Sul Ross
Lawrence Sullivan Ross in later years. Courtesy of Dr. and Mrs. Neville P. Clarke, private collection.
To Neville P. and Marselaine Clarke
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The Lone Star Beckons

RUFUS C. BURLESON, that stern Baptist divine and president of Baylor University, may have looked upon himself as an anointed vessel of the Lord, but it is doubtful that he ever imagined himself filling the office of a prophet. Nevertheless, Burleson uttered something akin to prophecy that evening in 1856 when he looked into the grave eyes of teenage Lawrence Sullivan Ross and told him, "You will be governor of Texas some day, and I will vote for you."1

Ross did indeed become governor of Texas, and Dr. Burleson did cast a vote in his behalf, but what the unwitting prophet did not know was that before taking the governor's chair, Sul Ross would also gain fame as a Texas Ranger. Neither did he foresee the conspicuous Confederate military career awaiting the young man, who would emerge from the coming war as the ninth youngest general officer to wear the gray.2 Equally hidden in the obscurity of the future were Ross's terms as sheriff and state senator. Finally, Burleson's second sight did not enable him to look past the statehouse to the position so similar to his own that Ross would hold at his death — the presidency of Texas A&M College.3

The future general and governor was born September 27, 1838, at Bentonsport, Iowa Territory, in what is now Van Buren County. The second son and fourth child of Shapley Prince Ross and Catherine Fulkerson Ross, he was named in honor of a paternal grandfather and brother, both Lawrence Ross, and a paternal uncle, Giles O. Sullivan. Apparently it was to distinguish him from the latter that Ross was first

2 Author's own computation, based on data from Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders.
3 Dictionary of American Biography, s.v. "Ross, Lawrence Sullivan."
known in the family as "Little Sul" and then finally as "Sul," the given name he preferred and used throughout his life.4

Indeed, Sul's was a heritage of which any individual — or family — could be proud. His father's paternal ancestors traced their descent from the followers of the ancient clan chiefs of Ross in Scotland, while his father's maternal forebears were wealthy English farmers who settled in Williamsburg, Virginia. The maternal side of the family tree combined, among other strains, German and Irish elements in a blend of frontier and plantation, soldiers and statesmen. There was, in addition, a fair sprinkling of particularly illustrious or interesting ancestors from both the maternal and paternal lines.

Sul's great-grandfather Lawrence had been captured at the age of six by Indians who raided the Virginia frontier school he was attending, and he lived with the Cherokees until he was twenty-three years old. It was with great difficulty that relatives persuaded him to return to the white world. One of Sul's great-uncles, William Prince, was instrumental in the settlement of Indiana. His mother's side included his grandfather Isaac Fulkerson — planter, sheriff, and member of the Missouri legislature — and an uncle, William N. Fulkerson, also a sheriff and state legislator. Other forebears were military men, and Sul was related by the marriages of two paternal uncles to the family of Zachary Taylor.5

Sul's own parents were equally notable. They deserve mention here because of the influence of their varying backgrounds on the formation of Sul's character. His father was born near Louisville, Kentucky, in 1811. Six years later the family moved to Missouri, settling in Lincoln County, where Shapley grew up. A typical son of the frontier, Shapley Ross endured formal schooling only six months. A year spent on an older brother's farm failed to quench his restless spirit; at sixteen he traded his share of the harvest for a horse and rifle and joined the fortune seekers at the Galena lead mines. From mining he turned to the livestock trade, specializing in blooded horses, which he raced successfully. Eventually he saved enough of his winnings to purchase a farm near those of his relatives.

4 "Captain Shapley P. Ross, Waco, Texas," Ross Family Papers, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas (hereafter cited as Ross Family Papers, Baylor), pp. 1-3, 7.
In November, 1830, Shapley Ross married Catherine Fulkerson, daughter of a wealthy German planter who had moved to neighboring Saint Charles County, Missouri, from Virginia. Convent educated and raised in a slaveholding family well staffed with household servants, Catherine had never dressed herself or even put on her own shoes until her marriage. As Mrs. Ross, the life of the planter's daughter changed drastically. Although comfortably situated financially, Shapley was never a large-scale slaveowner and did most of his farm work himself, assisted at first by his wife and later by one male slave and his own sons.

The couple remained on their farm for one year, when Ross's restlessness again precipitated a move, first to Troy, Missouri, and then, in 1834, to the Sauk and Fox Indian Reservation along the Des Moines River. When the Indian lands were absorbed by the federal government preparatory to the formation of Iowa Territory, Shapley Ross obtained four lots in the new town of Bentonport in return for building and maintaining a hotel. Hotelkeeping occupied him from 1835 to the fall of 1838, during which time his family increased by two sons, Peter Fulkerson and Lawrence Sullivan. It was shortly after the birth of the latter that Shapley sold his Iowa holdings and took his family back to Missouri. Although a large man of great strength and endurance, Ross found that the cold of the northern climate had begun to undermine his robust health.

