



## The “Yellow Rose of Texas:” How A Myth Becomes “Fact”

by Scott Sosebee

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*Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at [sosebeem@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeem@sfasu.edu).*

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(Feb 13, 2023) I am almost daily amazed by the sheer proliferation of the number of myths and folklore that have become accepted as “historical fact” by so many people. I should not be surprised since by its very nature folklore survives because it is a good story that people want to believe. The full breadth of American history is filled with such examples, but very few places—if any—rival Texas for the amount of folk tales that have become the accepted narrative among the public. One of the most aggravating, because of its racist origins and connotations, is the tale of Emily Morgan, the supposed “Yellow Rose of Texas.”

I think we have all heard the narrative that so many consider fact. The myth starts out during the worst days of the Texas Revolution when the Alamo had fallen, a Mexican army had massacred James Fannin and his men at Goliad, and another force under Mexican President Santa Anna was chasing Sam Houston and what remained of the rag-tag Texian militia around the countryside. Santa Anna and his army, as the tale goes, rode onto the plantation of James Morgan near the mouth of the San Jacinto River. While there, the Mexican dictator cast his glaze on a young, enslaved woman (or, depending on the telling, an indentured servant, or free Black, or an equally free mulatto woman) by the name of Emily Morgan. General Santa Anna was supposedly besmirched, and he forced Miss Morgan to accompany his army as they continued their march to face and defeat Houston’s band. The Mexican army found itself across from the Texas force on a plain between the San Jacinto River and Buffalo Bayou on April 21, 1836. Houston hesitated to call for an attack the morning of the 21st as he was waiting for an opportunity that gave him an advantage, and he supposedly got that reward during the afternoon of that day because Santa Anna had ordered his men to take a siesta so that he could retire to his tent and enjoy the comfort of his captive, Emily Morgan. The “Yellow Rose of Texas” kept Santa Anna busy long enough for the Texas forces to advance across the plain and, in eighteen minutes, decimate the Mexican troops and secure Texas’ freedom.

It's a great story that has only one glaring problem: it is not true. Oh, the facts around the Battle of San Jacinto and the napping Mexican soldiers are certainly accurate, but the Emily Morgan celebrated in song and verse was not in Santa Anna's tent. In fact, a woman named Emily Morgan does not even exist. However, as the saying goes, never let the facts get in the way of a good story. As researcher Jeff Dunn and former University of Houston History Professor Margaret Henson have definitively documented, the mythical "Emily Morgan" was most likely Emily D. West, a biracial free-born woman, born in Connecticut who was hired as either a domestic or seamstress by James Morgan in New York. When Morgan left New York to travel to his Galveston Bay plantation at Morgan's point, West most likely accompanied him. That meant that West was likely there when the Mexican Army came to Morgan's land and was one of the slaves and residents of the plantation that Santa Anna took prisoner in order to keep them from reporting reconnaissance to the Texians. Evidence is also good that West did watch the Battle of San Jacinto behind the Mexican lines and she and the other prisoners were liberated by the Texian Army. But, evidence does not exist that West was ever a concubine of Santa Anna or that she was ever in the tent with him.

So where did the legend arise? The first documented uttering of "the influence of a Mulatta girl (Emily) belonging to Col. Morgan who was closeted in the tent with g'l Santana" came in 1842 from a diary entry of an Englishman named Bollaert who stated that he saw the mention in a letter he claimed came from Sam Houston himself. No researcher or chronicler of the former Texas president has ever unearthed any other mention of Emily, Emily Morgan, or Emily West at San Jacinto. However, the tale did spread through oral tradition, which led to the publication of a song, "The Yellow Rose of Texas" in 1858 by someone known only by the initials "H.B.C." The song, which contains blatantly racist lyrics and perpetuates the oft-cited stereotype of enslaved African women as "highly sexualized" led the story to become even more widespread.

During the mid-twentieth century, Bollaert's diary entry was then referenced in a Ph.D. dissertation, which led writers such as Francis X Tolbert, Henderson Shuffler, and others to weave the "Emily Morgan" story into their narratives about San Jacinto as fact. The song—with its racist lyrics cleaned up—became a hit for Mitch Miller at about the same time. The myth became fact and grew even more "solid" with the 1976 publication of Martha Anne Turner's *The Yellow Rose of Texas: Her Saga and Her Song with the Santa Anna Legend*. Turner at least uses the word "legend," then she goes on to state the legend as fact. He leads her readers on a trail in which "Emily Morgan," as a true Texas patriot, knew exactly what she was doing and basically seduced Santa Anna so effectively that he stopped his army in a horribly strategic spot just so he could hasten to climb into the sack with Emily Morgan. The "Yellow Rose," according to Turner, then used her wiles to keep Santa Anna distracted long enough to allow the Texians to claim victory.

If that was not enough to turn a myth into a fact, a “heritage group” with the name of The Sons of the Knights of the Yellow Rose formed with the sole purpose of keeping the story of “Emily Morgan” alive and accepted as actual history. As public relations and propaganda, the SKYRT, the folklore authors, and the song have effectively made the “Yellow Rose of Texas” part of the state’s accepted history among many people. We professional historians could only hope to be so effective.

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