

# The TEXAS JACK SCOUT

VOLUME VI NO. 1

FEBRUARY 1991

## Elizabeth VanLew: Union Spy

Daisy VanLew Omohundro, wife of Malvern Hill Omohundro (Texas Jack's half brother and the author of the OMOHUNDRO GENEALOGICAL RECORD) shared with her husband the distinction of being related to an historical figure. Daisy's aunt was the infamous Elizabeth Louise VanLew: abolitionist, spy, and suffragette. Despised by fellow southerners during her lifetime, Elizabeth has now been recognized as "a person who would not sacrifice her principles and had the fortitude to live by them in the face of overwhelming odds." Her story is sketched in the following series of articles, originally printed in the RICHMOND NEWS LEADER, Richmond, Virginia.

January 6, 1959

View of a Vixen  
VanLew Spying Value Questioned  
by Pat Robbins

(First of Three Articles)

She was a tiny woman in a big house, isolated by hatred and exiled in spirit from the city of her birth.

To neighbors she was "the spy." To Richmond residents during the Reconstruction she was "that Yankee witch." To small boys she was "Crazy Bett." To General Ulysses S. Grant she was the source of "the most valuable intelligence I received from Richmond during the (Civil) War." And to her mother she was a tender and devoted, if somewhat unfathomable, daughter.

(please see VANLEW, p. 4)



Elizabeth Van Lew



# The President's MESSAGE

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Dear Fellow Members,

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jack (my name really is Jack) H. Omohundro. I live in Crowley, Louisiana with my wife Jane, and I'll take this opportunity to extend an invitation to any and all to stop by and visit with us anytime you are in this part of the country. We shall try to show you what southern hospitality is all about.

Our Association's main goal is to bring more recognition to the name of J.B. "Texas Jack" Omohundro. To that end, I would like to ask each and every one of you to "talk it up." Let people in your communities know about us! Speak to your local newspapers, your local radio stations, your local clubs. And when you do, please let us know by writing up an account for publication in the SCOUT. This is your newsletter and the primary means of communication for us all. I'm also sure that there are people who would like to join the Texas Jack Association if they knew it existed. Thus, more publicity will bring more members. So, "talk it up."

Next year, 1992, we shall hold our bi-annual round-up. We have not decided anything final, but just as soon as we do have definite plans, we shall let you know. At the present time, San Antonio and Austin, Texas lead as our choices of sites.

Now for a rather unpleasant but necessary matter--DUES! The money received from dues pays for publication of the SCOUT and provides seed money for our conventions. Our treasurer, R.C. Omohundro, reported that as of January 14, only 50 members had paid their 1991 dues. So get those dues in now!

I do want to thank you all for honoring me with the presidency of the Association and say that I shall try to do my best. With the help of each and every one of you, I know that we shall progress towards our goals and, above all, have fun doing it!

Please let me hear from you--your comments, your ideas, your criticisms. This is YOUR Association.

Thank you,



Send new memberships,  
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# from the Editor's Desk...



- A big THANK YOU to Marie Banton for getting the SCOUT printed and mailed!
- A secret message to Brandon O., Brandon W., C.D., Laura, Meghan, O.P., and Stephanie: Don't forget your special SCOUT assignment!
- I plan to feature the siblings of Texas Jack in future issues of the SCOUT. If you have photographs, newspaper/magazine articles, letters, obituaries, family lore, anything about Elizabeth, Orville, Arabella, Richard, Morton, Martin, Seldon, Manassas, or Malvern Hill I would greatly appreciate it if you would send me copies of your information.
- The next issue of the SCOUT is planned for June.

'Til then,  
*Kitty*



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Tax-Deductible Corporation

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\*deceased

Miss Elizabeth VanLew, who was born on Church Hill in 1818 and died there 82 years later, was one of the Civil War's greatest enigmas.

Few knew her; almost no one loved her. Memories, family stories and legends about her conflict as to the degree of value of her spying activities, her motives and her character.

The facts and stories in the VanLew case have been carefully sifted by two Richmond women, Mrs. Walter A. Williams, Jr. and Mrs. William R. Trigg, Jr., for their play, "The Lone Vixen." It will be given January 15-17 in McVey Theater at St. Catherine's School to aid Historic Richmond Foundation in its Church Hill restoration.

Their heroine was the oldest child of a hardware merchant who had come to Richmond from Long Island and his Philadelphia-born wife.

