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The Diary of Oscar Call-1856

Two diaries of Oscar Call are housed in the Barker History Center Archives at the University of Texas in Austin. There is an 1856 diary and an 1858 diary. They were acquired for the University through the efforts of J. Frank Dobie. Mrs. O.B. Owens, a former student of his, realizing that they were historically significant, told Mr. Dobie about them. The University library has lost contact with her, however, so any information she may have had about the diaries or Mr. Call himself is at least temporarily lost.

John Gray

Fortunately for persons interested in the pioneer life of early Central Texans, Oscar Call, an early Texas surveyor, has left a combination diary and sketch book in which he recorded day to day activities and observations. The 1856 diary is a small notebook which was written in pencil and today is heavily worn. Surveying notes of longitude and latitude make up a large portion of the notes along with attempts at poetry, the Pythagorean theorem and personal addresses.

The sketches are of particular interest. Most of them were drawn from the banks of the Colorado River and show large oaks and rolling hills. A surveyor, along with his tripod, appears in one sketch, probably a self portrait. Another sketch shows a candidate for political office who may have ran in a local Burnet County election that Call mentions in his diary. The drawings enhance the diary by giving the reader an added sense of intimacy with the writer.

Where Oscar Call came from and what became of him is an as yet unsolved mystery. Yet some facts can be gleaned from the information available. The 1856 diary centers around Burnet, Texas. Fond of writing his name, Mr. Call fills a whole page with his name and address, the address being Burnet.

In 1860 a group of Burnet County citizens petitioned Governor Sam Houston for protection from Indians. Oscar Call was a signatory. He is not, however, listed in the 1860 census of Burnet County. This may be explained by the nature of his occupation. Surveyors spend a lot of time traveling, so he could easily have been missed by the census taker. An

1858 diary which Oscar Call wrote recording a trip to the Trans-Pecos area begins in Burnet, apparently his home at the time. So, while there is little personal information about Mr. Call, it can be assumed that he lived in Burnet, Texas, in the late 1850's.

The diary begins in North Texas. He is traveling south. Oscar Call March 4, 1856
Oscar Call March 17, 1856
Mrs. R. May 14th
Otter Creek June 21
Beaver Creek July 1
Agency July 4, 1856
Kimball July ??, 1856
Rock Creek July 7
Patrick's July 7
Old Agency, July 9
Kimball Bend July 10
July 10 a very warm day.

Wind from the S.W. Prospect of rain.

July 11 Cool and pleasant, memorable day. I am the last remanent of the once powerful race of (Lyerubabs?) My fathers ghost cries to me from the depths of (Alamo Mission?) for revenge!!

The Agency, where Oscar Call stayed the night of July 4, was the Brazos Indian Agency that had been established the year before. Perhaps he and the men who accompanied him were doing surveying work for the Army which at the time was deploying a force of men 750 strong under the command of Colonel Albert Sidney Johnson.

On July 9, he stayed the night at the Old Agency. This was probably Barnards Old Trading Post, established as a trading house for Indians and used later as a frontier commissary. Still heading south he spent several days at Kimball's Bend on the Brazos, where he seems to have started a piece of fiction, but due to the illegible words and apparent incompleteness of the topic, it is impossible to gather any information from this curi-

ous passage.

Left Kimballs Bend
July 14 camped Steele Creek.
2 miles from Graham.

July 15 camped on the North Bosque a very pretty stream.

Oscar Call - Bought of Kerry Seel one Caddo Pony \$60 on July 15, 1856.

July 16 stopped for dinner near a small house 5 miles (word illegible) from the Comanche springs and borrowed a skillet from the dog. After refreshing ourselves and horses travelled on to Coman-

che Springs and found it a most glorious spring and the trees and rocks around it were covered with the names of ... stopped for night at a frame house north of the (river?) and found good water, good milk, good people and good fare generally and had the misfortune of being growled at all night by a most ferocious looking dog. Had pleasant dreams. Think I was in (Parenchis?) eating apples with Julius Caesar.

