

The O'Leary/Hart family's years in Texas

THE HART FAMILY SAIL TO FARAWAY TEXAS

The Hart family sailed for Texas on board the *Heroine*. All their children had died from whooping cough except for three daughters. Elisabeth, the one who had been kidnapped by the Portugese tourist while they lived at Roche's Point, died from sunstroke during the voyage.

TOM HART DIES ON THE TEXAS COAST

The Hart family set foot on Texas soil May 15, 1834. A cholera epidemic, caused by exposure to the illness while their huge ship was in New Orleans before smaller vessels took them to Texas, killed many of the emigrants, including Tom Hart. He died after he had been on the coast of Texas for only a few days. Mexican authorities kept the newly arrived Irishmen in quarantine on the beach because of the cholera.

ELISABETH O'LEARY HART FACES LIFE ON THE FRONTIER ALONE WITH TWO YOUNG DAUGHTERS

Elisabeth O'Leary Hart was left alone in a primitive land surrounded by danger and confronted with the challenge of setting up a ranch and farmland with no man to help. The settlers lived in huts made from wooden poles with no windows and dirt floors. On their first night inland at Mission Refugio Elisabeth made a shelter for herself and the two little girls by piling her equipment and provisions next to the wall of the Catholic Church that had been established there to work with the giant Indians who lived on that coast.

During their first months at the Mission she was one of two women who remained healthy and nursed all the other settlers through an epidemic of dysentery washing as many as 144 pieces of laundry daily in the river that flowed by their cabins. Several of the new settlers died during that epidemic. Elisabeth adapted to the demands of her new life and worked at milking cows and planting crops.

SANTA ANA'S ARMY MASSACRES THE TEXAS SOLDIERS, THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN FLEE ON FOOT IN "THE RUNAWAY SCRAPE"

When the war with Santa Ana's army broke out in 1836 the men from the Irish settlement all went to the nearest fort, to defend it. It was named La Bahia, or Goliad, but the Irishmen called it Labardee. Santa Ana's army of 6,000 soldiers killed all the Texians in the fort called the Alamo, then advanced on to the fort called by the Irish Labardee. General Santa Ana ordered all the Texians captured there to be marched outside the fort and shot down where they stood.

In between these two events all the women and children had to leave the Mission at night, walking through the unseasonable cold and rain for more than a hundred miles before they reached the coast where they were evacuated to the United States.

Rosalie, not quite eleven years old at that time, told in her book about what came to be called "The Runaway Scrape." Here in her own words is the story of their leaving their cabins in The Mission.

The next day the soldiers in Labardee sent Tom Connors and John O'Brien with three ox carts to take all the women and children from the Mission to a place of safety as they had proof that five hundred Mexicans and Indians were going to attack the town. We were ordered to take nothing but provisions for two days and one frying pan, one coffee pot, and a skillet. We were also allowed to take one change of clothing. They would not tell us where we were going for fear the women and children would speak of it, and the consequences would be fatal to us as the Mexicans and Indians would follow us and kill everyone of us.

Everybody buried their valuables before leaving. Mrs. Synot tied some money in a handkerchief and, putting the rest in a chest together with her jewelry and other valuables, moved her bed, dug a hole and buried the chest under her bed. She removed as far as possible all trace of the ground having been disturbed and replaced the bed where it usually stood. She then tied up some of her husband's best clothes, her own and some for the baby in a bundle to take with her, but in the confusion and hurry attending our departure she made a mistake and carried off a bundle of rags, leaving the clothes behind.

Everybody had to leave their homes as if they were only to be gone a couple of days, as we were told. I made a hole in the door and threw corn on the floor for my chickens to eat while we were gone.

That night the teamsters put feather beds on the wagons for the sick, and the others had to walk. It was a sorrowful sight to see so many women and children driven from their homes, and not one in the crowd ever recovered anything that was left behind. As soon as we left the Mission a man named King burned every house in town except the one belonging to the only family that remained behind and joined the Mexicans.

King and his men remained to fight the advancing army and burned the cabins so they would not provide cover for the Mexican soldiers. Vastly outnumbered by the Mexicans King and his men fought the enemy until they were finally overrun and the survivors captured. Those taken prisoner were executed in the public square.

