

Diana, Tiana or Talihina?

The Myth and Mystery of Sam Houston's Cherokee Wife

*By Stan Hoig**

Few people in the annals of Oklahoma history have stirred more romantic fervor than the Cherokee wife of Sam Houston. Her mysterious being has often incited historians and writers to fill in gaps of the unknown with speculation and rapturous embellishment. But, has there been a significant historical error made regarding the identity of the woman who was Houston's wife (or conjugal mate) during the period from 1829 to 1833 when the hero of San Jacinto resided in the region of Fort Gibson? On the basis of some recently found records, it is apparently so.

The background facts are well known. In 1810 a group of Cherokees migrated from the Tennessee River country of Alabama and Tennessee to the Arkansas country, being joined there in 1817 by long-time Indian trader John Rogers and his large Cherokee-blooded family. His several sons—John, Jr., Charles, James, and Joseph—played prominent roles among the Western Cherokees. On June 14, 1819, they were among those whom Agent Meigs addressed as "Arkansas Cherokee Chiefs."¹ Son James, along with the famed Sequoyah, was with the delegation to Washington which signed the Treaty of 1828 exchanging the Cherokee lands in Arkansas for those in present eastern Oklahoma.

In 1829 Sam Houston, recently resigned as governor of Tennessee following a disappointing marriage and divorce, arrived among the Cherokees, with whom he had lived as a young man in Tennessee. During his stay, Houston founded a trading post called the Wigwam Neosho near Fort Gibson and married (it is believed but not proven) a

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

young widow of the mixed-blood Rogers family. In 1833 Houston headed south to exercise his ambitions in Texas, leaving behind his part-Cherokee wife, never to return.

Historians have long identified Houston's Indian wife by a variety of names and spellings, among which the most prominent have been Tiana and Talihina. But there is good reason to believe that these names are misapplied, that the name of his wife was clearly, and only, Diana or Dianna. Just where Diana died, where she was buried, and who Tiana and Talihina were are all a part of the controversy that lives on today.

The matter of Sam Houston's wife was brought to public light in 1904 when *Fort Gibson Post* publisher J. S. Holden acted upon information supplied to him by John E. Gunter of Muldrow, whose sister had supposedly been living with Mrs. Houston when she died. Holden exhumed the corpse of a woman identified as Talihina or Tahlihina from a grave located on a hill near the mouth of Skin Bayou at the old Arkansas River steamboat port of Wilson's Rock. The bones, reckoned to be that of a very tall and large framed woman (there was a tortoise-shell comb in the grave), were taken to the Fort Gibson National Cemetery and on the rainy Sunday of September 4, 1904, laid to rest with a tombstone inscription reading: "No. 2,467, Talihina Houston."²

Two Cherokee historians, Emmet Starr and Shorey Ross, insisted that a serious mistake had been made. Starr believed the remains appropriated by Holden were that of a woman whose maiden name was Coody and that the body of Sam Houston's wife lay in some forgotten grave in the vicinity of Fort Gibson.³ There is no solid evidence whatsoever that connects Houston's wife with the Wilson's Rock or Skin Bayou area.

Just where the name Talihina originated is not known. It is said to be a Choctaw word meaning either "iron road" or "railroad."⁴ Narcissa Owen used the name to identify Houston's wife in her *Memoirs*, but this book was published in 1907, and her reference to J. S. Holden makes it likely that she obtained the name from him. Her claim to familiarity with the grave will be discussed later. So far as we know at present, the name came from Holden's informants. His account of the reburial makes no mention of any identifying marker on the original grave.⁵

Still another problem exists with the identification of Sam Houston's Cherokee spouse as the former Tiana Rogers. As we shall see, it can definitely be established that the woman's name was Diana, not

DIANA, TIANA, OR TALIHINA?

Tiana, and that Tiana Rogers was an entirely different Cherokee woman who arrived in the Indian Territory after Houston was long gone, and that Diana, who had remarried a man named Samuel McGrady, was already dead.

