

Who was the Yellow Rose of Texas?

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One of the enduring legends of the Texas Revolution is that of the "Yellow Rose of Texas" and her role in the defeat of Santa Anna's forces at San Jacinto. The popular legend goes that one of the reasons that the Texans were able to overrun the Mexican camp so easily was that Santa Anna was otherwise occupied at the moment of attack. The reason for his occupation? A beautiful, young mulatto - a person of mixed white and black ancestry - slave woman, Emily West, who had been sent into the Mexican camp by General Sam Houston on a mission to distract the Mexican president. Like most of the legends surrounding the Texas Revolution, the story of The Yellow Rose of Texas is based on evidence, but has taken on a life of its own over the years.

The first known account of the presence of a woman named Emily in the Mexican camp at San Jacinto comes from the 1842 journal of William Bollaert, an Englishman who traveled throughout Texas from 1842 - 1844. Although Bollaert recorded a brief account of the Battle of San Jacinto and Emily's presence there in 1842, his journal was not published until 1956.¹ It was not until after this 1956 publication that the story of Emily West became part of the myths of the Texas Revolution.

Bollaert stated in his journal that the Emily in Santa Anna's camp was a "mulatto girl belonging to Colonel Morgan." A search by historians revealed that Emily was in fact a free woman from New York named Emily D. West who had traveled to Texas under an indentured

¹ The first mention of Bollaert's journal entry on Emily Morganis actually by Joe Frantz in his 1948 PhD thesis at the University of Texas and again in his 1951 book *Gail Borden: Dairyman to a Nation*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951). The story does not, however, become popular until after the 1956 publication of the journal as *William Bollaert's Texas* edited by William Eugene Hollon (Norman: Newberry Library, Chicago by the University of Oklahoma Press, 1956).

servant contract with James Morgan. This information, as well as confirmation of her presence at San Jacinto is confirmed through an 1837 application for a passport for Emily's return to New York that was endorsed Isaac Moreland. As a result of the misassumption that she was a Morgan's slave, Emily West is often misidentified as Emily Morgan. She is alternately referred to as Emily Morgan West.

Emily West was employed as a housekeeper at the New Washington Association's hotel in Morgan's Point, Texas and was there on April 16, 1836 when Colonel Almonte swept through the town in pursuit of Texas President David G. Burnet. Emily and a number of other servants and residents of Morgan's Point were apprehended and forced to accompany Santa Anna's army when it departed a few days later. Emily and her fellow captives were in the Mexican camp on April 21, 1836 during the Battle of San Jacinto. Following the war, it is believed that Emily returned home to New York, as indicated in her passport application, but nothing else is known about her life.

The story of Emily West and her presence at the Mexican camp did not become associated with the song "The Yellow Rose of Texas" until the 1950s. The song itself has been around since the 1830s. The first known version of the song comes from a set of handwritten lyrics dated approximately 1836 that can be found in the archives at the University of Texas. The song gained in popularity during the American Civil War when a version referencing General Lee and Hood's Texas Brigade was composed. The modern version of the song was composed in 1955 by Mitch Miller.

The connection between Emily West and "The Yellow Rose of Texas" was first asserted by Frank X. Tolbert, a writer for the *Dallas Morning News*. This legend was expanded on by

Martha Anne Turner in her book *The Yellow Rose of Texas: Her Saga and Her Song*. The term "yellow" was commonly used in the 1830s to refer to mulattos and "rose" was a popular euphemism for a young woman, a description which Emily West met. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that the song was in any way connected to Emily West. The connection between the song and the story of Emily West was probably largely due to the publication of Bollaert's diary at around the same time as the release of the Mitch Miller version of the song.

William Bollaert's Account: Version 1

"The Battle of San Jacinto was probably lost to the Mexicans, owing to the influence of a Mulatto Girl (Emily) belonging to Colonel Morgan, who was closeted in the tent with General Santana, at the time the cry was made "the enemy! they come! they come!" and detained Santana so long, that order could not be restored readily again."

SOURCE: W. Eugene Hollon and Ruth Lapham, editors. *William Bolleart's Texas*. Edited by Butler. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956.

William Bollaert's Account: Version 2

"Much has been written relative to this celebrated battle, in which the flower of the Mexican army perished and when Santana was made prisoner, but I beg to introduce the following as given to me by an officer who was engaged in it -- given in his own words

"The Battle of San Jacinto was probably lost to the Mexicans, owing to the influence of a Mulatta girl (Emily) belonging to Col. Morgan who was closeted in the tent with g'l Santana, at the time the cry was made "the Enemy! they come!

they come! & detained Santana so long, that order could not be restored readily again."

SOURCE: William Bollaert. "Texas in 1842 - by a Traveller." The Ayer Manuscript Collection. The Newberry Library, Chicago in James Lutzweiler, *Santa Anna and Emily D. West at San Jacinto: Who Edits the Editors?* M.A. thesis for North Carolina State University, 1997.

Passport of Emily West

Capitol, Thursday Morning

To the Hon. Dr. Irion

The bearer of this -- Emily D. West has been since my first acquaintance with her, in April of -- '36 a free woman -- she Emigrated to this Country with Col. Jas Morgan from the state of N. York in september of '35 and is now anxious to return and wishes a passport -- I believe myself, that she is entitled to one and has requested me to give her this note to you.

Your Obed't Serv't

I.N. Moreland

Her papers were Lost at San Jacinto as I am Informed and believe in April of '36

Moreland

SOURCE: Passport of Emily D. West, Texas Secretary of State records relating to passports issued by the Department of State, Republic of Texas. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

"The Yellow Rose of Texas" (1830s Lyrics)

There's a yellow rose in Texas, that I am going to see,
No other darky [*sic*] knows her, no darky only me²
She cryed [*sic*] so when I left her it like to broke my heart,
And if I ever find her, we nevermore will part.

² The *Yellow Rose of Texas* was often performed by blackface minstrel groups, which were a popular form of entertainment during the nineteenth century featuring white performers with makeup portraying caricatures of blacks in comic acts, dances, and songs.

[Chorus]

She's the sweetest rose of color this darky ever knew,
Her eyes are bright as diamonds, they sparkle like the dew;
You may talk about your Dearest May, and sing of Rosa Lee,
But the Yellow Rose of Texas beats the belles of Tennessee.

When the Rio Grande is flowing, the starry skies are bright,
She walks along the river in the quite [*sic*] summer night:
She thinks if I remember, when we parted long ago,
I promised to come back again, and not to leave her so. [Chorus]

Oh now I'm going to find her, for my heart is full of woe,
And we'll sing the songs together [*sic*], that we sung so long ago
We'll play the bango gaily, and we'll sing the songs of yore,
And the Yellow Rose of Texas shall be mine forevermore. [Chorus]

SOURCE: <http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adp/archives/yellowrose/yrlyrics.html>

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