Elizabeth went to school in Philadelphia, spent a year abroad and returned home to Richmond so fired with enthusiasm for the cause of abolition that she persuaded her family to free their 15 slaves.

The estate was a beautifully landscaped one atop Church Hill. It was a three-story stucco house fronting on 2311 East Grace Street. A huge white-columned portico ran the length of the back and afforded a view of the James River.

Under the portico was a slant-roofed secret room that supposedly afforded shelter to escaped Union soldiers from Richmond's three prisons during the war.

This room, described as only 3½ feet in height but "of generous enough dimensions to accommodate 30 or 40 men," was reached by a hidden panel 2 feet 6 inches square.



Elizabeth's father bought the VanLew Mansion in 1836. She lived there until her death. It was demolished in 1911.

During Elizabeth's young womanhood, this house was a scene of gay parties, teas and visits by such notables as Edgar Allan Poe and Susan B. Anthony.

But Elizabeth made no secret in Richmond of her abolitionist leanings. And when war came in her 43rd year, visitors ceased coming.

Threatening notes came in their stead as word of Elizabeth's wartime activities spread.

It is known that she was a regular visitor to the Union prisoners at Libby Prison. She brought them food, feuded with the surgeon general over their medical care and loaned them books.

When these books were returned to her they contained secret markings which she translated into a cipher she kept pasted on the back on her watch. Then she passed the information to Gen. Benjamin (Beast)

Butler signed with the code name, "Mrs. Babcock."

She played the key role in the smuggling of the body of Yankee Col. Ulric Dahlgren through the Confederate lines. In February 1863, the 21-year-old colonel led an abortive raid on Richmond in which he was killed.

Because the citizenry was so aroused, his body was buried in secret in Oakwood Cemetery. Miss VanLew, with six men and two women helpers, dug up the body in secret and shipped it across the lines in a farmer's cart covered with peach trees.

The Church Hill spy also helped in the spectacular Libby Prison break of 1864, in which 190 men tunneled to freedom. Forty-nine of these eventually made it across the lines, and it is said that these men first were hidden in the secret room.

As the war thrust itself toward Richmond, threats were made of revoking Miss VanLew's prison pass. That was when she began appearing in disarray, humming to herself and earning the name among soldiers and street urchins of "Crazy Betty." She kept the pass.

And she discovered other sources of information. Disguised in a farm woman's poke bonnet and canvas hat she walked the lanes noting troop movements. A servant of hers, whom she had educated in Philadelphia, was employed in the home of Jefferson Davis.

Toward the war's end her dispatches became more frequent and it is said fresh flowers cut in her garden each morning reached General Grant's table each night.

Certainly her work was considered valuable, for when Union troops marched into Richmond (where a 9 by 20 foot stars and stripes had been raised over the VanLew house), Grant dispatched an aide to protect the VanLew house, later paid a call himself and rewarded her with a post-mistress's job when he became president.

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January 7, 1959

View of a Vixen

Union Spy's Fortune Declined After War  
by Pat Robbins

(Second of Three Articles)

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The march of Union troops into Richmond in 1865 was a moment of lonely triumph for Miss Elizabeth VanLew. It was her only one.

Her spying activities for the North had made her universally hated in her native city.

In the North, she was spoken of with admiration--at least for a short while.

Gen. Benjamin (Beast) Butler wrote to her: "There is no lady in the country whom I would rather meet than yourself."

(please see VANLEW, p. 10)

6	r	n	l	h	o	x
3	v	i	w	8	4	w
1	u	m	3	p	5	y
5	b	a	9	o	u	d
2	k	7	2	x	6	s
4	u	o	y	e	f	g
	1	3	6	2	5	4

When Elizabeth VanLew died, a yellowed piece of paper on which were written the letters of her cipher code was discovered in the back of her watch.

# There Was a Virginian

by Maurice S. Dean

December 9, 1951

RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

Young Virginians, like American children in every State, hope for Hopalong Cassidy costumes, Red Ryder carbines and rubber rocking-horses made in the likeness of a horse called Trigger come Christmas morning. Not one has written Santa Claus to ask for a Texas Jack rig, though Jack, who was born and grew up in Fluvanna County, was top frontiersman and Western scout in the days when the West was really wild and the frontier was a place where two-gun men were men and both guns were loaded.

Born John Burwell Omohundro, July 26, 1846, he gained fame as "Texas Jack," a nickname given him early in manhood.

A one-time partner of Colonel William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody in Western exploits and later in "Wild West" show business, Omohundro had few peers in the wide open spaces of the West.

