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The Stone Houses Fight

November 10, 1837

by Stephen L Moore

The year 1837 was a tough one for the Texas Rangers.

Sergeant George Erath lost two men, killed in his Indian fight on Elm Creek in January. That same month, three East Texas Rangers were killed and a fourth was wounded in an Indian encounter along the Trinity River. Twice in April, the Indians managed to stampede the Rangers' horses near their frontier outposts. In May, a five-man wagon

party of Captain Daniel Monroe's Ranger company was slaughtered by Indians near Post Oak Springs in present Milam County. In late May, another Ranger of Captain Tommy Barron's company was killed near Fort Milam at the falls of the Brazos River.

The hostile Indians of Texas had become more aggressive in 1837. By midyear, President Sam Houston furloughed most of the Texas army, leaving only a small group of cavalrymen and a battalion of Texas Rangers to protect the entire Republic of Texas. In September 1836, the Rangers numbered more than 450. By early October, there were fewer than 200 employed.

Major William H. Smith, a veteran cavalryman from San Jacinto, commanded the remaining units of Texas Rangers. Captain Lee Smith's Company E, having fulfilled its enlistment requirements, was discharged on October 1, 1837, by Major Smith. Captain Micah Andrews' Company C was also effectively out of service by this date, although Andrews would continue to be paid through year's end as a Ranger captain.

Many other frontier Rangers were leaving the service individually as their service terms expired. Despite his dwindling numbers, Major Smith was motivated to organize an offensive campaign against the hostile Indians in October 1837. The mission was to retrieve horses stolen by Indians from the Colorado River settlements.

Several units of men, under the direction of Smith, rendezvoused at the previously abandoned Fort Smith on the Little River, located in present Bell

County near the junction of the Leon and Lampasas Rivers with Little River. A detachment of Captain John M. Bowyer's mounted gunmen from Houston arrived at Fort Smith to join this expedition. Bowyer's Ranger detachment was commanded by First Lieutenant A. B. Vanbenthuisen and Second Lieutenant Alfred Miles. The senior officers from Major Smith's battalion were Captain William Mosby Eastland, who would take command of the men, and First Lieutenant John L. Lynch. The pension papers of Private George Green of Company D show that this expedition was referred to by some of the Rangers as the Eastland Campaign.

Various accounts give the number of Rangers participating in Captain Eastland's Campaign to be between sixty-three and sixty-eight. Expedition member George Erath said the total party comprised sixty-six men under Captain Eastland, and they "made a campaign of nearly two months time." Erath stated that the men "penetrated the Indian country between the Brazos and Colorado, further than the same number of men had done before or since." Eastland's men subsisted entirely on the game they killed, without even salt to use.

The expedition did not find any Indians by the end of the month. At this time, some sort of disagreement arose near the Colorado River on November 1 among the officers in command of the party. This conflict occurred when the expedition was near the head of Pecan Bayou, a tributary to the Colorado River. This site would be in present Callahan County, just southeast of present Abilene.

Captain Eastland and Lieutenant Lynch led the majority of their men back down Pecan Bayou for the Colorado River and, ultimately, back to Fort Colorado on Walnut Creek. In his report, First Lieutenant Vanbenthuisen simply stated that he "parted company with Captain Eastland."

Eastland's Rangers headed back for the Colorado River. Somewhere along the way, Eastland and twenty-four of his men fought a battle with what was estimated to be two hundred Indians. The site of the battle was on Ruan Bayou, and the fight continued for two hours. None of the Texans were killed. Another party of the returning Rangers from Eastland's campaign was "closely chased" but escaped without casualties. One of the small parties, of which volunteer George Erath was a member, included eight men from the Brazos. Erath wrote that he and his fellow men "succeeded in taking seven horses and mules from another party of Indians on our way homeward and arrived safely at home."

Captain Eastland's Rangers were back at Fort Houston on the Colorado by

mid-November. He signed the discharge papers of Addison Litton on November 20 at this post.

While all of these small bands of Rangers succeeded in making it back to their posts without loss, the eighteen-man group under Lieutenant Vanbenthuisen was much less lucky. After parting ways with Captain Eastland, Vanbenthuisen and Second Lieutenant Alfred Miles continued on with sixteen Rangers. Most of these men were originally from Vanbenthuisen's detachment, but his remaining party did include some of Captain Eastland's men who had decided not to end the expedition. They pursued the trail of stolen horses in an east-northeast direction toward the Brazos River until meeting a party of Cherokees on November 3 near the Forks of the Brazos. The site was likely in present Stonewall County. Vanbenthuisen wrote of his party's encounter with the Cherokees:

They were a going to the Comanche Indians with powder and lead for the purpose of exchanging it for horses and mules. This party of Cherokees was piloted by a party of seven Keechi Indians. When first discovered, one of the Keechis was [a] half mile in advance of his party. Our men surrounded him and tried to make him surrender, but he would not be friendly with us.

