

J. W. E. AIREY, THE COWBOY PRIEST

By Anne Sloan

Few if any Episcopal priests wear cowboy boots and sombreros with their Roman collars. Yet, for Jim Airey, who served as the rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Houston Heights from 1934 to 1944, boots were as much a part of his dress as his church vestments and collar. Parishioners called him the "Cowboy Priest," but an examination of his life reveals a man with far more than an affectation for boots.

Born on January 20, 1904, in Shreveport, Louisiana, Airey must have grown up admiring the idealized cowboys he saw as a teenager at the movie theaters and the western milieu that surrounded them. Young people in the 1920s found Tin Lizzies, ragtime, and movie queens fascinating, but for Airey it was horses, western gear, and figures like Buffalo Bill, Quanah Parker, and Kit Carson.

Airey's interest in frontier life was well established before he became a priest, and this avocation shaped his ministry. After his ordination, people often commented, "Why, he doesn't seem like a preacher."¹

A journalist called this the greatest compliment a layperson could give a clergyman; but Jim Airey, in fact, stood out as a revered church leader, delegate to the General Convention of the Church, and chairman of several diocesan committees in addition to his duties at St. Andrew's. When he died, The *Texas Churchman* obituary stated, "Airey's place in the Diocese and in Houston will be almost impossible to fill."²

Jim Airey's first passion probably stemmed from his



This image of Rev. Airey, wearing his traditional black suit and Roman collar with his cowboy boots and sombrero and sitting astride his horse comfortably whittling, captures the essence of this remarkable clergyman. He received the horse as a gift from his buddies at the Sam Houston Whittler's Association and named it Feedlebaum. He kept the horse in a make-shift stable behind the Parish Hall and pastured it on nearby Heights vacant lots.

Photo courtesy of J. W. E. Airey, Jr.

exposure to vaudeville where he presumably learned the art of magic and ventriloquism. He had become accomplished in both these professions when he entered graduate school at The University of the South in Sewanee on a scholarship. He paid his living expenses by staging shows in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama, going onstage as Merlin the Magician and performing his ventriloquism act with his dummy "Oscar" that he carried in a black suitcase. The handsome, six-foot-tall Airey performed in Texas and Louisiana in the summers. He chose a career in magic and became an assistant to the era's best magician, The Great Thurston, who operated the country's largest traveling show.

A chance visit with the Texas Episcopal bishop, Clinton S. Quin, interrupted

Airey's career choice and changed his life. In 1927, Quin so impressed Airey that he gave up his magician's dreams and turned to the church. Anyone who knew the dynamic and charismatic bishop can easily understand how Quin worked his own magic to persuade Airey to give up his. If only a record existed of that meeting between the senior churchman and the neophyte theological student, two larger-than-life figures who had both mastered the art of persuasion. Airey may have been swayed by his mother's desire for him to enter the Episcopal priesthood. Was the opportunity to move to Texas also a factor in Airey's decision? Airey had never lived in Texas, a center for Western culture.

By 1929, Airey had been ordained and installed as the rector of two churches, sixteen miles apart, at Columbus and Eagle Lake. Airey organized a Boy Scout Troop in



Jim Airey poses with an unknown Indian, probably in Oklahoma. The man to the right is the famous showman Major I. Lillie "Pawnee Bill," Airey's adopted father.

Photo courtesy of archives of Dana Butler, Mason, Texas.

Columbus and became leader of the Eagle Lake troop. His first scout project provides an indication that he would not forego showmanship as a cleric. Airey rented three elephants, a camel, a lion, and three other caged animals from a nearby circus to stage a "Boy Scout Circus." They played in nearby towns, and Airey laughed, "We didn't make any money, but it was a wonderful experience."³

In 1931, Airey went to Trinity Church in Longview, helping this mission achieve parish status. While there, he met and married Johanna Guelich. He also met Major I. Lillie and his wife, visiting them on their ranch in Pawnee, Oklahoma. "Pawnee Bill," as Lillie was known, had a partnership with Buffalo Bill and later formed his own Wild West show. Lillie "adopted" Airey and taught him how to handle a pistol. During his stay at Lillie's ranch, an Olympic champion, Thurmond Randle, who later became president of the National Rifle Association (NRA), taught Airey to shoot a rifle. A cowboy movie star taught Airey to rope, and Tommy Burns, former light-heavyweight champion taught him to box.⁴ Airey happily acquired all of the physical skills of which he had dreamed.

In 1934, Bishop Quin called Airey to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Houston Heights. He arrived at Quin's office wearing his customary garb, a Roman collar, sombrero, cowboy boots, and hair to his shoulders frontier style. Quin reportedly told him to get a haircut.⁵

St. Andrew's had no rectory for their clergyman, but Airey accepted the job anyway and moved his wife and two

small children into the second floor of the Parish Hall. These were cramped, miserable quarters—the roof leaked, and rats and cockroaches ran rampant.⁶ Airey's family would live there for the ten years he served as rector of St. Andrew's. More important to Airey than his family's comfort were his vision of a clergyman's duties and continuing his activities as a showman and frontiersman. Houston provided a splendid arena for his talents.

