

Chapter Research Project: NTCC Webb Chapter Film on Sam Houston and the Fate of the Texas Cherokee¹

A) The Scope of the Undertaking:

Our yearly historical dramatizations of previously un-filmed stories of Texas history are year-round efforts that reach high degrees of intensity during the summer. For example, this past September, when the only person actively involved in our film on a daily basis was Cassidy Watkins, our producer, we received a call from the National Public Radio station in Austin about our last film on Ma and Pa Ferguson. This led to an airing on NPR stations on 27 September of a commentary where our Honors Director (the NPR station decided against student participation), Dr. Andrew Yox, compared the Fergusons to Bill and Hillary Clinton. By October, Cassidy had a trailer made which we featured at the Webb meeting in Fredericksburg. But around the same time, four students—William Jones, Kassandra Martinez, Melody Mott, and Emmalea Shaw featured our Ma and Pa film at the meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council in Seattle.² In November, Cassidy continued her work on editing, while we applied for a \$1,000 Whatley Enhancement Grant for our next film on Mary Kay Ash, which was successful. This was parallel to our effort for a grant last year at this time, when Jerald and Mary Lou Mowry provided \$800 for the Cherokee film. In December we did a spot on our upcoming film for the local Radio Station, K-Lake. Currently we are preparing the premiere of the Houston/Cherokee film set for this 17 February we are at our college, which will close with a panel led by Presley McClendon (Director) Ryan Rose Mendoza (Unit Production Director) William Jones who played Sam Houston, William Fox who we call our Webb-Film Scholar since his research most paralleled our film, and Cassidy

Watkins. Copies of our poster are enclosed in this send. We plan to feature a segment of this film at the Webb meeting in Houston in March, and at the meeting of the Great Plains Honors Council in Beaumont at the end of March.

The yearly cycle of film making begins in earnest in May. Last May for our Cherokee film, William Fox, Kassandra Martinez, and Ryan-Rose Mendoza along with Dr. Yox traveled to Austin for a three-day sprint of note-taking at the Dolph Briscoe Center where we researched the letters of early Texians, and correspondence involving the Cherokee (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Our Students, Kassy, William, and Ryan in May 2016 at the Briscoe Center



The van rides to and from Austin provided time for our discussions about where we saw the film headed. We then scanned all the notes, and sent them out in email files, to gather the feedback of a larger group. Then we wrote the script. This year we were especially aided

in this endeavor by William Jones, a history major, whose work on Dutch Luman will appear in this spring's edition in *Touchstone*. Jones for the first time transliterated our drama into professional film script with sluglines, and indented dialogue.

One catalyst for our film effort this past year was a seminar given by Professor Brad Maule, the film professor at Stephen F. Austin University, at our local Franklin County arts alliance building 9 July. Four of us were able to attend this one-day seminar, Rachel Jordan, Cassidy Watkins and William Jones. They are shown below with Professor Maule who acted at Dr. Tony in *General Hospital*.

Figure 2: Below, left to right, Rachel Jordan, who became one of our Cinematographers, Cassidy Watkins, and William Jones (who transliterated the script and starred as Sam Houston) with Professor Brad Maule, 9 July.



Professor Maule made some major contributions to our whole sense of film-making and they are described below.

June and July are busy months as we form our executive committee, choose our actors, hustle to try to win student involvement, make reservations at B&Bs at the designated location—this last year, Nacogdoches, attempt to wring every penny we can get from the NTCC honors budget for equipment, and travel, and try to match the evolving script with the available students. This past year, we had a particular problem, as the incoming honors students who will be taking the Texas History-biology seminar, and thus have more of a reason to pursue the film, were lopsidedly female, and we had an upcoming film with a heavy male component!

Figure 3: Executive Committee: Ryan-Rose Mendoza, Presley McClendon, and William Jones, and Meeting at Jo’s Coffeehouse in Mount Pleasant, Summer 2016



We went forward with the male-deficit problem, getting two non-honors students, Hayden Duncan, and Joshua Yox, to join our effort, and impressing early-on to the guys that if they wanted to come to Nacogdoches, they would have to impersonate several roles. We

were amazingly fortunate with the guys who could do it, the two Williams discussed above, and Hayden, and Joshua; all are history majors with a strong interest in Texas history, and they all eagerly contributed to our film effort.

Our Webb Society does have a challenge securing actors, and good acting. NTCC Theatre people generally are not too interested unless they are in Honors, or connected to the Webb Society ideals. To try to help us professionalize, Jerald and Mary Lou Mowry, our very dear and perennial film sponsors, connected us with the Texas Shakespeare Festival in Kilgore. Mary Lou sits on the Board of this now year-round institution. In the midst of July, however, many of our people were away. But we did get a behind the scenes tour of the impressive troupe work in Kilgore from Matthew Simpson, Associate Artistic Director:

Figure 4: Matthew Simpson (center) of the Texas Shakespeare Festival Shows us their Operation in Kilgore: Our Students are Kassandra Martinez, William Jones, Leivy Zuniga, and Yami Zuniga.