This Kichai raised his rifle to shoot Lieutenant Miles but was shot dead by one of the Rangers. Felix McCluskey, a wild-natured Irishman, was the Ranger credited with killing this Indian. Afterwards, he is said to have scalped the warrior and gone through his pockets. Some of the riflemen were critical of him for this harsh act. McCluskey, however, ruthlessly displayed a chunk of tobacco he had lifted from the dead Indian's pocket and swore that he "would kill any Injun for that much tobacco."

By this time, the Cherokees came up and informed Vanbenthuisen that the Keechis were acting as their guides. They also explained that Jesse Watkins, who had been appointed an Indian agent by President Houston in September, had made a partial treaty with them.

Watkins would not live long in his appointment. He and his interpreter Lewis Sanchez worked largely with the Kichai, Caddo, and Tawakoni Indians near present Dallas County. According to Sanchez, Watkins was captured by the Cherokee Indians of Chief Bowles and killed. It is possible that the very Indians Vanbenthuisen's Rangers encountered were those who killed Watkins.

"I immediately called off my men from the pursuit," wrote Vanbenthuisen,

“but told the Cherokees that they could not furnish the hostile Indians with powder and lead to murder the inhabitants on the frontier.”

The Indians were informed that if they attempted to go onward, the Rangers would take their goods away from them. The Cherokees promised that they would return home and apparently did so. Lieutenant Vanbenthuisen’s Rangers crossed the forks of the Brazos River on November 4. They were troubled because they continued to find horseshoe tracks going in a northeasterly direction. Shod tracks indicated horses stolen from the white men, as the Indians did not shoe their horses.

By November 10, the eighteen-man Ranger party had reached a rock formation in the hills near the headwaters of the West Fork of the Trinity River, known to the Indians as the Stone Houses. This stone formation, standing out above the surrounding scrub brush and cactus, was thought to resemble early houses or tepees from a distance. The Stone Houses formation is located about ten miles south of Windthorst on Highway 61 in present Archer County. A historical marker is located just south of the West Fork of the Trinity River. The formation is actually 1.5 miles south of U.S. 61 down Prideaux Road, a gravel country lane.

Vanbenthuisen’s report continues:

I fell in with a large body of Indians in a moving position towards the southwest. I first supposed them to be Keechis, but was afterwards informed that they were Toweash, Wacos and a few Keechis and Caddos. I got this information from the Shawnees and Delawares. I judged the Indians to be about one hundred and fifty strong. About fifty or sixty of them were armed with rifles and the balance had bows and arrows.

When they first spotted the Indians, the Texans noticed that they had a large *caballada* [*cabalgata*] of horses with them “and were accompanied by many women and children.” Vanbenthuisen climbed atop the high Stone Houses rock mound “until I saw about one hundred and fifty mount their horses and come towards us.” He immediately rushed down and stationed his men in a point of timber with a deep ravine for protection.

About three o’clock, the Indians made a charge upon us and completely surrounded our position. When they commenced firing from their rifles upon us, they had fired eight or ten shots before we returned their fire. There was a continual firing kept up on both sides until about half past four.

The Texans made their defensive stand in a deep ravine, and the Indians took position about seventy yards in front of the gorge. At one point, Nicholson, who understood some of the Indian language, was sent out to try and make peace talk. He climbed a tree and opened conversation with the enemy.

Reportedly, the Indians first demanded the surrender of Felix McCluskey, who had killed the Kichai Indian one week prior. When this was refused, the battle ensued. Vanbenthuisen recorded that the skirmish, later known as the Stone Houses Fight, was fought on November 10 at 33.5 degrees north latitude.

The Indians remained on horseback and fired at the Texans. The leading chief of this band rode his horse rapidly up and down the ravine in order to cause the Texans to waste their ammunition firing at him. He boldly held his shield up between him and the Rangers. One of the veteran Indian fighters among the Texan group was not fazed by this shield. He took good aim, fired, and killed the chief.

In his battle report, Vanbenthuisen stated that his men were no more than a pistol's shot apart from their enemies during this exchange. He also noted that his men had "the good fortune to kill their [the Indians'] principal chief" during this exchange.