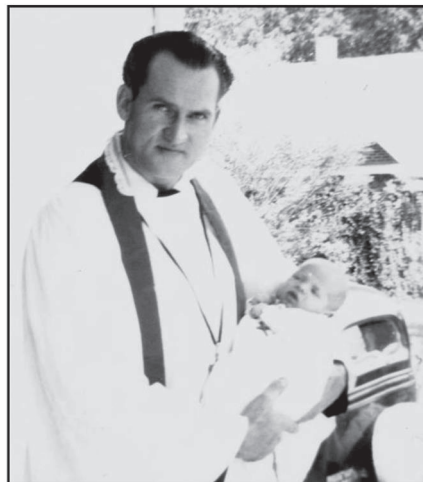
A year later, in 1935, nineteen-year-old freelance journalist Walter Cronkite wrote an article that appeared in the *Houston Press* discussing the many hobbies of the Episcopal minister. Included are a photo of Airey in his clerical collar and a photo of him wearing full western dress

with Santos Sandoval, governor of the Taos Pueblo Indians, and Pawnee Bill. Cronkite praises Airey's showmanship and his work with the Boy Scouts. He concludes by stating, Airey's "scope of interests are as wide as the universe but his work as a cog in the spiritual machinery of the Episcopal church is still closest to his heart."⁷

Airey's clerical status in Houston offered the chance to combine his diverse interests with his religious convictions. Over the next five years he became chaplain of the Young Democrats of Texas, Arabia Temple Shrine Circus of Houston, and Houston Yacht Club, in addition to serving as chaplain of the National Frontiersman's Association and national chaplain of the Circus Fans of America. He received lifetime honorary memberships in the Elks and Odd Fellows, became an honorary member of the Rodeo Association of America, and an honorary chief of the Alabama and Coushatta Indians of East Texas.

Within three years, he became friends with several socially prominent Houston businessmen and journalists with whom he founded the Sam Houston Whittler's Association in 1937. Named after the general whom Marquis James described as an "inveterate whittler," the club formed "to keep the ancient and therapeutic art of whittling alive." They chose *Houston Post* columnist Morris Frank as the "Disseminator of Shavings," and Airey as the "Blesser of the Wood."⁸

Airey preached well-received sermons in his powerful, melodic voice but continued his showmanship. In 1938, Chaplain Airey, acting on behalf of the Shrine Circus, "booked, produced and directed the largest indoor circus that had ever been seen in the Southwest." The newspaper called it a "rousing



Airey has just baptized a new St. Andrew's parishioner.

Photo courtesy of St. Andrew's Archives.

financial success.” The St. Andrew’s Register recorded numerous weddings and funerals for “performers” whose residences are listed as “Big State Shows,” “The Auditorium Hotel,” and the “Dragon Night Club.” A baptism took place at the “Gypsy Campgrounds.” He reportedly married film stars Jennifer Jones and Bill Walker. One former parishioner recalls Father Airey’s friends often staged shows in a vacant lot on West Nineteenth Street between Rutland and Ashland. According to his son, these visitors usually stayed overnight at the rectory.⁹

The young people of St. Andrew’s considered Father Airey their hero, but some parishioners found fault with him, especially the ladies. Three years after arriving at St. Andrew’s, Airey had a fifty-foot metal Quonset hut built adjacent to the Parish Hall/Rectory as a Frontiersmen’s Museum. Here he housed, along with other artifacts, wax figures he purchased for \$1500 from Scout Younger, claiming to be the last of the infamous Younger Gang. The money came from a fall 1938 “Hell’s Half Acre Show” Airey held in the Coliseum partnering with a Houston newspaper. St. Andrew’s parishioners tired of the museum, which they felt “never helped the church in any way.” Despite complaints about their minister known as “Wrangler” or “Cowboy” Airey, the minutes of a special vestry meeting on February 17, 1941, record, “If all the ministers of this Diocese were lined up for our selection of a minister for this parish, we would still choose Mr. Airey.”¹⁰



Airey, on the right at the north end of the Reflection Pool, points to the San Jacinto Monument in the distance at the monument’s dedication in 1939.

Photo courtesy of the San Jacinto Museum of History, Houston.

In February 1942, the Frontiersman Museum issue resurfaced when the women of the church wrote to Bishop Quin complaining about the Quonset hut. Among other suggestions, they wanted Airey to move his office into the museum and requested the rectory be moved away from the Parish Hall, which Airey’s children used as a playhouse.¹¹

Balancing his clerical duties with his other interests proved difficult for Airey. He informed the vestry that he needed his outside activities to supplement his meager salary. In truth, money meant nothing to him; the extra activities brought him pleasure. He loved people and “thought money was valuable only in the good that it would do.”