July 17 Rose early and went 15 each for the horses. Found

them not more than three miles ... and after traveling six miles stopped our horses on Stampede Creek where I succeeded in driving out a large tarantula which I wounded with a large pebble which I found convenient. At 10 o'clock we left Stampede and (rode) till 12 a.m. when we camped in a small bunch by a cornfield. Plenty of roasting ears. Enquired of a man how far it was to Belton, he said 12 miles. So we have come only 8 miles today!! Killed one squirrel and shot at a fly up the creek and scared a (mule?) rabbit and camped to night on Cedar Creek. Got milk and butter but no grits for our ponies.

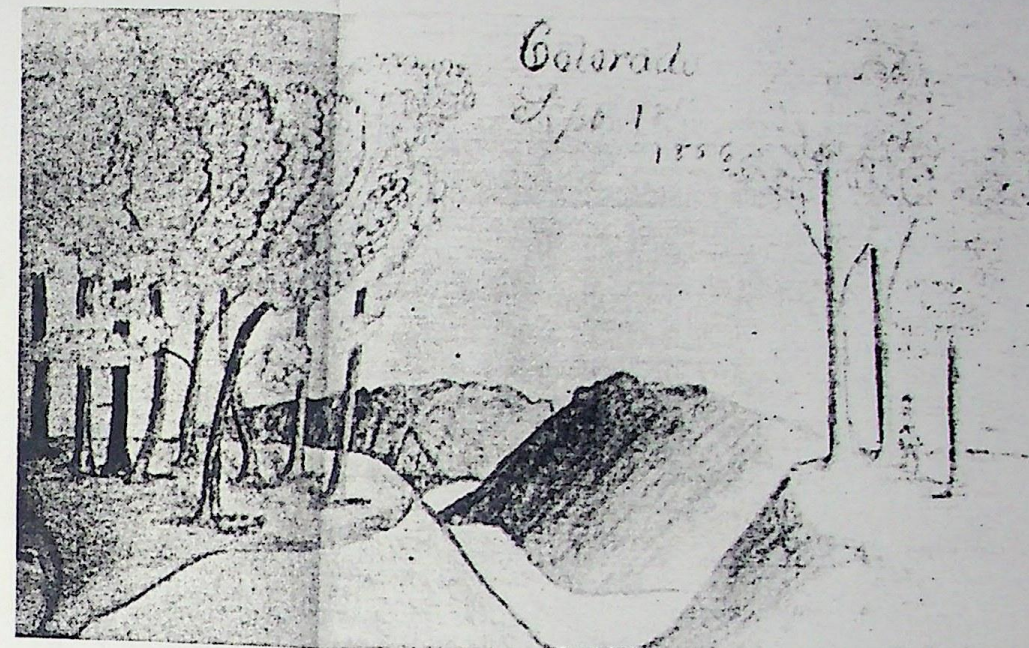
Ft. Graham was established in 1849, but when Oscar Call passed through it had been abandoned for three years. As the frontier people pushed further into Indian territory, so did the forts. The abandoned Ft. Graham became a shelter for cattle drivers and other travelers.

Horses may have been plentiful but they were such a necessity that they brought an excellent price. For \$60, instead of a Caddo pony a settler could have bought 24 acres of land at the prevailing rate of \$2.50 per acre.

The Caddo Indians were a friendly East Texas tribe who at that time were on the Indian Agency. The pony was apparently trained by the Indians as later when the pony gets lost, Mr. Call fears it has returned to the Agency.

The Comanche Springs he speaks so highly of must be the Eagle Springs in Eastern Coryell County near Mother Neff State Park, 18 miles north of Belton. The community of Eagle Springs was founded in 1858 but maybe before that date the springs were known as Comanche Springs.

Anyone reading the diary has to be impressed with the intelligence of Oscar Call. All through the notebook examples of his learning appear. Probably the most striking image coming from this well read man of the frontier is that of Oscar Call sitting under a tree discussing philosophy with Julius Caesar while both are eating apples.



