

Stories of Texas Women

Life in Colonial Texas

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Life in colonial Texas was full of hard work, hardship and danger, but also moments of camaraderie and merriment. As with the Anglo males who colonized Texas, the women who came to Texas under the empresario system did so because of the opportunities that the Texas frontier presented. Most of the Anglo women who entered Texas during the period of 1823 - 1836 did so as the wives or daughters of men who filed for a land grant in one of the colonies. However, under Mexican law, widowed women with dependent children were entitled to land grants of their own and could file a claim as a head of household and receive the same amount of land as their male counterparts. Austin's original colony, The Old Three Hundred, included eight such women and by 1835 there were 20 widows listed amongst the names in Austin's register.



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<http://www.ushistoryimages.com>

Most of the Anglo colonists established themselves as subsistence farmers, with males responsible for managing the farm and females responsible for managing the home. The homes of the early colonists were crude log or clapboard cabins. Glass for windows was non-existent as were metal nails. Floors were commonly dirt, although wood floors could be found adorning the homes of wealthier

settlers. Furnishings either had to be brought via wagon or steamboat from the East at great expense, or made by hand.

The remoteness of the Texas frontier meant basic supplies were expensive and hard to come by. Particularly scarce was wheat flour. The lack of this pantry staple is lamented often in the reminiscences of Mrs. Dilue Harris. Beyond the expected tasks of cooking, cleaning and child rearing, women were also responsible for the production of clothing. The majority of the clothing worn by early



Photo Source: Buel, J. W. *Heroes of the Plains*. St. Louis, MO: Historical Publishing Company, 1881 via ushistoryimages.com

colonists, including hats, was made in the home of buckskin or homespun cloth. The lack of doctors in the colonies and isolation of homesteads meant women also acted as healers for their families, neighbors and travelers.

Women were not relegated strictly to "women's work" in frontier Texas. The lack of laborers and frequent absences of men from the homestead necessitated women working the farm and providing protection for themselves and their family. Texas women were adept in the use of firearms and frequently carried Bowie knives. Jane Long reportedly even fired the canons at Bolivar Point to scare off Karankawa Indians during her winter there in 1821. Mrs. Harris remembers her mother protecting the family against animals, Indians and runaway slaves in the absence of her father.

Life in the colonies was not all work and danger, however. The colonists enjoyed entertainment, such as dances and balls, and would travel great distances to attend such festivities. Holidays, such as the Fourth of July, or the presence of visitors from back East were often cause for celebration. Horse races, picnics, and hunting parties were other forms of amusement that were popular with the Anglo colonists.

By August of 1835, the lives of Anglo women in Texas were becoming increasingly consumed by politics and the impending revolution. The coming Texas Revolution would present a new set of challenges for Texas women. They would see their husbands, sons and fathers march to battle. In some cases, such as with Susanna Dickinson at the Alamo, they would witness these battles first hand. With the revolution also came the Runaway Scrape and the scarcities common during wartime. After the revolution, life would change again, both for the better and worse, but many of the frontier challenges would be the same as during the colonial period.

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