

SAM AND DIANA, MADE FOR HOLLYWOOD

We've seen the Hollywood script often enough, the hero meets the lady, leaves, becomes famous, returns to what appears to be the perfect ending...only to leave again in the last scene, turning to wave farewell one more time. On occasion, fiction mirrors fact and, in this case it involves two real life characters, Sam Houston and Diana Rogers. Most of the stage for this drama is set at Three Forks in Indian Territory, between 1829 and 1833, but there is a prolog involving both characters.

Sam Houston, born in 1793 and raised by a widowed mother left home to live with the Cherokees, and ultimately became a favorite of the chief, John Jolly. Literally adopted into the tribe, Sam also became acquainted with John Rogers' sons Joe, William and John Jr., as well as their younger sister, Diana. Later, during the Creek war of 1812, the boys fought under the federal command of General Andrew Jackson. During that time Sam caught the eye of the future president and soon became Jackson's political protégé. After the war, following completion of his studies to become a lawyer, Sam with Jackson's help, became involved in Tennessee politics. He first was elected as a Tennessee representative to Congress and then Governor in 1837. After two years in office, Houston's political career took an abrupt turn for the worse following his marriage to 19 year old Eliza Allen, a wealthy socialite. Experiencing only two months of "wedded bliss," Eliza moved out of the mansion. A variety of explanations have been given for the split, and while the couple did not divorce until 1833, the end result was Sam's resignation as governor during the spring of 1839. At that time he made a decision to rejoin Chief Jolly and his Cherokee friends who had moved earlier from Georgia to the Three Forks area.

During these same years, Diana had grown to womanhood. Despite being labeled by historians as "Indian," she was only 1/16th Cherokee, with mostly Scotch and English ancestry, tall, olive skinned and beautiful. She married David Gentry, a wealthy blacksmith, and in 1817 the couple moved from Georgia to a community near Dardanelle, Arkansas, residing with the Western Cherokees. Several years later, Gentry was killed during one of the tribe's frequent skirmishes with the Osage over land rights, prompting Diana to move closer to her family near Fort Gibson.

After his arrival at the fort in 1839, Sam continued to carouse, drink and gamble resulting in locals referring to him as "the big drunk." However, he was also regarded as an astute lawyer, on various occasions representing the tribe in Washington. During that summer Sam met Diana during a Green Corn dance where tradition dictated past sins could be expunged. After a brief courtship they were married in a civil ceremony in 1830. Historians debate the legality of the union because Sam was not officially divorced from Eliza Allen until 1833, but under Cherokee law they were recognized as man and wife.

Building a home they called Wigwam Neosho, about three miles west of Fort Gibson on what was then called the Texas Road, the couple settled into married life. Early in the marriage, Sam continued to drink heavily and stories about his life during the first couple of years are alternately interspersed with drinking bouts and successes representing the tribe. However, as time passed he began to regain direction in his life. The couple's home, also a trading post managed mostly by Diana, became a center of social activity. Always

gregarious, Sam held forth with guests as well as dignitaries including among others, Washington Irving and A.P. Chouteau. Gradually, with Diana's support and encouragement, he regained his confidence and reputation as a political leader, also speculating in local land and business deals.

In addition to what might be called his professional rebirth with Diana, Sam, always the opportunist, cast an eye on his "promised land," Texas. Ultimately, the magnetism of his dream for Texas overcame the comfortable life with Diana and he left the nation in 1833. Various versions are given as to whether Diana was or was not to be a part of his dream, but in any event she did not go with him. One description of their parting has her riding with him to Wilson's Rock, watching as he crossed the river, then waving farewell. Poignantly, in 1838 when Diana became ill and died of pneumonia, she was buried at Wilson's Rock, later to be reinterred at Fort Gibson National Cemetery in 1904.

Conversely, the later years of Sam Houston and his rebirth as a Texan is well documented. President of the fledgling republic, then senator and later governor, he became an icon in that state. In 1840, he married 21 year old Margaret Lea and the couple raised eight children. Eventually convinced that Sam would not return, Diana also remarried in 1836 to Samuel McGrady.

Despite his triumphs in Texas there is reason to believe his heart remained with Diana. Questioned during an interview in 1856, Houston now 64 years old, is quoted as saying he loved her and would always remember where he spent the happiest days of his life...all of which would seem to be the makings for a Hollywood movie.