"COLORADO SEPTEMBER 18, 1856"

July 18 Started at 6 o'clock and traveled in company with a gent who was very imaginative. Set him down a decided land and after telling him a pile of stories bid him good day! and crossed the Leon River which was very low, wet our boot tops. Passed through Belton at 10 o'clock a.m. found

Camped on the (Galv?) tonight as there was no water within reach on the Brooksville River. Saw a man get soused in the Big Spring by old (word illegible) alcohol. took a good bathe myself, first, below the road in a deep hole. went to bed as honest man should, but not to sleep as the mesquitos were horrid familiar as well as numerous.

July 19 Got up this morning by sunrise. made our coffee, drank saddled our horses. Shook hands and parted Company. That is I took one road, William Thormyer took the other. Very sorry to part with him as we had been in company through dangers "seen and unseen" for three months. mounted my pony and pursued my solitary way toward Hamilton. found the road quite easily. Stopped at a house in timber and learned that the Banta Boys had left there the day before. Stopped at an old ruin to rest pony. Saw two men from the Gabriel going to Dallas for wheat, told me the people were making no corn in Burnet - this year. Camped for night about a mile west of (Sriends?) in the (Prunis?) rained a little with thunder and lightning. First night I had staid alone on the whole trip. felt "wretched and lonely". revisited the scenes of childhood and wandered over the hills of (word illegible). but caught in the reminences of By Gone days no shadow of the future. wondered if I would get letters at Hamilton. Thought of the boys on the (Canaching?) and then of mankind in general. till the first thing I knew resting, but awoke very early in the morning.

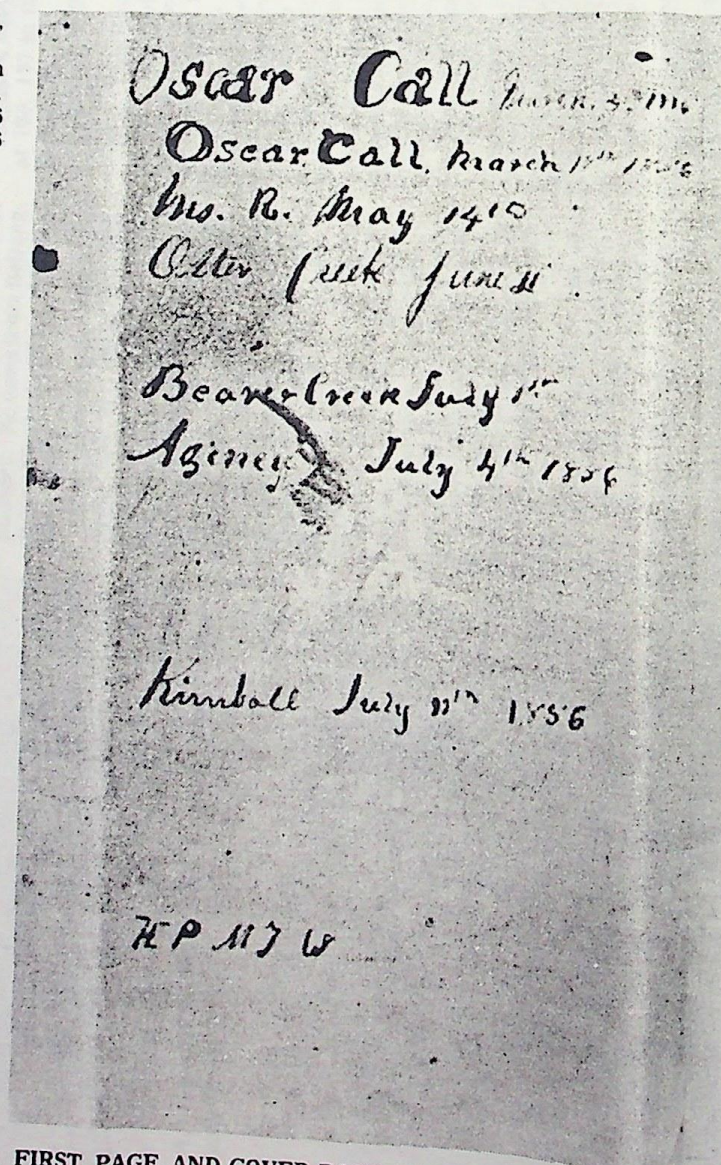
The double log house Mr. Call mentions was a common sight on the frontier. As the family grew, a second room would be added to the original cabin resulting in the familiar breezeway or dogrun between the two.