We no longer have a faculty member as we used to have with experience in cinematography, so our cinematographers who also lead our boom mic volunteers had to learn from scratch. We were fortunate that NTCC Vice President Ron Clinton, overturned his previous refusal of the purchase of a \$1,000 Canon HFG40. This is beautiful machine that gets good footage, and which we were able to combine with our slightly older HFG30. Having two cinematographers was a major breakthrough in doing films in a more professional way, as Professor Maule suggested. We were very fortunate when Rachel Jordan and Adriana Rodriguez stepped forward to lead this effort. They were incredibly fast learners.

Figure 5: Cinematographers



We staged rehearsals and a dinner in Mount Pleasant in late July, and early August. We also invited some supporters to meet our cast. We were very pleased to receive financial support at this time from Mark Leshner Esq, a Mount Pleasant lawyer whose law office is like a little Texas History Museum. Glenda Brogoitti, another local resident and former History Professor here, contributed to our food budget, and helped us with leads in Nacogdoches.

Webb members memorized their parts. Emmalea Shaw tallied prop needs, and Alecia Spurlin our need for costumes. We were especially benefitted by a transition at NTCC's

Theatre Northeast that allowed us access to their costumes. Though we also relied on Al and Shirley Clay, two local early-Texian re-enactors, the Theatre department had a lot to offer:

Figure 6: Alecia Spurlin and Emmalea Shaw at the Costume Studio of Theatre Northeast.



At last we were ready for the big trip to Nacogdoches, 9-12 August. We were excited. The people at the historical village there, Millard's Crossing were allowing us to film as were local B &Bs like the Jones House. We even planned to film at the Tol Barrett House, preserved on a tract of land owned by the Phillips family of Nacogdoches. Charles, who is an architect, and his sister, Pam, as well as their 91-year old mother, Anne who is a lover of Texas History, were making special provisions for us to come.

We had 65 scenes to film and only four days. We would have to coordinate travel as we would be staying at various locations in and south of Nacogdoches. Our leader who figured

out the myriad of technical difficulties regarding sequencing was Ryan-Rose Mendoza, our Unit Production Director. She is the sister of Miranda who was a very active Webb member, who acted and served as Prop Director in our Harriet Potter film:

Figure 7: Ryan-Rose Mendoza in the Red Hat on Set Below

Mendoza's plans were perfect, and we were set. We then discovered reaching Nacogdoches that our B&B planning had a fatal flaw. We had five of our women in the Rosewood House on the Phillips' estate. Though the Phillips family had labored overtime for our arrival, our girls were not ready for the place's rustic situation. There were no locks on the doors. The air conditioning was almost half-way ineffective in August in Nacogdoches. And worst of all. There was no cell phone service. It did not contribute to our optimism that one of our members also became ill. But the cell-phone problem was the clincher. We had to lose a night of filming and re-assemble. In this we were aided again by two faculty drivers who were indispensable for this effort, Honors Professor, Dr. Mary Hearn, and retiring Honors Professor, Dr. Shirley Clay.

We were thankful that the proprietors of our two B&Bs, and Jones and Hardeman Houses, forgave us for “packing in” the first night, and having many more show up to breakfast than we had given indication would come.

We now were in a near-desperate situation. But Mendoza stayed up late, and re-sequenced the effort. Presley McClendon, our Director, working with Ryan, did a superb job of rallying the troops, and working late into the night, and starting at 9AM, we were able to finish the 65 scenes.

Figure 8: Director Presley McClendon who also played the role of Margaret Houston



An unsung hero in our effort to finish was Cassandra Martinez who had accompanied us on our research trip to Austin. She had almost been kidnapped last summer while

crossing over to Durango, Mexico! But she kept in touch. She was invaluable as she had made it to state in High School in cosmetology, and now served as our makeup artist.

Figure 9: Cassandra Martinez, here with a Boom Mic, who rushed through hundreds of hair styles, and facial effects while we filmed.



This project would not have been possible without the encouragement of the State Walter Prescott Webb Society, and the Caldwell Awards which have enticed the support of NTCC administrators. We are also indebted to the Friends of Honors Northeast, and a tradition of Texas History scholarship at Northeast Texas Community College that is forging bonds with friends who support our premieres and outreach.

