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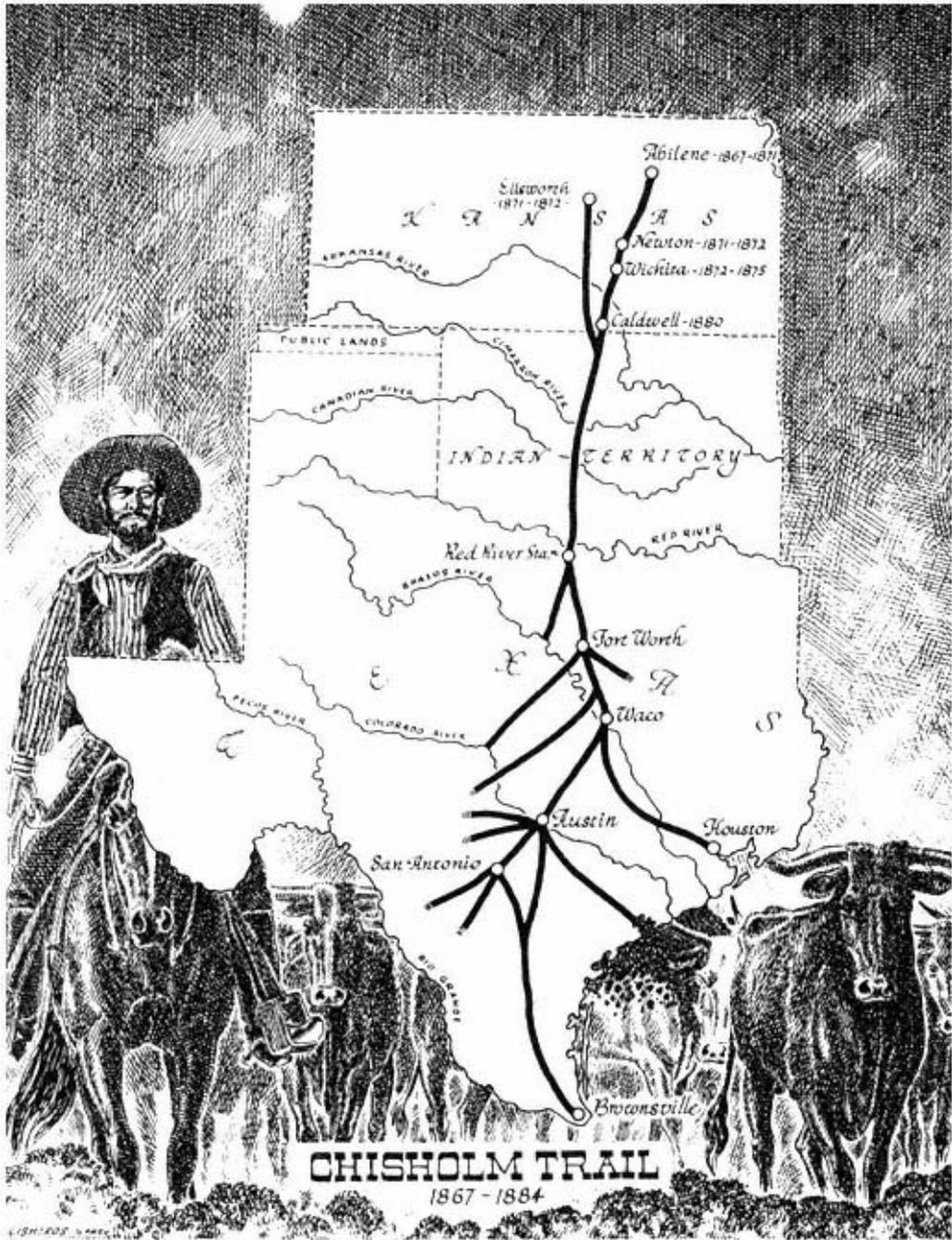
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Jesse Chisholm



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Trail Blazer Sam Houston's Trouble-Shooter Friend, Kin to  
the Cherokee

By Ralph B. Cushman

**EAKIN PRESS ★ Austin, Texas**

FIRST EDITION

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*To the  
Milby High  
connection:*

*Bess W. Scott,  
my patient mentor;*

*W. G. (Bill) Roberts, Jr.,  
who taught me to  
polish the gem;*

*and*

*Margaret Spraggins Cushman;*

*and also to  
my wife,  
Mildred Cushman,  
and son,  
Russell Clark Cushman.*



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JESSE CHISHOLM

## Preface

At about eight years old I was exposed to Texas' pioneer giants, those legendary men who kindled my boyhood dreams. My maternal grandmother, Virginia (Ginny) Durant McDougald, first introduced me to those earthy characters.

