

# hero

a novel by  
Boyd Taylor

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## PROLOGUE

The following article appeared in the April edition of the monthly magazine *This Texas*:

### THE HERO OF SAN JACINTO

By D. R. Cuinn

*For generations, Texas school children have been taught that Captain Sam Eben Payne was the real hero of the Battle of San Jacinto, ranking just below Sam Houston himself in the galaxy of stars of the Texas Revolution. Now it turns out that Sam Houston didn't share that view and in fact engaged in a massive cover-up to protect the reputation of Captain Payne, the man celebrated in the newspapers of the day as the man who single-handedly captured Santa Anna.*

*Captain Sam Payne, in case you've been out of state this election season, is the great-great-grandfather of Texas Attorney General Sam Eben Payne V, the leading candidate for Governor of Texas in this year's general election.*

*The received wisdom, reported to the new Republic by Houston himself is that Captain Payne was the captor of Santa Anna. Generations of Texas schoolchildren have been taught that he saw El Supremo dressed in a private's uniform and recognized him as the Mexican president and commander-in-chief; that he ran him down on horseback in the face of gunfire and delivered him to General Houston with the famous words, "Remember the Alamo! Here's the Bastard!"*

*We know that after recovering from his capture, Santa Anna cooperated with the Texans and ordered his second in command to leave Texas with the rest of the Mexican army. It was only after he had been to Washington, met with the president of the United States and was paroled to Mexico, that he resumed his bellicosity against Texas. Even then it was muted, the effect perhaps of the real events surrounding his capture.*

*Deep in the bowels of the Texas Archives, exists a different account of that day, written in Houston's own hand, an account so damning that Captain Payne was forced to swear to its accuracy before a Supreme Court justice. Houston threatened to make the document public if Payne ever sought public office in Texas again, even as a constable in that "God damned desert where you will spend the rest of your days." The document was to be opened only if the Hermit of West Texas, as Captain Sam was known for the rest of his eighty years, violated the terms of his agreement with Houston and returned to Austin, or sought a public role in Texas.*

*The desert Houston referred to was the thirty five thousand acres of West Texas land granted to Captain Payne by a grateful Republic of Texas. That land, of course, is home of the Payne Oil Field and the source of the Payne family wealth. One senses from the document that Sam Houston would not have appreciated the irony. That wealth did not come easily. Three generations of Paynes led a hard-scrabble existence on the barely arable ranch, raising a few cattle and a lot of goats. During the Great Depression it was rumored that only the family's name and its glorious ancestor allowed the present Texas Attorney General's grandfather, Sam III, to avoid foreclosure. Even then and through World War II, Sam III insisted that there was oil underneath the sand dunes of the Payne Ranch, and it was his persistence (some said recklessness) that finally led to the discovery of the Payne Field. For years, Sam III looked for an oil company willing to drill a test well on the ranch, before finally persuading a Midland driller named Abern to drill a wildcat. (Today, Abern Oil Company is one of the biggest independent oil and gas companies in the United States, and most of its production still comes from its Payne Ranch properties.) The first Abern well, called the Sam Eben No. 1, showed an oil sand, but it did not produce in paying quantities. Sam III would not let Abern give up, and to the everlasting gratitude of his heirs, took a 50% working interest (responsible for his 50% of the costs and entitled to 50% of the income and not just to a one eighth royalty.) That*

decision meant that when the Sam Eben No. 2 well came in as a producer, the Payne family was partners with Abern and not just a landlord receiving royalties. It also meant that Sam III had to come up with his share of the large costs to develop the ranch. He exhausted his credit with the banks. Oil sold then for less than \$3.00 a barrel and a well had to produce 50,000 barrels just to break even. Sam III knew the oil riches were down there, but he was cash short. Desperate, he turned to outside investors. Trading on his grandfather's fame as the Hero of San Jacinto, he brought in Hollywood promoters, and Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were soon cashing Payne Ranch royalty checks. Needing even more funds, the California promoters flew in a group of Hollywood models and starlets and photographed them on drilling rigs, working on the equipment in the altogether. It paid off. The rights of the investors ran their term, and the Payne family and Abern Oil have pumped tens of millions of barrels of oil from the Payne Ranch Field. It would not be the last time that the Payne family would trade on its illustrious forbearer. Sam IV moved to Midland and became an influential behind the scene player in Texas politics. He supported the arts in West Texas by building a museum, nominally devoted to the Battle of San Jacinto, but in fact, a glorification of the Hermit of West Texas and his role in the Texas War of Independence. Sam V filmed commercials at the museum in his successful races for state senator and later, attorney general. The Hermit of West Texas played a prominent part, as did, of course, the oil millions that helped finance Sam V's campaigns.

