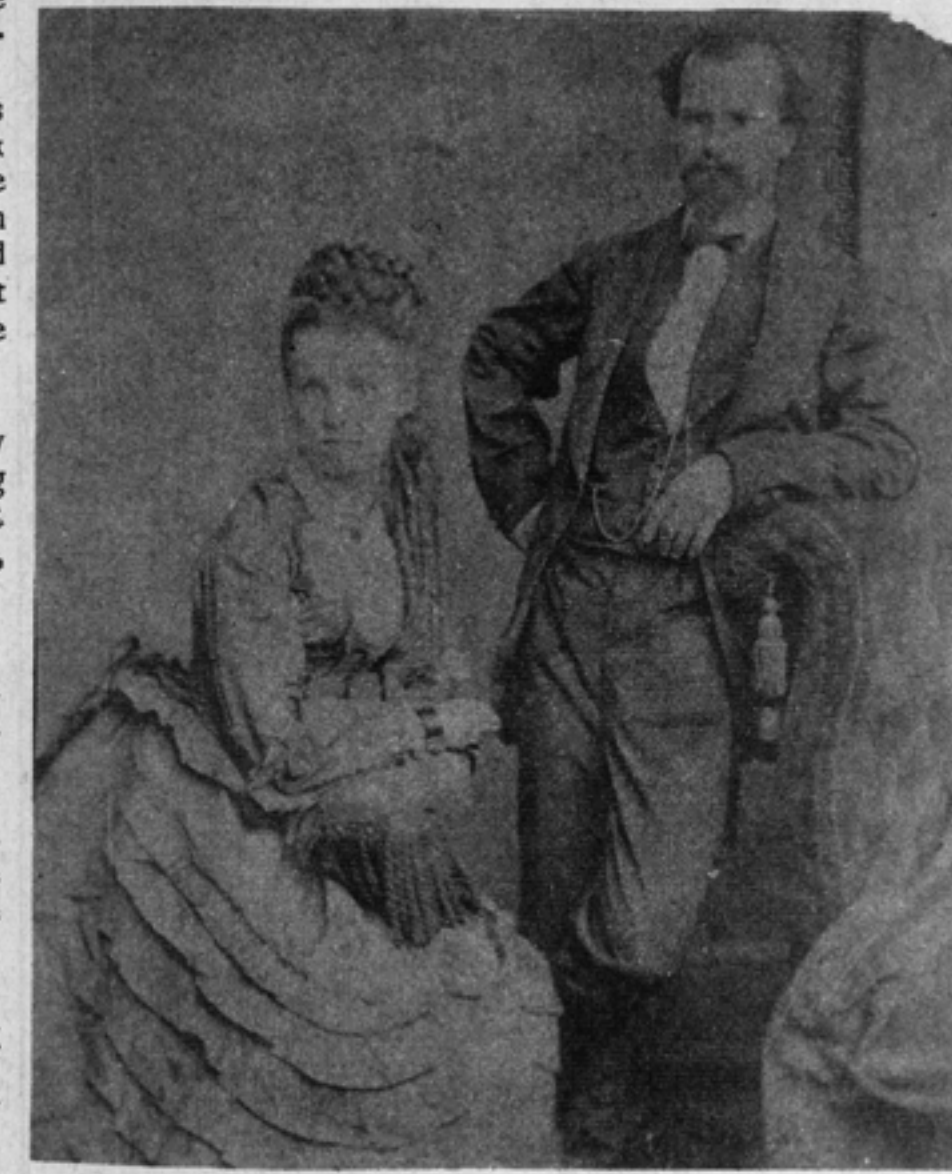
At that point, Ammon's determination took over. Not only could it be done, he was going to do it. He called in the negroes who worked on his plantations, and they set to work.

In the moving, the house was altered so that what had once been its back was now facing the river. With some satisfaction, Ammon watched the operation. To make sure that such a change would never again be needed, he had the house moved back more than the width of the river.

He was not to know that the house would twice more be moved back -- being cut in half in one of those moves, with the remaining structure all that remains of the original.

After the deaths of Ammon and Rachel, the house was occupied by Joe and his family, and remained, as it had always been, "home" for the entire clan. Its last occupant was Joe's daughter, Miss Laura Underwood, who lived there until her death several years ago.

Showing visitors through the house, Miss Laura would point out the mark of the axe still to be seen on live oak timbers in the attic, and mention other bits about the history of the house.



MR. AND MRS. JOSEPH P. UNDERWOOD

She chuckled in memory of the guest who asked -- obviously a bit overawed by what she had heard -- whether the wallpaper was that which was put there when Ammon built the house in 1839.

It stands unoccupied now, looking a bit forlorn and uncertain about the future. Its only hope for survival is success of the efforts by the West Columbia Garden Club and several his-

torical organizations which have begun raising funds in hopes of restoring the house, refurbishing it, and opening it to the public.

It would be a fitting memorial to those who settled the area and fought for its independence -- and to the wives who faced the even deadlier enemies of privation and loneliness in the little cabins along the Brazos. (End Of Series)



MISS LAURA UNDERWOOD