Some of Texas Jack's feats were brought to light in a book, "The Omohundros and Their Kin," recently published by Malvern Hill Omohundro, of Goochland County. The volume contains 1,287 pages and is profusely illustrated, dealing with eleven generations of the Omohundro family in America since 1670. The author began to collect genealogical data in 1905. The book was published by the author and was manufactured by the McClure Publishing Company, Staunton. It is being sold for \$15 a copy.

The clan's history contains no more picturesque character than the "boy scout of the Confederacy" who grew up to be the close friend, business partner and rival of Buffalo Bill.

## He Fought for Stuart

John Omohundro was born at his father's home, "Pleasure Hill," near Palmyra. He was educated in the county schools and by private tutor.

He never liked confinement of the school room and he wasn't fond of work. From early youth it was clear that he was a natural-born fisherman, hunter, horseman and marksman. Any kind of danger or adventure seemed to be his delight and he was an inveterate lover of the out-of-doors.

When he was 14 years old, the War Between the States broke and young Omohundro attempted to enlist but was not accepted until two years later.

He was then assigned to the command of J.E.B. Stuart where he gained renown as a scout of ability and bravery. Before Appomattox, he became widely known as the "boy scout of the Confederacy."

After the war, like many other residents of the impoverished State of Virginia, young Omohundro heard of immense ranches in Texas and their wealthy owners.

It sounded just like the life he wanted and in short order he migrated to the West.

## Young Man Goes West

In one of his early biographies, the tale is told of his travels from his home to Texas on horseback. He was beset by robbers more than once, but he was always able to shoot his way clear. He arrived finally at the Taylor ranch in Texas and went to work as a cowboy. It is also recorded that he intervened when a gang of seven were about to kidnap a very

# They Called 'Texas Jack'

attractive Mrs. Sophie Elgin. Jack's rifle stopped all of them when they tried to open the woman's door with a ram.

Later he became foreman of the Taylor ranch and made considerable money driving cattle from Texas to Nebraska and Missouri and selling them.

He received his nickname--a name that was to stick with him the rest of his life--in the late sixties. The annals say there was a very bad drought in the State of Tennessee and many were reported to be starving.

When Omohundro heard of this, down in Texas, he rounded up a large herd of cattle--investing all his capital in the venture--and with the aid of other cowboys, set off for Tennessee.

After losing part of his herd and seven of his cow hands going through the Indian territory, he arrived six months later in a town in Western Tennessee.

The hungry population awoke that day to see a herd of cattle approaching. Wild with glee, the Mayor of the town ran up and asked who was handling the herd.

## 'Texas Jack Has Saved Us'

Omohundro came forward, saying he was.

"What's your name?" the squire asked.

"Jack," was the reply.

"Where are you from?" the squire asked.

"Texas," said Jack.

"Well, boys," the squire yelled to the crowd, "here is Texas Jack, who has saved us."

The name stuck.

Later, during one of his trips north with cattle, Texas Jack met William F. Cody, at that time a scout in the service of the United States Army. The buffalo killer was so struck with Jack, that he got him a contract to hunt for Fort McPherson.

During the next few years, Texas Jack hunted bison for the fort and had skirmishes many times with hostile Indians, especially the Comanche tribe.

His most spectacular exploit against Indians came when he was caught alone, miles from the fort. A whole tribe of Indians surrounded him and cut off escape.

## One Against a Tribe

The Indians, knowing his ability with the rifle, did not attack, even though they knew he was alone, but tried to starve him out.

After seven days, Texas Jack decided to make the attack himself. When he was close to the Indians, he ordered his horse to lie down as he had been trained to do.

As the Indians began to advance on him, Jack took a position behind the horse and opened repeating rifle fire over the horse's back. Every shot brought down a Redskin. The others retreated, then started at him from the rear. Jack just turned the horse around and repeated the demonstration of marksmanship.

Having dispersed the Indians, Jack got on his horse and rode back to the fort unharmed, killing a deer on the way.

This and similar exploits brought Texas Jack a reputation as an

(please see TEXAS JACK, p. 9)



# THE COWBOY

by Russ McDonald

The fiction writers picked him up in the late 1860's, clothing him in silk and broadcloth with a white hat. They put him on magnificent horses and sent him careening through millions of pages of print, destroying evil, and defending innocence, especially if it was wrapped up in an attractive feminine form.

