

Pawnee Prisoner, The Story of Jane Gotcher Crawford is a tale of survival set in the 1830s and based on the true story of the daughter of Texas pioneer James Gotcher and widow of Alamo defender Lemuel Crawford.

Pawnee Prisoner:
The Story of Jane Gotcher Crawford
By Vivian McCullough

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Vivian McCullough

The Story of Jane Gotcher Crawford

PAWNEE PRISONER

A Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Early March 1837

How many tears can you cry before your head becomes a hollow shell of weather-beaten flesh, stretched and cracked, like a thirsty cow trapped up to her underbelly in the mud of a once-flowing riverbed, with no escape, while wolves stalk nearby? How can you hold your head up when it feels like it weighs a hundred pounds? How can you go forward when you don't know what there is to come back to? The past year had brought more tears than Jane could imagine, and now the wolves were circling. Sometimes she wished they would attack and get it over with.

Empty inside, Jane stared at the ground to keep from looking at the painted faces that yelled and howled around the bonfire that roared higher than their heads. They circled the blaze, spinning and stomping, singing, and chanting in a victory dance to drumbeats, their bone necklaces and beads clanging together in a roar of endless noise that deepened the throbbing headache Jane

had from the beating earlier that day. Some carried torches and some had rattles. On and on, the noise continued.

Jane slowly looked up at the poles that stood near the fire. The pieces of scalp attached to them with their blood-streaked hair reminded Jane once again of the terror she faced just this morning. Jane's thoughts went back to the work camp, and she remembered the bloody attack on her family. She cried as she thought about the bodies of those she loved that lay mutilated. She had seen the scalping, heard the screams, and looked into the frightened eyes of the children as the raid took place.

Jane's head filled with so many questions. Why had they moved to Texas? If only they had stayed in Alabama, none of this would have happened. Why had Lemuel joined the Texas army at the Alamo in Bexar? He should have been there to protect the family from these savages. And why did Paw, Samuel and Nate forget to take their guns with them to the woods on this particular day? They never went anywhere without them. Why had God allowed this to happen to their family? Why?

Jane tried to shake the fog that engulfed her. Self-pity would not do. Lemuel had looked into the faces of a thousand Mexican soldiers as they advanced on the small mission in Bexar, and he never turned to run. Her mother looked into the faces of a dozen painted warriors but ran toward them at their home on the Gotcher Trace with never a thought to hide from their arrows. And her father had looked at 80 miles of brush and trees in the Texas wilderness and never stopped charging forward in the face of the unknown.

Pawnee Prisoner

Jane knew this journey she was on now would take all her strength. She knew it would be difficult. But the faces of the children around her were all the incentive she needed to fight.

I will not retreat. I will not hide. And I will not stop charging forward. If death is my destiny, so be it.

CHAPTER TWO

November 1830

James “Jim” Gotcher returned from Texas in early November 1830 with big dreams and high hopes. What he found when he came through the door were tears of joy, and of sadness; a family so full of conflicting emotions, they couldn’t contain it.

It had been eight months since Jim left Franklin County, Alabama for the unknown of Texas. His good friend, James Burleson, had moved to Texas and convinced Jim he should consider moving his family there. Stephen F. Austin was settling a colony and had need of a new road. Jim decided to see what all the talk was about before making any decisions.

Gone longer than he intended to be, Jim’s wife, Nancy, had given birth to a sweet baby boy. William Riley Gotcher came in August without Jim being present. The baby was a healthy bundle of energy from the get-go, with Jim’s dark hair and his mother’s green eyes. Jim had planned on being home for the birth, but he got caught up in what was going on in Texas and didn’t make it

back to Alabama in time. He held the three-month-old boy with the same pride he had held each of his children at their birth. William Riley might be the last one, he thought. After seven children, and two miscarriages, it was time for Nancy to have a break from the morning sickness, backaches and swollen ankles that come with each pregnancy. Not that she complained at all. She rarely complained about anything.

In addition to the new arrival of baby Will, Jim discovered that his second daughter, twelve-year-old Elizabeth Ann “Lizzie” had died just three weeks prior to his return.

“Why didn’t you send word to me?” he asked as he held his wife close.

“You couldn’t have done a thing, Jim. By the time we knew she wasn’t going to get better, it was too late to have you get home in time, anyway. I wanted you to finish your work in Texas without feeling guilty or worrying about us.”

“I wish I could have been here to say goodbye to my Little Peach,” he said, trying to hold back tears that he knew would fall easily if he let them.

Lizzie had been ill a lot in her short life, but she would always get better. This time she didn’t. Nancy told him about the pneumonia that came quickly, and she was unable to fight off. Samuel told him about the Wake and how so many of the neighbors in the area had come to pay their respects and pray with the family. He told how the doctor in town talked about Lizzie’s determination to always get well, the schoolteacher told of Lizzie’s determination to be in school, and even the reverend had teared up when he talked about Lizzie’s determination to learn about Jesus.

