

POLONIA ROMERO
A B.R.F. and A.L. story
(Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands)
By John O. Stevenson

This story was written by Stevenson years after his tenure in Texas and perhaps he embellished the account a little. He wrote it in the third person and obviously substituted John Ogilvie for his complete name. However, the letters written to him by the bureau and missionary association substantiate much of what his story tells. It is one of the few accounts of his stay in Texas, and Port Lavaca in particular, that actually comes from his point of view and therein lies its value. He also makes a reference to Polonia among his sermons and later papers which leads me to believe this Mexican boy indeed existed and his tragic death a reality.

This copy was typed in 1935 by Stevenson's granddaughter and my aunt, Josephine Ogilvie Stevenson. She was a school teacher who never married and was interested in the family history. The whereabouts of the original story is unknown, but perhaps was in such a state of deterioration that it was salvageable only by copying it.

Flora Beach Burlingame
Great granddaughter of
John Ogilvie Stevenson

3567 Hilltop Drive
Mariposa, CA 95338

Copied by Josephine 1935

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I Port Lavaca

Bureau Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands
State of Texas
Galveston Texas

Special Orders No. 28

March 7, 1867

John Ogilvie Teacher of Freedmen's School will proceed to Lavaca, Texas and organize and teach a school for Freedmen at that place.

By command of Brvt. Maj. Gen. Griffin Asst. Com.
J. T. Kirkman

1st lieut. 26th U. S. Infy. A. A. A. G.

There you are, said the subject of the above order to the Galveston teachers, handing them printed copies of the same, and adding, I will leave by the first steamer of the Morgan Line for Indianola and Port Lavaca.

You have the honor of being the first white teacher of Freedmen's schools west of the Colorado River, said one teacher. But it is comical to think of a foreigner being ordered by the military to go and teach a school in Southwestern Texas. You are a subject of Queen Victoria and just from over the sea.

Well replied Ogilvie, it is in harmony with my A. M. A. commission which "commends me to the favor and confidence of the Officers of the Government" and, what is more important, it places me under the protection of the military post at Indianola.

Texas is a very large state. From Sabine Pass on the east to El Paso on the west is as far as from New York to Chicago: from the Oklahoma boundary on the north to Brownsville on the South is as far as Chicago to New Orleans. A trip from Galveston to Port Lavaca covers a very small portion of its coast line and still that trip is about 150 miles long. Just as there is a Northwest in the United States which is not a northwest geographically, just as there is in Texas a Southwest which is not southwest in reality. That section of Texas west of the Colorado River is commonly called Southwestern Texas by Texans.

Seated on the deck of a Gulf steamer, sailing into the west at set of day, watching the low sand dunes that fringe the coast, listening to the booming of the Gulf waves eternally pounding shoreward, the pioneer domine of Freedmen's schools for Southwestern Texas felt lonely. He judged from the general conversation that flowed around that all the passengers were Texans. He soon learned that all Texans are peculiarly proud of the Lone Star State, its size, its resources, its peculiar history and are never tired of talking about its advantages and characteristics. Awakened early next morning by the slowing up of the machinery he went on deck to see the ship crossing the bar at Pass Caballo. The air was balmy, the sky silver grey with the approach of the King of day, the ship rose and fell almost imperceptibly on the long easy swell of an almost glassy sea. Slowly she approached the bar paddling easily, ladylike she daintily picked her way among the rippling wavelets that showed the shallows were near, touched once or twice the hard sandy bottom and then shaking herself loose she was off and away under full speed on the

wide waters of Matagorda Bay. Shortly after breakfast Indianola was reached or rather the wharf was reached at the land end of which on a level with the bay lay the one streeted little village named Indianola. This wharf was a half a mile long, and it was difficult to determine from the looks of it whether the Steamship Co. had built it from the ship to the shore, or the town from the shore to the ship, for the town on its low sand dune seemed as much to be tied to the one end of the wharf as the ship was to the other, in fact, a few years afterward, the town was completely washed away by an unusually high tide. The Port Lavaca freight was transhipped from the steamship St. Mary on the one side of the wooden pier to the steam lighter San Antonio on the other side: the passengers transferred themselves and with loud tootings the lighter threw them off her lines swung around and stood up the bay for home.

On the way up the bay Mr. Ogilvie was asked by a fellow passenger if he was not a foreigner. Yes sir, he replied, I am a Scotchman.

When did you come over? About a year ago.

