

# Introduction

Most Texans, I believe, are well-acquainted with events in early Texas history, particularly the Revolution of 1835-1836. Is there anyone, for example, who does not “*remember the Alamo*” or feel some measure of pride for Sam Houston’s victory over Santa Anna at San Jacinto? But Texas history did not end with the founding of the Republic. There is so much more. The War with Mexico (the first major battles of which were fought on Texas soil) followed close on the heels of annexation. In 1861, Texans seceded from the Union they had voted almost unanimously to join sixteen years earlier and many of them died in the Civil War that followed. All Texas citizens experienced, in one way or another, the years of Reconstruction. The final defeat of the Comanches, the heyday of the Cattle Kings, and the rapid expansion of the railroads also marked this later period.

It was into this post-Civil War period that Arthur Babb was born in a log cabin in rural East Texas and it was during this time, when Texas began to change from a wild, untamed wilderness to a modern, urban society that he came of age. This book is his personal memory of that era, primarily covering the years 1865 to 1925. I believe it will interest anyone who wants to learn more about this period of Texas history or anyone who simply likes a good story.

Now generally, when history is written, the words and deeds of the wealthy and the famous are the ones most often recorded. Arthur Babb was neither, nor did he aspire to be. No doubt he thought himself an ordinary man who simply did the best he could with what he was given; a man who spent his life working to make a living and seeking to find a little happiness in a world that oftentimes seemed rife with disappointment and discouragement. Through it all, Arthur remained hopeful, although by the time he reached middle-age his natural optimism had been tempered somewhat by hard experience. The motto he adopted tells it all: “*Nothing is as good or as bad as we first expected.*”

In my opinion, however, Arthur Babb was no ordinary man. Despite a lack of formal schooling, he managed to transcend his humble origins by dint of his natural talents, intelligence, and ability. He was an observant, reflective person who loved nature

and cared deeply for the people who were, and who had been, a part of his life. What made him unusual is that unlike most of his contemporaries, Arthur took the time to record his memories and observations, hoping that they might someday be of interest to others.

Although we are related (his mother was my great-great-grandmother) I cannot say that I knew Arthur Babb personally. At the time he nearing the end of his life, I was just beginning. I first learned about him when I met his daughter, Tressa Babb Butler, more than twenty years ago. We found each other, so to speak, through our mutual interest in family history.

At our first meeting, Tressa showed me her father's "Life Book," in which he had neatly and meticulously printed his memoirs. From this little volume I gathered the clues that enabled me to overcome several stumbling blocks in my quest to learn more about my family's history. A few years later, when I was living in England, Tressa's daughter Helen mailed me a photocopy of the entire book. After my return to Texas and following the death of Tressa and her sister Evalyn, Helen presented me with Arthur Babb's "Life Book," along with a trunk full of his personal papers and belongings. Among the "treasures" I found in the trunk were a number of drawings Arthur had sketched during his later life, along with another hand-written book, called "This and That," as well as a variety of other written material.

In his "Life Book," originally a blank notebook with lined pages, Arthur Babb used a pencil to record his reminiscences, along with some observations and reflections. "This and That" is a similar notebook, containing his writings on a variety of topics, including science, history, religion, and the meaning of life. The writings included in this volume comprise the "Life Book" in its entirety, along with selections from "This and That" that are primarily biographical in nature. "The Death and Burial of Captain Denton" comes from neither book (although Arthur includes a brief version of the story in the "Life Book"). It was written on several lined pages, obviously removed from a small notebook. I found it in an envelope in Arthur's trunk.

Two incidents in Arthur's early life, mentioned briefly in the "Life Book," seem to have been especially memorable to him. In "This and That" he wrote about these events

in more detail. They are titled "My First Horse and How I Saved the World" and "A Chapter of Life."

In the first story, which takes place in 1875 and 1876, Arthur tells how he cared for a colt, as a favor for an older brother who later gave the horse to him as a gift. But no sooner had it grown large enough for ten-year old Arthur to ride than something dreadful happened. A meteor shower and an eclipse of the sun convinced both the young lad and the people of the tiny rural community in which he lived that the world was coming to an end. Arthur's description of peoples' reaction to their supposed doom and how he "saved the world" makes for an amusing tale.

"A Chapter of Life" tells of Arthur's first train ride, which he experienced during the summer of 1885, and how he embarrassed himself when the train made its first stop at Corsicana. The story concludes with Arthur's account of a 200-mile journey he made by horseback, in the dead of winter, from Mexia to Denison.



Deciding to publish these stories was not difficult but editing them was troublesome to me. Arthur's style of writing is so homespun and conversational that I was reluctant to tamper with it, for fear of destroying the very qualities that make it so appealing. At the same time, I felt that the misspelled words and uneven punctuation that betray Arthur's lack of formal education might be distracting. In the end, I resolved to correct the spelling and punctuation and to rewrite only the most poorly-constructed sentences. My object has been only to improve upon what needed it and to leave the rest alone. I believe that if he were still alive to see the result, Arthur would approve.