Those days may be over, however, on account of the document discovered recently by the author in the course of research for a thesis about Houston and the early days of the Civil War. It was folded inside one of Houston's journals containing an early draft of Houston's speech of resignation on the occasion of Texas' secession from the Union. The handwriting on the document clearly appears to be Houston's. It describes what Houston calls "the real events of the capture of General Santa Anna and the disgraceful conduct relating thereto of Captain Sam Payne."

The first, if not the most salacious, new information about that day concerns the attempted escape by Santa Anna. According to the document, believing that the battle was lost, Santa Anna threw on, not a private's uniform, but the dress of his mistress (finally confirmed in Houston's account to be the Texas spy Emily Morgan, a beautiful mulatto girl known as the Yellow Rose of Texas) with whom El Supremo was in flagrante delicto when the first shots were fired, and so dressed, Santa Anna ran for safety.

Even this new information would be enough to make the Houston discovery important. Confirmation of the identity of Santa Anna's noontime companion, and the account of the President of Mexico running from the battlefield dressed as a woman establish as almost incontrovertible fact what had long been rumored—that Houston had a spy in the Mexican camp, in the Mexican commander's bed, and it was her information that led him to order an attack when he did; and that Santa Anna had fled the battle under less than heroic circumstances. Both suggestions had been doubted by Texas historians and dismissed out of hand by Mexican scholars.

These revelations will not be good for Texas-Mexican relations.

What happened next is even more scandalous, is completely unexpected and may have a more immediate impact in Texas. In the upcoming gubernatorial election, a direct descendant of Captain Sam, Texas Attorney General Sam Eben Payne V, the Republican, faces a strong challenge from underdog Democrat Bob Braeswood.

The Attorney General has spent millions on TV ads calling for a "New Hero of San Jacinto" and a return to the "Spirit of the Texas Revolution." One ad shows a reenactment of the Battle of San Jacinto, starring Captain Sam and segueing neatly to the Attorney General, standing proudly before the only known statue of his great-great-grandfather, behind the courthouse in Eben Payne County.

Another ad shows the Attorney General astride his now-famous horse, Trigger V, a descendant of Roy Roger's Trigger, galloping toward the camera. The Attorney General waves his hat and shouts "Remember the Alamo! Remember San Jacinto!"

Payne has apparently chosen to write off Hispanic voters. His campaign is aimed directly at Braeswood's blue-collar base. The question now is whether he can survive an account from Sam Houston himself, that Captain Sam not only did not capture Santa Anna, but instead, in a drunken stupor, attempted to rape what he thought was a girl fleeing the battlefield.

What's more, and perhaps even worse to many of Payne supporters, when he tore the dress off the General and realized the object of his assault was a man in disguise, he still tried to force himself on the terrified Mexican, who only then turned and ran for Houston's camp for protection, screaming, "Detén al Pervertido!"

*Fortunately for the Mexican general, Houston's tent was nearby. Santa Anna ran there unobserved by anyone other than Houston's immediate staff. After the day's remarkable events, they were sworn to secrecy. Amazingly, not one of the five men aware of the day's events ever spoke publicly of them again.*

*The drunken Payne followed hot on the heels of Santa Anna and passed out at Houston's feet. He lay there as Santa Anna complained bitterly to Houston in Spanish about the "pervertido" and "bastardo" who had tried to rape him.*

*Houston had the unconscious man dragged out of sight and sent for Santa Anna's trunk. After the General had donned a proper uniform, Houston presented him to the Texas army. Needing a hero, Houston himself told his men of Santa Anna's capture and invented the famous line supposed to have been uttered by Payne, "Remember the Alamo. Here's the Bastard!"*