The women and children finally arrived in Victoria after suffering from cold and hunger and walking for days, hiding in the brush and sleeping on the ground.

***NEWS OF SANTA ANA'S MASSACRE OF ALL THE TEXIANS IN THE ALAMO
AND HIS ORDERS TO KILL ALL WOMEN AND CHILDREN SENDS THE REFUGEES
FLEEING AGAIN, THIS TIME FROM VICTORIA TO THE COAST***

Those who escaped walked all day and hid in the brush every night. They had very little to eat and almost no clothing or provisions. To make matters worse the weather was extremely cold with frequent rain; according to many it was the worst weather they had ever experienced at that time of year in Texas.

When they finally arrived at Dimmit's Landing Rosalie said that the fugitives felt safe for several weeks. A Negro family had an eating house there. Elisabeth Hart offered to help the owners cook to pay for food and permission for her and the girls to sleep in the building at night. The other fugitives camped under the trees. News reached them that all of the men in the Alamo had been massacred, and the women became even more frantic to escape. They needed to cross the Guadalupe river to reach Cox's Point where they could take a boat to Matagorda. In desperate haste they used rawhide strings to tie together logs laying on the ground to make a raft, but they could not push it into the water.

Finally two strangers rode up and asked if they could help. One man was from Kentucky, the other from Tennessee. These men were courageous enough to stay in that dangerous place and help the women and children cross the river then take them through a swamp to safety. Rosalie always regretted that she had never learned the names of the brave men who rescued them. The children called them "Daddy," and that was the only name she knew.

Late in the afternoon a skiff loaded with a family came down the river, hurrying to escape the Mexican army. The two men persuaded the owner to let them use the boat to take the refugees across the river. They had no more than unloaded the last passengers when screams broke out in the woods nearby. The man who owned the skiff jumped into it and began to row as fast as he could to move his family down the river. The bundles the women had carried with what little money they had brought were left on the makeshift raft on the wrong side of the river. At the sound of screaming the refugees dived into a motte of trees to hide. The man from Kentucky swam across the river to see what was happening. He saw that a group of people were being pursued by Mexicans and Indians, but he could do nothing to help because the skiff was already gone.

That night a cold norther with heavy rain blew in. They were afraid to light a fire and huddled in the cluster of trees trying to maintain some warmth by sitting as close together as they could. They had only some bread to eat. At the first sign of daylight the men took the smallest children up on the horses with them, and the others set out to walk twelve miles through knee-deep swamp water and weeds so tall the people were hidden from view.

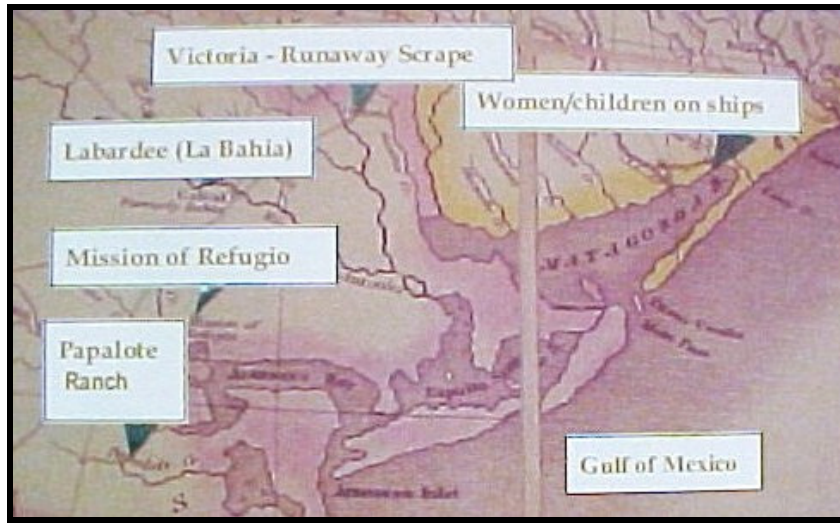
When they finally reached the hotel and sutler's store at Cox's Point the storekeeper told them to take whatever they could use from his goods because he was going to destroy all his merchandise to prevent the enemy from using it. The refugees were thankful that they could replace their shoes that had been ruined when they walked

through the swamp. The hotel keeper let them use his rooms, so Elisabeth put Rosalie and Mary Ann to bed while she washed their clothes. So many burrs had stuck in the girls' hair she could not get them out and had to cut their hair off short.