He was called things such as "buckaroo," "waddie," or "broncbuster." But, most of the time he was just called "cowboy," although he wasn't a boy and did not tend cows. He was a man, sometimes young, who could expertly handle cattle from horseback.

The American cowboy had his origin around 1820 in the open Texas country where men could ride wide and grass grew tall. Here were cattle so ferocious that only a man on horseback would or could approach them.

At the end of the Civil War, the unknown cowboys swarmed out of Texas on cattle drives to railheads in Sedalia, Abeline, Dodge City and Ellsworth. The long cattle drives across the Southwest's open range lasted until 1890.

As the cowboy spread over the West, he varied his practices, techniques and equipment. He did most of his work on top of an approximately 900-pound horse whose movements were uncertain--running, turning, stopping, stumbling or bucking.

Since he was dependent on the sometimes undependable horse, the ranch usually assigned him a string of eight to 10 horses.

In brush country and mountains he used a short rope, but in the open plains he could use a longer one. There were modifications in saddles and bridles. His clothes seemed picturesque to those who did not know their uses.

His boots, built to leave the stirrup when he left the saddle, protected his ankles. His chaps, twice as heavy as his pants, shielded his legs. His hat had to stay on even in violent winds, with a brim that wouldn't cut off his vision.

The bandana around his neck screened dust from his nostrils or the sun from his cracked lips. His saddle, spurs and bridle had to be the best quality to withstand daily rugged use. He carried a rifle and sometimes a pistol on his hip, or more often wrapped in his bedroll.

The era of the cowboy closed with the opening of the cross-country railroads. He had come on the scene at the end of a pioneer period, riding on horseback with clothes and gear that made him seem romantic.

But the truth is, the hired man was just another plain, everyday human, carefree and courageous, fun loving and loyal to the brand. The cowboy--real and mythical--soon became the subject of the greatest volume of literature and legend pertaining to any American worker.■

[The above article was sent in by TJA charter member Julie Greene of CA. She clipped it from the April 1987 issue of FEDCO REPORTER.]

Indian fighter.

Cody finally was influential in having "Texas Jack" made a United States government scout, even though a law at the time said that Confederate veterans could not be so employed. Working together, Cody and Jack became fast friends.

During this time, he gained wide fame as a scout and hunter for wealthy Americans and Englishmen, who came West for wild game.

Jack's father, to whom he wrote regularly, told other members of the Omohundro family numbers of interesting stories and anecdotes of Jack's various experiences.

"On one occasion," his father said, "Jack invited Lord Beckingham and a party to go on a grizzly bear hunting trip in the Rocky Mountains. The trip was so successful that on his return to Europe, Lord Beckingham, as a token of appreciation, sent Jack a silver mounted gun that cost more than \$500."

#### The Old Apple Target

Then there was the story of Texas Jack's wonderful marksmanship. He would have a man stand with hands out, an apple in each hand, and one on top of his head.

Jack then would stand 30 steps off with his back to the man. He would wheel around and shoot the apples off the man's head and hands in three seconds. He never lost an assistant.

The fast friendship with Cody remained until death parted them.

When "Buffalo Bill" decided to go East and enter the show business, it was natural that "Texas Jack" should go with him.

He and Cody went on to great success in show business and Wild West Shows. It is said that Texas Jack was the first person to lasso an Indian on the American stage.

By this time he had become the hero of a book written by Ned Buntline titled "Texas Jack," which gained him wide fame around 1870.

#### When Memory Fails

In the Winter of 1872-73, Buntline decided to produce a play in Chicago called "Scouts of the Prairie." He employed Jack and Cody to take the leading roles.

The pair had exactly one day to commit the lines to memory.

On opening night, the pair came out on the stage and neither could remember the first lines, much less those to follow.

Buntline jumped to the stage and saved the day by asking Cody and Jack about their hunting experiences and the crowd roared with delight. The play went on to a triumphant conclusion, but neither Buffalo Bill nor Jack spoke a line of their original parts.

The play went on tour and in April, 1873, it played the old Richmond Theater, which at that time was on the corner of Seventh and Broad Streets.

Malvern Hill Omohundro, who now lives in Goochland County, tells of the engagement in Richmond.

"I was only 6 years old then, and I have today, 70-odd years later,  
(please see TEXAS JACK, p. 11)

VANLEW

continued from p. 5

Gen. Grant sent troops to guard her house, and later brought his wife to pay a formal call. He told Miss VanLew: "Ma'am, you have given me the most valuable intelligence I received from Richmond during the war."