Ginny was an eyewitness to the founding of Alvin, Texas, in the 1870s by her father, Maj. George William Durant, a repatriated Confederate soldier. As a teenager, she spent many hours listening to her maternal grandfather, John Wesley Durant, recount his life during Texas' early years as a republic. John W. had represented Horry County in the 32nd General Assembly of the South Carolina legislature during 1836 and 1837. He also had served a hitch as captain in the South Carolina Militia during the Florida War in 1837.

John W. Durant, a lawyer by profession, arrived in Texas in the spring of 1839 and settled at Washington-on-the-Brazos. There, John W. renewed his acquaintance with Sam Houston and developed a lifelong friendship with him.

The U.S. Census Report of 1850 shows that John W. settled at Centerville and was practicing law in newly formed Leon County, Texas. By 1854 he formed a law partnership with Judge William D. Wood, who also was editor and publisher of the *Leon Pioneer*, the local newspaper.

An outspoken secessionist, John W. was elected senator of the 18th District, comprising Leon, Madison, Robertson, Brazos, and Burleson counties in Texas' Ninth Legislature in 1861. He served under Governor Francis R. Lubbock, who had been elected to that office when Sam Houston was impeached. John W. also served as senator in the Tenth Legislature under Governor Pendleton Murrah through 1864.

My grandmother, Ginny, found her grandfather's third profes-

sion more impressive than his political career. He was a circuit-riding Methodist preacher and remained active as a preacher until shortly before his death in 1889 at Alvin, Texas. She said John W. was probably heard by more people than any other man in Central Texas. He exposed his listeners to seven days of hell's fire and brimstone, readily expressing his views on theology, current events, politics, and economics.

John W.'s daughter, Emma Sherrod Durant, married a cousin from North Carolina, George William Durant, in 1865 after the Civil War ended. George surveyed and then settled on the site of what is presently Alvin, Texas, where the Durants' only child, Ginny, was reared.

Ginny remembered her grandfather John W. saying that he occasionally disagreed with his friend Sam Houston. They were estranged for a short time because of their differences about secession. John W. expressed great satisfaction that he and Houston had reconciled before Houston's death in 1863. When Houston died, Durant hurried to Huntsville to offer his support to Houston's widow. He continued this support after Houston's widow moved to Independence, Texas. It was during this period that John W. established a close friendship with Andrew Jackson Houston, the last surviving son of Sam Houston.

I spent the summer of 1935 with my Aunt Mattie and Uncle Henry Jonas at their home in LaPorte, Texas, and there I met Col. Andrew Jackson Houston. He and his two daughters, Margaret and Ariadne (Ari), regularly walked single-file along the shell-topped road fronting the Jonas home en route to and from church services about a quarter of a mile away, near Sylvan Beach. The old gentleman wore a heavy black wool suit even during the torrid July heat. His weather-beaten, black felt hat was pulled down to his eyebrows, except when he carried it, thereby exposing his partially bald head and a few stringy gray hairs. His salt-and-pepper mustache was full and neatly trimmed.

The two Houston daughters, both "old maids," always dressed as if they were going to a costume ball. Margaret and Ari were past fifty years old. Their antique clothes were a sight to behold. Margaret wore a great plumed hat with a snap brim, while Ari let her tightly curled red hair blow unrestrained.

From the time I learned the identity of Colonel Houston, I wanted to meet him. Like most young Texans I was thrilled about Texas' history, and I put steady pressure on Aunt Mattie to introduce me to this vital link with the

state's past. The great moment came one July afternoon in 1935. Aunt Mattie had taken me to hear Professor

Brown, a local astronomer, who was exhibiting his latest invention for predicting weather. On that day, two big fans produced most of the weather as we sat with Judge A. Muldoon, the local justice of the peace, in the steamy LaPorte School Auditorium. Colonel Houston came in view. As Judge Muldoon stood up to greet the colonel, I found myself between the two old men. Colonel Houston spoke to Aunt Mattie, and she introduced "my nephew, Ralph Cushman, Jr." I silently marveled at his fragile hand, seemingly void of muscle.

