

# BACKPACK ADVENTURES

## Episode 7

### *“Texas: 1867”*

“Rowdy! Come back! Get back here, Rowdy!” Travis called to the Catahoula Leopard dog bounding uphill through bluebonnets and Indian paint-brushes. As Travis stopped to catch his breath, he watched the dog’s dark mottled coat split the brightly colored wildflowers like a zipper. With a leap, the disobedient dog disappeared into the grove of live oak trees that crowned the tall hill. “Ah, man,” he muttered to himself, “I’ve chased you across the rabbit-holed pasture and up this forever hill with this stupid backpack hanging on me like a sack of feed. Don’t you go hiding in those trees... Rowdy!”

His voice echoed off the hilltop, but the dog did not return. Travis struggled up the last fifty feet and turned to gaze out over the rolling farmland. Far below him, he could see pastures where cattle grazed on tall spring grass. A curving line of trees followed the meander of a stream separating the pastures from the hayfields that dropped smoothly toward Yegua Creek a few miles away. He thought he could make out black bits of Highway 50 that ran straight as an arrow through miles of cropland rectangles in shades of emerald, rust and gold. The Brazos River bottom is beautiful in the springtime, Travis thought. Too bad the rest of the Club couldn’t be here on this gorgeous April day.

Travis sighed and turned back toward the copse of live oaks that covered the hilltop. There was no underbrush. The tall trees spread above him with massive branches intertwining, creating a shimmering ceiling of tiny leaves. Flickers of brilliant sunlight from an azure sky spiked the dark loam floor. As his eyes adjusted to the fluctuating light, Travis halted, surprised by what he saw.

Tombstones stood in rambling fashion between the rough trunks of the ancient trees. Here and there, rusted iron fences surrounded groups of graves. Tall monuments dominated the centers of some of these groupings while low stone vaults covered others. Rows of rusty iron crosses tilted like swords thrust hastily into the dark brown earth years ago.

Travis’ heart raced as he squeezed through a break in the crumbling fence that marked the edge of the cemetery. He struggled to free his backpack as it snagged on the broken wire.

Suddenly, Rowdy barked, sending shivers down Travis' spine. A dozen wrens took flight, scattering tiny fallen oak leaves in their wake.

"Rowdy! Here, boy!" shouted Travis, at once self-conscious of being too loud in a cemetery. Wasn't he supposed to be respectful of the dead? What does it matter if I yell, he thought. It's not like anyone here's going to care. Just get the dog and go, a tiny voice inside him said.

He sprinted deeper into the shadows and followed the narrow drive that wound through the trees. His feet crunched on the gravel, and he felt he was again too loud in this silent, solitary place.

"Rowdy. Come here, Rowdy," Travis called softly.

*A-w-o-o-o-o-o...* Rowdy's coyote-like howl sounded from behind a tomb. As Travis hurried to grab Rowdy's collar, the dog sat perfectly still, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

Rowdy turned to face Travis, his one blue eye and one brown eye regarding his master calmly, as if he was waiting patiently for Travis to reach this very point. Rowdy stretched out his front legs and placed his head between them.

"What is it, boy? What are you up to, rascal?" Travis squatted and scratched Rowdy's ear. The dog lay on top of a gravesite, his gaze fixed on the marker. Travis squinted to read the darkened engravings.

"Sam Houston, Junior. May 25, 1843 to May 3, 1894. Wow! This must be the grave of Sam Houston. Or is it his son?" Travis' initial apprehension had given way to curiosity. The old graveyard seemed peaceful and calm now. Rowdy wouldn't be so quiet if there were anything dangerous here, now would he? Travis surmised silently. "I wonder if any other famous people are buried here?"

Travis wandered between the markers, running his hand over the roughly hewn limestone headstones, feeling the coolness of smooth marble monuments. Hoxey, Bryan, Clay, Coles. I wonder if Dad knows this place is here? thought Travis. He glanced at his watch. Only thirty minutes had passed since he left his father and Mr. Clark from whom Travis was buying a show steer. When the two men began a discussion of tuberculosis and brucellosis testing, Travis decided to exercise six-month-old Rowdy, Mr. Clark's cow dog, by exploring the countryside around the little town of Independence.