Two other outstanding qualities of Arthur's writing are the candidness of his observations and his willingness to share his feelings. Yet Arthur was also frustratingly inconsistent. For example, he writes in detail of the deaths of his younger brother Guy, his sister Ella, and his mother. But the untimely death of his wife Bertha is barely mentioned nor does he say much about their courtship, apart from recalling their very first meeting. Even his wedding is given but a single sentence. Yet he was obviously very much in love

with this woman, who seems to have been his one and only girlfriend prior to marriage. Perhaps his depth of feeling for Bertha precluded his ability to write about her without experiencing all over again the tremendous feeling of loss he must have experienced when death took her at an early age, depriving him of her companionship for the remaining four decades of his long life.

Arthur's sensitivity to the female point of view is another characteristic that emerges from his writing. Perhaps this resulted from his being raised by a strong-willed, independent mother whom he admired and respected, as well as loved. The fact that he had more sisters than brothers may have also been a factor in shaping his sensibilities.

Evidence of this sensitivity can be seen in "My First Horse," when, hoping his older brother will give him the colt he has cared for, Arthur compares his feelings of anticipation to those that a girl who is expecting a marriage proposal might have. The fact that he consulted his wife Bertha regarding any job offers that came his way (as mentioned in the "Life Book"), particularly those that required the family to move, and that he respected her wishes even when they conflicted with his own, is further proof.

Arthur did not begin writing his "Life Book" until the fall of 1925, when he was approaching his sixtieth birthday. He seems to have completed the bulk of it by his sixty-first birthday anniversary, which occurred on October 31, 1926. Afterward, he added a few more paragraphs, at long intervals, in 1928, 1939, and 1941. "This and That" appears to have been written mostly or entirely during the 1930s.



Although he tells his story quite well himself, perhaps at this juncture, a few facts about the life of this "self-made man" are in order. Arthur Babb was born at Fairfield, Texas, the seat of Freestone County, on October 31, 1865. Raised in poverty, he was the sixth child and third son of an itinerant wheelwright named Isaac Lewis (or Louis) Babb, a Tennessean by birth. Arthur's mother, Lucy Ann, was a large woman who was devoted to her children. Both of Arthur's parents were previously married to mates who had died young. Lucy Ann gave birth to three more children after Arthur and had three daughters

by her first marriage, although by the time Arthur was born two of them were dead (as well as an earlier-born child whom she had by Mr. Babb). A brother, younger than Arthur, died in 1880 after falling from a tree. His mother always fretted about Arthur, who was a sickly child, but he must have inherited her constitution. Lucy Ann Babb lived to be 94 years old and although he suffered a major illness in adulthood, Arthur himself lived to the ripe old age of 85!

The Babb family removed to Fairfield from neighboring Anderson County shortly before Arthur's birth. They remained there but briefly. During Arthur's formative years, the Babbs moved back and forth between a small settlement named Bonner and the only-slightly larger town of Wortham (a community now noted as the birthplace of early-twentieth century blues musician "Blind Lemon" Jefferson).

Financial success eluded Isaac Babb, partly on account of bad luck and partly, so it seems, because he was not an especially ambitious man. Arthur was different. Although he never completed a full year of school in his life, he somehow learned to read and write. Blessed with a natural intelligence and a full measure of curiosity about the world, Arthur was keenly observant and insightful. These qualities all combined to stand him in good stead when he later taught himself to be an architect, a profession in which he enjoyed some degree of success.

In 1882, Arthur's parents separated, for reasons which seem to have been related to his father's intemperance. Three years later, while living with an older daughter and son-in-law in Denison, Lucy Babb inherited a sum of money from the estate of an uncle who died in Tennessee. She used the money to buy a small farm near Denison. At the time, nineteen year old Arthur was residing with my great-grandparents, William and Virginia Alice Butler, on a farm near Mexia, in Limestone County, Texas. Virginia Alice, Lucy Ann's daughter by her first marriage, was Arthur's half-sister. William Butler, the son of Arthur's Aunt Mary, was his cousin. That summer, Arthur, along with Will, Alice and their children (including my grandfather Herman), traveled by train to Denison, to visit Lucy Ann. Later, in December, Arthur left Mexia and rode on horseback to his mother's new farm. The week-long journey, made in cold, wet weather, took him across nearly 200 miles of North Texas prairie. Passing through Dallas one rainy night, Arthur

found shelter at the home of county surveyor Jack Cole. On New Year's Eve, Arthur arrived at Denison. The experience made quite an impression on the youth.