Figure 10

The Cast on the Final Night at Nacogdoches after a Dinner at the Clear Springs Restaurant with the Phillips Family



B) Its Purpose:

We have engaged in student lectures, poster competitions, essay publications, exhibits in the case of our Caddo collection, inviting a famous historian such as Dr. Walter Buenger of Texas A&M, and over-the-radio presentations of our historical research as we did this past December on K-LAKE in Mount Pleasant. These have all drawn interested members of the community. But we still believe that the best possible interface our Webb society can utilize

to stir discussion and awareness in state history is the medium of film. We have taken our films all over the country, to Chicago, New Orleans, Denver, South Padre Island, and now Seattle, and there is a momentum when we have so many people involved in the local effort, that we can expect a good attendance and discussion at our premiere. We have found as well that the presence of “films” out there or pending stirs press and media support. As noted above, a viewer of our film on Youtube from NPR led to the NPR commentary last September. Also, Honors Director Yox had two publications in the *East Texas Journal* last summer, one over three Northeast Texas leaders, Wright Patman, Morris Sheppard, and Sam Rayburn, and another over Chief Bowles and the Texas Cherokee. We hope to leverage this outreach in better ways, by appealing to more donors, and friends over the years.

We also believe this year we examined a critical issue about the Cherokee in Northeast Texas. Many people use the 259 and 271 expressways that connect Clarksville with Nacogdoches. But the first real “highway” that did this was the Cherokee Trace. We learned that they planted hedgerows, and roses to mark the path. The Cherokee, who have a county named after them two hours south of us, had a significant impact even though they resided here for only twenty years. But early Texas decided to eliminate them. Why? How?

C) Procedures Followed:

Our basic approach is to begin with an idea, obtain some funding, perform the research, write the script and form the executive committee, recruit actors, fix the logistics, film, produce, and disseminate.

This year the **idea** for our film about Sam Houston, and the Texas Cherokee came from the publisher of the *East Texas Journal*, Mr. Hudson Old. We were thankful that Mr. Old, who has always been very encouraging, and has featured our film efforts in his journal, could get involved at this level.

Our need for **funding** translates into a year-round enterprise. A primary source of our funding has been unused amounts in the Honors Scholarship fund at the end of the year. This fund is endangered as the college cut honors scholarships by 33 percent this past September. We are hopeful that this Cherokee film is not the last with access to this fund. The College has also held faculty salaries without a raise for three years, and is experiencing problems as enrollments at the college have stagnated, and costs have increased.

For **research** we are thankful for the ongoing efforts of the Webb Society to award Caldwell awards. We have about twelve students who seriously strive for this each year, and thus we have projects “in the making.” When Mr. Old first suggested the theme for this film, we had a student, Marisol Bautista, who immediately began research on it a year ago. She helped concretize Mr. Old’s suggestion but was not able to remain with us in Honors or the Webb Society.

Writing the **script** has in the past been a volatile exercise. Students mentored by Dr. Yox, and Dr. Yox as well contribute various portions of the script. These are reviewed by the **Executive Committee**, and sent back for more work. William Fox, William Jones, Ryan Mendoza, Kassandra Martinez, and Dr. Yox were the main authors. This year we avoided parental involvement which the year before led to damaging letters sent to our president and vice president, and forced visits to a psychiatrist because of the disciplinary action that resulted. We made all the students sign a form which stated that they were free to quit, but that major changes in the script could not be made after 30 June, and minor changes could not be made after 30 July.

We have the benefit of **recruiting** from a solid base, the 25 members of Honors Northeast, who are then drafted into our Webb Society. Sophomores like Presley McClendon, Emmalea Shaw, and Alecia Spurlin already had Texas history. The freshmen are almost all required to take it their first semester.

Fixing the logistics was pretty much in the province of two who maintained a presence at NTCC this past summer, Dr. Yox, and Ryan Mendoza. Often Yox has to go ahead and reserve B&Bs before the funding is there, and we have had to pay extra for this when changes are made. One particular mistake was ordering the Hardeman B&B through an agency rather than through them, as we paid more, and had less flexibility. We believe that Dr. Hearron who stayed at the Hardeman House may well have paid some extra money out of her own pocket to cover our irregularities at that House. We also have a tough time finding drivers since the college insists it has to be a college employee that drives. We were very thankful the two honors professors, Clay, and Hearron, were willing to come through.

The filming again encountered our biggest obstacle over the years. Sound. Out of doors scenes can be trying, and some of our students don't speak up enough, though we make every effort to get their volume higher. This year Cassidy Watkins, and William Jones hit on a wonderful solution. Since our honors students all have Apple MacBooks, we found a way to send emails, with files from Garage Band, the Apple App for sound. This helped with some of the weak spots.