Jim walked outside, looking around at the farm he had left eight months ago. His family needed him. His wife needed him for emotional support that only a husband can give. His younger boys needed him. His other boys, though old enough to take care of the farm while he was away, needed him to help with harvesting the crop. His oldest daughter, Jane, needed him because she had never been away from him this long. He was her hero. Losing her only sister must have been difficult.

Filled with mixed emotions, he grieved the loss of one child and celebrated the birth of another. He had news he wanted to share about Texas, but he couldn't say it, at least not yet. He glossed over details and shrugged away requests for comments on his journey. It just wasn't the right time to talk about it.

After 10 days, Nancy knew he was holding back and told him to spill it before he burst. As they lay in bed, Jim began to tell her about how beautiful he found Texas to be.

“There was wildlife everywhere, Nancy. Deer, elk, and jackrabbits the size of dogs roam freely. There were squirrels in every tree, beaver in all the streams, and buffalo larger than horses. There were wild hogs, wolves, and snakes to watch out for, but the pecan trees had so much fruit on them, you could get a concussion just walking beneath them, and the wildflowers and honeysuckle filled the air with the freshest aroma you've ever smelled.”

“It sounds like a dream place, Jim.”

“Stephen Austin is a good man, Nancy,” he began. “He told it like it was. He told me about the abundance of land and about the colony he had settled. But he also told me about the challenges they faced. We had many of those same challenges when we first moved here to Franklin County. In Texas, in addition to the

Indians, there was also the Mexican government which had strict policies on some issues. There were businesses that were needed, trades that needed to be started, and roads that needed to be marked so the settlers could get from one place to the other without having to go way out of their way.”

“And he convinced you to make one of those roads,” said Nancy, with a grin and one raised eyebrow.

“You know I’ve done that sort of thing before. Heck, Nancy, we didn’t have many roads around here when we first moved to Franklin County. I know how to find good places to cross rivers, and I’m not scared of a little old wolf or snake. It was a challenge I couldn’t pass up. But there’s more to it than that.”

“Your letter said you were staying to mark the road. I assume you finished it, and everyone was grateful.”

“Well, of course,” he smiled. “It’s called the Gotcher Trace.”

“And you’re not proud of that at all, are you?” smiled Nancy as she touched his cheek.

“It wasn’t easy work. Parts of summer were hotter than a tin kettle sitting on a bonfire, even in the shade of all those pine trees. We had a couple of bad storms go through that made the creeks and streams rise. Then we had to make sure those places we marked for crossing were still passable. With the road going so far, we had a lot of backtracking to do from time to time.”

“I’m sure everyone, including Mr. Austin, was pleased with your effort.”

“But, the thing is, Nancy, I found a great piece of land that we can settle. We can get 4,280 acres of land right on this pretty little creek called Pin Oak. Its right along the Trace and has gentle hills,

grass as green as emeralds, and cottonwood and elm trees everywhere.”

“I see that look in your eyes, Jim. Your mind is made up. It’s fine with me. I don’t mind picking up and moving. Just remember, though, you’re the one who has to persuade your children to leave. I think Nathaniel has a girl he’s interested in, and you know Jane. She can be as moody as a cat, sometimes.”

Nancy was right. By the time Jim sat the family down and told them about his plans, they all began talking at once. There were smiles, frowns, and a multitude of questions. He would have his hands full, but his mind was made up. They were going.

“Move to Texas!” Jane said. She could hardly believe what she just heard. “Why? What’s so bad about Alabama?”

Sure, her father had just made a road that stretched some 80 miles through the wilderness of Texas. And sure, the road had been named after him. But that didn’t mean they had to move there. Jane’s face turned white as a sheet as she fretted about the family leaving the only home she knew and going to a new land hundreds of miles away. This was all wrong. She had to change Paw’s mind. She couldn’t move away!

Eighteen-year-old Jane had put off dating because she wanted her paw to give his approval. Jasper had asked her to the social and she turned him down because Paw wasn’t home yet. Now, Paw wanted to move! He had only been gone since late March; how could he decide to move so quickly without even asking her first?

Samuel, Jim’s oldest son, was 20 years old. He was a rock for the family, especially when Jim wasn’t around. They relied heavily on him to help around the farm. He was by far the most excited of the family to hear about the plan to go to Texas. He

paced the room thinking about all the things he wanted to do there. With so many possibilities, his mind was full of ideas. He loved adventure and he loved challenges. He knew it would be a lot of work, but he was willing to leave tomorrow, if that's when Paw wanted to go.

Fourteen-year-old Nathaniel, however, sat with his arms folded tightly against his chest. Why was he going to have to leave his friends? What about Sarah Brown? It just wasn't fair to make him move. Paw didn't understand. He runs off and leaves them to do all the work around here and comes home saying they're moving. There was no way he was going to go to Texas.