One day early in 1839, a traveler newly arrived from the young Republic of Texas stopped at the Ross home. In the course of the night's entertainment the stranger told of rich opportunities to be found under the Lone Star. This traveler's tale struck a responsive chord in the soul of Shapley Ross, for he had long been intrigued by the favorable reports filtering in to the old states from the sister republic.

After the stranger's departure, Shapley and Catherine discussed

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6 "Shapley Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, pp. 1-3, 5-7; Waco Tribune-Herald, October 30, 1949. This centennial edition was thoroughly researched by Waco historians and contains much of interest to students of the era.

7 In 1850 Shapley was worth $5,000 and owned one male slave. By 1860 he owned real property worth $10,526 and personal property worth $10,250. Included in the total were seven slaves — three adults and four children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, unpublished returns, "Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Population Schedules, Milam County, Texas"; Census Bureau, unpublished returns, "Eighth Census, 1860: Free Inhabitants and Slave Population Schedules, McLennan County, Texas").

8 "Shapley Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, p. 3; Brown, Indian Wars, p. 316.
moving to Texas. She agreed to the scheme, but the couple's Missouri relatives tried to dissuade them from taking such a step. The arguments of these well-meaning relatives against the new land only hardened Ross's resolve to go there. At last the dissenting family members despaired of reshaping his thinking and dismissed him with the prediction that in a few years he would be glad to return his wife and children to the safety and schoolhouses of Missouri.8

Sul was too young to remember any of the long and hazardous journey to the land of his father's choice, but according to his children's accounts he heard Shapley in later years recall the beauty and wonder of that first trip to Texas. It was prophetic of the future of the Ross family that on the way to the settlements on the lower Brazos the party camped one night at Waco Springs. But the establishment of a white settlement at Waco was still ten years off. At the time of the journey Shapley was interested in reaching the centers of population in Milam County. On his arrival at Nashville, he took the oath of allegiance to the Republic of Texas, which entitled him to a headright of 640 acres. He chose land where the town of Cameron now stands, but Indian depredations soon forced the Ross party to join other settlers on the Little River.10

From the first, the position of the settlers was precarious. Even in the best of times, diet, lodging, and clothing were spartan. To make life more difficult, Indian raiders prowled about seeking horses and scalps. Shapley Ross often took part in citizen reprisals against the raiders; it is likely that Sul's earliest memories of his tall, handsome father centered around Shapley as an Indian fighter, because Sul's earliest ambition was to emulate him.11

With Shapley Ross's growing reputation as an Indian fighter, it was not surprising that Sul's first brush with hostile red men came in company with his father. One evening when Sul was not much more than a toddler, Shapley took the boy with him when he walked over to visit a neighbor. The moon had risen before father and son started home. As they hiked across the prairie toward the Ross cabin, Shapley

8 Elizabeth Ross Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, pp. 3-4.
10 Ibid., pp. 4-8; Waco Tribune-Herald, October 30, 1949; Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, p. 9; "Shapley Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, pp. 3-4.
11 Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, p. 12; San Antonio Daily Express, November 22, 1908; Victor M. Rose, Ross' Texas Brigade: Being a Narrative of Events Connected with Its Service in the Late War Between the States, p. 158.
became uneasy, some intuition warning him of danger. Halting, he bent over Sul and told the child he feared Indians were nearby. If he had to throw Sul onto his back and run for the cabin, could the boy hold on until they reached safety?

Sul answered satisfactorily, and Shapley and his son walked on. They were almost to their goal when fifteen mounted Comanche warriors charged. Shapley tossed Sul onto his back and with the child clinging tightly to his shoulders bounded swiftly toward the cabin. Amid a shower of arrows Ross leaped the dooryard fence, set Sul down, and told him to go inside. But, he cautioned, there was no need to tell his mother about the incident since they were not hurt. However, the experience proved to be too much for Sul's reticence. When his father followed him into the cabin, the boy excitedly asked, "Whew, Papa, didn't we fairly fly?" thus unintentionally revealing what Shapley had wished to conceal. But all of this was part of growing up on the frontier, where children did not remain babies long. Every hand, no matter how small, was needed to assist the family efforts in winning food, shelter, and clothing from the wilderness. As soon as possible, offspring were assigned tasks proportionate to their strength and skill.  

Play was likewise practical, teaching skills needed later in life as well as how to face danger, should it threaten. Since the Ross family was in almost constant danger from Indian forays, Shapley counseled his little brood on what to do if an attack should occur while they were outside the house. And if they should happen to be captured, the children were warned not to show fear or pain to their captors lest such emotions provoke some act of savagery. The Ross sons and daughters were well drilled, and "the Indians are coming" soon became a favorite game. At a warning cry, the children would run to hide in the brush as if from a real enemy.