Aunt Mattie did not share my ecstasy for the Houston family. Inhibited by pride and some prejudice, she felt the Houstons were not her peers. She had succumbed to false gossip that Sam Houston had been a traitor to the South. For Mattie Cushman Jonas, daughter of Basil C. Cushman, a repatriated Confederate officer, Houston's alleged breach of loyalty was irreconcilable. But B.C. Cushman, my great-grandfather and retired treasurer of the Southern Pacific Railway, lived in peace and harmony with Colonel Houston, his LaPorte neighbor, for nearly ten years. Aunt Mattie's allegations seemed to lack substance. I recall that Uncle Henry E Jonas, a nationally renowned design engineer who designed the old Galveston Causeway (still in use), was silent about this misunderstanding, even in his own home. He knew his wife's prejudices and never openly questioned her opinion.

Nevertheless, I presented myself at Colonel Houston's home for a visit the following morning. Margaret announced me. The Houston home was very *simpleno frills*. The family obviously did not expect company that day.

When Colonel Houston saw me, his eyes showed the surprise he felt. With obvious reticence but compelling good manners, he welcomed me to sit on his stoop for our first visit. My poor manners eventually drove him to the cooler shade of his living room chair with me on his heels.

During our first visit, I was eagerly trying to gain his confidence. I blurted out, "My great-grandfather, John Wesley Durant, was a friend of your father." To my surprise, Colonel Houston said, "He was also a good friend of mine." He then recalled several yarns about my kin that put me at ease.

Aunt Mattie disapproved, but I continued to visit Colonel Houston almost daily. We often would stroll leisurely along the bayshore as the colonel fielded the torrent of questions I posed. He was past eighty years and did not have much stamina, but he was in good health. Once he began to feel his subject,

he became engrossed with the story he was

telling. The old gentleman saw my unabashed idolatry for his father, Sam Houston, and therefore carefully nurtured my sentiments. After our third or fourth visit, he began to let me see his father through a son's eyes.

Suddenly, after two weeks of jawing, Colonel Houston abruptly became very reluctant to talk further about his father. About the same time, his tales about J. W. Durant seemed to be exhausted. He was bent on telling me about his personal hero, Jesse Chisholm.

"Jesse who?" I asked. I thought Colonel Houston had tired of my presence and was using some mythical character to get rid of me.

Colonel Houston's first effort to hook my interest in Jesse Chisholm was a failure. Initially, I believed he was trying to "pull my leg." Then I found I had no interest in the fact that Chisholm took food and supplies to his widowed mother at Independence, Texas. It was only after the old gentleman began to bare his soul to me on subjects he seemed to know intimately public scorn, dire poverty, and social rejection that I began to understand my host. Through him, I was introduced to the "cold, hard facts of life."

Colonel Houston vividly recalled the hate and spite that a large segment of Texans heaped upon the Houston family as the result of Governor Houston's stand against the secession of Texas from the Union. It had been seventy years since that episode of A. J. Houston's life, but he flinched when he told it. The hurt had not gone away. Sam Houston's tarnished image in Texas did nothing to make young Andrew's life pleasant nor the lives of his brothers and sisters, who also endured the taunts of their schoolmates. "Hadn't Sam Houston been kicked out as governor of Texas and branded a traitor?" they would hear.

The wounds inflicted on the Houston children left pock marks on Andrew's heart. He carried them to his grave. But out of this personal pyre, Andrew J. Houston had found one true, lasting, understanding friend Jesse Chisholm. The more time I spent with Colonel Houston over the years, the better I knew his friend Jesse Chisholm. In fact, I know Chisholm as few can through first-hand stories from a loyal friend.

Colonel Houston told of the dire poverty the Houston family suffered after his father's death. He acknowledged that poverty in Texas was fairly general after the Civil War, but he squirmed as he recalled the criticism he received because he was a Houston. Some family members believed they were victims

of Sam Houston's poor business sense

and were suffering for his sins. Colonel Houston was still groping for answers the last time we talked.