When the chief fell from his horse, the other braves rushed forward to retrieve his body. The Texans poured a volley into their midst as the savages tied a rope around the chief's body and galloped off out of range. After depositing the body, they returned on foot in fifteen minutes and took position within sixty yards of the ravine occupied by the Rangers. The gun battle now became intense as the Indians tried to avenge their fallen leader. The Indians had the better position in thick timber that was adorned with underbrush and tall grass. The Texans were forced to fire by sneaking a peak over the top of the ravine to spot an Indian and then quickly shooting. Each of their shots drew a volley from the enemy.

During the fight, the Rangers would pull off their hats, place them on the end of their ramrods, and raise them above the walls of the ravine. The Indians, mistaking the empty hats for hats with heads in them, would fire at them, sometimes putting as many as half a dozen balls through one hat. The Rangers would then immediately rise, take aim, and fire at the Indians. After an hour and a half, the firing died off about 4:30 p.m. The Indians withdrew, having suffered a number of casualties in the heated exchange. Lieutenant Vanbenthuisen's men had done surprisingly well against their

numerically superior foe. They had, however, lost four Rangers and six horses killed.

Those killed had been Joseph Cooper, Alexander Bostwick, Dr. William Sanders, and William Nicholson. Dr. Sanders had enrolled in Captain James Price's Kentucky Volunteers on June 1, 1836, for six months and had subsequently joined the Ranger battalion under Major Smith. Bostwick, an atheist, had argued to his fellow soldier James Ogden Rice on several occasions that he did not believe in the existence of God. Rice had prophetically chastised the man: "I may yet see you die on this trip." Vanbenthuysen gave praise to his men for fighting valiantly during the early gun battle:

Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon those brave men who fell. All of them received their death shots and died in a few minutes after being shot. Their cry was, "Fight on! Fight on! You can whip the Indians!" Mr. Bostwick, after being shot through the body, loaded and fired his rifle three times and had the fourth load in his gun when he expired in the act of drawing his ramrod from his rifle. Young Cooper insisted that we should help him up and let him fight after securing a death shot.

After a fifteen-minute hiatus, the Indians again advanced on the fourteen surviving Texans. The tall, dry grass and brush of the woods on three sides of them were set ablaze. A strong wind blew thick, blinding smoke over the Rangers. The Indians took defensive positions at either end of the ravine to prevent the Texans from escaping. "We discovered a smoke rising around us," wrote Vanbenthuysen. "The Indians had made a ring [of] fire completely around our position, [and] the fire was advancing rapidly." As the flames rose, Vanbenthuysen realized that the only escape for his men lay on the fourth side, an open prairie where Indian horsemen with bows and arrows were stationed.

The only option left for the hapless Rangers was to brave a charge through the rifle-armed Indians. These natives were considered preferable to those equipped with bows and arrows and able to reload quicker and discharge more shots at them. When the horses would not move through the flames, the men were forced to leave them and proceed on foot. According to veteran Ranger Oliver Buckman, the dense smoke helped hide the Texans until they made their final charge from it.

The surviving Rangers now attacked approximately fifty armed Indians and drove them ahead. Finding the ravine heavily populated with Indians on horseback, the men ultimately decided to race up the hill and across the open

prairie for the thicket beyond.

Leading the charge was Private James Rice, a young man of about twentytwo years who had served in one of the early Texas Ranger companies under Captain John Jackson Tumlinson Jr. during the Texas Revolution. Rice was nearly killed when he met an Indian with a raised gun. As he sprinted, he raised his own gun, leaped to a stop, and fired a chance shot at his adversary. Good aim or pure luck was with Rice this day, for his shot hit the brave squarely and dropped him dead on his face.

While making this most desperate charge from the ring of fire, six of Lieutenant Vanbenthuisen's men were not as lucky as Rice. Lieutenant Alfred Miles, Lewis F. Sheuster, James Joslen, James Christian, Jesse Blair, and Westley Nicholson were shot and killed while trying to escape the burning field.

James Christian was one of the original enlistees into Colonel Robert Coleman's 1836 Ranger battalion, having previously served in Captain Alfred Walden's infantry company. Lieutenant Miles was a San Jacinto veteran who had been involved in the capture of Santa Anna. On Saturday, December 16, 1837, *The Telegraph and Texas Register* announced that Miles was originally from Richmond, Virginia, and that he left behind a sister and mother in Texas. In the end, only eight of eighteen Rangers escaped the deadly Indian encounter at Stone Houses. Three of these men--John Zekel, Robert Fletcher, and Samuel Blish--were wounded in the process. Five men escaped without bullet or arrow wounds: Vanbenthuisen, James Rice, Felix McCluskey, Oliver Buckman and John Hobson.