Are you going to stop in Port Lavaca? yes sir. Going into business That depends. What kind of a place is Port Lavaca? asked the teacher. It is a busy little town, the shipping port for the little Mexican States Chihuahua and Coahuila. It is the oldest white Texan settlement. Here La Salle the French explorer planted a colony and built a fort in 1685.

Just then a huge dredge at work on the bar between Lavaca Bay and Matagorda Bay hove in sight. Do you see that dredge? said he; that is where La Salle lost his provision ship nearly two centuries ago. Yesterday that dredge dug up a part of its keel. We intend to dredge a channel across that bar deep enough to admit the deepest steamers to Lavaca Bay wharves.

The Antonio slowing up, passed the dredge, entered the channel moved along for a quarter of a mile between huge mounds partly of sand and partly of mud mixed with oysters, and emerging opened up to the teacher a view of Lavaca Bay. On the right hand and stretching northward, dimly outlined in a summery haze lay a distant shore wooded to the waters edge; on the left hand and sweeping around it in front stretched a broken outline of bluffs, the more distant of which was crowned by the town where he was to organize and teach a school for freedmen. The steamboat whistle blew, the distant wharf drew near, grew large, there was crashing, bumping creaking of the boat and groaning of the wooden pier as the landing was made and the boat tied up. Mr Ogilvie found a scrawny, scattered town of about 600 inhabitants with a sidewalk here and there. The town was connected with Victoria by a stub of a railway that had been wrecked by the Confederacy and repaired by the Federacy, on which ran a weekly train which started every Monday for Victoria and returning left for Port Lavaca every Thursday. On steamer days a hand car was sent with the mail to Victoria. In the evening looking from his room in the upper floor of the hotel he saw stretching to the horizon on every side the unbroken, unfenced, and almost untracked hog wallow prairie. On the outskirts of the town stood a corral of huge clumsy two wheeled Mexican cart, each cart having

for its motive power many yokes of oxen. On the horizon rose the smoke of the weekly train trying to finish its weekly trip home from Victoria. The teacher thought, This place was settled about the same time as Boston, New York, Philadelphia. It had west of it a few hundred miles an ancient wealthy civilization under Spanish rule, they had west of them Indians and wilderness clear to the Pacific Coast, what makes the difference between them? The problem is an old one, a hard one and many solutions have been offered by sages, historians, and politicians.

II Freedmens School

Mr. Ogilvie commenced at once to adjust himself to his surroundings and to make preparations for opening or organizing a school. He rented rooms and engaged board with a French family; he rented as Bureau teacher the upper floor of an empty and unused warehouse from a Spanish or Mexican Company whose agent was an Englishman; he made the acquaintance of two New Englanders, one of whom had come to look after the estate of an elder brother who was killed during the war for his Union sentiments, the other a mustered out soldier had gone into a general commission and forwarding business in company with an Italian. In transacting what business was necessary to opening a school for Freedmen Mr. Ogilvie found that the white people of the town were largely of the Latin races; were French, Spaniards, Mexicans, Italians.

The warehouse whose upper floor was rented to be the pioneer schoolroom for Freedmen in that part of the country was under the bluff down by the Bay. Behind and above it were the remains of a fort that had been knocked to pieces by a Federal gunboat when the town was bombarded in '64. All around in the Bay the water was full of charred stumps of the piling that had been destroyed by the same bombardment. The school was furnished with seats that were simply planks, borrowed for the time, laid on boxes donated by a Yankee grocery. The teachers desk was a box full of Barnes and Burrs textbooks sent at low rates for introduction. Forty-five scholars were registered on the first day of school. Mrs. Wallace aged 45 was the oldest pupil, Jim Beauregard aged 4 years and nine months was the youngest, and all ages were filled in between. These new students were not only of all ages but also of all colors from a black Congo negress of powerful muscular development, through all shades of black mixed with brown and red, through all shades of brown mixed with red and white, to all shades of red and white to the pure white of the twins Ophelia and Melinda Houcks. Lucinda and Patsy Harper had woolly hair with which they wrestled in vain to secure a straight out quarter of an inch to a few tufts here and there. Ophelia and Melinda Houcks the twins had yellow golden hair as straight that their mother could secure nothing but limp corkscrew curls however much she papered and tonged or curling-ironed it. Their mother was young and fair and it was evident that their putative father was a Saxon, perhaps an Anglo-Saxon.

