David Ayers

Texas Methodism perhaps has never had a more useful layman than David Ayers, who came to Texas from New York. He tried farming for a year, and after the revolution he embarked in business, first at Washington, removing later to Center Hill (near Hempstead), and finally to Galveston, where he became one of the merchant prince’s of his day. His service in the days of spiritual destitution in Texas, and the hardships of the pioneer, are set forth in the following letter, written to a friend in 1843.

You will recall that I sailed from New York in May 1843, in the brig Asia, Captain Johnson. Contrary to my express agreement with Captain Johnson, he shipped a barrel of whiskey. The consequence was, he was intoxicated most of the time. He ran us aground on the Bahamas Banks, where we were aground eight days. We suffered much from exposure to the scorching rays of the sun, having no awning. To enable us to get afloat, we threw overboard all our heavy lading, and about two-thirds of our water. After we got afloat, we were becalmed. Our water failed us. We had on board one hundred persons, one-half of whom were women and children. We were out at sea six weeks. We suffered much for want of water, and when our last half pint was served out to us, our vessel was run aground near Corpus Christi Bay. We escaped from the wreck in a small boat, and landed on a desert island, where we camped for four weeks. I succeeded in securing from the wreck the box of Bibles and Sunday school books, which we had received from the Bible and Sunday School Societies in New York. I also saved most of my goods. I was compelled to leave my goods on the beach while I went with my family to San Patricio, the nearest settlement. We arrived at this place three months from the time of my departure from New York with my family. Three of my children were dangerously ill with a bilious fever, and I was obliged to remain with them. When I returned to the beach, I found the boxes of goods had been opened, and most of my valuable articles carried off, including most of our clothing. The box of Bibles I found safe, and secured it, and felt thankful that things were no worse. In San Patricio I procured a small cabin for my family, this was made of poles drove into the ground, and covered with grass, without a floor. We were thankful for the shelter. This settlement was composed of Mexicans and Irish Roman Catholics - all, or nearly all, were very ignorant. Having some testimonials from several Catholic clergymen in New
York, one of which from Rev. Mr. Powers was a very flattering one, I called on the priest and presented them. These testimonials procured us a very hospitable reception, and we were soon supplied with all comforts the place offered. The priest called at our cabin and expressed a desire to inspect my library, which the rabble had not thought worth carrying off. A Spanish testament attracted his attention, he examined it, and pronounced it a correct edition and expressed a desire to possess it. I immediately presented it to him, and he appeared pleased with the present.

Father Malloy was our constant visitor, and his example was followed by the inhabitants, including the officers of the garrison. My library was the chief attraction to our visitors, and I took care to have two copies of the Spanish Testament always in a conspicuous place. These, they all were sure to see, and invariably they would express a desire to procure a copy, and then I would avail myself of the opportunity to present it to them - at the same time informing them that Father Malloy had examined it, and pronounced it a genuine translation. In this way nearly all the intelligent part of the inhabitants procured Spanish Testaments. My supply was nearly exhausted, when one day the priest came to my cabin in a rage, and demanded of me how I dared to circulate that dimmable book among his flock. He threatened me with imprisonment, and said he would burn my books and confiscate the little property I had remaining. He actually did seize a quantity of tracts which, by order of the alcalde, were publicly burned in the public square.

I reminded the priest that he had pronounced the translation a good one, and that I supposed he wished his people to read the word of God. He left. Denouncing me in the severest manner. In a few minutes I was called on by the alcalde, who informed me that I had committed a great offense. He threatened me, etc. I showed him my passport as an American citizen, and claimed my protection as an American.

I afterwards learned that the priest went around and demanded all the Testaments that he could find. I was much gratified that he could not procure all. Some from whom the priest had taken their Testaments away came and requested another copy, promising to conceal it from the priest. I concealed the box of Bibles under my bed. The priest soon made the place too hot for me, and I was constantly annoyed with vexatious lawsuits before the alcalde, which always went against me - and in this way my resources were nearly exhausted. Here I was, two hundred miles from my intended home, robbed and deprived of almost all my means of support, by unjust suits before the alcalde, with a large family, amid an ignorant Catholic population, who were ready to obey the priest, and this priest my enemy.
I determined immediately on moving east, and was fortunate to procure a large ox wagon, in which I placed my effects, and I mounted my wife and children on ponies, and we left this place, esteeming myself fortunate in being able to get away with the wreck of my property.

I arrived in safety at my place, having spent the last dollar I had in paying ferriage across the river. The wagoner gave me credit for his bill. On this route, I supplied every family I found destitute with a Bible.

The revolution broke out, we were invaded, and we had to flee before the enemy, leaving behind us all our property, excepting some bedding, clothing, some provisions, and a box of Bibles. We wandered from place to place to keep out of the reach of the enemy, and lived in the woods eleven weeks, destitute of almost every comfort.

The memorable battle of San Jacinto was fought. The enemy retreated, Santa Anna was taken prisoner, and we once more returned home. But what a scene presented itself to our view. The spoiler had been there, and nothing was remaining but an empty cottage - every article had been destroyed or carried off. Our bee-hive was split open, and furniture all gone - all, presented a scene of desolation which made our heart sink within us.

We had escaped the horrors of war, and now famine stared us in the face. No corn nearer than 40 miles, nothing to buy corn with but four quarts of salt. No meat - our smoke-house had been emptied. At this juncture a bull passed my cottage, and we shot him down, and on him we subsisted until we procured supplies. My farming prospects all blasted, my stock all gone.

I removed to Washington, and there commenced a small business. Mrs. Ayers and my daughter took in sewing, and God prospered our efforts, and we soon got in good business.

At this period, the Spring of 1836, there was not a solitary church organized in all Texas - nor was there a Sunday school. I started a prayer meeting at my house, and there in a back room a few pious females met with my family, and united with us in praying that the Lord would send us Ministers of the Gospel. I started a Sunday School. The books I had received from the Sunday School Society in New York furnished us with books. On inquiring of the children if they had Bibles at home, I found most of them were destitute of Bibles. These I supplied, and soon my box of Bibles was emptied, and to supply the demand I gave away nearly every Bible I had in my house, except my large Bible. In 1837, I removed to Center Hill and left the Sunday School prospering.