From there they sailed to Matagorda on board some ships that had come to pick up the guns and gunpowder stored there.

There were not enough men in Texas to care for the women and children and protect them from all the hostile forces, so the Harts had no choice but to leave Texas with the other refugees. Merchants were putting as much of their merchandise on the *Tensaw* and the *General DeKalb* as they could and throwing the rest of the goods into the bay so the enemy would not benefit from the supplies.

Elisabeth Hart and her two daughters boarded the *Tensaw*. It started out for New Orleans, but three days out on the Gulf a Mexican pirate ship began to follow them. It was a dark night, so the captain extinguished all the lights on board the schooner and changed his course to Mobile, Alabama.



THE YOUNGEST DAUGHTER DIES, ELISABETH O'LEARY HART WORKS LONG HOURS AS A NURSE

The youngest daughter, Mary Ann, died from yellow fever which was a recurrent plague in Mobile. Elisabeth was much in demand as a professional nurse at forty-five dollars a month if the sickness was not serious, but in serious cases she received five dollars per day. She was so determined to care for her patients with all of her ability and energy that she would not leave the sickroom and go to another room to sleep. She was afraid the person who took her place to watch over them might do something that made the patient worse or neglect the sick person, so she stayed by the bed and managed to get along with short naps in her chair. Elisabeth was able to save several patients who had been told by their doctors that they would die very soon. Rosalie said that she was treated with the greatest respect and always had a servant by her side to get her whatever she wanted. No three people could have nursed all the patients whose families asked for her, but she cared for as many as she could.

ELISABETH HART ENROLLS HER ONLY SURVIVING CHILD IN A CONVENT SCHOOL

In the year 1838 Elisabeth Hart enrolled Rosalie, her only surviving child, almost 13 years old, as a boarder in the Convent of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin about four miles outside the town of Mobile, Alabama, a school with a reputation for excellence in instruction. Rosalie was reluctant to go there, but her mother assured her she would not have to stay if she wanted to leave after her first term. Long before the term came to an end, Rosalie discovered that the nuns were caring and kind, that the entire situation was very much to her liking.

Elisabeth wanted Rosalie to have the best education possible because she might someday be put in a position where she had to earn her own living as Elisabeth had been, and the tiny, delicate Rosalie could not earn her living by manual labor. With a good education she could always support herself by teaching.

[NOTE: Rosalie did indeed use her education to support her family when Corpus Christi was occupied by the Federal Army during the War Between the States. Families would bring food to them that had been smuggled in through the seaports in Mexico in exchange for her teaching their children. She set up the first school in Corpus Christi.]

The other reason Elisabeth wanted Rosalie to be in the convent where she would be safe and would be taught the right moral values was that Elisabeth needed to go back to Texas and try to claim and organize the land and ranch that belonged to her so they would have the security of land ownership. But Texas was still a very dangerous place although the Texians had won a decisive victory over Santa Ana. Texas was an enormous territory with a sparse population. There were not enough Texas Rangers to protect all the widely separated settlers. And the place where Elisabeth had land was in the most dangerous area of all. The Powers grant was next to the Nueces River, next to what was called The Nueces Strip. From hideouts in that land between the Nueces River and Rio Grande River bandits and Mexican officials who hoped to get back part of Texas, constantly raided the settlers.

ROSALIE MARRIES AND ELISABETH HART GOES BACK HOME TO TEXAS TO HER RANCH AND HER STORE

Elisabeth was able to make enough money to keep Rosalie in that convent school until she graduated. During the years that Rosalie was safe and happy in the convent school Elisabeth made trips to Texas to claim her land grant and establish her ranch there on Paplote Creek. She went to Texas to work on their interests there, but she spent enough time in Mobile to make sure that Rosalie was happy and had all the money she needed, not only for her academic needs but also ample money to take part in the school's social activities.

