

## **A Story Based on Facts:**

### *A Visit with Ransom Williams*

Ransom Williams sat at his table, enjoying the cool evening breeze and tinkering with the old muzzle-loading gun he was fixing for his long-time neighbor, Daniel W. Labenske. He liked working with guns, lanterns, or almost any other mechanical device for that matter. He was good at it, too, having spent a lifetime working with his hands. This was an old 1853 Enfield rifle, still a good gun that could bring down a deer at 1,000 yards; more for someone who was a good shot. Daniel wanted the gun repaired so he could give it to one of his older sons, and Ransom was happy to fix it and make some extra cash. It was a tedious job and Ransom was focused on the repetitive motions.

The creaking of the wagon jolted Ransom out of his deep concentration. His son William was just returning from a trip to visit a girl over at Antioch. Ransom knew the wheel hubs needed lubricating, but he was betting Will hadn't noticed the sound at all. Now 19 years old, the boy had little on his mind except that girl! He wouldn't be surprised if the love-sick boy had forgotten half of the supplies he was supposed to get at the general store. He hoped Will had at least remembered to stop at Bear Creek and fill the barrels in the back of the wagon with water.

Several shrill notes coming from the end of the porch pierced through the sounds of the dog barking and the chickens clucking behind the house. Henry was standing under the lantern, attempting to make music with the instrument Ransom had given him on his last birthday. But the noise coming out of it was almost as irritating as the squeaky wagon wheel. For a moment, Ransom thought that maybe he should have given Henry a good book instead of the harmonica. But Ransom had learned to play a harmonica when he was 12, so he figured he would have to put up with the squawking until Henry got the hang of it. Once he got better, Ransom would show Henry a few harmonica tricks that his father had passed on to him.

Ransom glanced around the yard and beyond. The recent rain shower had perked up the grass and trees. School was over for this year so all of the children were home and one of his nephews from over at Antioch was staying with them for a few weeks. Ten-

year-old Mattie had spent the last hour shucking corn and had run to fetch the hand-held sheller. Mattie was still a little young to cook over the open fire in the yard, but she always wanted to help. Ransom's wife, Sarah, was planning to grind the corn into meal tomorrow. That meant they would have sweet cornbread for supper, one of Ransom's favorites. The sun was dropping fast, and his second son, Charley, was coming in from the south end of the pasture, where he had been digging some more boulders out of the field and piling them up along the property border. There seemed to be a never-ending supply of big rocks in that field. Charley looked hot and tired, reminding Ransom how glad he was that he didn't have to do all the backbreaking work by himself anymore. When he first moved on the land, Ransom had dug out and moved more rocks than he cared to think about. Using only a mule and skid, he had dragged the boulders and stacked them to form the maze of rock walls that now served as corrals and livestock fences. He and the mule had dug the pond in the corral area, which would have gone dry if not for the recent rain.

Sarah was sitting in her favorite chair sewing as she often did in the evening just before supper. That way, she could also keep an eye on the two youngest kids as long as they stayed near the porch. They kept the yard area swept and cleared of debris, a habit which carried on a long-standing tradition among the black community. From a practical perspective, it left no hiding places for critters, especially rattlesnakes, that came around the house from time to time. The small trash dump on the west side of the house was off limits to the younger kids, and they knew they would get in trouble if they ventured there. Now they threw their trash over the rock wall onto the slope, and the pile of old trash that was still between the chimney and the rock wall had become a nuisance.

Emma, the baby of the family, was serving tea to her doll and harassing the dog at the same time. She was talented that way. Her brother John was cradling his book, pointing at the pages and saying each letter out loud. John was 6 years old now, and he would be starting school soon. But John already knew the alphabet and some simple words because the older kids had started teaching him to read before he was 4. Ransom always wished he and Sarah could read and write, but he was sure proud his kids could.

"Uncle Rance!"

The abrupt sound brought Ransom around once again, ending his pleasant daydream. He focused his attention on his nephew sitting right across the table and whittling on a stick with his pocketknife as boys his age tended to do. Ransom had not been able to get any of his sons interested in fixing things, and he liked the fact that his nephew really wanted to develop his skills and hoped to become a handyman someday. Tom was a good kid. He always watched carefully as Ransom repaired things, and he always asked lots of good questions. Ransom wanted to encourage Tom any way he could and he enjoyed explaining the steps in detail to an eager listener.

The wind switched directions for a moment, and Ransom caught a whiff of the stew that Mary was cooking in the big cast iron pot over an open fire. Mary had added some fresh vegetables—tomatoes, potatoes, onions, and squash—along with some corn that she had shelled earlier that day. She also added some fresh greens picked from a meadow along Bear Creek and chunks of smoked pork from the pig they had butchered three weeks ago. Whatever else she had added to spice it up, the stew sure smelled good. At 13, Mary had already become a good cook and was very resourceful, making tasty use of whatever he and the boys could hunt up—rabbits, squirrels, birds, and all kinds of critters.

Ransom was glad now that summer was here and they were getting fresh garden vegetables again. He hated the last part of winter and early spring when the family was eating expensive store-bought canned foods and using up the last of the dried sweet potatoes they had kept over the winter in the pit below the house floor. Fresh vegetables were one of the treats that made all the hard farm work worthwhile.

Ransom thought about how blessed he was to have such a fine family. He would give thanks tomorrow when the family took the wagon to church in Manchaca. The family would attend the community lunch after church so they could see some of their relatives and friends. Sundays were always a good day for socializing and for remembering where the blessings had come from. Besides church, the Juneteenth celebration held over at Dodson's Park in Manchaca was the big event each year. People came from miles around and brought food. Lots of great food!

For a brief instant, the thought of Juneteenth reminded Ransom of the old days—the days before he met Sarah and before freedom. The days when he labored hard so his white owners could profit. While Ransom’s master had been good to him, many of his friends were not so lucky and had lived in constant fear of being whipped or sold away from their families. Ransom had learned some useful skills before freedom, especially how to care for and work with horses. Ransom’s master had even given him a few horses on freedom day if he would continue to work for him for another year. Ransom had fared better than most of his friends who worked in the fields.

Ransom and Sarah didn’t talk much to the kids about the slavery days, but they did what they could to make sure their children learned proper behavior and got an education. No matter how good things were at the moment, a little bit of worry always lingered in the back of Ransom’s mind. He remembered the stories that Charley had read him over the last few years from *The Herald*, the black newspaper from Austin. There were plenty of articles about whites terrorizing blacks, which sometimes led to the lynching of one or more black men for some cockamamie reason. Ransom had seen this type of senseless violence happen before, and he thought about how it seemed to be more common now than it was right after freedom. Ransom was keenly aware that it was still a white man’s world and that one had to be careful to avoid unnecessary confrontations. He tried to teach his kids this concept without scaring them. “Lay low and don’t cause nobody no trouble,” he always said.

All things being considered, however, Ransom was glad he had chosen to buy land in Travis County. Being close to Austin, his farm was in a progressive area, and things were better there than in many other parts of Texas. He and Sarah were in a good place. They had come a long way together and had worked hard to build their farm and raise their family. A smile came across Ransom’s face. He was rightfully proud of what they had accomplished together.

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**Note:** This story was written by archeologist Doug Boyd of Austin, the Principal Investigator for the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead Project. It is a fictionalized account based on facts: artifacts and other findings from the farmsteads excavations, historical research into state and county records and newspapers, and interviews with descendants in the community. The story has been modified slightly by Laine Leibick for classroom use.