The survivors had broken through the Indians and commenced their retreat on foot. They had just crossed the skirt of timber when they again came in sight of the Indians. This time, the braves did not pursue the Texans but merely stood and watched. "They had enough of the fight," thought Vanbenthuisen, "for we had killed about fifty of their warriors."

Lieut. Vanbenthuisen's Stone Houses Fight: November 10, 1837

First Lieutenant: A. B. Vanbenthuisen

Second Lieutenant: Alfred H. Miles (K)

Privates:

Jesse Blair (K)

Samuel K. Blish (W)

Alexander Bostwick (K)

Oliver Buckman

James Christian (K)
Joseph Cooper (K)
Robert Fletcher (W)
John Hobson
James Joslen (K)
Felix McCluskey
Westley Nicholson (K)
William Nicholson (K)
James O. Rice
Dr. William Sanders (K)
Lewis P. Scheuster (K)
John Zekel (W)
K = Killed by Indians.
W = Wounded in battle.

Unfortunately for the ragged survivors of the ill-fated Ranger expedition, escaping from the Indians would not end their ordeals while returning to safety. All of the men had lost their horses and their provisions in escaping the battleground. In the ten days following the Stone Houses Fight,

Vanbenthuysen's men roughed it on foot through the wilderness as they cautiously followed the West Fork of the Trinity River in an east-southeasterly fashion through present Fort Worth. They had nothing to eat for the first four days until the men managed to kill some buffalo and save themselves from starvation. The wounds of the three injured Rangers were bound up and greased with buffalo tallow.

By November 20, Vanbenthuysen's men were fortunate enough to find a friendly Indian camp in present northwest Dallas. The camp was located near the junction of the West and Elm Forks of the Trinity River. Lieutenant Vanbenthuysen wrote:

We first discovered an Indian on the prairie. We followed him to his village. When we arrived there, we found the warriors drawn up to receive us in a hostile manner. They were all armed with rifles and the squaws had bows and arrows. I expected nothing else but we should have to fight them, but after a good deal of parleying they said that our little party might stay there that night. We then dressed the wounds of the men and camped in the midst of the hostile camp.

On November 21, the Rangers crossed the Trinity River at the Three Forks. That evening, they arrived at a Kickapoo village, where the Indians were friendly and treated them with "the utmost hospitality." The Kickapoos gave

them food to eat, and the next morning, two of the young braves led the Texans to a trail. They were told that it would lead them to the Neches Saline near the Neches River.

Vanbenthuisen's report noted the beauty of the East Texas area: The country on the waters of the Trinity is handsomely situated, well watered, plenty of timber of large growth consisting of hickory, oak and cedar. The prairies abound in game of every kind: the game is chiefly bear, deer antelopes and buffalo. I have seen the prairies black with immense herds of buffalo, as far as the eye could extend. I think that this country is the garden of America, and will in time be the most valuable part of Texas. They reached the saline in Cherokee Nation and proceeded on to Martin Lacy's trading post on the old San Antonio road. On November 27,

Vanbenthuisen's men reached their first white settlement since the battle. This made seventeen days and one night that they had retreated through hostile Indian territory--on foot, without horses or blankets or provisions! Lieutenant Vanbenthuisen left the wounded men in the white settlement, and on November 28, he started for Houston in company with Rangers Rice and McCluskey. They eventually arrived on December 8, 1837, after an absence from that town of six months.

Today, a Texas historical marker marks the site of the Stone Houses and mentions the battle these riflemen survived. It is located in Archer County on FM 61, ten miles south of Windthorst.

The Battle of Stone Houses was a tough loss in the early history of the Texas Rangers. Of the survivors, John Hobson settled in Harris County and Oliver Buckman moved near Bastrop. Vanbenthuisen never held a significant command again in Texas. James Rice continued in the frontier service and his name would become well known for commanding Rangers in a fight on the San Gabriel in 1839. Felix McCluskey, whose killing of the Indian in early November ultimately led to the attack at Stone Houses, was later killed in a drunken brawl.

Condensed from Stephen L. Moore's *Savage Frontier. Volume 1: 1835-1837. Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas*. Plano, Tex: Republic of Texas Press, 2002.)

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