One of the first applications of the name Tyania Rogers to Houston's wife was made by Alfred Mason Williams in his *Sam Houston and the War of Independence in Texas*, published in 1893. Williams states in his foreword that he got his information "from the lips of aged Indians who remembered him [Houston], and particularly from the late Judge Riley Keys . . ." who was familiar with Houston during his residence with the tribe.⁶ It must be noted that this was well over fifty years after the death of Houston's Cherokee wife.

Cherokees West, which was authored in part by publisher Emmet Starr and in part by the former Cherokee missionary Cephas Washburn, gives the name of Houston's wife as Tiana. Washburn was dead in 1910 when Starr published the book, incorporating the entirety of an 1869 book by Washburn entitled *Reminiscences of the Indians* and adding to it material of his own.⁷ It is significant that in Washburn's original publication, there is absolutely no mention of Sam Houston or his wife by any name. Starr does not indicate the source of his information on the subject, but again it must be noted that he undoubtedly had to rely upon memory accounts and that he offered no tangible evidence to support Tiana as a name for Houston's wife.

Historical errors, often fostered by romanticism and by inadequate research, have a way of being perpetuated through the years; the longer they last, the more difficult they are to disbelieve. Such is the case of the real first name of the part-Cherokee wife of the man who became famous as a leader of the Texas revolution against Mexico.

Unquestionably, the documents most pertinent to her true identity are two affidavits presented by her, one in 1833 and the other in 1836. The first of these notarized statements declares: "Know all men by these present, that I Diana Gentry, widow of late David Gentry, of Frog Bayou; Do by these present authorize, constitute, and appoint Saml. Houston late of the Wigwam my true and lawful attorney. . . ."⁸

In the other, which concerns a dispute over a slave, she states: "On the 20th of November 1834, Joseph Rogers, a Cherokee, executed to his sister Dianna Houston, formerly Dianna Rogers, a Bill of Sale. . . ."⁹ Both affidavits were signed by her with an "X."

From these statements it is perfectly clear that Houston's Cherokee wife was named Diana, or Dianna. It is difficult to rationalize

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

that she considered herself identified by any other name, though many have attempted to do so. But what of Narcissa Owen's claim, "I as a young girl often gathered roses near her [Talihena's] grave, which was marked by a small white marble head and foot stone."¹⁰ This supposedly took place at Skin Bayou, just west of Fort Smith. Owen also made reference to a Little John Rogers who lived on Skin Bayou.

A major difficulty with Narcissa Owen's account is that of location. She states that her family moved from Webbers Falls, where she was born in 1831, to Beatte's Prairie in 1833 when she was two years old. Beatte's Prairie, situated just west of Maysville, Arkansas, is well to the north of Skin Bayou. Narcissa remained at Beatte's Prairie until 1845, when at the age of fourteen she moved to Fort Smith.¹¹ If she picked roses near the grave of Houston's wife at Skin Bayou as a young girl, it would have been during the two years she remained at Fort Smith before going off to school in Indiana. This seems doubtful, and makes her validation of the name Talihena suspect.

But was there a Tiana Rogers who might have created confusion in the memories of people? Indeed there was, and it can be clearly established that she was not the wife of Sam Houston. The matter of Tiana's mistaken identity is compounded by the existence of at least five men by the name of John Rogers who were closely connected with the Cherokees during their early years of settlement in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Tiana Rogers was the wife of one of them. The identities of these men in capsule form are:

John Rogers, Sr., often believed to be Diana's father, lived among the Cherokees and Creeks in Tennessee and Georgia as early as Revolutionary War times. He married a Cherokee woman and sired a large family which resided in the Hiwassee area on the Tennessee River prior to moving west to Arkansas in 1817.¹² By his own statement, this John Rogers (born in 1749) was sixty-six years of age in 1815, and thus he was sixty-eight at the time of his move westward.¹³ It is probable that this John Rogers died prior to 1820, for he is no longer mentioned in Cherokee Agency correspondence following that time.