On the way to Mr. Clark's farm, Dr. Allen, Travis' dad, had pointed out some ruins in Old Baylor Park. That was where Travis was headed when Rowdy changed the course.

Travis paused before a very old gravestone. The letters were faint, but Travis could make out "fought in the American Revolution." Travis let out a low whistle. "That is an *old* grave!" He zigzagged around the close growing trees to a row of graves in another section, reading aloud. "1867. Died 1867. Departed 1867. 1866-1867. That was just a baby. September, 1867. Died, age 15 years, 3 months and 10 days, 1867. What was the deal in 1867?" Travis checked his watch again. "I'm calling Roman," he advised the now sleeping dog. He tapped his best friend's number into the keypad of his backpack computer.

"What's up?" Roman's voice buzzed out of the tiny speaker. "You buy a Grand Champion yet?"

"Naw, man, my dad and Mr. Clark are still talking, so I took Rowdy, his puppy, for a walk, or should I say a chase. I finally caught up to him and found this really cool place. Roman, I want you to meet me here, but not now, I mean, I want you to come here now, but meet me in... in 1867."

"In what?"

"In the year 1867. Here, in this spot. I need your help figuring out what happened."

"What happened to who?"

"To a bunch of people. In 1867."

"Travis, if I didn't know you better, I'd say middle school was making you loony," Roman teased. "I've got your geographic coordinates, but we've got to set an exact time if you want to meet in the past. You tell me when."

Travis checked his watch. "Three p.m. Uh, let's make it today, April 21, in honor of General Sam." He tapped the time and date into his keypad.

Roman answered, "Three p.m., April 21. General Who? Oh, never mind. You can tell me later. Much later. 1867?"

"1867."

"One-two-three, go!"

When the colors stopped whirling around Travis, he could see Roman's look of surprise. The trees were not as thick around as Travis had seen them at first, but they were well on the way to forming a "ceiling" of leaves. There were fewer gravesites, no perimeter fencing, and sprinklings of wildflowers in the sunnier spots. The hillsides were covered in tall native grasses that swayed and danced in the stiff April breeze. Travis could hear the distant rumble of thunder.

"OK, Sherlock, what's the big mystery? I can tell you what happened to each and everyone here. They died. Mystery solved. Can I go now? I thought we were meeting someplace *cool*, not stone cold. Let's go!" Roman anxiously grabbed the keypad of his BPC.

Travis rolled his eyes at his best friend. "Just a minute, Mr. Chicken, there's something missing. None of the 1867 tombstones are here. Let's check..."

"Boo!" Travis and Roman leapt back as a teenage girl jumped from behind a six-foot-long stone vault. Her long, light brown hair was tied behind her head with a blue ribbon that matched her calf-length faded blue cotton dress.

"Oh. I'm sorry to frighten you!" the young girl sputtered between belly laughs. She held her sides and laughed so loudly, Travis thought the dead might wake. Composing herself, she smoothed her dress and folded her hands in front of her, looking closely at the two speechless youths.

"Do forgive my transgression. I thought you were my younger brothers come to torment my solitude. I'm hiding from the three rascals. You are surely dressed strangely," the girl continued eyeing their backpacks. "Are you Yankee carpetba... Are you Northerners?" For the first time, the girl showed signs of unease, rocking on her feet like she was ready to run, but was unable to overcome her curiosity.

"We're Texans, and we're not scared," Travis answered, drawing himself up to his full height of 5 feet 10 inches. "In fact, my friend here's related to Juan Seguin. His family's been in Texas longer than mine." Travis had been impressed with Roman's family background ever since he found out Roman was related to a Texas Revolutionary hero.

"Yes, and longer than mine too. Both my parents are from other states and they have both spoken highly of Senator Seguin. Please pardon my lack of propriety. My name is Nettie. And you are...?"

"Travis."

"Roman."

The three teens stared at each other a moment in silence.

“Aren’t you scared coming alone to a cemetery?” asked Roman.

“No, I like this place. It’s quiet and peaceful and I can read and write in privacy, which is something I have little of at home. I live in town and go to school here at Baylor. We’ve lived here off and on since I was little. We moved back in ’63 when Papa died so Mama could be closer to her mother. But my grandmother died the very next year. We don’t have much money, so we just stayed put for a change.”