During the first week many scholars were added until the roll numbered over seventy. On the second week a young looking man with a Mexican cast countenance came to the school building leading a boy with a similar cast of countenance. Please sah I wish to put this boy in school, said he.

What is his name asked the teacher? Polonia Romero answered the man.

Are you his father? No sah his father is a refugee. He left the state, enduring the war, cause he was onwillin to enlist

under Macgruder. His father was a Spainard sah, who left Mexico because of wah dah and wasnt gwine fight in no war hyeah.

Has he h mother? No sah his mother is dead. She was my half sister; she was a Mexican ladysah. Polonia is an orphan sah and according to what you said on Sunday about de Bureau schools is titled to free books and free larnin.

Polonia was given a seat and a book. His uncle with much ostentation lectured him on how he ought to behave, urged the teacher not to spare him, and with a most obsequious bow to teacher and school gracefully withdrew.

The scholars all began with the same books which was the cause of much confusion. At the close of recess the cry would arise, Gus has got my book, Melinda had got my book etc. etc. The teacher at first wrote their names in the books forgetting that they could not read which was no great relief to the situation. One morning the twins came to the school with their books covered in caliso exactly like the dresses they wore. Ogilvie at once saw his way out of his difficulty. He ordered the scholars to go and do likewise. Under the stimulus of a strong desire for knowledge long forbidden the school made rapid progress.

The Ku-Klux excitement and the odium that was visited on all who boarded teachers of Freedmen or rented rooms for Freedmen's schools soon convinced the teacher that he must build in order to secure any degree of permanence to his work. He built himself a dwelling place on a lot owned by an aged colored couple and adjacent to their home. They agreed to board him and take the house in payment after a certain length of time. He wrote to the sub-assistant commissioner at Indianola told him the situation and asked advice about building a school house. He was encouraged to go ahead and was promised Government aid to the amount of one thousand dollars. A lot was secured, interest was awakened in the project among the business men of the town by persuading some of them to take shares in the enterprise, a white carpenter of some architectural skill was engaged to manage and supervise the work, and colored carpenters were hired to do it. A building was planned large enough for church and school purposes. For church purposes it was to be a union building to be used by the different denominations on different Sundays as might be arranged by and among themselves. The erection of the building was begun. The sills were laid on an underpinning of cedar blocks four feet high to keep the house out of the water in the wet season. The construction went on until the frame was up, the siding on, the roof shingled, the cupola finished, and the bell hung. The bell was a gift from Mr. Ware of Massachusetts.

Here the work stopped because all the money raised on the ground had been expended and because nothing could be got from the Bureau. Voucher upon voucher was signed and sworn to, sent and returned unpaid because of alleged or assumed violation of trivial technicalities. Finally we were told that the sub-assistant commissioner had absconded with all the available funds including our appropriation of the promised thousand dollars and we never received a cent of money for that building from the government. The structure when stopped had places for floor, windows and doors but no doors windows or floors in their places.

Mr. Ogilvie was compelled to transfer his school from the rented building to the unfinished church. He laid his planks for benches across the joists, constructed a platform of the odds and ends lying around the house for his classes to stand on and continued the school. A rooster hops up through the floor at the far end of the house, balances himself on a joist and recites clearly to the amusement of the class. A texan cow pokes her head in at the door and listens unmoved to g-o, go t-o-, to, etc. A swallow darts in at one window swings around and shoots out at another. A hog with dissatisfied frunt runs the gauntlet of the heels and toes of the children dangling between the joists. A tap of the bell announces recess and the scholars vanish through the floor: school is called and up they rise in their places as unexpectedly as the mysterious warriors of Rhoderich Dhu. No banging of door, no noisy floors, no shuffling of feet, perfect ventilation all through the long clear dry sunny wether of the delightful Texas spring time.

The teachers holding an A. M. A. comission were expected to write a monthly church letter and to the Lavaca teacher were assigned the churches in Winnebago, Port Byron, and Stillman Valley Ill. and the church in Muskegon Michigan. In the last monthly letter of the school year to these churches he told of the awkward predicament in which the defaulting Bureau Commissioner had placed him. Dear friends he continued, I find I am teaching as many white as black scholarâ. I know of one family only whose purely African origin is at all certain. The majority are mixed black and white. Some are wholly white, among them are the twin girls named Houcks and the Mexican boy Polonia Romero. It would seem that the Latin race is more ready than the Saxon to affiliate with races of retarded civilization and that in so doing it almost always lowers its own grade. On the other hand while the Saxon race in hokding itself aloof with haughty superiority is often cruel to inferior peoples nevertheless it retains its grade of civilization by so doing. Is this anâ explanation of the difference between Mexico and New England between the U. S. and Brazil? Is the problem between races the same as between individuals of different grades? Maintain the higher ground: do not descend to the same level; reach out a helping hand. At any rate we are in great need of help at present. Remember where our schools approach Mexican lands we are elevating white as well as black and herein we have perhaps a call to greater generosity/.