*He thus made a hero out of Payne. A shrewd judge of men, Houston used the affair to bargain with Santa Anna, not only by threatening to reveal what really happened, but also by bringing a sober but still menacing Payne into the General's presence and suggesting he might appoint Payne as Santa Anna's personal guard if an agreement wasn't reached that very day. An agreement was reached, and quickly.*

*That might have been the end of the affair. It would have been a lucky ending for Payne, turning infamous actions into heroism, courtesy of Houston. But Payne was not only susceptible to liquor and unnatural sex acts. He also committed a grave sin in Houston's eyes. "Puffed up" as Houston writes, by the news accounts of his bravery "and ambitious far beyond his talent." Payne quickly began to see himself as a natural leader of men, one who perhaps might even be the next president of Texas, a rival of Houston himself.*

*Why anyone would expect Houston to allow such impudence is hard to imagine. But Payne soon learned the magnitude of his error. Houston summoned him to the president's house and, in a private meeting, told Payne his fate. It was exile to far West Texas, where he was ordered to remain the rest of his life, albeit on land granted by the Congress of the Republic of Texas. The alternative was public exposure, humiliation and a criminal trial. Payne took the deal and moved west, never to return. A county was named after him, and he earned the sobriquet "The Hermit of West Texas" and a reputation for extreme modesty. (Another of the Payne campaign ads says, "Like his ancestor, he only talks when he has something to say. And he's talking now. It's time to save Texas again!") The Hermit never received guests, never left the county that bore his name and apparently never knew for sure what Houston had done with the affidavit he had been forced to sign. It seems that all Houston did was put it in the back of one of his journals where it lay forgotten until recently.*

*The Attorney General has declined comment on this article, "pending review of the libels."*

*Bob Braeswood's campaign also had nothing to say for publication, but his representative could be heard laughing uncontrollably at the other end of the phone line.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Donnie Ray Cuinn was nestled deep in his feather mattress, snuggled tight against his feather pillow, wrapped in his soft blanket, a Christmas present from his mother. Sleeping soundly and dreaming about the very blonde, unusually accommodating, and extremely elastic girl Donnie thought of as “The Acrobat.” She had been in the bed with him when he went to sleep, but she was gone and the dream was replaced by extremely loud, hammering. He finally woke up enough to realize that someone was banging on his door. The hammering got even louder and more insistent.

“Cuinn? D. R. Cuinn? Are you in there?”

More pounding.

Thoughts of The Acrobat vanished, consigned to the recesses of the brain where good memories resided.

“D. R. Cuinn!” More hammering. “Answer the door!”

He lay still for a long minute, pulling the pillow over his head. He prayed for the dream to return and for the noise to go away.

It didn’t work.

“Goddamn it,” Donnie said, dragging himself out of the warm bed. He had been with Wesley and the girls until dawn, celebrating Donnie’s long-awaited graduation. The effect of too much beer and too few aspirin hit him when he struggled to his feet. The voices were coming from outside his door.

“Hurry up, Cuinn,” one said. “Peace Officers! We know you’re in there. Get your ass to the door or we’ll break it down.”

He got his ass out of bed, a bed still warm with the imprint of The Acrobat, and got to the door, barely conscious. For no good reason, probably having to do with being only half awake, he opened the door and blinked at the Central Texas sun. It was noon in August in Austin. The sun and the heat hit him at the same time.

Two very large men in tight-fitting suits barged into his small apartment. For a second he thought he might still be asleep, but he wasn’t. *These two clowns are for real.* Donnie stared at them with his first-thing-in-the-morning, before-even-his-first-cup-of-coffee brilliance.

“Huh?” he said smartly.

“Cuinn,” the taller one said. “You’re a mess. It’s noon. Is that all you T. U. fairies do: party and flop out? You’re disgusting. Put some clothes on.”

Donnie looked down at himself stupidly. His head throbbed and his eyes stung and his throat was scratchy. Even so, he could tell that he was naked. He did have his soft blanket in one hand though, and he draped it over himself, toga style. Rather smartly, he decided through the haze. “Huh?” he managed again.