Cassidy Watkins, a Salutatorian from Daingerfield was our **Producer**, and she is the one who gets what has been referred to as our *Maltese Falcon*, all the hours of work on her computer. She edits during the semester, and her production is performed in lieu of a paper grade for Texas History. She was very smart, reliable, and dependable; she began editing even as we were filming in Nacogdoches. She and William Jones and Dr. Yox had to even meet this last Christmas Break to work out some details with film intelligibility. Cassidy always came through, and for that, we thank God!

We are now in the dissemination stage. Cassidy has just got the entire film on Youtube, and we encourage you to watch it. Our Trailer is nearby and has a golden sign on Youtube,

so watch that you get the full one-hour film. Query on Youtube: <Sam Houston, and the Fate of the Texas Cherokee>.

D) Findings:

In our research in Austin, we realized that the state lacks a good treasure trove on the Texas Cherokee, but we tried as best we could from other sources to piece together images of the Cherokee way of life. We staged a wedding ceremony, a birthing, and the Green Corn Festival from extent sources on Cherokee life. We found that the Texas Cherokee were a traditionalist group, and hypothesize from the murders of quarter-blood Cherokee such as Richard Fields, and John Dunn Hunter that there were some fairly profound differences between their way of life and the Anglos, as well as blood memories from the East that made the Texas situation with the Cherokee more volatile.

It was interesting how we came together on the script. Ryan was very intrigued by Houston's relationship with Anna Raguet, and believed that Houston had more energy than empathy. William found the case of Edward Burleson, troublesome, and believed that Houston had some similarities with this leading anti-Indian racist. We debated this until we found that Houston had once called the Mexicans, "half-Indians." Kassandra took the most notes, and she was startled when she found that Houston must have been related to the Texas Cherokee Chief Bowles, because his Cherokee wife, Diana Rogers, was the daughter of one of Chief Bowles' wives. As we re-enacted the parts we embraced the quote from the Bible, Hosea 6:4—"For Your Love is like the Morning Mist." That is to say, the love that was proffered between Houston and his Cherokee family was not really love, or at least, not love that lasted.

E) Conclusions:

Houston's life story pivots not only with his marriage to Margaret but with the simultaneous destruction of a tribe that represented much of his youth, the Cherokee. The Cherokee episode transformed Houston. He was outraged with the elimination of his former friends, but also aware that he had done little, in practical terms, to save them. Our film concluded by showing that Houston was more prepared to be resolute about taking an enlightened role with his slaves. He in the end, with spiritual guidance from his new wife, Margaret, was now prepared to suffer for his convictions.

F) Significance:

We are gratified at least by the fact that we now have the only cinematic version of Sam Houston, and the Texas Cherokee in existence. Films are important in today's culture.

For even as historians have compiled an A-list of monographs about Texas, much of the public remains oblivious. The average American of the early twenty-first century encounters the past in some way every year, but watches about twenty films for every book read. Not only is the interaction with yesteryear usually through television or film, it is with legend rather than history. Whereas *The History Channel* or Stephen Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) may provide exemplary channels to awaken public interest in the factual past, in regard to Texas, the fictional deluge is especially pronounced. The second highest rated prime-time telecast ever, an episode of the Soap Opera, *Dallas*, reverberated with that show's fictional obsessions and verisimilitudes. Cowboy Westerns accounted for about one-fourth of the films produced by Hollywood in the twentieth century. As one of the most admired of the Western filmmakers, John Ford, noted, when the "truth becomes legend," one indeed needed to give people the legend. Aside from films about the Alamo, and Sam Houston, the Texas past has been highly fictionalized. One is reminded of the numerous jokes about Texas swimming

pools having lighthouses, or Texas oil barons buying automobiles by the six-pack—the state remains a stronghold of a prevaricated past. Historiography walks. Fiction sprints.³

The Northeast Texas Community College Webb Chapter’s effort to “film un-filmed” stories of Texas in the past five years has stemmed from the conviction that cinema is where the “cultural action” is. But our goal is to dramatize history as best as possible. This is an action which exhilarates our students and sponsors: we hope to utilize good historical research to communicate the stories that will expand our horizons and bring us together as a culture.

We welcome you to view the completed film, and the trailer on YouTube. Type <Sam Houston, and the Fate of the Texas Cherokee>.

¹ Our film is on Youtube. Please query at this site:<Sam Houston and the Fate of the Texas Cherokee> to view.

² Usually a community-college honors project would have only a slight chance of being presented at the annual meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council. But the NCHC judges each year for the last four have selected our film projects for a special session, viewing them as an optimal integration method, and creative exercise to bring a group of honors students together as a team.

³ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1; William Indick, *The Psychology of the Western* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 1-2; Richard Schickel, “The Man Who Shot the West,” *New York Times*, 9 January 2000. Peter C. Rollins, *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies have portrayed the American Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xi.