We learn that for whatever reason corn was not available in Burnet. Perhaps the dry weather he mentions all through his diary caused the crops to be very poor.

We learn also that Oscar Call was something of a philosopher. He seems to have preferred company to solitary travel, as he laments parting with William Thormyer. But he was now alone and facing the wild, open country of Central Texas without a companion. He uses the time to reflect on the condition of man and events that had shaped his life, questions that intrigue all thoughtful men.

In the July 19 entry, he writes of "dangers seen and unseen" during three months of travel. He is traveling from Indian territory and apparently was there for a good while. Yet strangely enough, this vague statement which brings to mind Indians perched upon a hill or crouched behind a rock is the only mention of danger in the whole diary. This perhaps can be explained by the fact that the government was at last setting aside land for the Indians at two different sites. Although the reservations were not large, considering the Indians' nomadic nature, most tribes were anxious to live in peace and wanted to have land that was

See THE DIARY page 2-C



FIRST PAGE AND COVER PAGE OF THE OSCAR CALL DIARY. This page has been partially rewritten in ink at some time. The empty spaces were pencil entries that have been so worn as to be illegible.

The Diary . . .

Cont. from page 1-C

regarded by white men as Indian land.

July 20 And brought up my pony. Eat my solitary meal, sharing it only with a mouse. Saddled my pony and traveled slowly toward Brooksville, found Brooksville a pretty little log town. And the people washing for church which put me in mind that it was Sunday and caused me to remember that people use to go to preachings on Sundays, instead of traveling or surveying. Learned that one of the Bantas got thrown from his horse. Stopped a short time at Berry's Creek three

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Marble Falls, Texas
July 26, 1973

who lived in Burnet County, ranged in age from 21 to 30 and it seems likely that Oscar Call would be near the same age as that of his friends. The Bantas were well known stock raisers who frequently joined Indian fighting bands. William Banta, the eldest brother, wrote a book about his experiences entitled "Twenty-Seven Years on the Texas Frontier."

July 21 Monday morning again cool and pleasant, 7 miles further to Hamilton. Think that I will get there some time in the day and sure enough I came in sight of Hamilton at 10 o'clock, hardly knew the place . . . found several letters at the post office for me . . .

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which sheds some light on Oscar Call's age. The Banta brother:



CANDIDATE "ON THE DAY OF HIS ELECTION" -- Probably this is one of the candidates for the election in Marbletown that Oscar Call writes about in his election, but since there is no date on the sketch it can't be verified.

deal of excitement in election matters. No news from Belmont. Berry Vanderbreer's child died last night.

After a short three hour ride, Oscar Call arrived in Hamilton. Hamilton or Hamilton's Valley was founded in 1849, seven years before Oscar Call rode into town. In 1852, Burnet County was formed with the Legislature naming it after a former President of Texas. The citizens of Hamilton's Valley changed their town's name to Burnet several years later, since there was already a Hamilton's post office in Texas. The first thing Oscar Call did upon arriving was to satisfy his previous curiosity about mail. Several letters awaited him; thus giving further evidence to the belief that he called Burnet home.

The summers were just as hot 117 years ago, but the elections of those days certainly engendered much more interest than do present day local elections.

3rd August Went to camp meeting in Marbletown Valley, and staid til Monday night. Had a great time. Election and camp meeting in the same place. Methodists marched to the polls singing "Moses (word illegible) the Water" and voted the Methodist ticket entirely. Sorry time for sinners and camp (illegible), pity!

August 5 Tuesday Hamilton. a good deal of excitement in town in regard to election also much anxiety felt respect to the San Antonio mob and death of McDonald.

August 6 very warm morning at 108, 137 in the shade and 107 in sun.

August 7 a dull day in town that's all His temperature readings seem a little off. It does convey the usual summer climate however, even if it is a little mixed up. His August 3 comment about the election is difficult to comprehend, but it doesn't seem to be a statement in praise of the Methodist ticket. Probably he was trying to express a feeling that many traditional Methodists felt toward the sects inclined toward an outward display of their religious feelings.