Thanks to Shapley's training and Sul's coolness in the face of danger, tragedy was averted when thirty Comanche warriors surrounded the Ross cabin not long after Shapley had killed Bigfoot, one of their chiefs.  

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12 Rose, Ross' Texas Brigade, p. 158; Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, pp. 13-14; Everett Dick, The Dixie Frontier: A Social History of the Southern Frontier from the First Transmontane Beginnings to the Civil War, pp. 82, 99, 283.

playing their favorite game of hiding from the Indians. Sul had tired of the game and had stretched out to rest on a quilt spread under a tree. When the warning came, he ignored it and pretended instead to be asleep. The other children scattered like quail, but Sul remained on the quilt. Presently he heard footsteps. When he opened his eyes he found himself ringed by warriors, who grabbed him and dragged him along to the cabin. Remembering what his father had taught him, the youngster was careful not to cry or show fear.

Meanwhile, Peter, the eldest boy, had raced to warn his parents. Mrs. Ross joined her husband, who was lying ill on the porch, just as the Comanches and their little captive arrived. Instead of ordering his braves to fall upon the frontiersman and his family in immediate massacre, the elderly chief began to converse with Shapley in sign language, saying that he and his followers wished to make a treaty. In the meantime, the chief indicated, he and his companions were hungry.

Hoping to allow his wife and children time to escape, Shapley told the Comanches that he had corn and melons in plenty but that the Indians would have to get the produce themselves, since he was ill and could not rise. The Indians indicated that they wished Sul to lead them to the fields. Ross agreed to this demand reluctantly, knowing that he might never see his son again. Then he told Sul that he must lead the braves to the fields and give them everything they desired. As the little fellow trotted bravely off, the Comanches swarmed around him, some of them pinching his bare legs, others whipping them with the shafts of their arrows. He did not flinch as he and his captors disappeared from his parents' view.14

After a seemingly endless wait the party returned, Sul still refusing to show any fear or pain although his legs were bleeding in numerous places. The Comanches were greatly pleased by his courage and speedily concluded the treaty. In later years Sul modestly attributed his family's escape to the Comanches' ignorance of the fact that Shapley had killed Bigfoot, but at least in the minds of his parents he was the hero of the hour.15

14 During the early days on the frontier, boys "wore nothing but a single garment, a 'wamus' or shirt that reached down nearly to the ankles" (Dick, The Dixie Frontier, p. 297).

15 There are at least four versions of the incident from which this composite sketch was written, all agreeing in substance if not in detail: (1) an undated four-page manuscript version, probably by Elizabeth Ross Clarke, found in "Notes," Ross Family Papers, Baylor; (2) the version given in Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers,
Danger, as well as deprivation and hard work, was all a part of growing up on the Texas frontier. As Sul grew older he was able to assist more with the work around the homestead. He and Pete were especially helpful to Mrs. Ross since Shapley was often absent from home, first with a ranger company and later in an abortive attempt to free the Mier Expedition prisoners.16

In 1845 Shapley made a decision that affected the lives of his children. According to the account of a family friend, Shapley came to the doleful conclusion that his four eldest children were growing up in the deepest ignorance because of the failure of the only school in the neighborhood. Lest the dire prophecies of his Missouri relatives come to pass, he decided to move to Austin and enter his children in school. Mrs. Ross was not surprised by his sudden statement of intention, merely remarking that he had been a long time in reaching that decision. Shapley traded 290 acres for a wagon and a yoke of oxen, loaded his family and possessions into the vehicle, and set off for Austin, much to the relief of Armstead, the family's only slave, who feared Ross planned to move deeper into the Indian frontier.17

Austin at that time was a straggle of log cabins scattered along the banks of the Colorado, housing citizens, places of business, and the government, but it was already the hub of Texan life. It was also to be the scene of Sul's early demonstration of his fighting abilities. Upon their arrival, Shapley and Mrs. Ross met many friends and acquaintances. Sul's welcome, however, was of another kind. Although a sturdy seven-year-old, he was still dressed in the long shirt of the frontier. A group of older boys, already breeched, began to make fun of Sul and his costume. When the youngster realized that he was the object of their ridicule, he singled out the largest of his tormentors and waded into him, fists flailing and shirttail flying. Not in the least hampered by his long shirt, Sul soon had his opponent rolling on the ground and

(footnote continued from previous page)


glad to own himself vanquished. As Sul's battered opponent made his way home, it was hard to say who was prouder of the exploit, Sul himself or his father, who had watched his son prove his mettle.18

