

# The Lynching of Methodist Episcopal Reverend Anthony Bewley

By J. B. Hogan

**I**n the years leading up to the Civil War, “paranoia and chaos” began to spread throughout the slaveholding states as the fear of slave revolts and abolitionist agitation grew to a fever pitch. Nowhere was this more clearly shown than in northern Texas during the year 1860. In that summer, amid what is called the “Texas Troubles,” between “thirty and a hundred black people and suspected white collaborators were lynched.”<sup>1</sup>

One of those charged with being a white collaborator, and worse, the Reverend Anthony Bewley, a Methodist Episcopal (Northern Church) minister, was forced to flee Texas under fear of his own imminent death. His flight, recapture, and ultimate fate—though now nearly forgotten—would be forever connected to the Ozarks hill town of Fayetteville, Arkansas.<sup>2</sup>

Anthony Bewley was born in 1804 in Tennessee. He joined the church in 1821 and by the time he was 25 years old had become a circuit-riding preacher.<sup>3</sup> Like many others during this time, he drifted toward the West as the nation moved into its Manifest Destiny phase. From 1843 to 1858, Bewley belonged to the Missouri Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, preaching in Southwest Missouri and Northwest Arkansas.<sup>4</sup>

In 1844, a great schism developed within the Methodist Episco-

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pal Church, and it split in two, primarily over the issue of slavery. The Southern Church supported the “peculiar institution,” while the Northern Church did not.<sup>5</sup> Bewley aligned with the Northern Church. It was a pivotal choice, given his abolitionist views and his decision to minister in slave-holding Missouri, Arkansas, and finally Texas—where anti-slavery views were taken as a capital offense by the virulently pro-slavery crowd that lived in constant fear of slave uprisings, especially caused by “infidel” abolitionists in their midst.<sup>6</sup>

After his time in Missouri and Arkansas, where he “headed up a mission near Fayetteville, Arkansas”<sup>7</sup> and had made friends, acquaintances, and enemies for his forthright anti-slavery position, Bewley made a fateful and fatal choice to move to Texas and minister there. By 1858, he was in Johnson County south of Fort Worth,<sup>8</sup> and in 1860 he was found in Tarrant County—Fort Worth is the county seat—where fears of slave uprisings, supposedly abetted by meddling abolitionists, had reached a fevered pitch.

In mid-summer 1860, the “Texas Troubles” flared up, so to speak, with a series of fires on July 8. On that day, flames razed buildings in Pilot Point, Denton, and the little town of Dallas.<sup>9</sup> The offices of the *Dallas Herald* newspaper burned, triggering allegations by its fiercely pro-slavery editor Charles R. Pryor of abolitionist involvement in the series of conflagrations. A purported group of radical abolitionists called the “Mystic Red” were accused of being behind the troubles—although no evidence was ever linked to this so called “secret society.”<sup>10</sup>

Just before the fires of July 8, a letter attributed to William H. Bailey, a fellow Methodist abolitionist, had added even more fuel to the frenzied fire of the Texas Troubles. Addressed to Bewley, the “incendiary” letter seemed to prove that there was in fact a “widespread abolitionist plot to burn Texas towns and murder their citizens.” The letter, which “urged Bewley to continue with his work in helping to free Texas from slavery,” was considered by many to be a forgery. However, it was “widely published” and viewed by others as “evidence of Bewley’s involvement with the John Brownites in Texas.”<sup>11</sup> From this point on, Reverend Bewley’s life was in serious danger.

On July 17, 1860, with his Tarrant County enemies calling for retribution against him, Bewley chose to leave North Texas, the “bloody land of mobocracy.”<sup>12</sup> He departed under such duress that most of his seven children were left behind. Bewley, his wife Jane, and their 11-year-old son, George quit their home in a wagon and headed toward Indian Territory.<sup>13</sup>

Temporarily left behind were Dorthula (25) and husband David Roper; Mary Jane (23) and husband Charles Wesley Garoutte (sometimes spelled Garoot); Catherine (21 and born blind); William (18); John Anthony (16); Sarah (13); James Robert (6), and Larribe Simpson (born in 1856 and already deceased).<sup>14</sup>

After a wary trip of several days, in which they often traveled by night, the Bewleys reached Indian Territory. They remained there for 11 days

## Text of Rev. Bewley's letter to his family, written from Fayetteville

From the *New York Times*,  
January 23, 1861, page 6

*The Cleveland Herald publishes a letter written by Rev. ANTHONY BEWLEY, the Methodist clergyman, who was murdered by a Pro-Slavery Vigilance Committee in Arkansas, some weeks since. It is dated Fayetteville, (Ark.,) Sept. 6, and is addressed to his wife and children. Much of it is advice to his wife regarding the disposition which she must make of her scanty means in view of his probable decease. Among other things, Mr. BEWLEY writes:*