Travis looked around at the tombstones wondering if any belonged to Nettie’s kinfolk. She noticed and answered his unspoken question.

“Papa is buried in Oakwood in Huntsville and my grandmother had enough money to build a vault in town, across the street from our church. She always liked being in the middle of things.”

A low roll of thunder seemed to announce the boisterous arrival of Nettie’s brothers who were whooping and hollering for Nettie as they pulled an older teenage girl along with them. As the unruly troop reached the cemetery, their shouts fell to whispers as they surveyed the two strangers and their sister.

“It’s well we came to look for Nettie, dear little brothers, for she seems to have forgotten she is fifteen, not five. It is unbecoming for her to be playing hide and seek in a cemetery,” admonished the tall girl. Her beautiful auburn hair was pulled up on either side of her head in two loose buns. Though her tone was formal and severe, her eyes betrayed her concern for her younger sister.

“Mary, dear, allow me to introduce two steadfast Texans: Travis – I am sure named after the brave colonel—and Roman—a relative of Senator Seguin. Gentlemen, these are my siblings: my *elder* sister, Mary, a mature lady of seventeen, and the brothers of whom I warned you, Andrew, age thirteen, Willie, age nine and the baby, Temple.”

“I’m not a baby! I’m almost seven!” the little boy with dark, wavy hair screamed as Mary kept him from punching Nettie for her teasing.

“Wow!” exclaimed Travis. “Five kids. You’ve got a big family, Nettie.” He reached to shake the hand Andrew extended.

Andrew, almost as tall as Travis, assumed the role of family spokesman. “Yes. We’ve also two recently married sisters and a brother who is a war hero, wounded at Shiloh. He’s

studying medicine now. Someday, I'm going to be in the military. It's in my blood. I like a good fight and..."

Nettie interrupted. "Andrew is especially good at shooting. Shooting off his mouth."

"Oh, what do girls know about men's affairs? Say, Travis and Roman, how would you like a bite of beef jerky?" Andrew pulled a thick salty chunk of dried beef from the pocket of his gray, threadbare trousers.

"Good grief, Andrew, have you salt pork too?" Nettie scolded. "Let's invite these two visitors down to the house to have a real meal. Mary, what do you say? Mother wouldn't mind at all. Aunt Eliza could bake a blackberry pie and biscuits. And we have that fresh rabbit and the mustard greens."

Before Mary could answer, a flash of lightning and instantaneous clap of thunder sent little Temple rushing into Mary's arms and Nettie scurrying for her book and tablet that lay behind the stone vault.

"We must go home before the storm breaks or Mama will be worried," commanded Mary, her arm around Temple to lead him swiftly down the hill. Andrew and Willie raced past them hollering as if they led a cavalry charge.

Travis looked at Roman and shook his head. Turning to Nettie, he spoke quickly. "We've got to be on our way. Go home, be safe. It was nice to meet you."

"But..." Nettie hesitated and then smiled. "Will I ever see you again?"

"It's possible we may return," Travis said with a glance at Roman, "in the future." They could smell the rain now.

With a sudden sound like falling coins, the clouds burst open in a torrent of nickel-sized raindrops, pounding the spring soil into mud before Nettie could reach the bottom of the hill.

"You coming back with me?" Travis shouted over another thunderclap.

"Well, I'm sure not staying here!" Roman replied as he grabbed Travis' backpack to tag along for the trip back to the future.

The next lightning flash was not from the storm.

---

Travis and Roman would have been surprised to find themselves dry and surrounded by brilliant, late afternoon sunshine had they not had so many prior experiences traveling with the

BPC. No matter the weather or time of day when they returned, they could always get back to the present place and time as if they had never left. Even Rowdy still lay in contented sleep on top of Houston's grave.

"At least we figured out this is not General Sam, but his son," Travis commented as he began to walk Roman through the older sections of the cemetery. "Here's where I found a lot of the 1867 tombstones. Let's see if they give actual months or not."

Roman and Travis began to examine the markers more closely. Markers from years other than 1867 had more information than those for 1867.