In 1869, just 15 days after his inauguration as President, Grant appointed her postmistress of Richmond.

From New York, the 79th Regiment of Highlanders, Fourth Brigade, sent him a resolution approving the appointment which he passed on to her. It was carefully kept among her most treasured personal possessions.

She served a second term, and, in 1877, Grant recommended her to his successor, President Hayes. But Hayes appointed someone else. She became a government clerk in Washington where she fared badly until she was demoted to the lowest salary and grade and finally lost her job completely.

She returned to the big empty house here to live out a life of exile by silence from neighbors and friends. Her mother had died in 1870; her brother John, who, with his two daughters, had moved into "Bett's" home after he was widowed, died in the 80's followed almost immediately by his eldest daughter.

The other daughter, "young Miss Lizzie," stayed on, following in the spinster footsteps of her aunt.

"Miss VanLew never had a friend here in Richmond after the war," wrote family physician, Dr. William H. Parker. "People shunned her like a plague."

Little boys taunted her and called her "Crazy Bett." Little girls were terrified of her. One woman recalls a visit to her house as a tiny child--how frightened she was of the many cats and of the possibility that Miss VanLew might lock her in the house's infamous secret room where Union soldiers had been hidden.

Her old friends avoided her. Mrs. Margaret Pickett Stokes, the great-great-grandmother of a member of the Historic Richmond play committee, Mrs. John McElroy, had Elizabeth VanLew as a bridesmaid. But after the war she never spoke to her again.

Meanwhile, Miss VanLew's fortunes declined and furnishings of her house went to the auctioneer in steady procession to support her and her niece.

The late Alexander Wilbourne Weddell, son of the rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, where Miss VanLew was a parishioner, describes a visit at age 6 to her home in an uncompleted autobiography:

"It was with a mixture of fear and curiosity that I accompanied my father one day when he went to see her. She received us in an octagon room suggestive of former affluence, but whose shabbiness so approached squalor as to impress even my childish eye."

At last she was forced to take in roomers. The house at that time was described by a former neighbor, Mrs. Charles R. Hyde, as having huge billboards in the front yard telling of Miss Bett's aid to the Union.

In the back yard, a strange mélange of roomers gathered--two maiden ladies, the nephew they cared for who had a broken back and was wheeled in a cart and an old lady who carried a big-headed baby to whom she crooned constantly.

Mrs. Hyde went to call only once--on a roomer in danger of eviction. As she was about to leave, Mrs. Hyde came upon Miss VanLew in the hall.

(please see VANLEW, p. 11)

VANLEW  
continued from p. 10

She took Mrs. Hyde's hands pleading:

"Stay, oh stay, I'll take you upstairs and show you where I hid the Union prisoners....you are the only nice Richmond lady who has called on me since the war."

That was the year "young Miss Lizzie" died. Miss VanLew never went out again and fell ill shortly after.

She died in September, 1900, with only a few faithful servants to mourn her, and her house went under the auctioneer's hammer the next month. When the remainder of her personal property was auctioned in Boston in November, it brought a scant \$1,000.

The little iron-willed woman summed up the lonely post war years in one of the manuscripts found among those personal papers:

"For my loyalty to my country I have two beautiful names--here I am called 'Traitor'; farther North a 'Spy'--instead of by the honored name of 'Faithful'."■

(Part Three will appear in the next issue of the SCOUT.)

[Ed. note: The many photographs of Elizabeth and the VanLew Mansion which accompanied the original newspaper articles were not reproducible. The photos used in the SCOUT and the quotation cited in the introduction are

from VAN <sup>LIEW</sup> LIEW GENEALOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RECORD, by Emerio R. vanLiew, <sub>LEW</sub>

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TEXAS JACK  
continued from p. 9

vivid recollections of the three days and nights we spent in Richmond," he said recently.

"Jack gave my mother a ring he had made from a stone he found on the Red River in Texas. My mother gave it to me when I was 21 and I am wearing it today.

"I have never seen nor heard of another ring like it. It is invaluable; money can't buy it. He gave me a gun for hunting, a velvet suit and a peculiar pocket knife which I still have.

"Many relatives and acquaintances called to see the Virginia cowboy at the old Exchange Hotel on East Franklin Street and the newspapers gave glowing accounts."

In Malvern Hill Omohundro's archives is this copy of a nickel novel by Ned Buntline, in which the Virginian called Texas Jack was a star.

(please see TEXAS JACK, p. 12)