It had been nearly twenty years since Andrew Jackson Houston had settled in the relatively obscure backwaters of Trinity Bay near LaPorte, seeking peace and quiet. Unlike his famous father, Colonel Houston abhorred the limelight. Upon Texas' hundredth anniversary in 1936, he knew his family would be drawn into the centennial celebration, but he didn't look forward to the role he would be asked to play in those ceremonies.

After nearly two decades as neighbors to the Beasley, Bradley, Cushman, Jonas, and other families, he doubted any of them liked him. There had been little communication. Neither faction tried to get to know the other.

Houston told me he had lived his life doubting his own ability. He had received an appointment to West Point followed by a string of state and federal job appointments, but he held deep resentment for his lot in life. He showed me a collection of letters from people he called "vultures, trying to capitalize on the good Houston name."

Even his oil paintings and whittling drew unwarranted attention, according to Houston. He admitted that he had toiled long and diligently on his various literary works, but he said each work had been done with the help of others. He knew other writers received help, but he wondered if the public would forgive him for accepting assistance as he edited his works for publication.

Probably his greatest anguish came from criticism he got from his family for joining the Republican Party. He conceded that being a Republican in predominantly Democratic Texas was indeed to wave the red flag at the bull. With his lack of conformity he drew heavy attention, not all of it favorable, and he opined that "the Republican Party used him too."

All the time Colonel Houston was airing his thoughts I was totally unaware of his motivation for telling me all this "boring stuff." Try as I would to steer him back to yarns about his father or even his friend, Jesse Chisholm, he continued to analyze his own station. As I came to know him better, to know him as a sensitive, shy, honest and intelligent man, I began to understand his oft-repeated phrase, "I've never been seen as anything but 'Old Sam's daft son.'" I argued with him but with no success. He was sure he would die without knowing his own ability or the depth of commitment of his friends.

In 1938 my English teacher, Miss Martha Dobie, read one of my

poorly composed but uniquely different themes, and she questioned me about my subject, Jesse Chisholm. Sensing that I had stumbled onto an unexplored crevice of history, she encouraged me to write more of my personal experiences with Colonel Houston and his stories of Jesse Chisholm. Since it didn't require any outside reading, I jumped at her suggestion.

Miss Dobie told me later that her brother, J. Frank Dobie, had expressed a desire to meet my friend Colonel Houston and wondered if I could arrange a meeting during the Christmas holidays. Dobie was an English professor at the University of Texas and had already written several books. I eagerly agreed to set up the meeting.

Using the school's telephone, I tried to place a call to Colonel Houston but learned to my surprise he had no telephone service in his home. This embarrassed me because I sensed Miss Dobie now had some doubts about my ability to produce the meeting. Before she had time to react, I placed a call to Aunt Mattie and asked her to go get Colonel Houston and bring him to her phone. She was less than enthusiastic but finally agreed to try to get him to her phone. To add to Aunt Mattie's anxiety, she had to wait for not only Colonel Houston but both of his daughters, who insisted on accompanying their father to hear him make "phone talk."

The "phone talk" revealed a side of Colonel Houston I'd never seen. He was flustered, maybe even awed, by my telephone call. He couldn't understand why I would need to make an appointment with him, after years of just popping into his living room. I explained I was calling for another man who wanted to meet him. He asked why this man didn't call himself. It was a frustrating conversation that ended with me telling Colonel Houston I would visit him the next Monday morning and would bring Mr. Dobie with me. His response was noncommittal and caused me to be qualmish. I worried over what I had gotten myself into by pushing for this meeting.

En route to LaPorte, I discussed with Mr. Dobie the colonel's reaction to my call. The great Texas writer said he would understand if the meeting didn't go well and that we would simply excuse ourselves and leave if Colonel Houston didn't feel comfortable with us. My worries left me when Houston invited us into his home. The meeting was a success from my viewpoint, primarily because Mr. Dobie was relaxed and patient, even though Colonel Houston was still bemused about Dobie's reason for seeking him out. Even my high-pressure efforts to get Colonel Houston to talk did not dampen Dobie's

composure. After