

DEAF SMITH, THE MAN ON THE FIVE DOLLAR BILL,  
DIED 175 YEARS AGO, NOVEMBER 30<sup>TH</sup>.



WHO WAS HE?

## DEAF SMITH POSING

It's Monday, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1836. New Orleans has never been more festive, or welcoming. The hero of San Jacinto has arrived to get his shattered ankle repaired. At least half a dozen Paris-born artists want to immortalize the brave conqueror of the despot Santa Anna in oil-on-canvas. They are bumping elbows to get at him.

One artist who misses out on Old San Jacinto, captures Houston's great scout Erastus Deaf Smith in a careful studio-posed portrait that has given Texans a false image of the "First Texas Ranger" ever since.

Here we have the man in all his glory: fresh-barbered, hair tousled in popular Lord Byron style, stylish black frock coat, shining white shirt casually open at the neck, flowing red cravat. His blue eyes look right through the viewer. It's obvious that the old scout-and-spy is fit and muscular. Keep in mind: this is a **HARD** man. Houston has rebuked him for threatening to shoot prisoners who try to escape.

This is how he looked, in fashionable borrowed clothes, in midsummer, 1836 — for one day only, out of his 50 years. The handsome false portrait created that day by a French artist who made his living flattering wealthy cotton planters, has been copied and reproduced so many times that it's become “official.” It's as true as Travis's line in the sand — as seen by a European visitor.

American-born artist William Henry Huddle gives Smith due prominence in “Surrender at San Jacinto.” Smith is clean-shaven (of course) in the forefront of the painting, on Houston's left, with hand symbolically cupped to ear. This is not great art. It is paint-by-the-numbers stiff. Ignore it. Deaf Smith deserves better.



To see him as he must have actually looked, turn to a Connecticut Yankee for whom he never posed. Artist William Tylee Ranney was 23 at San Jacinto. After Santa Anna's capture, Ranney stood guard over him.

Ranney's “Advice on the Prairie” ought to be on the five dollar bill. If that's not Deaf Smith, it's his twin. The painting even includes Deaf's old dog Alarum. (For you to investigate: Where was that rascal Alarum in the Battle of San Jacinto?)

President Sam Houston and scout Deaf Smith were surprised to find Andrew Jackson's nephew waiting for them when they returned from New Orleans. His name was John Coffee Hays and he traveled with surveying equipment.

In a snap of the fingers, the First Ranger and the future Greatest Ranger, bonded. The president quickly puts Jack, 19, in Deaf's ranging company. These early Texas Rangers are called spies. They double as surveyors, look for Comanches and keep a third eye on the Mexican army that's lurking just across the Rio Grande.

Captain Erastus Deaf Smith proves to be a fine teacher. Three years later, young Jack signs his reports to the War Department:

Very respectfully,

JOHN C. HAYS

*Capt. Com. Spies*

Deaf Smith eludes easy classification. Stories about him are flimsy, careless, unrevealing. The old scout/spy does not let go of his secrets. You might suspect that he was tough to interview, with one hand cupped to his ear and with a large shaggy dog growling nearby.

Here is the fullest of the newspaper articles about Deaf Smith. It was written less than three months before his death. The writer is so sloppy that he doesn't even find out Deaf's given name. Or, maybe this sunshine patriot wants to be funny.

The writer bloviates shamelessly, flatters, exaggerates and is downright petty. But stay with him till he gets to his description of a Ranger Company on the move. You'll never see it done to better effect.

## **Matagorda Bulletin**

Matagorda, Texas

Vol. 1, No. 6, Ed. 1

Wednesday, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1837

There are few persons who have not heard of Deaf Smith. He is one of the most daring of the many brave men who will be remembered in the history of the Texas Revolution, in which reality has surpassed the fiction of romance.

As Jack, or Billy, or \_\_\_\_\_, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ Smith is next to no name at all. The Harvey Birch (James Fenimore Cooper — "The Spy") of Texas is known by the simple sobriquet of Deaf Smith. His Christian name — which I do not remember to have heard — being obsolete in speaking or writing of one who has rendered many signal services in the struggle for Texian independence and liberty.

He is, I suppose, about forty-five years old, of very muscular though not robust proportions. He is a little above the ordinary height, with a face deeply bronzed by severe exposure. He has a calm and not very unusual countenance, except the eye, which "in the settlements," or in the social circle, indicates by its keen, searching glance, just enough to give warning of the intrepidity and energies of the spirit that slumbers within.

He is a native of the state of New York, and came to Texas about the year 1822, in very feeble health. His constitution was soon renovated by the effect of a good climate and active exercise. He married a Mexican woman (the appropriate term is Tejana; she was Guadalupe Ruiz Duran) by whom he has several children. (Widow Duran had four children. She and Deaf added three daughters.)