I never took up my pen under such circumstances before. After I left there that day I was hurried on, and the next day about 9 o'clock we got to Fayetteville. I am here yet. They have not put me in jail, but keep me under guard. At night I am chained fast to some person, and in the day I have liberty to walk about with the guard. I have been, in the general, tolerable; although my company in general has not been as desirable as some. They are now after TOM WILLET. So soon as they succeed in getting him, I suppose they will set out with us to Texas on the overland stage, and if so, hand us over to the Fort Worth Committee and receive the reward. Then we will, I suppose, be under their supervision, to do with us as seemeth them good. And if that takes place, dear and much beloved wife and loving children, I shall never, in this life, expect to see you; but I shall look to meet you all, with our little babe that has already gone to that blessed haven of repose. The reason why I so speak, in these times of heated political excitement, mole-hills are raised mountain high, and where there is none, it is frequently imagined they see something. That being the case, it is enough to know that we are "North Methodists," as they are called; and from what we learned in Texas about that Fort Worth Committee, they bad [sic] sworn vengeance against all such folks. I expect when they get to us we will go the trip. But, dear wife and children, who are big enough to know about these things, know that, so far as I am concerned, all these things are false. You have been with me, and you know as well as I do that none of these things have ever been countenanced about our house, but that we have repudiated such to the last. \* \* \* I, with a portion of the Vigilance Committee, will leave Fayetteville to-night some time. The Committee has returned without WILLET, and have given up hunting him any more.

A. BEWLEY.

involved in the lynching of Reverend Bewley, but almost as soon as he arrived in Fort Worth he was taken by a "mob" and "hung on the same pecan tree" on which fellow abolitionist William H. Crawford had been hanged on July 17, 1860—the very day Bewley had made his run to Indian Territory and beyond.<sup>31</sup>

The death of Anthony Bewley has an aura of predestination about it, as if once the North Texas frenzy of anti-abolitionism began, his fate was fixed. Charles Pryor's rantings after the Dallas fire, the workings of the Fort Worth Vigilance Committee headed by the hard-core pro-slavery Alabama emigrant Nat Terry, and the Bailey letter—forged or not—together spelled inevitable death for the firmly anti-slavery, abolitionist Methodist minister.

As harsh as Bewley's death was, the treatment of his body after the hanging is even more so. Again, details vary, but a single, grotesque picture emerges. Bewley was left hanging from the pecan tree the rest of the night he was killed. The next day a shallow grave was dug for him—so shallow that his bones stuck out of the ground.

Some three weeks later, it was said that his body was dug up and someone "hacked the remaining flesh from the bones and threw the skeleton up on the roof of a storehouse." From time to time, boys climbed on the store roof and rearranged Bewley's bones into a "variety of attitudes" while calling out such epithets as "old Bewley" and "old abolitionist."<sup>32</sup> Another account says that his bones were removed from atop the store after the Civil War and kept in the office of two local doctors with the label "Thus be it ever with Abolitionists."<sup>33</sup>

Reactions to Reverend Bewley's death, as might be expected, fell into two camps. On the pro-slavery, anti-abolitionist side his demise was cheered. The *Fayetteville Arkansian* had no doubt of Bewley's guilt and printed that there "was enough evidence against him to hang twenty men."<sup>34</sup> The position of the lynch mob and its supporters requires no elaboration as their actions speak for themselves.

Naturally, the response from Northern Methodists was quite the opposite. Calling the Texas Vigilance groups "blood thirsty assassins" and "theft-glutted" demons, they viewed Bewley's lynching as a "brutal and atrocious" murder, and as an execution by mob rule. From their point of view, Bewley was a man of principle, innocent of any crime, save his staunch opposition to the immoral and "great evil of slavery."<sup>35</sup>

In the aftermath of Bewley's lynching what, then, became of his family? Besides the young son Larrabee who died in Texas before 1860, Jane Winton Bewley, the reverend's wife, remarried in 1863 to Emery Alverson in Baldwin, Kansas. She died in Cordell, Oklahoma, in 1894 just shy of her 80th birthday.

