

CHAPTER 4

GAIL BORDEN— THE TEXAS ECCENTRIC

Gail Borden, Jr., was born November 9, 1801, in the hamlet of Norwich, New York, the son of Gail and Philadelphia (Wheeler) Borden. By age 13 he seemed well on his way to



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carrying on the family tradition of surveying. As he helped his surveyor-father lay out the town of Covington, Kentucky, there was yet no recorded sign of his genius. However, young Borden would grow to be, literally, head and shoulders above his contemporaries; his slender, slightly stooped, six-foot frame would carry him across the world and back and support him in the vast riches and in the abject poverty that would mark his life.

By the time he was 18, Gail was in New London,³⁷ Indiana, where he received his only formal education—one and a half years in a small frontier schoolhouse. Despite his youth, he had already gained an appreciation for land and its value, having just purchased 2.5 acres in New London for \$200.

In 1827, at age 26, he was named official surveyor for Amity County, Mississippi and two years later married a local girl, Penelope Mercer. The young couple soon moved to the Mexican province of Texas when Gail's younger brother, Thomas, summoned him to be his deputy. Thomas Henry Borden was one of the "Old Three Hundred" as they call the original Texas families. Austin had first summoned a William Lewis to survey the new territory, but he never

37 now a ghost town

showed up. In the ensuing years, Gail would produce the first topographical map of Texas and lay out the City of Houston (making sure that its North Main and South Main Streets didn't run true north and south so they could better catch the Gulf breezes).

Within two years, a grateful Mexican government had granted Gail more than 4,000 acres for farming and ranching, holdings he gradually expanded to 14,000 acres, including town lots in nearby Galveston.³⁸ In 1833, Texas was still part of the Mexican state of Coahuila, and, when petitions for separate Mexican statehood were denied, Texas drew up its own constitution. One of the authors of the document was Gail Borden. When Texas revolted in 1835, Gail went into the newspaper business. He, Thomas, and a Joseph Baker³⁹, nicknamed "Don Jose" because he read Spanish, founded and published *The (San Felipe) Telegraph* and *Texas Register*, which became the official newspaper of the revolutionary government. Gail wrote most of the editorials while the two other co-publishers went off to fight. The newspaper was enough of a threat to Mexico that General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna raided it, dumping the whole thing, printing press and type, into a Houston bayou. Fortunately for us, Gail's person was spared the wrath of the man whose place in American history was cemented in his March 6, 1836 slaughtering conquest of The Alamo, an undermanned former mission where a relative handful of separatist rebels, including Jim Bowie⁴⁰ and frontiersman and Congressman Davy Crockett, made their last stand.⁴¹

Rallying cries of "Remember the Alamo" echoed across the broad plains and soon the proponents of a Republic of Texas broke free from Mexican rule. In 1837 Sam Houston named Gail Borden the Collector of Customs at the port of Galveston. He became agent for, then Secretary of, the development company that owned Galveston Island. Between 1837 and 1851, Borden sold almost every lot the company offered—except those he bought himself—making Galveston the largest city and port in Texas and Gail a wealthy man.

38 These holdings were, through mortgaging and hypothecation, to pay for much of Borden's research (and losses) in the development of his condensed products over the years.

39 The son of William and Jane (Gerrish) Baker, he was born in Maine in 1804. He became a county judge and a government translator, and was elected to the 2nd Texas Congress. He died at 42. There is nothing that I know of to connect him to our own Baker clan.

40 Balancing the myopic legend of his knife and heroic exploits, Bowie was a wealthy slavetrader, gambler and land speculator.

41 Defenders included natives of England, Germany, Wales, Ireland, Scotland as well as men named Baker from Arkansas and Missouri.

Along the way, Penelope bore him seven children, four of whom lived to adulthood: Henry Lee (b. 1832), Philadelphia Wheeler (b. 1838; who would, with her husband, Jehu Johnson, help found *The Houston Post*); Mary Jane (b. 1841); and John Gail (b. 1844).

An elected alderman of the region's largest city, Borden played a major role in early Texas life. Reputed to be the first Texas Baptist to be baptized in the Gulf of Mexico, he fought to rid the city of gamblers and other unsavory characters, acted as the island's missionary to new immigrants, and helped found Baylor University, which evolved into the largest Baptist college in the South. He supported many poorly paid ministers, teachers, missionaries and students of all Protestant beliefs and helped establish and underwrite a number of Protestant churches of both Negro and white congregations.