This section of the diary provided the most curious events recorded. The election for local and state officials was combined with a religious camp meeting. It serves as an excellent chance to check Oscar Call's accuracy in regard to dates. On record at the State Archives are returns for an election held August 4, 1856, agreeing with Oscar Call. No mention is made in the public records as to where the election was held or in what atmosphere. In retrospect it would hardly seem possible for anyone but Methodists to win in such a situation.

The day after the election, Mr. Call records a great deal of excitement. The election returns were still out causing the San Antonio mob and the death of McDonald. A record of this exciting and most unusual San Antonio event is found in the San Antonio Ledger for Saturday, August 2, 1856. The 1850's

are a bad year for newspaper collections because the papers were printed on inferior paper and deteriorated rapidly. Subsequent issues which most likely dealt with the matter further are unavailable. San Antonio Ledger August 2

On the evening of Tuesday a dreadful calamity occurred in the drugstore of the Mayor, J.M. Devine. About 5 o'clock Mr. J.S. McDonald entered the store in company with several other gentlemen and immediately afterwards an altercation arose about the proclamation issued by the Mayor that morning, calling upon all good citizens, irrespective of party to come forward and be sworn in as a special police for the protection of the city. A difficulty ensued in which Mr. McDonald, the Mayor, and some others were engaged, and in the course of it Mr. McDonald was so severely wounded by a shot from a pistol in the hands of the Mayor, that he only survived a few minutes. Dr. Devine, who was himself injured, though not seriously, has been committed to prison to await the result of an examination . . .

The deceased gentleman was an influential member of the Native American Party; and the excitement caused by his death was so great that it was considered necessary to guard the jail by a large body of armed men. The melancholy occurrence has cast a gloom over the whole city. Mr. McDonald was buried on Wednesday after-

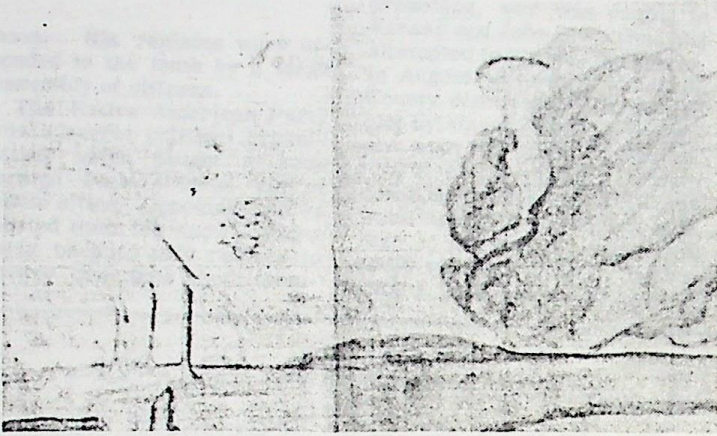
See THE DIARY page 3-C

45 RPM SINGLES

PI - Inaudible



"NOVEMBER 4, 1856 NOONING CAMP" -- A sketch done after the last entry in the diary.



A SKETCH OF VIOLENT TEXAS NORTHER showing trees blowing and breaking in the wind. The sketch labeled "Nortner" shows a flock of ducks flying before the wind.

miles from Brooksville. rode on again to Mathis Mill found the Gabriel very low indeed scarcely running at all. Stopped near the mill and eat lunch. Pony most give out. walked nearly half the way from Brooksville. Found a fire where someone had camped last night and with some roasting ears which I succeeded in stealing. with coffee bread and butter made a hearty meal. Boy says that it is 25 miles to Hamilton. But I think that he is "damned big mistaken". at 1 o'clock started again, think it is the warmest day of the season, the road very dusty and no water. Country resembles the country around Comanche Springs and (Bear) creek. Overtook the Banta Boys at (Rainbolts) and camped with them tonight.

As Mr. Call neared Burnet, he was still feeling very lonely, a mouse being his only companion. The little log town he passed through was the budding town of Florence founded in 1848, settled in 1857 and originally called Brooksville, according to the Handbook of Texas. However, in 1856, when Oscar Call was in the town it seems to have been settled enough to have people attending church services.