III Polonia Romero

Polonia Romero was a Spanish boy born of a Spanish father and a Mexican mother. His eyes were black and brilliant, his hair black dull and straight, his complexion a dusky white, his features had that Celtic cast of high cheek bone and long cheek or jaw common to the Scotch, Irish, Welsh? Breton and that part of Spain and its people which still reta ins the marks of an ancient Celtic people. He may have been about thirteen years of age and he may have been older for he was somewhat undersized judged by American standerds. He had a sad, silent, reserved, repressed air as if he had been abused all his days, but this may have been due to hisrace temperament which is slow and at times seemingly dull. He did not learn easily or as rapidly as his classmates, but this may have been owing to the fact that

he thought and conversed in Spanish, whereas his lessons were all in English. His behavior was a model to the rest of the school.

Ogilvie's A. M. A. commission had a seal on which was printed these words, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every living creature". The teacher himself was the child of generations of Presbyterian preachers and elders. The spirit of the commission and preacher was one; he saw a people without a shepherd and he opened a Sunday School in the new church and school building. Polonia was a fervent Catholic. Mr. Ogilvie was wise enough to see that religious preferences must be left alone. The A. M. A. was as broad and as Christian as its teachers were wise. Polonia became a Sunday School scholar with several other Catholics just as soon as they realized that their church preferences were to be undisturbed, and the Mexican boy soon outstripped all others in religious scholar ship. It was not for nothing that he belonged to the same race as Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier.

A mile or so from Port Lavaca lay the "abandoned lands" of Senor Romero's ranch and farm. He had fenced in a section of land by planting an osage hedge around it; he had stocked this ranch with cattle; adjacent to it on Chocolate Bayou he had a beautiful home orchard and farm. He brought his lovely Mexican wife and boy to this home, hoping to escape troubled Mexico and live in peace under the U. S. government. Soon the war of the rebellion, with which he was wholly out of sympathy, broke out. He could not be a Confederate soldier and he suffered in consequence of it. The Confederate Government confiscated his cattle and drove them off for the use of its armies; quartered its troops continually on his place eating up and destroying nearly all he had. Disheartened he went away leaving his destination, purpose and probable whereabouts known to his wife alone, which she for obvious reasons revealed to no one. In his absence she came to the mother's hour of trial amidst hardship and sorrows. She never rallied and the baby followed soon after her. Senor Romero never returned and what became of him is one of the secrets of the Confederacy. Polonia heir apparent to the "abandoned lands" was thus left to the care of his uncle.

The pastoral instinct being strong in Ogilvie he made a business of visiting the homes of all his scholars. One Saturday morning he walked out to the "abandoned lands" on Chocolate Bayou. The prairie was carpeted with the pinkish-yellowish ~~lowly~~* lowly Texan primrose: the chaparral was vocal with the mocking bird. The neglected osage hedge had become a long row of spindling trees alternated with equally spindling bushes and shrubs: the orchard had become a matted jungle through which ebbed and flowed the slumberous waters of the bayou: the mansion had become that melancholy ruin possible only to a frame building. Its walls were partly painted and partly unpainted its windows partly broken and partly whole: its rooms partly habitable and partly uninhabitable: the stope was rotting and the front and the front of the house full of bullet holes. Polonia was at work with his uncle in a truck patch. He welcomed Mr. Ogilvie gladly, and the "abandoned lands" became a favorite resort of the teacher, for a warm attachment grew up between the Mexican student and his Scotch domine.