Beginning in 1840, evidence of Borden's inventiveness began to emerge. Although some of his ideas might bring indulgent smiles today, they were treated as serious proposals in the still young and impressionable nation where all things seemed possible. Borden, remember, was one of the most important civic leaders in Texas – a towering, blue-eyed, ambidextrous visionary whose abilities with a long rifle were said to be “second only to Davy Crockett.”⁴²

In 1840, when Galveston faced a disastrous shortage of fresh water, Borden saved the day by locating an unlimited supply near a city beach.

Five years later, he convinced the Galveston City Company to construct portable bath houses that in the scorching summer heat would be pushed by locomotive into the surf to provide Galveston ladies the pleasure of a cool bath. Let's just say it proved a less-than-popular idea.

On another occasion, Galveston officials took to the water for a personal demonstration of Borden's “Terraqueous Machine,” a contraption looking much like a floating Conestoga wagon with sails to move across land or water with equal aplomb. Borden abandoned the project when it capsized with all aboard. He was soon back with a steam and belt-driven paddle boat with paddles thrashing all round the perimeter of the craft. It stayed afloat but investors looked askance, and it also was abandoned. Gail Borden, however, was far from beaten. He was still on the young side of middle age, rich and brimming with ideas; personal tragedy provided the next one.

His beloved Penelope died of yellow fever in 1844, eight

42 Borden Company archives

months after giving birth to John. A frontier father of four needed a wife, and Gail soon took his second one, Mrs. Azuba F. Stearns of Galveston. Penelope's death made Borden determined to fight the disease that killed the mother of his children.

Borden built a huge refrigerator that he said could cool and kill the deadly yellow fever bacteria and all but eradicate the disease in Galveston. Temperatures within would be kept between 30 and 40 degrees, which he proposed to control with \$12,000 worth of ether. The idea was to create a winter-like environment where Galveston residents could live until the summertime epidemics passed.

Although city fathers were "cool" to the idea, he actually built the structure, but soon was off on another idea to which he converted the building's use: a process for condensing beef into a extract which he formed into a meat biscuit. He poured all his time and resources into the project, transforming his huge refrigerator building into a meat biscuit manufacturing plant. The new process was considered of such merit that it won one of five gold medals awarded Americans at the 1851 Great Council Exhibition in London.

Borden formally established his meat biscuit company in San Francisco and sailed off to London to receive his royal honor. He went as a wealthy man with holdings exceeding \$100,000. Within just six years, though, his meat biscuit business would fail. Borden would lose his land, his fortune, and his marriage and, at 55, find himself facing life on an income of just \$30 a month.

Such reversals of fortune would have signaled permanent ruin for most men of his age, yet they proved to be only the beginning for Gail Borden. The personal, professional, and financial triumph that would provide him a permanent place in history lie just ahead somewhere in the Connecticut hills. But just which hills remains in question to this day, at least 'round here. We'll get back to the subject, but let's head back to Bakersville.

CHAPTER 5

THE MILL, THE MILK, THE MYSTERY

By 1853, Alonzo Neal had been a neighbor of the Baker's for almost 20 years. In March, however, he had sold Walhalla, the rear parcel containing the old Toy Shop, and just over sixty-three nearby acres to Albert Clark for \$3,000. Neal took back five sequential, one-year mortgages at \$600 each plus interest (Vol. 19 p. 22 New Hartford Land Records).

Was Gail Borden another neighbor? Local legend has it that he was, that it was not Burrville in Torrington, but right here in Bakersville that Borden's historic breakthrough occurred.

Conceivably, Borden did have a business arrangement with Baker before 1855. Bakersville had the building and the water power Borden needed. Baker was pushing hard for the vital rail link Borden would have sought to get his product to market.

According to Borden Milk and Elsie the Cow, on Borden's return voyage, he witnessed a tragedy that led him back to thoughts of condensing milk. During the voyage, the story goes, the two cows which had been brought aboard to provide fresh milk for traveling babies, took sick and died. Without fresh milk, crying babies could be heard throughout the ship. One infant died.

The tragedy convinced Borden to return to his milk experi-



Known today as the "Old Mill," this 1858 structure actually replaced the original two-story building after it was seriously damaged by fire. The different tone of the upper and lower clapboards in this old picture may demarcate the line of the new topside construction. In its heyday, the third floor, Baker's Hall, was the site of many area dances and shows.

ments in 1852. He boiled milk in a kettle, and after the water evaporated, let it cool. It was condensed alright, but bitter. That year, he went on a trip to upstate New York where he learned that the Shaker community in New Lebanon (just over the state line west of Pittsfield, Massachusetts) was condensing sugar, fruit juice and extracts using a vacuum pan to allow for lower temperatures without burning the ingredients. Borden hurried off to the colony and borrowed one of the pans.

