

The Son

By Philipp Meyer

Chapter One: Colonel Eli McCullough *Taken from a 1936 WPA Recording*

It was prophesied I would live to see one hundred and having achieved that age I see no reason to doubt it. I am not dying a Christian though my scalp is intact and if there is an eternal hunting ground, that is where I am headed. That or the river Styx. My opinion at this moment is my life has been far too short: the good I could do if given another year on my feet. Instead I am strapped to this bed, fouling myself like an infant.

Should the Creator see fit to give me strength I will make my way to the waters that run through the pasture. The Nueces River at its eastern bend. I have always preferred the Devil's. In my dreams I have reached it three times and it is known that Alexander the Great, on his last night of mortal life, crawled from his palace and tried to slip into the Euphrates, knowing that if his body disappeared, his people would assume he had ascended to heaven as a god. His wife stopped him at the water's edge. She dragged him home to die mortal. And people ask why I did not remarry.

Should my son appear, I would prefer not to suffer his smile of victory. Seed of my destruction. I know what he did and I suspect he has long graced the banks of the river Jordan, as Quanah Parker, last chief of the Comanches, gave the boy scant chance to reach fifty. In return for this information I gave to Quanah and his warriors a young bull buffalo, a prime animal to be slain the old way with lances, on my pastures that had once been their hunting grounds. One of Quanah's companions was a venerable Arapahoe chief and as we sat partaking of the bull's warm liver in the ancient manner, dipped in the animal's own bile, he gave me a silver band he had personally removed from the finger of George Armstrong Custer. The ring is marked "7th Cav." It bears a deep scar from a lance, and, having no suitable heir, I will take it to the river with me.

Most will be familiar with the date of my birth. The Declaration of Independence that bore the Republic of Texas out of Mexican tyranny was ratified March 2, 1836, in a humble

shack at the edge of the Brazos. Half the signatories were malarial; the other half had come to Texas to escape a hangman's noose. I was the first male child of this new republic.

The Spanish had been in Texas hundreds of years but nothing had come of it. Since Columbus they had been conquering all the natives that stood in their way and while I have never met an Aztec, they must have been a pack of mincing choirboys. The Lipan Apaches stopped the old conquistadores in their tracks. Then came the Comanche. The earth had seen nothing like them since the Mongols; they drove the Apaches into the sea, destroyed the Spanish Army, turned Mexico into a slave market. I once saw Comanches herding villagers along the Pecos, hundreds at a time, no different from the way you'd drive cattle.

Having been trounced by the aboriginals, the Mexican government devised a desperate plan to settle Texas. Any man, of any nation, willing to move west of the Sabine River would receive four thousand acres of free land. The fine print was written in blood. The Comanche philosophy toward outsiders was nearly papal in its thoroughness: torture and kill the men, rape and kill the women, take the children for slaves or adoption. Few from the ancient countries of Europe took the Mexicans up on their offer. In fact, no one came at all. Except the Americans. They flooded in. They had women and children to spare and to him that overcometh, I giveth to eat of the tree of life.

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In 1832 my father arrived in Matagorda, common in those days if you viewed the risk of death by firing squad or a scalping by the Comanches as God's way of telling you there were great rewards to be had. By then the Mexican government, nervous about the growing Anglo horde within its borders, had banned American immigration into Texas.

And still it was better than the Old States, where unless you were son of a plantation owner, there was nothing to be had but the gleanings. Let the records show that the better classes, the Austins and Houstons, were all content to remain citizens of Mexico so long as they could keep their land. Their descendants have waged wars of propaganda to clear their names and have them declared Founders of Texas. In truth it was only the men like my father, who had nothing, who pushed Texas into war.

Like every able-bodied Scotsman, he did his part in the rout at San Jacinto and after the war worked as a blacksmith, gunsmith, and surveyor. He was tall and easy to talk to. He had a straight back and hard hands and people felt safe around him, which proved, for most of them, to be an illusion.

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My father was not religious and I attribute my heathen ways to him. Still, he was the sort of man who felt the breath of the pale rider close on his neck. He did not believe in time to waste. We first lived at Bastrop, raising corn, sorghum, and hogs, clearing land until the new settlers came in, those who waited until the Indian dangers had passed, then arrived with their lawyers to challenge the deeds and titles of those who had civilized the country and vanquished the red man. These first Texans had purchased their holdings with the original human currency and most could neither read nor write. By the age of ten I had dug four graves. The faintest sound of galloping hooves would wake the entire family, and by the time the news arrived—some neighbor cut up like a Thanksgiving shoat—my father had checked his loads and then he and the messenger would disappear into the night. The brave die young: that is the Comanche saying, but it was true of the first Anglos as well.

During the ten years Texas stood alone as a nation, the government was desperate for settlers, especially those with money. And through some invisible telegraph the message went back to the Old States—this area is safe now. In 1844 the first stranger arrived at our gate: a barbershop shingle, store-bought clothes, a lady-broke sorrel. He asked for grain as his horse would founder on grass. A horse that could not eat grass—I had never heard of such a thing.

Two months later, the Smithwicks' title was challenged and then the Hornsbys and MacLeods were bought out at a pittance. By then there were more lawyers in Texas, per capita, than any other place on the continent and within a few years all the original settlers had lost their land and been driven west again, back into Indian country. The gentler classes who had stolen the land were already plotting a war to protect their blacks; the South would be cursed but Texas, a child of the West, would emerge unscathed.

In the meantime a campaign was launched against my mother, a Castilian of the old line, dark skinned but finely featured, it was claimed by the new settlers that she was octoroon. The plantation gentleman took pride in his eye for such things.

By 1846 we had moved past the line of settlement, to my father's headright on the Pedernales. It was Comanche hunting grounds. The trees had never heard an ax, and the land and all the animals who lived upon it were fat and slick. Grass up to the chest, the soil deep and black in the bottoms, and even the steepest hillsides overrun with wildflowers. It was not the dry rocky place it is today.

Wild Spanish cattle were easily acquired with a rope—within a year we had a hundred head. Hogs and mustang horses were also for the taking. There were deer, turkey, bear, squirrel, the occasional buffalo, turtles and fish from the river, ducks, plums and mustang grapes, bee trees and persimmons—the country was rich with life the way it is rotten with people today. The only problem was keeping your scalp attached.