For the next three years Arthur took care of his mother's property almost single-handedly, an experience that convinced him he was not cut out to be a farmer. In 1888 he took a job in Denison, working for the Houston and Texas Central Railroad, the same line that ran past his old home in Freestone County and on which he made his first train trip.

As a railroad carpenter, Arthur helped build the wooden structures the railroad required. Always on the move, his crew worked in Dallas in 1890 and in Ennis in 1891. That summer Arthur met his future wife, Bertha McCanless, then only fourteen years old.

Arthur and Bertha were married two years later, when Arthur was twenty-seven and Bertha sixteen. Their first home together was in Melissa, a tiny community in Collin County, Texas, a few miles north of McKinney. There, Arthur was helping to build a new depot. They later returned to Ennis, where in 1894, Arthur was taken ill with pneumonia. During the 76 days he was bedridden, his first child, Tressa, was born.

In the fall of 1894 Arthur traveled to Dallas, where he underwent an operation to remove his right lung, damaged by his long bout of pneumonia. While recuperating, he worked at light jobs and it was during this time, aided by his brother-in-law Hix McCanless, that he taught himself architectural drawing. In the summer of 1896 he put his new-found skill to practical use for the first time, working for an architect in Ardmore, Oklahoma. The following spring Arthur returned to Ennis. Shortly afterward, he got his first contract to build a house. The job was in Bremond, the seat of Robertson County, where, apparently by coincidence, he had relatives. The next house Arthur built was in Houston.

When the house in Houston was completed, Arthur returned to employment with the H. & T. C. but left after only a short time to work for a building contractor. Over the next few years, he worked off and on for both the H. & T. C. and the S. A. & A. P. railroads, doing contracting work in-between. During this period of Arthur's life, from 1897 to 1913, he traveled to Kerrville and San Antonio and he and his family lived variously at Ennis (on N. Paris Street with Bertha's father, Stephen McCanless), Houston, Corpus Christi, and Yoakum. The family also grew larger when Evalyn was born in 1907 at Ennis and Arthur Jr. came into the world in 1909 at Yoakum. While living at Yoakum Ar-

thur also became a member of the local Masonic lodge and in May 1913 Tressa Babb, age nineteen, graduated from Yoakum High School.

Tragically, it was during the second decade of this century that Arthur lost three of the people who were especially dear to him. The first was his sister Ella. In the "Life Book," Arthur records in some detail his journey to Denison by train, in late December 1912, after receiving word that she was dying. (Unfortunately, he arrived a few hours too late.) He also tells, in the family history portion of the "Life Book," of keeping vigil at his dying mother's bedside on Christmas Eve 1919. But as mentioned previously, Arthur was curiously silent about the death of his wife Bertha, who passed away in 1916. There are, however, among Arthur's belongings, a number of letters which shed some light on a subject that was obviously too painful for him to write about.

These letters reveal that by 1914, the Babb family had moved to San Antonio where Arthur was doing some contract work. Around this same time, Bertha began to have severe coughing spells. At first, it was thought she had bronchitis but her condition was much more serious than that. In June, she traveled by train to Dallas, to be examined by Dr. H. K. Leake (the same physician who operated on Arthur in 1894). As it turned out, Bertha had tuberculosis.

Later that same year, the family moved to Dallas, taking up residence at 219 S. Henderson, near old East Dallas. For about two years Arthur was employed by the City of Dallas, working on a street-widening project. Early in 1916, he found a new position - with the valuation department of the Texas and Pacific Railway.

Unfortunately, Arthur's new job required him to travel and there were periods when he spent a great deal of time away from home. In the early spring of 1916 he was away from home, working in Louisiana.

On April 11, 1916, in what may have been her last letter to her husband, Bertha Babb wrote that she had called a doctor to come to the house to examine Arthur Jr., who was also ill at the time. She also told Arthur not to worry though, that the doctor "doesn't think Son is affected similar to me at all." In closing, Bertha mentioned that she was feeling better herself, but that "I am not equal to another tooth-pulling soon."

A week later, on April 18th, Tressa wrote a letter to her father, telling him that her

mother "has not been doing so well since you left," mentioning that Bertha had recently suffered two "spells" during which she "could only get half her breath." Tressa also said that the "place where you pulled the tooth is still sore and eating is not very pleasant for her." She urged her father to come home the next weekend if he could. Seven days later, on April 25, 1916, Bertha Babb died at the age of thirty-nine. She was buried at her hometown of Ennis. It is uncertain whether or not Arthur returned home before Bertha died. If he didn't, that may account for the reason why he was reluctant to write about it. Perhaps he was too consumed by guilt.

Arthur is also curiously quiet about the mysterious disappearance of his older brother William, or "Brother Willie" as he called him, in 1883. According to family lore, William, who was married but had no children, simply vanished one day and was never heard from again.

Following his wife's untimely death, Arthur continued to work for the T. & P. but he moved, taking up residence at 1114 Apple Street in old East Dallas, where he and his children lived for about two years. Around 1919, they moved to 4906 Parry Avenue.