Shapley obtained suitable clothing for his family and entered the four eldest children in school. It is not known whether the Ross children attended an academy or a mere one-room school, but they soon made excellent progress. Although Shapley soon became restless and raised a ranger company that under his captaincy served during the Mexican War, he left his wife and children in Austin to benefit from civilized society.19

Early in 1849 Captain Ross received an offer from Jacob de Cordova, one of the owners of a large tract of land west of the Brazos and surrounding Waco Springs. If the frontiersman would move with his family to the new settlement, he would receive four free city lots of his choice, the sole right of operating a ferry across the Brazos, and the privilege of buying up to eighty acres of farmland at one dollar an acre. Such inducements proved irresistible. In March of that same year the Ross family again moved in search of the frontier farmer's dream — rich, inexpensive bottomland. It was to be the last such family exodus. Thereafter, the names Ross and Waco were inseparably linked.20

Captain Ross arrived with his family two months before the first lots officially went on sale and selected his town lots, on the bluff above the springs, and his eighty farming acres. He also purchased an additional two hundred acres in what later became the south of town. As other would-be Waco settlers began to gather, the captain set about the construction of a double log house for his family. There would be much for the active Sul to put his hand to as the family settled into its new homestead. Captain Ross was eager to break ground on his farming acres and get a crop in before planting time had passed. Sul and Peter were expected to work in the fields with their father and Arm-

18 Rutherford B. Hayes, Diary and Letters of Rutherford B. Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States, I, 259-60; Melinda Rankin, Texas in 1850, p. 155; Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, pp. 30-31.
20 "Shapley Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, p. 5; Clarke, "Life of Sul Ross," Ross Family Papers, Baylor, p. 35.
stead, for theirs was not a social class that looked down on a white owner for laboring shoulder-to-shoulder with his slave.  

Later, when Shapley Ross expanded his activities to keeping a hotel, operating a ferry, running the city waterworks, and trailing cattle to Missouri, there would be even more chores to keep a capable preteenager busy, but the captain knew the value of creative recreation. As soon as his sons were old enough to sit a horse and hold a firearm, Shapley taught them to ride and shoot, instilling in them not only his love for fast horses but also his marksman's skill with rifle and revolver. They would also be expected to run, wrestle, and hold their own in any fistfight.

There also were opportunities to fish or hunt in the river bottoms for deer and small game. Grown-up amusements such as quilting, husking, and cotton-picking bees and the accompanying dances might not have had much appeal for a boy like Sul just entering his teens, but he could enjoy food, fun, and fellowship with other youngsters his own age. Holidays brought additional celebrations, and political campaigns and weddings furnished still more occasions for recreation. These and many other events offered opportunities for the proud owners of fleet horseflesh to test their steeds against those of their neighbors. Captain Ross devoted a good part of his time to attending racing meets. Sul became such an expert horseman that his father regularly scheduled him to ride the family's entries in the match races held either at Waco or at one of the nearby settlements.

His inherited love of action and good horses was to involve Sul in


22 There were compensations, even for work done around the hotel. In the early 1850s Richard Coke, later governor of Texas and supporter of the state's Agricultural and Mechanical College, stayed at the Ross hotel. The story is told that Sul liked to sit on the arm of Coke's chair and listen as he told tales of Virginia (George Sessions Perry, The Story of Texas A. and M., p. 57).


his first Indian fight while still a boy. One night, hostile tribesmen raided the settlement and drove off many horses; several animals belonging to the Ross family were stolen, among them Sul's favorite racer. Captain Ross, with the other men, soon began organizing a posse to pursue the raiders. Sul determined to go along, so carrying his rifle and accompanied by Armstead he unobtrusively joined the pursuit. The problem was that the only mount he and Armstead could find was a recalcitrant mule. On this animal, young master and slave brought up the rear of the party. 

All went well until the posse caught up with the horse thieves. A running gun battle broke out between the settlers and the Indians — just the kind of excitement for an adventurous boy who longed to be an Indian fighter. Sul urged his long-eared mount to the front so he too could fire at the fleeing red men, but the mule could not be forced within fighting range of the Indians. Sul was disgusted by his failure to win his spurs in this encounter. What was worse, his father took him to task for joining the posse without permission. Secretly, however, Captain Ross was proud of the courage and spirit exhibited by his son.25

But Sul Ross was soon to decide that horse racing and Indian fighting were not everything in life. As he approached young manhood, he faced an ethical and moral crisis of the greatest importance. It was much to his credit and to that of his parents that he chose a course of self-sacrifice and public service.26

26 Sul's mother had immeasurable influence on her children. “Among the remarkable women who have helped to lay the foundations of Texas, none have rendered more enduring service, or bequeathed to it a sturdier race of sons and daughters than Mrs. Shapley P. Ross” (Elizabeth Brooks, Prominent Women of Texas, p. 67).