Jim spent several days explaining what happened in Texas, but he didn't have to explain to his wife. Nancy knew there was always the possibility that Jim would come home with ideas of moving to Texas. She knew her husband well enough to know that going to "look" at Texas meant they would be packing up and leaving Franklin County.

Nancy patted Jim on the arm. "It's okay, Jim. The children will be fine. It's been a hard few months for them, especially losing Lizzie. Give them a little time and they'll adjust."

Jim smiled at his wife. He thought Nancy was still as beautiful as she was the day they met. She was petite but she was a spitfire. She stuck with him and always supported him in all his wild ideas and business adventures.

"What about you, Nance? Are you really okay with this?"

"Of course. You are my husband, and I would follow you to the moon and back, if that's what you wanted to do. We can pack tomorrow." She knew they wouldn't be leaving in the middle of winter, but she wanted him to know she had no qualms about

following him wherever he went. Her only thought was not being able to put flowers on Lizzie's grave. She would find someone willing to do it, and she would always have her memories to hold on to.

"There is too much to do to go anywhere that quickly, but soon. Very soon."

Pulling his wife of 22 years into his arms, he kissed her deeply. "I have missed you. I want what's best for my family and I really think this is best. Besides the land we can get, there is something else great there, too. I just know it. Trust me."

"I do."

Stephen F. Austin, always the good salesman for bringing new settlers to his Little Colony, had told Jim about rumors of lead on land east of Bastrop. No one had found it yet, but making the small road from San Felipe to Bastrop that the settlers wanted would give Jim a chance to look for it, if he was interested. Jim was hooked.

Making the Trace had been harder than he expected because he wasn't familiar with the area, and it was such a long stretch of wilderness, but he gathered a couple of young men to help. Jim's friends, Jake Fletcher and Daniel Warren, had gone with him to Texas, so between the five of them, they set about marking a road. Jim told all of them about the possibility of lead in the area. He wanted it for himself, but if one of them found it first, then he would be happy for them.

Five months of wandering the wilderness of south-central Texas, marking trees, locating shallow crossings in streams, and clearing brush was hard work. They found their fair share of Indian campfires and saw a few wild hogs and wolves, but the narrow

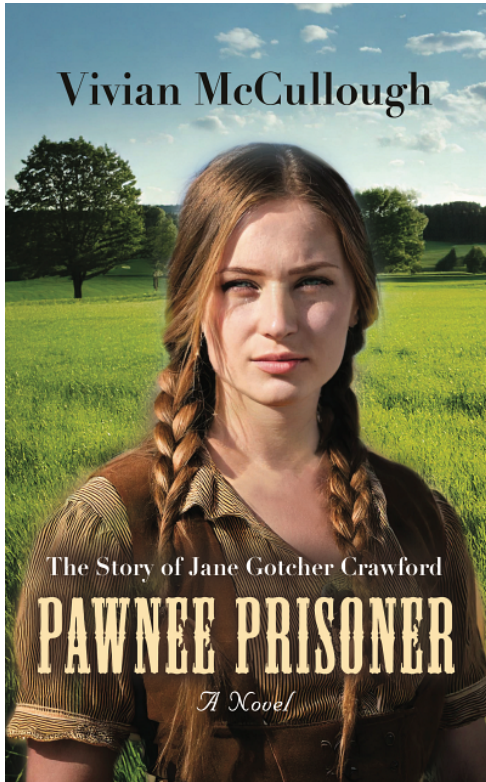
road was done. He had not found the lead, but he was sure it was there, and he intended to find it one day.

Just over two years later, after settling their business affairs in Alabama and waiting out Mexico's new ban on foreigners moving to Texas, they headed out for the new wonderland. They didn't have to travel alone. There were almost a dozen families waiting for the ban to be lifted so they could move. Jim was prepared to sneak in if he had to, but Nancy convinced him to do it lawfully.

As Jim built his homestead at Pin Oak Creek, he continued looking for the lead. Try as he may, he couldn't find any trace of it. He wasn't sure Stephen Austin was telling him the truth about it, in the first place. None of his friends had found it. Finally, deciding there must not be anything to the rumor, he came up with a plan.

There was a nice piece of land east of Bastrop on Rabbs Creek that was secluded. It had a lot of cedar trees on it, and he was offered a contract to provide posts to a man for fencing if he was to claim that piece of land. Jim decided that he would give everyone the impression that he found a rich treasure there while clearing the land, leaving them to believe he had found lead. He would call it his work camp and the land would be claimed in Nate's name.

Along with building a cabin and a barn at the work camp, Jim built several outbuildings near the woods. He had a few pens for hogs and cattle, but he wanted people to believe he was mining lead there, even if he never actually admitted that he was. He secretly began importing lead from New Orleans. Between the work camp on Rabbs Creek and the homestead over on the Trace at Pin Oak Creek, he was feeling good about Texas.



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