The Freedmen out of their poverty, the churches that were appealed to, and individuals out of Christian charity raised funds enough to finish and furnish the union church and school building. The school prospered amazingly and the blessing of the Lord was upon it. It came to pass one Friday afternoon that the lessons seemed to drag, especially with Polonia. Perhaps the day was warmer than usual perhaps the teacher was more than usually tired; perhaps the trap of freedom with those we love, betrayed him into undue severity with his favorite pupil, as it sometimes does. He saw Polonia gazing dreamily through the open door at the chaparral greenery beyond. He rebuked the dreamer and ordered him to remain after school was dismissed. He had never spoken so to Polonia and a look of pain shadowed the dusky Mexican face which touched his heart with remorse. After school was dismissed he called Polonia to him. The boy came forward with that look in his countenance which love sometimes has when it is afraid of being slain in the home of its affections.

Did you find the lessons too hard today Polonia?

Si sen- yes, Master, said the boy tears filling his eyes.

Well Polonia whenever your lessons are too hard let me know it. I am so anxious to teach you all I can during the short time remaining to me here that it frets me to think of you wasting any time over your studies by lack of attention or earnest application.

Smiles shone through the scholars tears. He promised greater diligence, and was dismissed.

On the afternoon of the following day a horseman rode up in haste to the teachers gate and called him out. Polonia is dying, said he to the teacher and he wants to see you. What has happened, excitedly asked Ogilvie. His uncle had a mustang pony staked out on the prairie near to the house and he told the boy to go out and bring him in. Polonia went to do so but did not return. Noon came and still he was absent. His uncle became alarmed for his boy was nowhere to be seen. We went on a hunt for him and in two hours found him a few miles away out on the prairie, dangling at the end of the lariat by which the pony had been staked out. He was battered and bruised almost beyond recognition, having been dragged by the pony for hours across the hog wallow prairie.

How did it happen? We can only guess for the boy cannot speak. The Victoria train went past this morning and it may be that the horse took fright at the train. It must be that Polonia looped the lariat over his arm. Of course he would then be thrown and dragged along and this would alarm the horse still more. How long or how far he was dragged behind the terrified horse we do not know: his bones are broken; his face is disfigured; he wants to see you and you must come immediately if you would see him alive. You can have this horse said the messenger dismounting.

Ogilvie sprang into the saddle, touched the horse with his spurs sped across the prairie, and in a few minutes was at the bedside of the dying boy. He sat down by the bed and gently took the bruised and broken hand in his own. Polonia's jaw was broken so that he could not speak and his face disfigured almost beyond recognition but his eyes were as black and as brilliant as ever. And he talked with his eyes. He said I am so glad you could come teacher. I am so glad you did not scold me yesterday for I love you and I was doing my best. Goodbye teacher. Tears, silent tears fell from Ogilvie's eyes. Goodbye Polonia he said. I am sorry if ever I did

or said anything to hurt your feelings at any time. You are going to the better land of which we have talked in our Sunday School lessons. It is a better land than this, there you will meet your mother and some day we will all meet again, then with a quiver and a little sigh the light of love and life went out and the heir to the "abandoned lands" fell asleep. Ogilvie bowed his head and many times since then he has been grateful to Almighty God that he had grace sufficient given him to avoid unkindness on that last afternoon in what turned out to be his last advice to his favorite pupil. He told the uncle the story and added How careful we should be about what we say and do for we never know what words will be the last.

The burial custom among the Freedmen is to hold services at the grave first and afterwards at the church. The teacher conducted Polonia Romero's funeral service himself. At the church, which was crowded he told the story of Polonia as a scholar. As he told it in simplicity a moaning arose in the congregation, then a groaning, and finally a shouting. Women became helpless, strong men were carried out. A revival began in that funeral that lasted over a month with wonderful results.

In his church letters for the month Ogilvie told the story of Polonia Romero and among other things he said, WE should be careful in our use of the words negro and nigger. There are many boys and girls in the south who are not negroes for they are not black or niggers for they have not been slaves. On the contrary they are Saxon whites who like the Huck twins or Latin whites like Romero Polonia Romero. To apply these words to the citizens of the United States who happen to be slightly tinctured with colored blood or who happen to have relatives thus tinctured is to speak that which is untrue, unjust, injurious and unkind. All Christian men and women should govern their conversation in this respect. Paul said on Mars Hill, "God hath made of one blood all nations of men Acts XVII26, and Peter wrote in his general epistle these words,

He that would love life,
 And see good days,
 Let him refrain his tongue from evil,
 And his lips that they speak no guile;
 And let him turn away from evil, and do good;
 Let him seek peace and pursue it.

I Peter III 10-11

J. O?

J. O. Stevenson
 Waterloo, Iowa.