By 1940, the rector of this small Houston church had achieved prominence in the city, state, and nation. His writings included magazine and newspaper articles about pioneer history. He wrote an article for the *Houston Post*, later reprinted in *Frontier Times Magazine*, titled “Is Jesse James Among the Living?” The *Post* referred to him as the life-time chaplain of the National Frontier Association and an “authority on Frontier History.”¹² In August 1935, Airey conducted the funeral for a prominent Colorado County resident, Mrs. Bertha Wagner. The *Colorado County Citizen* obituary acknowledges indebtedness to Rev. Mr. Airey for his

notes on the “history of this brave and bold pioneer woman of Texas.”¹³ Elmer Parker, descendant of Comanche Chief Quannah Parker, sent a telegram to Airey on November 5, 1937, regarding his “Dad’s surgery in the Kiowa Hospital.”



Shown at the dedication of the San Jacinto Monument, held April 20-21, 1939, Airey, on the left, poses with Ariadne and Marguerite Houston, granddaughters of General Sam Houston, Andrew Jackson Houston, and two unidentified men in Indian attire.

Photo courtesy of the San Jacinto Museum of History, Houston.



Airey, seated, with individuals who are probably members of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe. Dressed in western clothes, Airey's solemn expression may indicate his having been recently named their honorary Chief. Photo courtesy of J.W.E. Airey, Jr.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote a letter addressed to "Reverend J. W. E. Airey, Chaplain, and The National Frontiersman's Association" on October 27, 1937, sending "cordial greetings" to the association members, and trusting "that their forthcoming roundup will be a red letter day in the lives of all lovers of the Old West."¹⁴ *Life* magazine covered the dedication of the San Jacinto Monument in May 1939 and included a photograph of Airey with Sam Houston's granddaughters. The magazine caption states the women, "fluttered timidly in the background" but came forward to be photographed when "they sighted an Indian from a nearby reservation." Airey, an honorary member of the tribe, was photographed with them and identified as "chaplain of the Frontiersmen's Association."¹⁵

Airey could not adequately support his family and participate in his outside activities on his monthly salary. How did he manage? Airey wore Bishop Quin's hand-me-down vestments and enjoyed the patronage of many wealthy Houstonians. His son recalls the men regularly gave Airey expensive cigars, but Airey gave them away and smoked his Roi-Tan's, not wanting to get used to expensive tobacco. Airey wore the same pair of cowboy boots, which he re-heeled many times. Others customarily compensated Airey for meals and hotel accommodations. Though he accepted these kindnesses, he was known across Houston as one who gladly emptied his pockets for anyone in need.¹⁶

Airey's love of adventure and horses unfortunately caused his untimely death. In December 1942, he fell from

his horse on Heights Boulevard. Riding bareback, Airey pulled back on the reins to control his horse that shied from a car noise, but the horse threw him. Airey fell onto a stake in the ground puncturing his chest and causing irreparable kidney damage.¹⁷ He lingered two years but never recovered and knew his injury was fatal. He died on October 31, 1944, at the age of forty.

Shortly before his death, he penciled a letter on notebook paper to Jerry Werlla, his closest St. Andrew's friend that provides a poignant glimpse of this complex churchman. He apologizes for the unfinished business he is leaving behind, mentions his terrible pain, and expresses gratitude for "all the good things with which my life has been blessed. I deserved so little and I have had so much." He thanks God for "all of his blessings and especially for the revelation of Himself to me through so many of His children" and calls Paradise "much sweeter than this so precious earth." He asks forgiveness for his "blunders" and concludes by quoting the Twenty-third Psalm.¹⁸

Airey's death, though not a surprise to the many who had witnessed his decline after the fall, was nonetheless an occasion for great mourning. Bishop Quin conducted the Requiem Eucharist at St. Andrew's on November 2, 1944. Thirty clergymen served as pallbearers. Quin's eulogy in *The Texas Churchman* is especially touching.

*While my whole ministry is built on the conviction that life goes on in the new body, I shall miss greatly dear Jim. I believe I never saw quite such a representative outpouring of people as were present at this Burial Service. Every cross section of human life was there, and we record our grateful appreciation for Jim's life among us.*¹⁹

One newspaper account said Airey's friends numbered in the thousands and praised him as a man "equally at home in the circus or on a cow pony as in the pulpit."²⁰ At the time of his death, he was trustee for the Diocese serving on the board of trustees for The University of the South.

No one can account for the forces that created this extraordinary man who lived such a furiously paced life. His son vividly remembers after finishing a meal, whether at home, in a parishioner's home, or a restaurant, his father would rise and say, "Well, I hate to eat and run...." A magician, ventriloquist, cowboy, whittler, showman, circus promoter, frontier historian, writer, and dedicated Episcopal clergyman, Airey had no time to waste. How could one man combine talents and interests as varied as these with a pastoral vocation that made his small parish, the Bishop of Texas, and the Diocese so seriously mourn his loss? How could he accomplish all of this in a lifespan of forty years? There seem to be no answers to these questions.

Anne Sloan received her B.A. from the University of Texas at Austin, and her M.A. from the University of Houston. She is a retired Heights businesswoman whose poetry, essays, and articles have appeared in newspapers and national magazines. Her fourth book, *St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Faithfully Serving Houston Heights for 100 years*, was published in November 2010.