His last recorded communication with Cherokee Agent Meigs is dated October 30, 1819, when he reported from Dardanelle, Cherokee Nation, Arkansas, that "My family and myself are tolerably well, and we have just secured a plentiful crop. This country has been extremely sickly this fall . . . several of the Indians have died."¹⁴

John Rogers, Jr., who was born circa 1776 and who operated a saline

DIANA, TIANA, OR TALIHINA?

on the Grand River, played a leading role in the Western Cherokees and led the opposition to Chief John Ross's control of the Cherokee government when the final Cherokee removal was made in 1838. Without much doubt it was John Rogers, Jr., who in 1820 traveled from Arkansas to Tennessee to bring back two Osage children who had been captured by the Cherokees.¹⁵

A statement by Cherokee agent P. M. Butler on February 8, 1842, identifies John Rogers, Jr., as the father of Diana (John Rogers, Sr., reporting that ten days after Diana's death "Jno. Rogers, the father of Mrs. McGrady, through his son Judge Wm. Rogers" seized all of Sam McGrady's property in payment for an alleged debt).¹⁶ Obviously this was not John Rogers, Sr., who would have been 89 years of age at the time. Butler was possibly mistaken, but the matter of just who was Diana's father remains under some shadow of question. This John Rogers died in Washington, D.C., on June 12, 1846.¹⁷

John Rogers, a merchant, was a founder of the city of Fort Smith, Arkansas, having come there originally as a sutler for the military post. He promoted a trapping excursion to the Rocky Mountains in 1829 and was a partner with General John Nicks in the sutler's store at Fort Gibson for several years.¹⁸ General Ethan Allen Hitchcock met both the John Rogers of Fort Smith and the John Rogers (Jr.)—whose name he spelled Rodgers—of Grand River Saline during his tour through the Cherokee country in 1841–42.¹⁹

John Rogers, who lived near Tawany Old Town in Georgia in 1829, married the half-Cherokee daughter of Thomas Caudry (or Cordery), and migrated to the West during the 1830s. This John Rogers is believed to have been a brother to the grandfather of Will Rogers. He gave his age as fifty-five in 1829.²⁰

Little John Rogers married the daughter of a promiscuous Georgia white man named James Foster. Her name was spelled variously as Tiana, Tianna, Tyanna, Tyana, or Tihana, etc. This John Rogers came west in 1833, leaving Tiana Foster Rogers and four minor children in Georgia.²¹ That she was still in Georgia in 1838 is established by a claim she issued for a stolen horse there that year.²² Eventually, in 1839 she and her children were forced to come west and join Rogers at Skin Bayou.²³ Little John sold his homestead to a Fort Smith merchant and returned to Georgia, where he died, but Tiana and the children remained in the West.²⁴

After Houston departed for his Texas destiny in 1833, Diana (who

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

had two children by her previous marriage to David Gentry) married again, this time to Samuel McGrady, who operated as a whiskey runner between Fort Smith and Fort Gibson.²⁵ Diana Rogers Gentry Houston McGrady died on November 4, 1838.

Tiana Rogers lived a good while longer. In September of 1845 a claim was submitted on behalf of "Mrs. Tyanna Rodgers" to the U.S. Government by S. C. Stambaugh, appealing for payment for certain improvements under the Treaty of 1828.²⁶ This appeal was still pending in 1853 when Stambaugh died. Interestingly, the appeal papers were later found among Stambaugh's effects and were purchased in 1875 by a J. M. Bryan.²⁷

It would appear from this that Tiana Rogers has been confused with Diana Rogers, at least in reference to name. But any theory that it may have been her grave which was removed from the Skin Bayou area to Fort Gibson is pretty well destroyed by the fact that Tiana Rogers moved to Chetopa, Kansas. She was there in 1847 when Larkin McGhee established a trading post at the site of Chetopa, marrying Tiana's daughter Sarah in 1848.²⁸ Tiana raised her family of four sons and three daughters at Chetopa and very likely was buried there.

The story of Sam Houston's Indian wife is by no means done with; the myths and mysteries remain. Romanticism and controversy in themselves will keep the matter alive, but there is unquestionably more information about Diana and Tiana waiting to be uncovered to shed new light on these two, or three, intriguing women of Oklahoma and Cherokee history.

ENDNOTES

* Stan Hoig is a professor of journalism at Central State University, Edmond, Oklahoma. He is the author of several books, including *The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889*, published by the Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹ Records of Cherokee Agency, 1819-20, National Archives (M208, Roll).

