



Born in rural Tennessee about 1814, Susanna Wilkerson was only fifteen when she eloped and married a dashing U. S. Army artillerist named Almeron Dickinson in 1829. Early in 1831 the couple joined the flood of American emigrants to the Mexican province of Texas. There they settled on land near the new town of Gonzales, fought off raids by hostile Indians, and had a daughter, Angelina, born late in 1834.

When revolution came to Texas in 1835, Dickinson volunteered his experience with cannons, joined the fight, and was with the force that took San Antonio on December 3. Susanna joined him there after Texas volunteers looted their home. Dickinson was placed in command of artillery batteries at the fortress of the Alamo, and Susanna took up residence with other non-combatants at the home of prominent citizen Ramón Músquiz.

When the Mexican army under command of President Antonio López de Santa Anna appeared unexpectedly on February 23, 1836, Dickinson dashed into the town, scooped his wife and child up onto the horse behind him, and eluded Mexican patrols to spirit her safely into the Alamo as the siege began. As the famous 13-day ordeal began, Susanna became well acquainted with all of the principal figures within the walls, including David Crockett, Jim Bowie, and William Barret Travis. As the siege neared its climax, Travis gave a ring to the infant Angelina, on a string that he hung around her neck. The Travis ring remains a treasured family heirloom.

When the final assault on the Alamo began before dawn on March 6, 1836, Susanna and other women and children – all Latino – were sheltered in an anteroom of the chapel. As resistance crumbled, Dickinson darted into the room to tell her that the battle was lost. He expressed the hope that she and the baby would survive, and returned to the fight to meet his fate. As the battle ended, one Texas soldier who fled into the room was killed before their eyes.

Once firing stopped, the women, children and slaves were led from the chapel. Susanna and Angelina returned to the Músquiz home, where she was interviewed by President Santa Anna. He made her the “Messenger of the Alamo” when he gave her two dollars and a blanket, and an escort to carry a message to Texas General Sam Houston that resistance was futile. After she found him at Gonzales, she was caught up in the “Run-away Scrape” of retreat until Houston finally defeated Santa Ana at the Battle of San Jacinto.

Now a widowed mother, Susanna appealed to the Congress of the Republic of Texas for financial relief, but was refused. In need of a male protector, she married one John Williams, who proved to be an abusive drunk and she divorced him. When she finally received land bounty from the republic as a war widow, Susanna looked to her own welfare, and made her own way as a laundress and boarding house keeper. She married a third time and settled in Houston, but was soon widowed.

After this she sought employment at the Mansion House, an inn and tavern that was a well-known brothel, which has led historians to question the nature of her employment. Dickinson, however, was already experienced enough to help run the establishment, and may have had no need to resort to prostitution.

Nevertheless, she was far ahead of her time as a liberated woman. Her fourth husband divorced her on the grounds of serial adultery, which she did not challenge because she had already left him. She settled in Lockhart, where she operated a successful boarding house and gained local fame as an expert cook. In 1857 she married one of her frequent guests, a German immigrant twenty years her junior, Joseph William Hannig.

Ambitions to succeed in business, Hannig may have married Susanna in part for her substantial savings. She was willing to back him, and they relocated to Austin, where he opened a furniture store and also became an undertaker. When the Hannig’s’ first house near the Colorado River was destroyed in a flood, Hannig built the present structure on Pine (now 5th) Street, directly across from the stage coach depot, about 100 feet east of its present location. The home was considered substantial and comfortable for its day. The bedroom suite bears the stencil of his shop.

Hannig expanded into real estate investments and became a respected city alderman. With greater wealth, the couple moved into a mansion on a sizeable farm on Duval Street at 32nd. There Susanna lived out her remaining years, doting on her grandchildren, contributing memories of the Texas Revolution to journalists, and helping other survivors and descendants of the Texas Army prove their claims to pensions and land bounties.

Far more than just the “Survivor of the Alamo”, Susanna Dickinson’s life spanned the entirety of early Anglo Texas: colonial pioneering, revolution, frontier statehood, and urbanization. She embodied the experience of real Texas women who navigated the stark challenges of those times. She took life as it came, lived it on the best terms she would get, and achieved a measure of contentment in their later years.

She was nearly 70 when she died in 1883. She was rich and famous, but still haunted by the memory of her first husband and great love who fell at the Alamo. She is buried in Oakwood Cemetery. Hannig survived her and remarried, but chose to be buried beside her.