The taller man (Donnie thought of him as Mount Everest) didn’t seem surprised at Donnie’s limited vocabulary. “You are D. R. Cuinn?” he asked. “T.U. graduate student?”

*Only Aggies call The University of Texas, T.U. I should correct him,* Donnie thought, then decided against it. Donnie shook his head with confusion. Of course nothing really surprised him. He had survived six years as a student at the University. He had just received his Master’s Degree in Nineteenth Century American History. His thesis had been accepted. Soon he would be teaching young college freshmen, molding their mushy minds, working on his doctor’s degree. *I am mature, and ready to take my rightful place in the education establishment.* He was too urbane for anything to surprise him. At the same time, he wished he were back in bed, or even better, upstairs in the café watching the daytime soaps with Lena.

“Huh?” he repeated himself.

“Well, are you?” the shorter man asked.

Donnie observed if the taller goon was Mount Everest, the shorter one was Mount Etna. If a human being

could smolder, he was smoldering. He seemed, well, out of sorts.

Etna twisted one end of Donnie's makeshift toga in his beefy hand and pulled Donnie closer to his baldness. "Are you the D. R. Cuinn that's been slandering public officials?"

He grabbed back his blanket. *My mother gave me that*, he almost said, but even drowsy, he knew unexpressed thoughts seemed wiser, somehow. Instead he gulped and finally recovered the power of speech. "Are you serious? Who are you guys?"

Etna flashed a badge. "Special Investigators for the Attorney General's office. General Payne wants to talk to you. About the fucking *This Texas* and the fucking things you've been writing about him and his granddaddy. He wants to fucking see you right this fucking minute."

Even in Donnie's impaired condition, he knew what they were talking about. *Wesley Bird will not believe this.*

"Get dressed," Everest ordered. "Then we'll drive over to the Capitol and see General Payne."

Donnie pulled on a pair of jeans and a wrinkled t-shirt and stepped into his dirty sandals.

"Jesus," Etna said. "No fucking underwear? You're going to meet the Attorney General of Texas without any underwear?"

*This guy really is out of sorts.* Donnie went to the dresser and rummaged around until he found a pair of clean underwear. He vaguely resented their insults. Only last night, The Acrobat had told him he was cute, and Lena always said that with his sandy hair and slender build, he looked a lot like the young Robert Redford, "before the wrinkles and bad dye job." Of course, The Acrobat was drunk...and horny, and Lena was his stepmother and he could do no wrong as far as Lena was concerned. Cute or not, Sundance Kid or not, Donnie doubted that his well-practiced Aw Shucks, hangdog grin would work on these two.

They turned away while he put on his briefs. They guarded the door; apparently afraid Donnie was going to make a run for the border. He started to comb his hair, but they were having none of it. They half-dragged him out of his apartment, out the side entrance, and across the parking lot. His was the largest apartment at the Haven and he was proud of it, in a way. He certainly didn't believe he deserved to be dragged out of it. He was sure there was some Innkeeper's Law that prohibited that sort of thing. *I needed to Google that, he thought.*

Regardless, there he was, being manhandled across the stubby grass, under the giant old live oak trees that shaded the entire property, both the Haven Hotel and its adjoining Coffee Shoppe. The neon sign had once said, "Lena's" after Lena Rothschild, the proprietress and his guardian angel, but years ago all the letters other than the L had burned out, so people called the café "The L" and "Going to L" was understood by West Campus students to mean going to Lena's for some eggs and grits or maybe some chicken fried steak. It did not bother Lena enough that she ever considered replacing the letters in the sign. *Truth be known, she probably was proud of it. Sort of an Austin Weird kind of thing,* Donnie had decided.

The familiar smell of frying bacon drifted across the parking lot. It was past breakfast service, so Lupe, Lena's number one assistant and sous chef, was probably frying some more bacon for Lena's famous BLTs. Donnie could see the bread already stacked neatly in the kitchen, ready to be toasted, and the big container of Miracle Whip, ready to be spread.

