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19th Century Shining Star:

Texas Ranger William A. A. "Bigfoot" Wallace (1817 - 1899) by Steve Moore

Vengeance sought, vengeance found. William Alexander Anderson Wallace came to Texas to settle a score. He accomplished his mission while serving with the Texas Rangers, fighting both Mexican soldiers and frontier Indians. Never married, he became something of a folk hero and was known throughout Texas as "Bigfoot."

Born April 3, 1817, in Lexington, Virginia, Wallace was a large and powerful man. During the prime of his life, he weighed 240 pounds and stood 6 feet, 2 inches tall—a towering giant for those days. One story later claimed that Mexican soldiers gave him the sobriquet "Bigfoot" because they could not find shoes big enough to fit their large prisoner. Wallace denied this folk story, saying that although he was a large man, his feet actually fit comfortably in a size-10 shoe.

Another version of the origin of Wallace's nickname comes from the story he told one of his biographers, A. J. Sowell. Wallace hunted and worked odd jobs, including hauling cedar down the Colorado River to the settlements. According to his story, he earned the name "Bigfoot" during 1839 while working his logging business near Austin. A certain Waco Indian had a small band of eight Indians who often raided settlements near Austin, killing settlers and stealing horses. The leader of this small Waco bunch was known to the settlers as "Bigfoot," as he weighed 300 pounds and stood a reported 6 feet, 7 inches tall.

William Wallace and the Waco named Bigfoot both wore moccasins. Following a depredation, large moccasin footprints were found around the victim's home. The settler alleged that the tracks must belong to Wallace. Wallace settled the accusation by placing his foot into one of the tracks and proving that his own foot size was actually smaller. After that, the locals began referring to both the troublesome Indian and Wallace as "Bigfoot." The nickname would stick with Wallace for life, and various other stories would surface as to the origination of the name.

Some of William Wallace's relatives, including his brother Samuel, went to Texas in 1835 to fight in the revolution. When Lieutenant Colonel James

Fannin's men were executed by General Santa Anna's Mexican soldiers at Goliad in the famous massacre, three Wallace relatives were among those killed. One was William's cousin and another was his older brother, Samuel P. Wallace. William swore that he would go to Texas and avenge the loss of his brother and cousin by killing Mexicans. He reached Galveston in October 1837 and drifted about the Colorado River settlements during the next few years. He lived alone, and spent a great deal of time hunting in the woods. During 1838, he killed his first Indian while pursuing a band that had raided settlers near La Grange.

In 1840, Wallace moved up on the Medina River beyond San Antonio, where he resumed his hunting and camping. Despite previous accounts that state otherwise, Wallace did not claim to his biographer Sowell to have directly fought at either the 1839 Brushy Creek battle or the 1840 Plum Creek battle. He was with a group of about twenty volunteers who narrowly missed Brushy Creek.

Wallace first joined Captain Jack Hays' Texas Ranger company in San Antonio on March 10, 1842. Hays' men were active throughout the year, chasing Mexican horse thieves and clashing with the Comanches. Wallace later recalled one such 1842 Indian expedition from his Ranger days:

We collected by agreement at my ranch, organized a company of forty men and the next time the Indians came down from the mountains we took the trail, determined to follow it as long as our horses could hold out. The trail led us up toward the head waters of the Llano, and on the third day out I discovered a great many signal smokes rising up a long distance off in the direction we were traveling. Before dark, a campfire was seen some three miles ahead.

Wallace received permission from his captain to scout out the Indian camp during the early morning hours. In the darkness, he ran into a husky Indian scout, and the duo engaged in a free-for-all, hand-to-hand battle for life or death. Wallace finally managed to plunge his Bowie knife into the Indian's chest and survive the contest.

Although Hays' company protected the settlements from hostile Indians, the greatest menace the communities faced in 1842 was of the Mexican soldier variety. Rumors surfaced in late August that General Adrian Woll planned to invade Texas, so Jack Hays and Antonio Menchaca were authorized to raise new Ranger companies.

In the absence of government money, Hays had to send Bigfoot Wallace and Nathan Mallon to Austin to secure munitions with private funds. Wallace had just been given a payment voucher of \$127.50 from Captain Hays, affirming his service for five months and twenty days' service spanning the period of March 10 to September 1, 1842.

The new invasion by Woll kept Wallace active with Hays' Rangers beyond his original tour of duty. General Woll managed to slip into San Antonio with 1,300 troops and take the city on September 11, 1842, after a short fight.

Wallace returned from his munitions trip to Austin to find Captain Hays gathering Texas volunteer companies at Seguin. Noted Ranger Mathew Caldwell took overall command of the troops, which included companies under Captains James Bird, Ewen Cameron, Daniel Friar, Jack Hays, and Adam Zumwalt. The Texans engaged General Woll at Salado Creek and won a solid victory. Bigfoot Wallace had a close call from a rifle shot that grazed his

nose, and his mule was wounded during one of the charges.