"It's like they were in too much of a hurry to really engrave much on the headstones. I'm really curious what happened." Travis ran his fingers across a rough limestone marker that had weathered so badly only the faintest trace of the year remained. 1867. Beside it, another was just the same. A third, identical in shape, stood close beside the other two, completely blank. As Roman tried to lift a fourth marker that had fallen beside the others, Travis stood up to view the stones from another angle. That's when he saw the fifth plain marker nearly buried beneath the drooping branches of an old live oak tree.

"Roman, isn't it kind of strange to have five identical markers in a row?" asked Travis, a sickening knot growing in his stomach.

Travis knelt beside the fifth marker, lifted the old branch away, and brushed the dirt and withered leaves from atop the stone. He ran his fingers across the scratched surface. His forefinger traced the crude marks. Two parallel, vertical lines. A dash. Two small semi-circles – one on top of the other. A larger circle. A dash. And then the familiar 1867, the seven partially broken off in the crumbling edge of rock returning to earth. No name remained, not even one letter.

Roman leaned over his friend and helped gently lift the fifth marker from the soil. It came free with a soft sucking pop, but the bottom was too eroded to allow the boys to stand the stone upright. Instead, they carefully leaned the last stone against the gnarled branch that had protected it for so long.

"You don't think..." Roman began, unable to finish the question they both feared to answer.

"November." Travis wiped the dirt from his hand onto his blue jeans. "We've got to go back to November 30, 1867. I've got to know what happened."

“Back to the graveyard? All we’ll find is these stones brand new!”

“No, I think we need to go into Independence, to that church Nettie mentioned. Dad and I passed it when we came into town. Can you set the coordinates for Independence Baptist Church, November 30, 1867?” Travis faced his friend, his face solemn, serious. “Will you go with me?”

“Couldn’t keep me away!”

---

A glittering rainbow of light seemed to fill the silent church, and Nettie lifted her eyes to watch it play across the white boards of the back wall above the oil lamps and the preacher’s heavy wooden chair. The red, blue, green and yellow rectangular panes of the stained glass windows were dull with the gray pounding rain that had devastated the town for weeks. She turned in the hard wooden pew to seek the source of the light.

“Travis! And Roman! I... I didn’t hear you come in,” Nettie greeted the boys with a soft smile. She was dressed in a simple black cotton dress with her hair tied in the back with a black grosgrain ribbon. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long,” replied Travis. “I was hoping I’d find you here.” The relief in his voice was audible and Nettie looked at him with a questioning frown. He hurried toward her pew then remembered what she had said about wanting privacy. He hesitated. “Do you mind if we talk awhile?”

“Of course not. I may not be the best company just now.”

“Nettie, is everything OK with you, with your family?” Travis asked.

“So far, but I’m really worried about Mama. Ever since we returned to Independence, she’s been visiting the sick and grieving for her old friends who’ve died. She says we never should have gone to Maggie’s farm in Labadie in September.” Nettie held a white cotton handkerchief to her nose and sniffed. A faint smell of camphor lingered in the air.

“Who’s Maggie?” Roman asked.

“She’s the third oldest. She married Captain Williams last year in October and they live out in the country on a farm. When the fever started moving inland from Galveston and got as close as La Grange, Mama decided to vacation with Maggie. Now we’re only home long enough to pack to go to Nannie’s house for Christmas.”



“Who’s Nannie?” Roman asked again. “Another sister?”

“The oldest sister. She married Mr. Morrow, a wealthy merchant from Georgetown, last year in August. She had a baby girl this past June. Aunt Eliza moved to Georgetown to help her with the baby like she took care of all of us. Aunt Eliza was only ten when my mother was born and has lived with her ever since. Mama needs Aunt Eliza now. We all do.”

“Well, sounds like you’ll all be with your mother’s older sister when you reach Georgetown,” comforted Travis.

“My mother’s sister?” Nettie frowned in confusion. “Oh, you mean Aunt Eliza. She’s not my real aunt. She’s our house servant. My grandmother, Nancy Lea, the one who’s buried across the street, owned Eliza’s parents back in Alabama and gave Eliza to my mother. Eliza used to say my mother was her living baby doll. Of course, Papa freed all our servants after the war started, but Eliza stayed with us. We can’t offer much now since our money is all gone, but we’d never let Eliza live alone.”