The boy was indeed wrong about the distance from Mathis Mill to Burnet. It is 20 miles, not 25 miles. This may not seem like a major mistake but when you have to walk your horse most of the way due to a dry season, five miles can be a long distance.

Leaving the Mathis Mill at 1 o'clock, Mr. Call travels 13 miles and at last catches up with his friends, the Banta Boys. Here is a clue worth noting which sheds some light on Oscar Call's age. The Banta brother:

July 22 warm day mail day.
July 23 very warm indeed considerable electioneering. . . very warm, warm, warm

July 26 went to Thads, fun with (Mulins) staid til 19th

July 30 warm and dry no prospect of rain

August 1 pony lost, fear he has left for Brazos Agency.

August Sunday. At town yet found pony last night everybody going to camp meeting. a good

last night.

After a short three hour ride, Oscar Call arrived in Hamilton. Hamilton or Hamilton's Valley was founded in 1849, seven years before Oscar Call rode into town. In 1852, Burnet County was formed with the Legislature naming it after a former President of Texas. The citizens of Hamilton's Valley changed their town's name to Burnet several years later, since there was already a Hamilton's post office in Texas.

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45 RPM SINGLES

The Diary . . .

Cont. from page 2-C

noon. His remains were attended to the tomb by a large assembly of citizens.

The Native American Party was a secret political organization which sought to keep foreign born citizens out of public office. Opposing parties labeled them the Know-Nothing party because they refused to answer questions about them-

selves. In July of 1856, the nation was on the verge of civil war. A bitter election was approaching, war was raging in Kansas and John Brown had just attempted to liberate the slaves. In August, citizens of Colorado County discovered a suspected plot by slaves to kill their owners and run away to Mexico. The newspaper article doesn't explain why the citizens were called to arms, but it is easy to see how such an action could result in tragedy during such a volative period of his-

THE HIGHLANDER
July 26, 1973

Marble Falls, Texas
PAGE THREE-

tory. With the leader of a major political party murdered and the Mayor of San Antonio in jail, it is little wonder that Burnet citizens were aroused.

August 8 Started for Stennis in Pecan Bayou in company with Sullivan Cox. Stopped to night in Lelano county. rained a little this evening.

August 9 Staid here all day. went to the Llano. A fine county. 10th Left again for Pecan

Bayou. Stopped for dinner a fall creek and camped to night on Cherokee creek on Kellys 11th Started early this morning, got in sight of San Saba Valley at 10 o'clock. Found everything dried up consequently grass all dead. Concluded to go to Simpsens Spring and stop to barbecue our beans. found lots of horse tracks near the springs. Supposed there was a shooting match on hand but after hobbling our horses were surprised to hear groans and shouts which we saw come from a squad of people near and we first became sensible that we were in a Methodist Camp Meeting. Staid this evening in camp. Went to preaching after dark and a wretched preach it was.

The Methodists seem to be having a hey day in the area. Noah Smithwick remembers that the first camp meeting was held in 1855 but that they soon occurred quite frequently. The Methodists that Oscar Call encountered at Simpsens Springs must have been the Protestant Methodists that Smithwick refers to in his book The Evolution of a State.

"There finally sprang up a sect in Backbone valley that discounted all others in spiritual manifestations. Protestant Methodists they styled themselves, though just what the name implied I never learned. They had meetings every night, singing, shouting and going into trances, during which they spoke with tongues and played on imaginary harps, and, as a grand finale, springing to their feet and running as if pursued by the emissaries of Satan. Crowds of curious sightseers flocked to see the performance as though it were a circus."

12th Rose early, find our horses had wandered off or stampeded from the groans and yells last night. Started at 7 this morning and rode into Steal Easy. a town containing one dwelling, one blacksmith shop and one grocery. stopped in town sometime and then crossed the San Saba and stopped for dinner under the shade of a big elm. learn that it is forty miles to the fort yet. very warm weather. travelled through a beautiful mesquite country this evening and left the road and camped on the San Saba near a crossing.

13th left camp in river at 6 o'clock and rode on to woods in Richland Creek. Stoppe dour horses at the house, and got directions about our course. Thirty-five miles of it by their say so, to (fort). Going five miles in, going nearly 20 miles.