Lena was probably hard at work, planning the dinner menu, an activity she took very seriously, even though, as far as Donnie could remember, the menu had never changed in all the years he had lived there. Meatloaf on Monday, Spaghetti and Meatballs on Tuesday, Swiss Steak on Wednesday, Enchiladas on Thursday, Fried Catfish on Friday, Chicken Fried Steak on Saturday, Baked Chicken and Dressing on Sunday. Lena would cook other orders on any day, but she didn't like it, and she let the customers know it. Few repeated that mistake.

Donnie glanced nervously in the direction of the café, hoping that Lena didn't see this. It was embarrassing. Besides, if she saw these guys abducting him, she might reach under the cash register for her handgun and commit felony murder.

The two men had parked in the handicapped parking space. It was clearly marked "Haven Hotel Guests Only." *Another probable violation,* Donnie thought. He considered pointing out these breaches of the law to them, but looking at Mount Etna, he decided to go quietly, as they say.

His tormentors were impatient. They shoved him into the backseat of a blue, government issue Crown Victoria. Sighing and grunting at some imagined injustice, they lowered themselves into the front seats. Mount

Everest was driving and he made a point of locking the doors. An air freshener hung from the rearview mirror. It gave the inside of the car the smell of an overripe banana. Everest backed rapidly out of the parking lot and sped toward the Drag (the unofficial name for Guadalupe Street), which runs along the west side of the University of Texas campus. He hung a hard right, running the red light at the corner of Guadalupe and Twenty-Sixth Street, ignoring the students in the crosswalk who scattered with angry gestures, and Donnie imagined, creative curses. *They didn't know this was the Man or they would have been more discreet. God, I wish I had been.* Everest sped down the Drag, past the Student Union Building and the light at the West Mall, almost running another red light. Donnie lurched to one side and banged against the door.

His anxiety, not helped by the air freshener, the beer, the nachos, the smoke, the beer, *oh God, the beer*, churned his digestive system. "Could I have some more air back here?" he asked weakly.

They ignored him.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

That got Everest's attention. He slammed to a sudden stop, bouncing Donnie up and down in the back seat. "Not in my car, you're not," he snarled.

He pulled to the curb and unlocked the back right door. Donnie rolled out of the car and emptied his gut under a crepe myrtle tree trying to grow in the tiny bit of grass in front of the University Baptist Church. The tree's red flowers covered the ground and mixed nicely with the contents of Donnie's stomach.

Students hurried by, careful not to step on the crouching Donnie or his mess. Otherwise, they ignored him. *They're being non-judgmental, Donnie thought approvingly. It's the University of Texas way. Or maybe this is a common occurrence: a grad student under arrest puking in front of God's house. Wait a minute, he asked himself irrelevantly, or is it irreverently? Does the University Baptist Church even believe in God? Isn't it sort of Unitarian? He wasn't sure. I needed to Google that sometime. But not right now.*

Everett knelt beside him. "Come on then, Sonny," he said in a little softer voice.

Donnie spit one last time and crawled back into the car. The big cop handed him a Kleenex and a stick of Juicy Fruit. "You can't show up in the General's office smelling like puke," he said, opening the back windows.

The warm Texas air flowed over Donnie. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe deeply. He had heard that breathing deeply would help in situations like this. Situations like when you have been manhandled and dragged across Austin to see the most important law enforcement official in Texas, who he suspected was not going to be in a friendly mood.

[The story of Donnie Cuinn continues in Boyd Taylor's next novel, \*The Antelope Play\*](#)

## **About the Author**

BOYD TAYLOR is a writer who lives in Austin, Texas. In his prior life, he was a lawyer and corporate manager.

*Hero* is the first book about the lives and times of Donnie Ray Cuinn. An erstwhile grad student in this book, his encounters with wrong-doers on both sides of the law, and his ill-fated romances, are continued in *The Antelope Play* and, most recently, in *The Monkey House*.

Boyd welcomes questions and comments from his readers. He can be contacted at [www.boydtaylorauthor.com](http://www.boydtaylorauthor.com) and followed on Facebook at: [facebook.com/BoydTaylorAuthor](https://facebook.com/BoydTaylorAuthor)