“You owned slaves? But I thought you said you were poor.” Travis was now the one to frown in confusion.

“We owned lots of homes and farms, you know, property. You can’t eat property. Papa was a Unionist even though he owned slaves. He lost his job when the War started. He was a heavy drinker before he married Mama, but I think he drank due to his war wounds. He was baptized into this very church when Andrew was born. After four daughters, he finally had a second son he could name after his hero, Andrew Jackson.” As she talked about her father, Nettie traced the initials carved into the pew in front of her. The dark wood, smoothed by countless rubbings, gleamed beneath her pale hand.

The little stone church was silent except for the steady drumming of rain on the roof. Nettie spoke so softly that the boys had to lean forward to hear her over the rain. “In here, tracing his initials, sitting in the pew that belongs to my family, in the church my mother and grandmother helped build—this is where I finally feel at home. I was just eleven when he died. He was seventy.”

A single tear slid down Nettie’s pretty cheek.

“So, we are poor now. Mama’s money was all in Confederate notes. Worthless. Uncle Joshua offered us \$2000 in gold, but Mama wouldn’t take it. He worked hard to earn all that

money. He was one of our house servants, too, but Papa let him keep all his earnings from his blacksmith job.”

“Did your father free him too?” asked Roman.

“Yes, even though it was illegal to do so. Mama says Uncle Joshua’s sons will be educated and do great things some day.”

“So you’re having to go to your sister’s because you’re poor? Why can’t you just stay here?” Roman asked.

“Mama says we’ll come back after the winter sets in. That’s usually when fever epidemics subside. Maybe we can finally stop wearing black! I’m sick of the rain and the mud and the stinking water. I’m sick of the hot black clothes and the camphor rags and the mosquitoes. I miss my friends from Galveston who are quarantined and can’t come back to school.”

“Why do you have to wear black?” Travis asked.

“Funerals every week. Some people we know, some people no one knows. Today we buried a family of five German immigrants. They had been on their way from Indianola to New Braunfels when they decided to detour to Waco. Mr. Cole said they weren’t quarantined long enough, but they had been waiting three months and were perfectly healthy till they reached Independence. They died within a week of becoming sick.”

Travis and Roman exchanged glances.

“Mama says they traveled after dark to make up time and got night vapors. That’s why I carry this camphor rag to guard against swamp gases.” Nettie waved the little white handkerchief with its medicinal smell.

“But there’s no swamp here,” remarked Travis.

“The whole town is a swamp! Have you not noticed the ditches and the overflowing privies? The Brazos River has overflowed its banks all summer and the rain has not stopped more than three days in a row since June.” Nettie looked wistfully toward the stained glass windows lining the west wall. “I think that’s what I miss the most.”

“What?” Roman and Travis asked simultaneously.

“The sun. Maybe if the sun would shine for a while, everyone could get well. I think sunshine makes people healthy, but we stay all shut up inside where the air is as stagnant as the cotton fields down by the river. Mama says the malaise enters your very bones till you can’t lift

yourself out of bed. Is it any wonder that some people let the fever grow until they get the black vomit or the jaundice?”

“Can’t you take some kind of medicine?” Roman asked.

“There’s quinine, calomel, castor oil, oil of black pepper, chlorine water – nothing that works for sure. No way of knowing if you’ll be the one to burn for days and then awake with immunity, or take ill one day and be dead the next. I just know I can’t stay cooped up all day and night. If I ever get sick, I’ll allow no one to let my blood. Papa had that done and I think that’s what killed him finally.”

Travis was about to ask what Nettie was talking about when Andrew burst into the church, skidding to a halt beside the pew, a wild look in his eyes.

“Nettie, I’ve been looking everywhere for you! Come quick!” Andrew struggled to catch his breath. “Mama collapsed.”

Nettie’s hand went to her mouth, a look of terror on her face. Without a word, she slipped the black ribbon from her hair and pressed it into Travis’ palm. She rushed to catch up with Andrew. Roman and Travis watched them slosh across the muddy, rutted lane and into a two-story white house a block away from the church.

Travis looked across to the pew where Nettie had sat tracing the carved initials of her father. He traced the “S H” then walked to the far right aisle of the church, next to the east wall. A small sign was attached to the end of the pew. “Reserved for the Houston Family.”

