

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Frontier Tales

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Last month, we wrote about early Texas educator Thomas Jefferson “Bristletop” Johnson. While his portrait shows an austere looking man with bushy hair and a thick, unruly gray beard, he was known to his students to be a fair and kind schoolmaster who disciplined not with a stick, but with wisdom. In 1852, Johnson established his school, the Johnson Institute, in the remote countryside beyond the reach of Austin or other civilized settlements in Central Texas. The school had to be self-sufficient and the students had to be robust and sturdy.

The school began in log cabins hand built by Johnson, which were soon replaced with a fine two-story limestone building. The student body was co-ed with lodging upstairs and school rooms, dining room and kitchen on the first floor. Their day started promptly at 6 a.m., with the ringing of an old college bell. The bell ruled over the institution, being mounted in a live oak tree with a rope which ran from the bell crank to the ground. Both boys and girls spilled onto the long porch that ran the length of the second floor where they would find a wash pan and towel to spruce up for the day.

Being a man of faith, Johnson invited preachers of all denominations to hold services at the Institute. Services were held every Sunday as the gospel was brought to the hills and to the homes of the pioneers who lived nearby. Students not only attended these services, but the gospel was part of their everyday lessons. If a preacher was not available, the professor would not hesitate to do the honors himself.

The students studied the usual subjects of arithmetic, geography, history, poetry and classical literature. They were required to write compositions and a collection of their essays illustrate their fancies – “Love of Fame,” “Power of Song,” “Log Cabin,” “Mission of Tears,” “Influence of Woman,” “Influence of Books,” and so forth. The first piano to arrive in Hays County was delivered to the Johnson Institute. It was brought hundreds of miles from the Texas coast by a freight wagon driven by an oxen team. Piano lessons for the girls were required and under the direction of the professor’s wife, Catherine, they would practice upstairs while she prepared meals just below them in the kitchen. This gave Catherine ample opportunity to point out any missed notes by banging on the ceiling with a broomstick. Occasionally a child would become homesick and skip off at night and not show up for breakfast in the morning. Johnson had an old mule who, despite the absence of roads, knew the mountains well enough to carry the professor where he needed to go. Johnson would start the school lessons and then mount the mule and quickly travel to a tactical location and wait for the runaway to come by. The child would be placed upon the mule and returned to his studies. After the untimely death of Bristletop Johnson from cholera in 1868, his son Ben took over as administrator and his daughter Emma taught classes until its closure in 1872.