

# LESSON IN LIVING

## INHERITED COURAGE

Elma Allen Milano

So much of what we have and are we owe to our forefathers. It is thrilling to read accounts of their wonderful COURAGE. My brave, pioneering grandparents bore the last names of: Allen, Phelps, Lillywhite and Coplan. Let me tell you a little about my Grandmother Lillywhite's father, Willis Coplan:

He was born in Staunton, Augusta, Virginia, 9 November 1816. When he was ten years old, his family moved to Racine, Wisconsin. Here he married, had two children and then his attention turned westward. He left his little family with no other intention except to secure a more desirable location to live. He arrived in Texas in the spring of 1842, just in time to take part in the war with Mexico.

He was one of one thousand cavalry sent to guard the frontier on the Rio Grande. A few months later, when many of their horses had been stolen or died, he, with three hundred other men, started out on foot, crossed the river and pursued the enemy into Mexico. They encountered six hundred Mexican cavalry at the town of Meir and a great battle ensued.

The thrilling stories of his experiences and how many times he was literally snatched from death have become treasured family tales. In one account, he told of the capture of three hundred men and how they were marched into the City of Mexico, corralled in a high stone wall and placed under heavy guard. They later escaped, but it profited them nothing, because the escape route took them over mountains and into country where there was no water.

They began to famish for water and when they came to a moist place, they would take off their clothes and bury their bodies in the damp earth, in hopes they might absorb some of the moisture. After eight days, they came to a lake of water. Here 124 of their number died. Willis' tongue was so swollen that his throat was almost paralyzed. His suffering was so great that he begged a companion to kill him.

While at the lake they were overtaken by an army of Mexican Cavalry. Willis gave a Mexican one dollar for a cup of coffee because he could not drink the water. He felt this saved his life. They were marched back to the City of Mexico, thrown into the old rock corral again and a double guard was placed over them.

The prisoners kept themselves entertained by teasing their guards. They would take a piece of charcoal and draw on their white-washed walls. The scene was usually one of the Mexican army in retreat with a lone U.S. soldier in pursuit. By diligent effort at night, they managed to loosen the shackles off their feet. They then danced about shrieking and making hideous sounds. Many times, their punishment was to strip to the waist and run the gauntlet. This meant running at top speed for 150 yards between two rows of soldiers, each with a whip. The prisoners did not mind the cuts; they felt the diversion was worth it.

Finally, orders were issued for their execution. However, United States and English ministers got the order modified to killing every tenth prisoner. Acting on these orders, the officers brought in a jug of 176 beans, one-tenth of which were black and the rest white. Each man was compelled to draw his own fate. Those who drew a black bean were to be killed. After the drawing, the doomed men were separated, given supper, cigars, whiskey, paper and a pencil to write to their folks. They were then taken out and deliberately shot down

Willis had drawn a white bean. Those who did so were compelled to witness the execution. A few months later, he was made a trustee and at a favorable time, he climbed the wall and escaped. He made 900 miles in 21 days and when within only a few miles of the border, he was recaptured.

Eventually, the United States and English governments were successful in obtaining a pardon for all the American prisoners in Mexico. But, when Willis had escaped from prison, the guards feared they would be punished, so they published a report in the leading Mexican newspaper that Willis Coplan had died. This news reached his hometown where they held a funeral over his empty coffin.

Willis decided to return to his family before locating a home in the west. En route, he received the sad news that his wife had remarried. He, not having any reason to feel badly towards her, went to visit his parents. They had difficulty believing it was their son until he showed them a familiar scar on his knee.

His wife, upon hearing of his return, offered to leave her husband, but on reflection, he concluded that the children she had by her second husband were younger and that his sacrifice would be the least, so he took her to the local judge and obtained a divorce. His only request was that his children call him, "Father."

Willis heard a great deal about Utah and seemed lured there for reasons he could not explain. The trip to Salt Lake City was made in a one-horse buggy pulled by a big mule. In 1858, after locating in Salt Lake City, he obtained employment as a cabinetmaker at the Dinwoody Furniture establishment. In the spring, he met and married my great-grandmother, Amelia Andrew Angier. She was a pretty, reddish-brown-haired, 15-year-old orphan who had walked the plains from the east to the west, cheerfully calling the entire journey a "grand adventure."

Two years after their marriage, they were asked to help settle Dixie County. They journeyed by team over extremely rough country. During this strenuous trip, they lost their eighteen-month-old daughter. The little babe was ill when they started but the doctor thought the trip would be beneficial for her. Instead, it proved otherwise; she was buried in Springville. Willis and Amelia became community leaders and built one of the first of fine homes in St. George, Utah.

***NOTE FROM ELMA: How grateful we should be for the COURAGE our ancestors exemplified. Those who survived their hardships were strong. Hopefully, we can be as courageous in our generation as they were in theirs. Our children could be taught to improve on us, enabling each generation to be even more courageous.***

[elma@lintonmilano.com](mailto:elma@lintonmilano.com)

*Elma Milano is the 83-year-old founder of Milano Music and former member of the National Speakers Association and the City Council. The "Lessons In Living" are based on her life's experiences and teachings. The entire series can be found on the web [at lintonmilano.com](http://lintonmilano.com).*