In 1920, Arthur's daughter Tressa married H. Allen Butler, an estimator for the Clem Lumber Company. Allen and Tressa took up residence at 1507 McKell, where Allen had resided prior to his marriage. They later moved to 3411 Roberts Avenue (now McFarlin Blvd.) in University Park, near Southern Methodist University. In 1923, Tressa's first and only child, a daughter, was born. They named her Helen.

It was in 1923 that Arthur moved again, to 2605 Thomas Avenue, between Routh and Boll streets in North Dallas. This may be the house where he, Evalyn and Arthur Jr. were living when Arthur began writing his "Life Book" during the fall of 1925.

In June 1925 Arthur traveled to Colorado. He left Dallas on June 17 and began a diary of the trip but failed to keep it up. The date of his return is unknown.

In February 1926 Arthur made a business trip to Washington, D. C. He arrived on a Friday, finding the capital, as he put it, "wrapped in snow." He spent the weekend sight-seeing and was particularly impressed by George Washington's Mount Vernon home. Arthur's description of that historic site is included in this volume.

In May 1926, Evalyn Babb was graduated from North Dallas High School. During



the ceremony, Arthur recalled that the school stood on the site of the Cole farm, where he spent a night in December 1885, during his long journey from Mexia to Denison.

Later that same year Arthur traveled again to Louisiana, where he supervised the construction of some railroad buildings. In his "Life Book" he noted that he was boarding his younger two children with their older sister and her husband while he was away in Louisiana. He also wrote proudly that Evalyn was then taking a secretarial course and that Arthur Jr. had also found a job with the Texas and Pacific Railway.

In August 1928, Arthur Sr. lost his own job with the T. & P. but wasted no time in scrambling for "something to do." A resourceful man, he called on everyone he knew in Dallas who might have a lead on a job. In the end, his search paid off. In September, Arthur was offered a position with the City of Dallas.

Less than a year later, however, Arthur found himself out of work again, due to a change in administration. Throughout the summer, he actively sought work, traveling to Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Austin, hoping to find something in his line. When he arrived back in Dallas, after a week in the state capital, he wrote in frustration: "My trip accomplished no purpose, I found nothing to do and spent about \$35.00."

Apparently out of necessity, Arthur moved in with his daughter Tressa and son-in-law H. Allen Butler. It appears that he lived with them until about 1932 or 1933.

Around this same time Arthur Jr. was working for the Knox Street Hardware Company, having also lost his job with the railroad. In October 1932 he was driving the company truck when it was struck by an automobile. The young man was badly injured and spent several weeks in the hospital. Two years later he won a lawsuit against the driver of the car that hit him and was awarded \$5,000, out of which he was able to pay his doctor bills. Arthur Jr. used the balance to buy some clothes and a car, in which he took his father and his sister Evalyn on a trip through Mexico in September 1934.

About 1933, Arthur moved out of his daughter's house, taking up residence at 5702 Vanderbilt. He later rented rooms at 4018 Maple Avenue.

Arthur Babb's world fell apart on January 25, 1937 when his son, Arthur Jr. died, following a brief illness. The young man was only twenty-eight years old and had never married.

Arthur was still residing at the Maple Avenue address when he was interviewed in January 1940 by a reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*. On January 29 the paper published a feature article about Arthur, focusing on the fact that ten years earlier the sixty-five year old out-of-work railroad man had taught himself the rudiments of book-binding. Since then, said *The News*, Arthur had forged a new career for himself, repairing old and sometimes rare books, for collectors and libraries alike. Among his customers was noted author James DeShields.

During the last few years of his life, Arthur moved in again with Tressa and Allen, at their new home on Monticello Drive in the "M" streets section of Dallas. There, he continued to write and to draw, corresponding with friends and reflecting on the experiences of his long life.

In 1949, when he was eighty-four, Arthur received treatment for an illness at White's Hospital in Midlothian, Texas, a few miles southwest of Dallas. There, he kept busy while recuperating, making a sketch of the view out his window.

Two years later, he was hospitalized for the last time. On October 28, 1951, Arthur Babb died, three days short of his eighty-sixth birthday. He was buried at Ennis, beside Bertha.



As I wrote near the beginning of this introduction, I never knew Arthur Babb personally. Yet I feel a certain bond to him. In many ways we are kindred spirits. Helen Butler, Arthur's only grandchild, agrees. She once told me that I reminded her of her grandfather and this is why, I believe, she entrusted his books and other belongings to me.

For many years I have also felt that I owe Arthur a debt of gratitude for the help he unknowingly provided me in my search for my family's "roots." By sharing this extraordinary man's words with other people, who, I expect, will find them as interesting, as funny, as sad, and as moving and inspirational as I have, I am at last repaying that debt.

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June 1998*