

# The Yellow Rose of Texas: Fact or Legend? Or Both?

By Tim Wilton

The story behind the song that many people consider *the* anthem of Texas, *The Yellow Rose of Texas*, is very much like the state it celebrates--a fascinating mixture of legend and fact, of heroes and heroines, of long lost love and new found frontiers--and a far cry from the sanitized but hugely popular 1955 arrangement by Mitch Miller that is the most widely known and accepted version today.

According to UTSA's Institute of Texan Cultures, the first recorded manuscript surfaced around 1836 as a poem, not a song, and was hand-written on a piece of paper and signed "H.B.C.". Historical documents point out that it was written either just before, or right after the Battle of San Jacinto, which occurred on April 21, 1836. The original words and stanzas are as follows:

*There's a yellow rose in Texas  
That I am a going to see  
No other darky knows her  
No one only me*

*She cryed so when I left her  
It like to broke my heart  
And if I ever find her  
We nevermore will part*

*She's the sweetest rose of color  
This darky ever knew  
Her eyes are bright as diamonds  
They sparkle like the dew*

*You may talk about dearest may  
and sing of Rosa Lee  
But the yellow rose of Texas  
Beats the belles of Tennessee*

*When the Rio Grande is flowing,  
And the starry skies are bright  
She walks along the river  
In the quiet summer night*

*She Think if I remember,  
When we parted long ago,  
I promised to come back again  
And not to leave her so.*

*O, now I'm going to find her,  
For my heart is full of woe,  
And we'll sing the songs together,  
That we sung long ago;  
We'll play the banjo gaily,  
And we'll sing the songs of yore,  
And the yellow rose of Texas  
Will be mine forevermore.*

But who exactly is this Yellow Rose and did these two lovers ever finally reunite?

In her book, "Yellow Rose of Texas: Her Saga and Her Song", author Martha Anne Turner reveals that the original title of this poem was "Emily, the Maid of Morgan's Point." The poet is presumed to be a black Texian soldier from Tennessee who is writing of a long lost love or heroine whom he hopes to reunite 'forevermore'. And as crude as it sounds today, it was common during that time to refer to people of mixed races, or mulattos, as "yellow" or "high yellow." Additionally, the name "Rose" was a popular 19th century feminine name, and according to Turner, was frequently used in songs and poems as a symbolic glorification of young womanhood.

Historic records indicate that an indentured servant of mixed races named Emily D. West arrived in the settlement of New Washington, Texas in December 1835, from New York. Indentured to the settlement's founder, an entrepreneur named James Morgan, Emily was described by him as "an eastern import with extraordinary intelligence and sophistication". (It should be noted that slavery in the Mexican colony that was Texas was forbidden, thus slaves were converted into 99-year indentured servants.)

Strategically located near the mouth of the San Jacinto River and extending into San Jacinto Bay, Morgan's growing settlement would play a vital role in the Texas war for independence from Mexico. A staunch supporter of Texas independence, Morgan freely sent flatboat-loads of oranges, grains and cattle to the volunteer army led by General Sam Houston. Morgan's loyalty and generosity was rewarded with an appointment to the Texian army as a colonel.

In March, 1836, Morgan was assigned to Fort Travis at the Port of Galveston, and to ensure that Houston's supply line would continue, he left Emily in charge of the loading of flatboats at Morgan's Point.

It is at this point in the story that perhaps the line that separates fact from fiction gets a little blurry, and yet it remains a fascinating story nevertheless.

On April 18, General Santa Anna and his army had captured and plundered a nearly evacuated New Washington. Santa Anna took Emily, who had remained behind to ensure that the supply line would continue, captive along with a young servant named Turner. According to legend, Santa Anna had fancied himself as quite the ladies' man and had secured Emily as his personal "spoil of war." Meanwhile, the young servant Turner had escaped the Mexican army encampment and rushed to Houston's camp to tell him of Santa Anna's location.

According to Texas lore, the beautiful Emily was knowingly "distracting" the libidinous Mexican general in his tent on the afternoon of April 21, 1836 when Houston's men charged the surprised and unprepared Mexican army camp and slaughtered Santa Anna's men. In fact, Santa Anna was literally caught "with his pants down." Thus, the legend of "Emily, the Maid of Morgan's Point" is born and celebrated in the poetry of a lovelorn soldier who misses his "yellow rose of Texas".

Eventually the poem was put to music and ultimately copyrighted in 1858, then published in New York. Soon afterward, the song became hugely popular and was sung in the most well known minstrel shows both in America and abroad.

But after the Civil War began, it was adopted as a marching song by Confederate forces, most notably by soldiers from Texas. And because the song was originally intended for and sung by a black soldier, some of the song's lyrics were changed. "Soldier" replaced "darky", and the first line of the chorus was changed to "She's the sweetest little flower..."

Later on, a last stanza was added that bemoaned the disastrous war campaigns of confederate General Robert Hood, a Texan:

*Oh, now I'm marching southward  
My heart is full of woe.  
I'm going back to Georgia,  
To see my Uncle Joe.*

*You may talk about your Beauregard  
And sing of General Lee,  
But the gallant Hood of Texas  
Played hell in Tennessee!*

Finally, in 1955, Mitch Miller recorded an arrangement for Columbia Records, and the lyrics were, by then, very different than the original:

*She's the sweetest little rosebud,  
That Texas ever knew  
Her eyes are bright as diamonds,  
They sparkle like the dew,*

*You may talk about your Clementine  
and sing of Rosalee,  
But the Yellow Rose of Texas  
is the only girl for me!*

Whether the song and the woman are actually connected in truth (or in legend) is for historians to sort out and debate. However, it is a bit fascinating to see a long lost lover's lament that could have easily been lost in the dustbin of history evolve from a poorly transcribed, spelling error-filled poem into a legitimate standard of Texas music that has survived nearly 150 years. And a few revisions along the way.