² *Fort Gibson Post*, July 21, September 8, October 15, 1904; *Muskogee County Republican and Fort Gibson Post*, May 26, 1910. Holden originally planned a headstone which was to read: "Sacred to the Memory of TAHLIHINA, Cherokee Wife of GEN. SAM HOUSTON, Liberator of Texas. Died at Wilson's Rock, C. N., in the Year 1838. Removed to Fort Gibson, May 30, 1905." Instead, Holden and five others went to Muldrow, rented a wagon and hauled the remains back to Fort Gibson, erecting the simpler headstone in September 1904.

³ Emmet Starr and Cephas Washburn, *Cherokees West, 1794-1839* (Claremore: Emmet Starr, Publisher, 1910), pp. 142-43; Jack Gregory and Rennard Strickland, *Sam Houston with the Cherokees, 1829-1833* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 51. Ross thought Houston's wife had been buried on Fourteen Mile Creek.

⁴ Gregory and Strickland, *Sam Houston with the Cherokees*, pp. 34-35.

⁵ *Fort Gibson Post*, July 21, 1904.

DIANA, TIANA, OR TALIHINA?

⁶ Alfred Mason Williams, *Sam Houston and the War of Independence in Texas* (Boston: Mifflin & Co., 1893), pp. 50–51.

⁷ Starr and Washburn, *Cherokees West*; Cephas Washburn, *Reminiscences of the Indians*, (Richmond: 1869).

⁸ Affidavit by Diana Gentry, June 27, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., Cherokee Agency West, 1832–33, National Archives (M234, Roll 78). It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that in this 1833 affidavit Diana gives no indication whatsoever that she was the wife of Sam Houston, identifying herself as “Diana Gentry, widow of late David Gentry. . . .”

⁹ Statement of Samuel McGrady Case. In this affidavit made August 24, 1836, the statement is made “I, Dianna McGrady, late Dianna Houston. . . .”

¹⁰ Narcissa Owen, *Memoirs of Narcissa Owen, 1831–1907* (Washington: 1907), p. 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–57.

¹² John Rogers to Col. Meigs, October 4, 1806, Ltrs. Recd. Relating to Indian Affairs, Sec. of War, 1800–1824, National Archives (M271, Roll 1).

¹³ John Rogers statement, December 22, 1815, Ltrs. and Misc. Records, Cherokee Agency, 1813–1815, National Archives (M208, Roll 6).

¹⁴ Records of Cherokee Agency, 1819–20, National Archives (M208, Roll 8).

¹⁵ *Missionary Herald*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 (January 1821), pp. 21–23.

¹⁶ Statement by P. M. Butler, Ltrs. Recd., Cherokee Agency, 1842, National Archives (M234, Roll 86).

¹⁷ *New Orleans Picayune*, June 21, 1846.

¹⁸ *The Arkansas Gazette*, September 2, 1846; Grant Foreman, *Advancing the Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1933), p. 55.

¹⁹ Grant Foreman, ed., *A Traveler in Indian Territory, the Journal of Ethan Allen Hitchcock* (Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1930), pp. 61, 89.

²⁰ John Rogers statement, December 9, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., Cherokee Agency East, 1829, National Archives (M234, Roll 73); George Morrison Bell, Sr., *Genealogy of Old and New Cherokee Indian Families* (Bartlesville: Leonard Printing Co., 1972), pp. 354–58.

²¹ File 46, Special Files, OIA, National Archives (M574, Roll 5). This statement by Looney Hicks, May 23, 1845, declares: “Thathe was well acquainted with James Foster, the father of Ti-ha-na, the wife of John Rogers, commonly called and known as ‘Little John Rogers,’ that knowing the character and circumstances of said Foster, who having in the Old Cherokee Nation two or three sets of children by three several (*sic*) women, the two first wives he did not live with at the time. . . .”

²² Affidavit, Tiana Rogers, May 11, 1838; claim of Tyanah Rogers, May 23, 1837, Cass Co., Georgia, with John Ridge endorsement, July 13, 1837. Copies of these and other pertinent documents were supplied by Mrs. Marjorie Lowe, a Cherokee descendant, now living in Houston, Texas.