The Mexican force retreated. They had with them some Texas prisoners and more than 200 of their own soldiers who were wounded. At the Hondo Creek crossing of the Medina River, Jack Hays' Rangers, including Bigfoot, made a daring charge to overtake Woll's cannon. Hays' men rode into the midst of the Mexican army's camp and killed the cannon gunners, but the balance of the Texan infantry failed to follow through on their charge.

President Sam Houston called for an expedition to avenge Woll's invasion of Texas. Shortly after his first service with Hays' Rangers, Wallace signed up again under Captain Hays for the expedition into Mexico led by Brigadier General Alexander Somervell. Bringing his own horse and firearms, Wallace enlisted on October 17, 1842. Fellow soldiers Gilbert R. Brush and James A. Glascock later certified in June 1850 that they and Wallace "were mustered in as members of the campaign of 1842 to proceed to the Rio Grande."



After guiding the expedition to the vicinity of the Mexican town of Mier, Captain Hays tried to convince the leaders to give up their attack plan and return to San Antonio. He had been warned that a large force under General Pedro Ampudia had been sent out to repel the Texan invaders. Hays, Ben McCullough, and some others departed. However, William S. Fisher, elected to command, was determined to lead the assault on Mier. He would soon find that General Ampudia had indeed reinforced Mier with an additional 700 soldiers.

During the battle of Mier, Bigfoot Wallace claims to have loaded and fired his rifle fifteen times, with deadly result to Mexican soldiers. Nevertheless, the Texans were ultimately outnumbered and forced to surrender to General Ampudia. Wallace was one of the last to quit fighting. The Texas soldiers were captured on December 26, 1842, and were conveyed to Perote, where they were held.

Following an escape attempt by the Texas prisoners, President Santa Anna ordered that some of the Texans be executed as punishment. The prisoners were forced to draw lots for their own execution. Into a large container were placed 159 white beans and 17 smaller black ones. Anyone drawing a black bean would face the firing squad. When Bigfoot Wallace's turn came to draw, he grabbed a handful of beans and sorted them in his hand, feeling them until he found one large bean and one small. Believing the white beans to be smaller, he kept it and dropped the larger one. He was right. Seventeen of Wallace's comrades drew the fatal black bean and were put to death before the Mexican firing squad.

Wallace remained a prisoner until September 16, 1844, almost two years exactly after he had first enlisted for the campaign into Mexico. He had lost everything. Upon landing in New Orleans from his Mexican prison, he spent some time there claiming bounties by capturing runaway slaves. Bigfoot returned to Texas in 1845, settling in his old hunting cabin on the Median River.

On December 17, 1845, Wallace enlisted lawyer and Ranger buddy R. A. Gillespie to file a claim for the losses he incurred while a prisoner of Mexico,

including his lost horse and personal equipment. By this time, he had returned to service with the Texas Rangers. Wallace was first sergeant of Captain Robert Addison Gillespie's Texas Mounted Rangers, who were mustered into federal service on September 28, 1845. Recruited primarily from San Antonio, the company served through March 28, 1846.

The company's second tour of service began on that closing date, and Gillespie's men were discharged from service on June 28, 1846. Captain Gillespie's company was mustered back into service on August 30, 1846, at San Antonio. By now, Bigfoot Wallace was serving as the first lieutenant. Gillespie's unit served as Company I of Colonel Jack Hays' First Regiment, Texas Mounted Riflemen, through September 29, 1846.

Wallace was among those who stormed and captured the Bishop's Palace in Monterey in 1848. His senior officer, Captain Gillespie, was mortally wounded during this bloody fight.

During 1849, Wallace was in command of his own Ranger company. A group of nearly two dozen Comanches tried to steal his horses on one occasion, but an alert Ranger picked up the sound of their approach. Wallace's men took cover and poured lead into them, killing or wounding four of their number. One Ranger was wounded and one of the Texans' pack mules was killed.

The Indians retreated and prepared for another advance. "We had scarcely reloaded our rifles and six shooters when they rose up all around the little thicket in which we were," recalled Captain Wallace. With Colts blazing, the Rangers withstood several more charges by the Comanches. One other Ranger was wounded.

The Indians stayed in the vicinity of Wallace's camp, and the captain and his men managed to kill four more of them before the day was out. Another forty-odd Comanches arrived shortly as reinforcements, and they challenged Wallace to fight them. Wallace accepted the offer and said that his men would meet the Comanches at a certain springs after they had finished their meal. With only a small company of men, and three of them wounded, Wallace knew that the Indians were stirred up to avenge their own losses. His men instead returned to Fort Clark as fast as they could ride.

In 1850, Bigfoot Wallace took a contract to carry mail from San Antonio to El Paso. He rode with guards and had a number of exciting fights with Comanches during his trips out. On at least one occasion, one of his guards was wounded and several Comanches killed. After quitting the mail service, Wallace was commissioned by Governor Peter Bell to take command of seventy-six Rangers to protect southwest Texas. They were constantly on the scout and fought a number of small skirmishes with Indians.