At An Election held in the County of Burnet on the 4th day of August A.D. 1856 For the Election of the following named Officers State and District Officers pursuant to Law and the Proclamation of the Governor of State for the Office of

The Offices	Names of Candidates	N of Votes
Attorney Gen.	James Willie	170
	Wm Steadman	74
	John Humphill	227
C. J. of the S. D. Court		
Associate Justice	R J Wheeler	187
	A S Lipscomb	121
	J J Jennings	111
Comptroller of Public Acct	James B Shaw	155
	E S C Robertson	89
Treasurer of State	Jas H Raymond	157
	W A Carlton	84
Judge of the 2nd Judicial Dist	Thomas H Duval	85
	E B Turner	140
District Attorney	B W L	

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	E B Turner	140
District Attorney	E W Jones	54
2nd Judicial Dist	A H Chalmers	163

I, Jas. B. Bousland, Chief Justice of the
aforesaid County do Certify that the
above and foregoing is a true and
Correct Return of said Election as appears
by the Returns of the same made to me
by the Managers of said Election in and
for said County.

Given under my hand and
Seal of the County Court of
Burnet County this the 16
th day of August A.D. 1886
Jas Bousland
Chief Justice
B.C.

singing, shouting and going in trances, during which they spoke with tongues and played on imaginary harps, and, as a grand finale, springing to their feet and running as if pursued by the emissaries of Satan. Crowds of curious sightseers flocked to see the performance as though it were a circus."

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14th Saw plenty of Antelope for the first time since we left Hamilton. Stopped for dinner on the banks of the Colorado.

19th Left Camp Colorado this morning on our return to Hamilton.

Still pushing north, traveling through San Saba County. Mr. Call passes through Steal Easy. According to the Handbook of Texas, a community was organized at the mouth of Richland Creek and the San Saba River. This village was called "county seat", even though there was no county until 1856. The location corresponds to where Oscar Call was when he saw Steal Easy, six miles north of the county seat site, as he says on the return trip. With the inhabitants of "County Seat" stuck with such a mediocre name, more than likely they took to calling themselves Steal Easy, if only to quicken their image.

After leaving Steal Easy, he camped on Antelope Creek at Halls, home of John M. Hall and founder of Hall, Texas. It had only been one year before that Mr. Hall had settled on his land and a traveler passing through was more than welcome. Visitors to these frontier farms were usually welcome to camp nearby and "steal" a few ears of corn from the field.

Camp Colorado was founded

The Diary

Cont. from page 3-C

in 1856 on the Mukewater or Makewater Creek in Coleman County, six miles north of the Colorado River. Because of sickness at that location, it was moved 20 miles north in July of 1857. Oscar Call stayed in the area for only a few days, doing some hunting for antelope and exploring the area. The fort was another link in the chain of forts that stretched across the western frontier. Two months before he had been on the Brazos frontier, now he was on the Colorado frontier.

20th Stopped to noon on the San Saba at the county site. supposed that we travelled thirty-five miles yesterday and ten or eleven today. Started at 3 and crossed the San Saba at a very good ford 6 miles above Steal Easy and presently we struck Wallace Creek road about three miles above McAmelmys creek crossed Simpsens creek before sun set. and went up to Watts where we staid to night. Found them very clever people at home as well as abroad, learned that Bower left here today for Hamilton via Wallace Creek. Left Watts this morning at 8 O'Clock and took the old road towards the salt

Marble Falls, Texas
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works over a rough and rocky country. Stopped to noon at Cherokee Creek. Took cold last night and feel musty and chilly today, head ache and very warm weather for travelling . . .

22nd Started at an early hour this morning and at 1 O'Clock reached the Lelano where we stopped for dinner. Mounted at 2 and rode on to the river where we took a wash and got some splendid water at Lelano. Rode into Hamilton at dusk. found everything in time.

23 Staid in town all day and went to preaching this evening, heard a first rate discourse from Strickeland.

24 in town

25 meeting

26 "

27 "

28 in town yet, had a very good rain on the evening of the 29th of August which is the second which has fell for three months.