When she was 19 years old Rosalie married Jean Marie Priour, the man who had designed the elaborate gardens at the convent. After Rosalie was married her mother stayed close until she was sure that the small, fragile Rosalie could survive having children.

Once satisfied that Rosalie was well established in her marriage, Elisabeth went back home to Texas never to leave it again except to sail to Mobile to buy goods for her store. She established a very successful store in Corpus Christi. The building that housed the store and the ample living quarters was huge and built of rammed seashells, a substantial material that had to be dynamited many years later when city developers wanted to raze it.

Elisabeth in her many voyages across the Gulf of Mexico waters survived three shipwrecks.

ROSALIE'S HUSBAND DECIDES THAT HIS FAMILY WILL ALSO LIVE IN TEXAS

After a number of years on their plantation near Mobile, Jean Marie Priour insisted that his family move to Corpus Christi to join Elisabeth. This decision dismayed Rosalie who preferred the more sophisticated life in Mobile.

Rosalie tells of his decision:

"Mr. Priour told me I should not go home any more; the voyage across the Gulf was too dangerous. He would go himself and rent out the homestead, sell the cows, horses, and wagons and carriage, and we would settle in Corpus. I did not like the rough life I would have to lead in a little frontier village, yet there was so much truth in what he said about the dangers of travel I consented to remain on condition that he would not sell our homestead. I thought he would not like Texas as a place of residence. He could not have the luxuries or even the conveniences of life that he had been accustomed to at home and would soon get tired of such a life, but I was sadly disappointed. He could have a garden and plenty of game, and as he was passionately fond of hunting and gardening he cared for nothing else. The country was to him a perfect paradise while it rested in its wild condition."

ELISABETH O'LEARY HART LIVED OUT HER LAST DAYS ON HER BELOVED RANCH WHERE SHE WAS BURIED, A TEXAS PIONEER TO BE REMEMBERED

The Irishwoman whose original family name meant "Keeper of the Calves" retained that inherited love of land and cattle. She bought 500 head of yearling heifers and branded them with an A inside a heart shape. And she bought

land in the town of Corpus Christi and in neighboring areas whenever it was up for sale for overdue taxes. Out of what looked like a hopeless situation with the loss of all but one family member and all of her belongings and money, Elisabeth built up a ranch, a profitable retail business, and owned vast amounts of land.

More important than any of her business accomplishments, however, was the fact that she was known as the most charitable woman in the town of Corpus Christi who would take care of any person who was ill or hungry or homeless. And on both sides of the Gulf it was recognized that the word of Elisabeth O'Leary Hart was an absolute guarantee that she would carry out whatever she had promised. According to a favorite saying of that era, "Her word was her bond."

Union Troops blockaded the port of Corpus Christi during the War Between the States which made it impossible to bring in merchandise to sell in her store so Elisabeth O'Leary Hart went to her beloved ranch on Papalote Creek where she lived the rest of her life. She died on December 20, 1863, and was buried as she had requested beneath a big liveoak tree near her house on the ranch.

An incredibly courageous and hard-working Irish woman, Elisabeth overcame impossible sounding difficulties and constant danger to establish her family in Texas. Her daughter Rosalie said that her mother would undertake the overwhelming tasks that confronted her, saying always that she could do them because:

"The good Lord always shapes the back to fit the burden."

**Elisabeth O'Leary Hart was another pioneer with those typically Irish qualities
so cherished and revered by their descendants.**

Edited and summarized by Catherine Elisabeth Klein Keblinger, great-great-great granddaughter of Elisabeth Hart.



***SOME DESCENDANTS OF
ELISABETH O'LEARY HART***

Isadore Priour (black suit), grandson of Elisabeth Hart, with his wife, daughter, grandson and great-grandsons. All were ranchers in the Hill Country of Texas. The daughter brought in the surname Klein when she married the rancher next door, and all in this picture except the original parents have that last name. In the year 2011 both great-grandsons shown here as children are still living in Texas, still own their ranches and work on those ranches, and have great-grandchildren of their own.