²³ E. A. Teter, Chetopa, Kansas, April 15, 1965, citing record from National Archives.

²⁴ Special File 46, *ibid.*, National Archives (M234, Roll 89); Larkin McGhee letter, December 1, 1891, Rogers File, Genealogy Room, Bartlesville library.

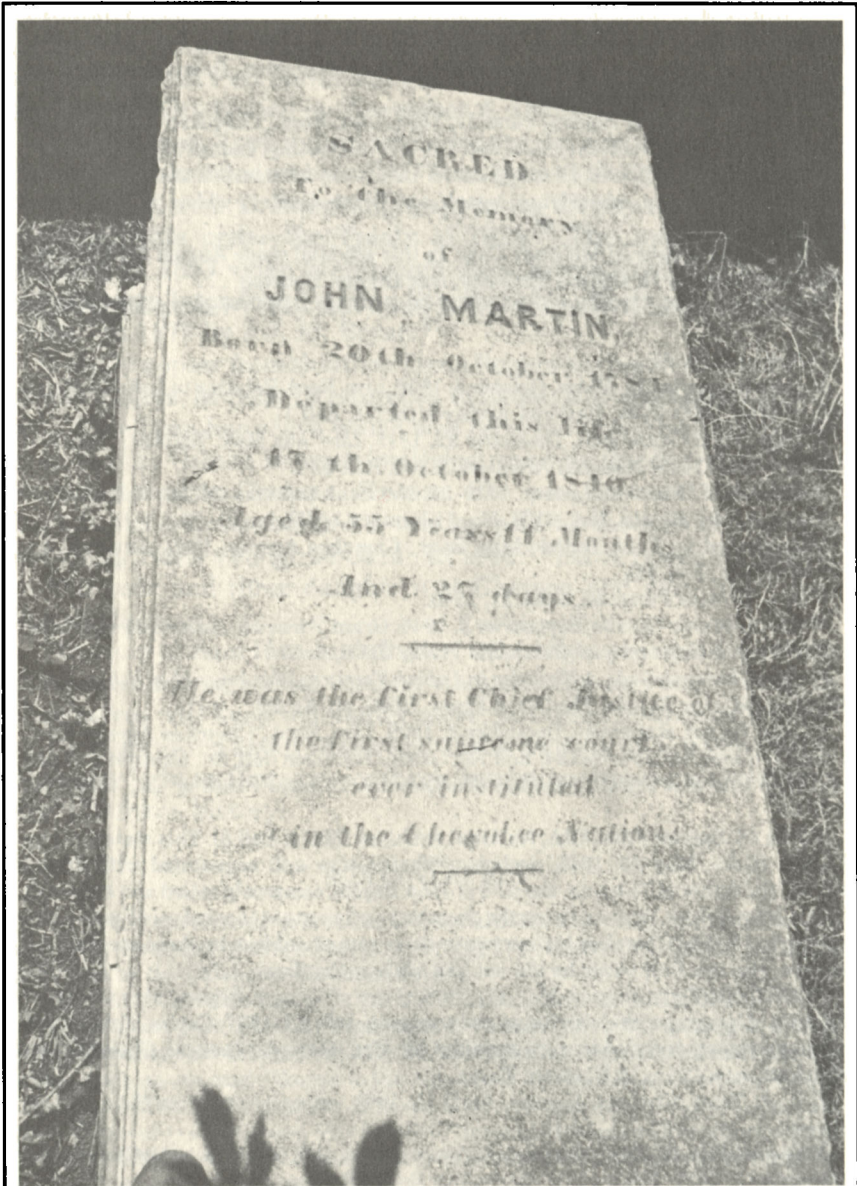
²⁵ Butler statement, February 8, 1846, *ibid.*

²⁶ S. C. Stambaugh to Hartley Crawford, September 1, 1845, Ltrs. Recd., Cherokee Agency, 1845, National Archives (M234, Roll 89).

²⁷ *Cherokee Advocate*, November 30, 1883.

²⁸ Larkin McGhee letter, December 1, 1891.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



John Martin's grave is located near the old barracks at Fort Gibson, a final resting place far removed from his home in Georgia (Courtesy Richard Ryan).