For months he worked and experimented and in the Spring of 1853 found the proper formula to condense milk without burning it and preserved its freshness for three days. He headed to the U. S. Patent Office in Washington to register but was rejected as having developed “nothing new.”⁴³



The Kellogg House once stood dominant in Nepaug. The original saltbox was built in 1780 and the east wing added in 1825. The house was razed and re-erected in Fairfield County in the 1950s. (Photo from the Republican, March 15, 1950)

Precisely where Borden conducted his final, breakthrough experiments is also undocumented to my knowledge. Torrington’s Burrville has claimed the honor since 1923, but folks around there say that was just a grab for publicity. Sure, Borden produced condensed milk in Burrville, they concede, but maintain he actually discovered

and perfected it here in Bakersville.

Some believe that Borden headed to Bakersville after hearing about a fellow named Pond who had also discovered the secret of condensing milk, but was in financial trouble. The story is that Borden bought him out and took over his plant in Baker’s mill.

George W. Jones recalled: "At one time this Old Tannery Building was the place where the first condensed milk was made in this country. They say it was started by Borden and operated for a time by a man named Pond, but they had trouble with the farmers who brought in their milk and the condensed milk business was transferred to Burrville. There was trouble in procuring milk for the condensed milk business in Burrville also, and finally John Burr of Burrville bought the building for \$100."⁴⁴

43 Borden Milk and Elsie the Cow—Borden Co. Archives.

44 New Hartford Historical Society Archives.

The popular tale has Borden finding Pond short of cash and buying him out.⁴⁵ No other documentation for this story has surfaced in my research as yet, however.

Even how Gail Borden came to Northwest Connecticut is unclear. He did have a cousin, Thomas Henry Borden (1826-1897), a New York native who lived in New Canaan, Connecticut, a long ride from Northwest Connecticut. Borden Company archives simply state Gail Borden went to Litchfield County because of the good dairying area. Borden's family, though, hailed from New York state, not an insignificant dairy area itself.

Also, Borden had known Stephen Austin in Texas. Austin, at age 11, had attended school in Connecticut; his cousin, Mary Austin Holley was a New England native and lived in Kentucky where Austin received his degree from Transylvania College. Mary might have been related to the previously mentioned Col. Aaron Austin of New Hartford, the agent for the company who in the early 19th century operated the toll road that ran by Walhalla and through Bakersville. The company, you may remember from Chapter 1, gave up its toll license in 1861 when railroad interests began to look elsewhere to build the new line.

Was there a prior connection to the Pond family? Julius was born in 1820 and was made a Freeman of Connecticut in Torrington in 1848. To be a Freeman, one had to be a household-er, a landowner, a Trinitarian, and selected as worthy by the General Court. When their son was born to him and Caroline in June 1853, Julius was listed as a New Hartford farmer. Since that was the same year Borden applied for his first patent for condensed milk, chances are that Pond had not been and was not then producing condensed milk in Bakersville. Julius was united [with God] at Torrington Church in 1858.⁴⁶

Pond was a common name in these parts, and Borden eventually had to know some of them. There was a Barton (Burton?) Pond, one of the capital stockholders in the Torrington Farmers' Company which opened a "peoples' store" [cooperative] in the Greenwoods Section of Torrington at the north end of Torrington Street.⁴⁷ He was one of Borden's 1858 milk suppliers at Burrville. Also, a family named Pond is said to have lived in Bakersville in the

45 *History of Bakersville*—Bartholomew, p. 38.

46 Torrington—Orcutt, 1878.

47 *Ibid.*

early 1900s.⁴⁸ Orcutt lists several other Ponds as being united with the Torrington Church: Philip, 1843; Nancy in 1843; Burton in 1838; Charlotte (Colt) in 1821; and Martha A. (Watson) in 1836.

So far, I can find no corroborating documentation to support Jones' story, but he was there, and I was not. In any event, the final word is yet to be written. There is, however, one report that seems to fit what little evidence exists and the time frame of known history.