“Whoa, does that mean what I think it does?” asked Roman as he read the sign over Travis’s shoulder. He looked at the carved initials and added, “As in Sam Houston?”

“Roman, we answered the mystery of the five tombstones, but we found a whole graveyard more.”

“Yeah, and I think these riddles are best investigated from a safe, fever-free location – like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ready to go, Travis?”

Travis clutched the black ribbon in his fist. “Ready or not, I think we need to go... Listen, the rain’s stopped.”

A shaft of low-angled sunlight pierced the breaking cloudbank and illuminated the simple stained glass panes. The reflection cast jewel-hued patterns across the dark oak pews. Brilliant sapphire and emerald, deep gold and crimson blended for a moment with the multi-colored flash

that was the boys' return via the BPC. In the sodden dusk, hundreds of hungry bats emerged, winging from the hills into the very center of Independence.

---

Travis and Roman stood at the intersection of Highway 50 and Highway 390. No traffic passed on the narrow two lane roadways as the sun slowly rolled toward the horizon. They had set their coordinates for sunset on April 21, 2002, when they knew the weather would be hot and dry.

The lot across the street from the church was vacant except for a small stone building atop a grassy knoll. Travis and Roman walked to the building and found the only opening on the opposite side from the street. The rough planks that formed the door to the weathered structure allowed little light and a limited line of vision into the dark cavity.

"Do you think we could open it?" ventured Roman. "I wonder what's in there?"

"This must be Nettie's grandmother's burial vault. Look, the latch is open!"

Travis slowly pried the door open as Roman voiced his concern, "Wait a minute, Travis, this is somebody's *grave*. We shouldn't be messing with it! No telling what we'll find in there..." His voice trailed off as he peered around Travis.

"Maybe it's not what I thought," said Travis.

Cobwebs adorned a wide, dirty shelf that stretched across half the tiny building. Boards leaned against the other walls and folding chairs covered with dust lay on the ground. A large, dilapidated wooden box sat on the rude shelf.

"Travis, let's go," whispered Roman. He knew his friend's curiosity could lead them both into trouble.

"Chill out, Roman, if there was any *body* in here, there would be a marker or a sign and they wouldn't leave the thing open." Travis took a step inside the vault, stooping to fit under the low doorframe. The lid to the box was caved in and Travis could see the casket was empty. "It's empty, Roman. You can come in now, Mr. Chicken."

"Yeah, right," Roman retorted and slammed the wooden door back into place, scraping up dust and enveloping Travis in darkness. Roman jumped back as the door flew open again and Travis leapt, gasping and sputtering, toward his friend.

“Cut it out!” Travis screamed. Roman’s laughter slowly died as Travis regained his composure. Roman began to walk around the iron fence that connected to two corners of the building making a small enclosure.

Travis pulled the door shut again and followed his friend to the street side of the fence.

There were several tombstones in the tiny graveyard.

“Aunt Letha, Aunt Eliza,” Roman murmured the names. “No dates.”

“Nancy Lea,” Travis read, “That’s Nettie’s grandmother.”

“Margaret Lea Houston,” Roman read, “I’ll bet that’s her mother. Look at the dates: April 11, 1819 till December 3, 1867.”

“December 3. That’s just three days after we last saw Nettie. Three days after her mom collapsed. Wonder what...”

Just then a stiff breeze whipped the tall live oaks in the churchyard. The dry brown remnants of last season’s leaves rained down noisily and skittered across the street toward the graveyard. The old bronze bell outside the church hall softly tolled, an echo from the past. The startled boys turned to the street where they noticed for the first time a small museum behind the church.

“Bet we could find a lot of answers in there,” Roman speculated.

Travis was staring toward the rooftop of the church where a dark creature darted and dipped in quick, jerky flight. Roman followed his gaze.

“Bat,” Roman stated.

Travis seemed mesmerized by the bat’s aerial maneuvers till a dog’s sudden bark echoed off the hills and broke his reverie.

“Rowdy. I’ve got to check on Rowdy. We better head back to real time, Roman. The museum looks closed now, anyhow. We can come back another time.”

“Yeah, any time we want.”

Travis felt in his pocket for Nettie’s ribbon. “Even 1867.”