Of the children, Dorthula, the oldest Bewley girl, was married twice as well, and she also lived nearly 80 years, passing in 1915 in Stotts City, Missouri.<sup>36</sup> Mary Jane died in 1914 in Brownsville, Oregon. She was 77

years old. Catherine, born blind, was 63 when she passed in Van Buren, Arkansas. Son William Winton Bewley died in Clay Center, Kansas, at the age of 64. John Anthony was 72 when he died in Gracemont, Oklahoma. Sarah Clementine died in Oklahoma at 68. George, who was nine when the Bewleys escaped Texas, died, like sister Catherine in Van Buren, Arkansas. He was 69. The last Bewley child, James Robert, died at 76 somewhere in Florida.<sup>37</sup>

There is a certain irony, of course, in the longevity of the surviving members of Reverend Bewley's family when juxtaposed to the violent death that abbreviated his own life. Over the decades, this story—like so much of history—faded from public consciousness and out of local awareness. However, it was not lost completely and the story of Reverend Anthony Bewley, a man who “decidedly opposed” slavery in a time when such a position could literally be a matter of life and death, can be told once again to illuminate a dark era in our collective past.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Stephen Harrigan, *Big Wonderful Thing: A History of Texas* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2019), p. 287.
- <sup>2</sup>*Flashback*, Volume 10, No. 4 (October, 1960), p. 15. Pages 15-26 of this *Flashback* issue reproduce Chapter VIII of *South-Western Methodism: A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Southwest, 1844 to 1864*, by Rev. Charles Elliott, edited and revised by Rev. Leroy M. Vernon, Poe and Hitchcock. (Cincinnati, Ohio: R. P. Thompson printer, 1868).
- <sup>3</sup>*Flashback*, October 1960, p. 26.
- <sup>4</sup>Anthony Bewley (1804-1860), Wikitree. Accessed September 22, 2021, internet genealogy site, at <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Bewley-83>.
- <sup>5</sup>Deane G. Carter, *Methodists in Fayetteville, 1832-1968*, (Fayetteville, Arkansas: Central United Methodist Church and Washington County Historical Society, 1968), pp. 29-30.
- <sup>6</sup>Article from the *Richmond (VA) Daily Dispatch*, reprinted in the *South-West Independent*, William Queenbury, editor and publisher, Fayetteville, Arkansas, July 18, 1856, p. 2. Southern defense of slavery was often couched in biblical language, with Northern opposition seen as being opposed to God's will.
- <sup>7</sup>Donald E. Reynolds, *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 2007), p. 149.
- <sup>8</sup>Civil War: 'Unheard of Scoundrelism,' Secession, and the Great Hanging," Hometown by Handlebar, internet history webpage, February 23, 2021, at <https://hometownbyhandlebar.com/?p=14788>.
- <sup>9</sup>Harrigan, p. 286.
- <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 287.
- <sup>11</sup>Donald E. Reynolds, "Bewley, Anthony (1804-1860)," *Handbook of Texas*, internet document. Accessed September 19, 2021, at <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/bewley-anthony>.
- <sup>12</sup>*Flashback*, October 1960, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup>From the *Houston Telegraph* as reported on October 15, 1860, in the *Richmond (VA) Daily Dispatch*. Reproduced in "Civil War: 'Unheard of Scoundrelism,' Secession, and the Great

Hanging," Hometown by Handlebar, internet history webpage, February 23, 2021. Accessed September 18, 2021, at <https://hometownbyhandlebar.com/?p=14788>.

<sup>19</sup>*Fayetteville Arkansian*, August 24, 1860, p.2.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>"Sheriffs of Washington County," Washington County, Arkansas. Accessed September 21, 2021, at webpage, <https://www.washingtoncountyar.gov/government/departments-f-z/sheriffs-of-washington-county/sheriffs-1828-1866>.

<sup>22</sup>*Flashback*, October 1960, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.* In this report, it was said that "Bewley was saved, while under arrest in Fayetteville, Arkansas only by the Sheriff of Washington County" (most likely John Crawford who succeeded Zebulon M. Pettigrew as sheriff in 1856).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>29</sup>*Fayetteville Arkansian*, September 14, 1860, p.2.

<sup>30</sup>*Flashback*, October 1960, p. 23. This article reports that the five men received only \$250 when they returned Bewley to Texas instead of the promised \$1,000, which was a "pittance" and "not enough to pay their liquor bills."

<sup>31</sup>From the *Houston Telegraph* as reported on October 15, 1860, in the *Richmond (VA) Daily Dispatch*.

<sup>32</sup>Harrigan, p. 287.

<sup>33</sup>From the *Houston Union*, February 14, 1871. Reproduced in "Civil War: 'Unheard of Scoundrelism,' Secession, and the Great Hanging," Hometown by Handlebar, internet history webpage, February 23, 2021. Accessed September 18, 2021, at <https://hometownbyhandlebar.com/?p=14788>.

<sup>34</sup>*Flashback*, October 1960, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 22, 25-26.

<sup>36</sup>Anthony Bewley (1804-1860), Wikitree, internet genealogy site. Accessed September 22, 2021, at <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Bewley-83>.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