30th cool and pleasant staid in town nearly all day

31 Sunday. The last day of summer. Cool, cloudy and pleasant this morning. All quiet and still in town today, Very different from the Sundays two years ago. in place of the rolling and rattling of tin (jars), the clatter of dozens of drunken wretches with (word illegible)

and quilts all in (word illegible) . . . No more is the soul inspiring sound of the morning solution of the members of the Lone Star greet our ears as we take our morning walks at (word illegible).

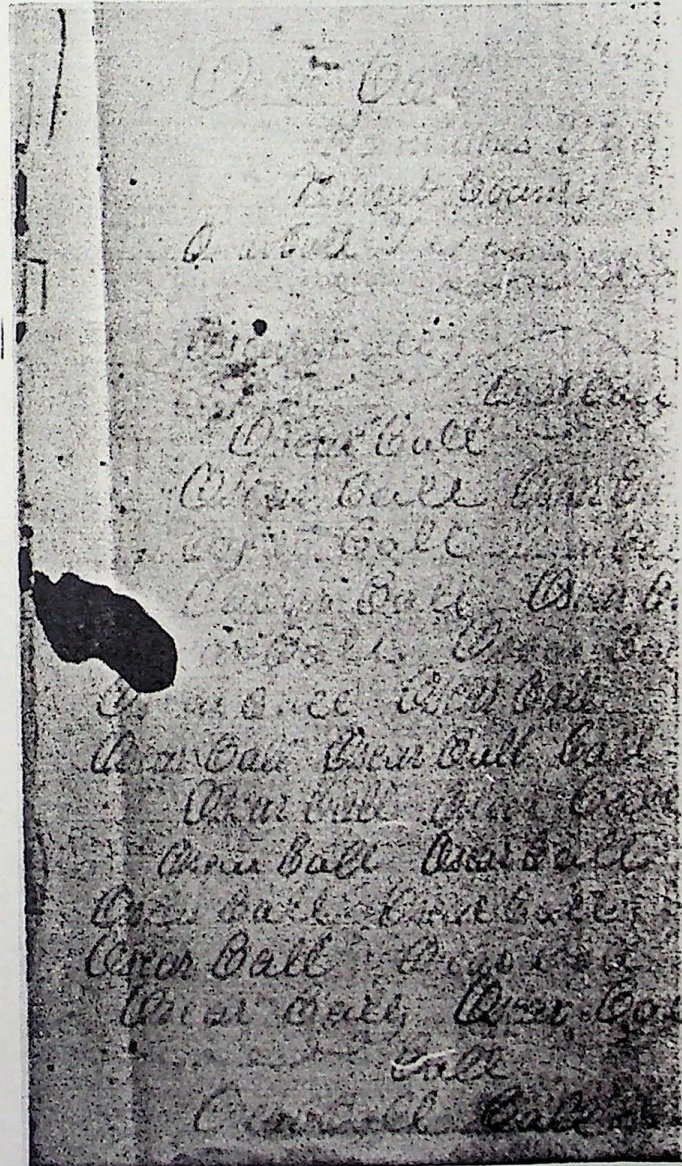
September 1 first day of Autum. Cool and Cloudy. Not much like the September in the frozen North.

Once back in Burnet (Hamilton), he records his stay for two more weeks before the diary ends. The discourse from Strickeland was very popular at the time. Isaac Strickeland had been a founding father of Texas Methodism who died at an early age in 1839 and, according to A History of Methodism in Texas, he was one of the denomination's greatest missionaries.

The next to the last entry is very difficult to read and harder to understand. He seems to be praising the improvement the city had made in just a few years, but he also seems to be making fun of certain group organizations.

The closing entry is befitting to a wanderer like Oscar Call. From simple thoughts of weather, his ever searching mind quickly drifts to far lands that summon men and women who search for excitement.

Twentieth century man Oscar Call a great debt. only does his writing enter us with its humorous episode and honest style, but it reminds us of how much early Texans loved the land and thus encourages us to the same.



THE PAGE FROM THE DIARY WHERE Oscar Call writes his name and address. "Oscar Call, Hamilton Valley, E. County, Texas".