One of Wallace's hardest fights in the early 1850s was at a place called Black Hills in present La Salle County. As he related to biographer Sowell, his Rangers trailed the Indians for some time. They closed steadily on the Indians and were finally confronted by one lone native who showed himself on a ridge and invited the Rangers to fight.

Wary of an ambush, Wallace scouted ahead and found hundreds of Indians lying in wait. After a number of challenges to attack their main body was refused by Wallace, a group of twenty-five Indians attacked the Rangers. Wallace's men killed several of the enemy, wounded more, and killed and wounded many of their horses. The Indians re-formed, grabbed new horses,

and made their attacks again. The Rangers poured more accurate gunfire into the Indians, again killing and wounding horses and Indians alike. The Indians regrouped, gathered more reserve warriors, and then charged into the Rangers for a third time. "But it was the same old thing," recalled Bigfoot Wallace. "We pitched the rifle bullets into them so rapidly they couldn't stand the racket, and once more retreated toward their camp."

Among those killed during the third charge was the tribe's medicine man, who rode forward "waving a bunch of roots he held in his hands." The spirits brought this man no luck as the Rangers soon put a bullet through his chest. The Indians scrambled to draw his body to safety and regroup. Their chief was seen riding up and down the lines, preparing his men for another charge.

Prior to this fourth and final charge, Captain Wallace yelled to his men to prepare themselves for the worst. "We are going to catch it hot and heavy!" The chief rallied his troops, and this time they charged straight at Wallace's Rangers, not bothering to circle them as before. Wallace called to his men to take out the leader's horse. Waiting until the Indian chief had closed to thirty yards, three Rangers blasted his horse out from under him. As the chief scrambled to his feet, Captain Wallace "fired and shot him in the right hip." The Indian leader fell, yelling, and his followers raced to help him from the battlefield.

Two of Wallace's Rangers had been wounded, and the men were in dire need of water. Taking advantage of the lull as the Indians bore off their wounded chief, Wallace had his parched men mount their horses and fall back to the last Indian camp they had passed through. Captain Wallace knew that some Indians were certainly left behind to guard the camp's water source, so he took ten Rangers on foot and ran, zigzagging through the brush as they approached camp. Wallace and his men came under fire, and they returned it. Wallace, Billy Johnson, and Jim Brown each killed an Indian. The shooting raised another party of Indians from the main body that they had so recently engaged. As more Indians raced toward the camp, Wallace and his men were forced to return to their horses and flee the Indian camp.

Having stirred up a large hornets' nest this day and being badly outnumbered, Captain Wallace decided to leave well enough alone. He waited for the Indians to retreat from the camp that afternoon before moving back in to get water for his horses and men. Aside from water, the Rangers found one other treasure when they finally searched the camp. As Wallace recalled, "The Indian killed by Johnson had two plugs of tobacco in his shot pouch, which was a God-send to us, as we had been without a 'chaw' for several days."

Throughout the day's fighting, Wallace suffered three Rangers wounded. The bodies of twenty-two Indians were found on the ground, and Wallace estimated that his Rangers had wounded at least fifteen others.

Aside from his stories, little specific information remains on Captain Wallace's 1850s Texas Ranger service. It is likely that his muster rolls and other records burned in the 1855 Adjutant General's office fire, which consumed many early Texas military records.

During the Civil War, old veteran William Wallace helped protect the frontiers of Texas by keeping raiding Indian forces at bay while the able men were off fighting the war. While living in Medina County in 1874, Wallace filed a pension claim for any money that he was due for having been a Mier prisoner. At age 81, he was living with W. W. "Doc" Cochran and family some three miles from the community of Bigfoot, which was named in his honor.

A. J. Sowell, himself a Texas Ranger and also a writer, spent several weeks with Wallace in 1898. Wallace was reportedly not happy with some of the stories written about himself in an 1871 biography by John Duval. He hoped to set the record straight, including how he earned his nickname of "Bigfoot."



Wallace died of pneumonia at 10:00 a.m. on January 7, 1899, in Frio County, at his ranch near Devine. The January 8th edition of the San Antonio Daily Express ran his obituary with the headline, "Heroic 'Big Foot' Wallace Dead." His remains were later moved from Medina County to Austin's State Cemetery. The epitaph on his gravestone reads, in part:

BIG FOOT WALLACE

**Here Lies He Who Spent His Manhood
Defending the Homes of Texas
Brave Honest and Faithful Texas Representative**

Representative Tarver, speaking at Bigfoot Wallace's reinterment in the Austin cemetery, said that "his name and fame are indelibly impressed on every page of the earlier history" of Texas. Wallace had avenged his brother's death and had lived a single life, participating in any worthwhile fight he had the opportunity to join. In Tarver's words, Bigfoot Wallace's "whole life was a sacrifice to duty."



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