It came to me through Bakersville native Allyn Sedgwick, now



The foundation with stepped floor of what is reputed to have been the site of Gail Borden's first experiments with condensed milk. An open spring runs through its center. (Yates photo)

owner of the former Sherwood family farm on Gillette Road near the Torrington line. Sedgwick states that in the 1850s, a cooling spring on the farm served Borden's experiments which he conducted in the Sherwood Farm spring house. A stone foundation measuring approximately 20' by 10' rings a shallow underwater floor cut out of the bedrock to a depth where milk cans could be comfortably placed in the water. The water, Sedgwick

says, stays at exactly 42 degrees year-round. The foundation stones can be seen to extend beyond this sunken floor onto ground level.

Farmers who milked their own cows for their own use would have no reason to preserve large quantities of fresh milk, Sedgwick says, and I can't disagree.

Sedgwick recalls that Russell Sherwood, now over 90 and living

48 There was a Torrington-raised physician, James Otis Pond [b. 1790], who as a young man moved to New York City (from where his wife hailed) and bought a home on 6th Ave., which he maintained for many years. He was an early member of a Presbyterian Church in New York City. Sixth Avenue intersected with Canal Street, along which Borden would ultimately open his first milk outlet in 1857. I have not established any connection between the two men or their families, however.

in Torrington, whose father, Myron, owned and operated the family's Bakersville farm, told him the barn was a two-story structure and that Borden used the upper floor to conduct his experiments, while keeping his milk supply cool in carved ledge stone basement below. It is unknown at this time how far back the Sherwoods go on this land, but if they were there in the early 1850s, probably at least to Russell Sherwood's great-grandfather.

Following his initial rejection by the Patent Office, Borden waged a three-year patent battle, said to have been assisted by two respected friends—Robert McFarlane, editor of *Scientific American*, and John H. Currie, head of a “famous” (?) laboratory. Ultimately, Borden won the fight and was granted his patent on August 19, 1856.⁴⁹ Attempts to gain insight through current *Scientific American* editors has been met with silence, more, I suspect, out of consternation than ignorance, but perhaps I do them too much justice. To date, the mystery continues. And, dear reader, so shall I.

The hope of the railway died with Anthony Baker's death in 1855.⁵⁰ Perhaps it was then that Borden decided to move his fledgling enterprise to nearby Wolcottville (Torrington).

Apparently, by this time, Walhalla was in a state of flux. Anthony Baker had bequeathed his Maple Hollow Turning works to his two daughters, Elizabeth (Baker) Clark and her sister, Caroline (Baker) Osborne, whose husbands re-named it Osborne and Clark's Turning Works. The Clarks somehow lost Walhalla, the toy shop, and the 63+ acres soon after, because sometime between 1853 and March, 1857, the three parcels ended up back in Neal's hands. The Clarks bought the house and workshop across Litchfield Turnpike on the corner of East Cotton Hill Road.

On March 21, 1857, Neal sold the trio of parcels to Franklin Burr of Torrington (Vol. 19 p. 149). This time he got just \$1,300, but a year later, on March 28, 1858, a mortgage deed was filed whereupon Neal granted Burr \$1,400 to be repaid in three, one-year notes of \$400, \$500 and \$500. (Vol. 20 p. 37). Burr seems to have paid Neal \$2,700, with \$1,300 up front. Smart move. But Burr was no fool; a week before the mortgage was filed, he had sold the Walhalla and Toy Shop parcels for \$1,000 to Elias Wilcox, keeping the 63+ acres for himself.

49 Borden Milk and Elsie the Cow—Borden Co. archives

50 Years later, after it considered a line running through Nepaug, the Hollow, then north to Winsted, the Connecticut Western Railroad was routed north from Canton through what became, largely because of rail access, the center of New Hartford and, from there, on to Winsted and Canaan where it intersected New York's Harlem Valley Line. The line bypassed Bakersville and Nepaug completely and spelled the end of Nepaug as the center of New Hartford.

Anthony Baker had lobbied hard to bring the Hartford rail line through Bakersville to connect with the Naugatuck Valley line at Torrington.⁵¹ His sudden death left our village with no strong railway advocate.

The year after he died, the tannery that his father, Scott Baker, had built in 1812 and the income from which had fueled the family's fortunes, burned to the ground.

John Scott Baker in 1859 built a new, even larger mill building across the road from the old tannery. It began as a saw mill, but soon also housed Baker's tannery, a tailor shop, book shop, shoemaker's shop, and hosted a manufacturer of birch-flavored liquid called "small drinks" sold locally in earthen containers. With Walhalla and the old toy shop, it would go on to become the base of a condensed milk production business, but not, at least directly, connected to Gail Borden.

51 *Gail Borden - Dairyman to a Nation*, 1951, p. 28.