He is a man of limited, plain education, speaks the Spanish language well, is a close observer of men and things, thoroughly acquainted with the manners and customs of the Mexicans, and with the topography of Texas and the frontiers.

At the commencement of the revolution, he resided in the town of Bexar or San Antonio, on the San Antonio River, and about the period of its capture by the Mexicans, removed his family to Columbia, on the Brazos.

He has been engaged, and with distinguished coolness and courage, in most of the hard fighting that has occurred in Texas, happening always to "drop in," as by chance, just on the eve of battle, though he was never regularly attached to the line of the army. He has the entire confidence of the President and Cabinet, and of the citizens of Texas, with authority to detail such men as irregular excursions, in which he is continually engaged, require.

On these excursions, he is accompanied by some twenty-five or thirty picked men, well equipped and mounted, who are generally commanded by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ Smith. He leads these scouting parties far into the interior, reconnoitering outposts of the enemy, surprising their pickets, capturing their expressos, and bringing to headquarters the earliest and most authentic intelligence of events in Mexico.

Such a man on such enterprises must have met many a perilous risk, and shed much blood. The history of what this man of the prairie and the woods has seen and suffered, would cast the fabulous heroism of romance in the shade.

Deaf Smith is a man of great modesty and propriety of deportment, and when he can be prevailed upon to narrate some of his adventures, he does it as if he were not at all conscious of the thrilling interest which they are calculated to excite. Like thousands of others who have been unjustly and ignorantly regarded as fighting for the spoil of conquest, he has staked his life for liberty, against the oppression of a corrupt clergy and impotent court.

Like his comrades in arms, he is nerved for the unequal, gloriously successful struggle, by the sacred impulse of freedom, and both he and they have learned to endure hardships, and to encounter dangers, without a dollar in their pockets, or a ration in their knapsacks.

Deaf Smith bears the character of a frank, open-hearted, honest and humane man — for humanity is a virtue not unknown in the camp — the best soldier is one who can and does feel of the suffering which duty compels him to inflict. He is very deaf and hence his name.

When asked one day, if he did not find much inconvenience from this defect, he answered — “No, I sometimes think it is an advantage — I have learned to keep a sharper look out — and I am never disturbed by the whistling of a ball — I don’t hear the bark, till I feel the bite.”

Deaf Smith had just returned from one of his incursions on the Rio Grande when I saw him. He brought back forty horses, and some valuable information as to the bungling movements of the inert Mexicans. He tarried just long enough to greet his family and refit his party, before he set out on another expedition.

Some of my friends who had come from the United States to see the young republic, joined him. They could not have found a better pioneer. As Deaf Smith’s party of two dozen hardened men took leave of us, and moved off in fine cheer, I was struck by their appearance. We mutually wondered if they would be recognized at home in their present caparison.

Each was mounted on a mustang — Deaf Smith’s horse bore evident marks of superior breeding — with a Mexican saddle, consisting of the bare tree with a blanket or great coat covered over it. Mexican spurs, the shank about from one to two or three inches long — bridle of ponderous and very rank bits — a Mexican gourd swung from the saddle bow — holsters — a pair of pistols and bowie knife in the belt, a rifle on the shoulder — a mackinaw blanket rolled up encroupe — a cabarras, or rope of hair around the horse’s neck, with which the animal is hobbled while he grazes at night — a sumpter mule, either following, or driven ahead, laden with supplies of salt, sugar, liquor, a small camp equipage, cooking implements, &c. &c. for the campaign.

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**Here is Deaf as every Texan thinks of him. Romantic Poets never looked better.**

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About the forty horses mentioned by that Matagorda reporter, there's some time-line confusion : The Bulletin's story is dated September, but the forty horses were captured six months earlier. These ponies were the spoils of a battle outside Laredo. Against all odds, Smith's men killed ten Mexicans, wounded ten more, and themselves had only two wounded. But that was back in March of 1837.

Maybe there was more than one 40- horse roundup by Rangers in 1837? We may never know.

Erastus Deaf Smith died in Fort Bend with his family close — November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1837.

Oh!

Sam Houston's portrait from the summer of 1836? It's just awful! He was a handsome man, as we know from dozens of images that captured him at every stage of his life. But when he sat for his portrait in New Orleans that summer day, the shattered ankle must have been on his mind. He had leg-amputation on his mind. Something. Anyway, it's a rarely seen picture.

You could google it, but you should just leave it alone. It's a long way from Lord Byron.

## The Elvis of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century



**George Gordon Lord Byron — 1788 - 1824**

Byron was outrageously famous in his day and for decades after. A recent writer says, “He was a sort of rock star.” And did he love to get his portrait painted! Every artist wanted to capture him. Or turn their subjects into Lord Byron copies.

Byron quote: *“Look for ironies and history will never disappoint you.”*

Who knew that a narcissistic British self-promoter, dandy and poseur would obscure our most modest hero, our quietist, our greatest, spy?