When challenged to a duel by army officer James Shields in 1842, Abraham Lincoln supposedly suggested cow dung at five paces as the choice of weapons. This was not a joking matter, and when forced to make a serious choice of weapons, Lincoln selected broadswords. Shields was a small man with a short reach; common sense prevailed, and the affront was resolved with nothing more than verbal abuse followed by a handshake. Certainly, the entire incident reflected Lincoln's sometimes caustic sense of humor; yet the issuing of the challenge in the first place illustrated a rather eccentric cultural phenomenon of nineteenth century America. "Satisfaction" for affronts to one's personal or family honor was often obtained by dueling.

On March 2, 1985, the Star of the Republic Museum will open an exhibition of American dueling pistols and related artifacts from the collection of Lt. Col. William R. Orbelo of San Antonio, Texas. The exhibit of over 140 handguns is considered to be the largest collection of American dueling pistols in existence. In addition to the pistols themselves, "The Code of Honor: Dueling in America" will feature numerous original challenges, letters, court documents, and miscellaneous items related to dueling in early nineteenth century America. Highlights of the display include the only known pair of dueling pistols made by Jacob and Samuel Hawken of St. Louis (widely known for their rifles) and cased dueling pistols produced by United States martial arms con-
tractor Simeon North. Over sixty gunmakers are represented in the collection, including such prominent individuals and firms as Deringer, Wurfflein, Calderwood, Krider, and Robertson all of Philadelphia; Sutherland of Richmond, Virginia; F. Glassick of Memphis; and Hyde & Goodrich of New Orleans.

The quality of material and skilled workmanship represented by some of these American pistols rival that of Europe's finest gunmakers. The dueling pistol was the great equalizer; success in a duel was no longer dependent upon size or agility. The dueling pistol's uniqueness lay in its purpose. One's life relied upon the gun working perfectly.

The "Code Duello" may have been introduced into the United States by French officers aiding the American cause during the Revolutionary War, and although duels were fought in the colonial period, it was in the antebellum South that dueling reached its zenith. By 1844 duels in Mississippi were supposedly as "plenty as blackberries." Ultimately, dueling and slavery became the South's "two ill-favored sacred cows."

The duel personified the southern perception of violence as an essential part of human nature. Emphasis was placed on controlling and confining violence; it could not be eradicated. The duelist acted out the moral conflict between the natural, passionate man and the civilized man of discipline and restraint, i.e., a gentleman.

Both condemned and condoned, the practice of dueling was given legitimacy because of the immense political and social status of the individuals involved. Henry Clay, Sam Houston, James Bowie, Alexander Hamilton, Confederate cavalry leader Nathan Bedford Forrest, and naval hero Stephen Decatur all were participants in duels. Dueling reinforced a social hierarchy; one duelled with one's equal and caned or whipped a social inferior. Statesmen, doctors, lawyers, and planters all participated. Yet it was newspaper editors "who most frequently occupied the field of honor." Dueling in the military was in a class all to itself. Between 1780 and 1860 more United States naval officers were killed in duels than died in the defense of their country.

No one duelled with the thought of changing anyone's mind, and there was little satisfaction to be found in taking your opponent's life. The real meaning of the duel lay in the willingness to risk one's life as proof of honor and reputation. Honor was a public matter, and public opinion, as opposed to law or morality, gave sanction to dueling.

All of the southern states had laws against dueling, and most passed legislation which barred participants from holding office. But, these laws were not rigidly enforced as the elite were reluctant to impose the law on each other. Quite often individuals simply crossed over into another state to settle "affairs of honor."

Duels were most commonly fought over political differences, but suggestions of unsavory business practices or insinuations about a family member's or friend's physical, mental, or moral character were often sufficient reason to demand satisfaction. Contrary to the episodes in romanticized historical fiction, a duel over a woman was rare. Yet women supported the institution, one stating that she "would rather be the widow of a brave man than the wife of a coward."

Duels provided structure and ritual with codified rules of etiquette. The most common treatise on dueling in America was written by a former governor of South Carolina, John Lyde Wilson, in 1838 and reprinted in 1858. "The Code of Honor, or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling" detailed the conduct of all persons involved in a duel.

The code stated that tradition and common sense determined the time, place, distance, and weapons to be used in the duel. Historically those choices were the prerogative of the challenged party. Yet, before a challenge to duel was
ever issued, a formal note was hand delivered to ascertain if indeed an insult had been intended. The response to this letter was crucial to the resolution of the altercation. If the tone was apologetic or clearly demonstrated that no insult had been intended, a public notice announced that the matter had been amicably settled. This was done through a newspaper or a prominently displayed poster.

A challenge was issued if the response was unsatisfactory. Subsequently, the seconds of both participants began making arrangements for the duel. To ignore a challenge was to risk being “posted,” a process where placards were placed around town or an advertisement in a newspaper, acknowledging the person’s refusal to duel. A typical posting read: “I do proclaim to the world, that John Miller, refusing to accept my said message, has envinced himself a lyar, a scoundrel, and a cowardly assassin. Richard Heyleake.”

At the dueling site the seconds continued their prominent role. They measured and pegged the distance (30 to 60 feet), loaded the weapons, and placed them in their principals “awkward” hand (the one not normally used for firing). They then tossed a coin for the right to give the signal, with the losing side being allowed to choose the direction his principal faced. Often the participants wore silk vests as it was believed silk deflected the bullets.

If no one was injured after the first volley, the seconds attempted a reconciliation; if this was not possible, the seconds reloaded. The duel ended with the injury or death of one of the participants, or with the challenger admitting “satisfaction” had been achieved.

From its earliest introduction into the United States, there had always been opposition to dueling from the few individuals with the courage to refuse a challenge. Both ministers and newspaper editors played a role in articulating anti-dueling sentiment. The Reverend Lyman Beecher called dueling a “great national sin,” and Arthur Wigfall of South Carolina preached in a sermon that “the code of Cain is but the original draft of the ‘Code of Honor’.” Newspaper editors also took up the crusade; ironically, they were the ones most often involved in such confrontations. In 1828 an Alabama editor noted: “Duelers are fireeaters and would be gentlemen, who think it a greater disgrace to bear an imaginary insult than to murder a fellow-being in cold blood.”

Ultimately, public opinion, more than ministers or legislation, led to the extinction of the duel. The Civil War ended the grip of the “Code Duello” over the South. After four years of “devastating fratricidal warfare,” the threat of being called a coward, or public opinion concerning one’s “honor,” was no longer relevant.

By the mid-nineteenth century, dueling had become a source of caricature and sarcasm. In his autobiography, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) describes his involvement in a duel while a newspaper editor in Virginia City, Nevada. He noted that “by 1864 everybody was anxious to have a chance at the new sport, mainly for the reason that he was not able to thoroughly respect himself so long as he had not killed or crippled somebody in a duel or been killed or crippled in one himself.” Twain challenged James Laird to a duel, and when he refused, the writer had him “posted.” Mark Twain then left hastily for San Francisco — just in case Mr. Laird decided to actually follow through with the challenge. He later wrote, “I had no desire to fight a duel. . . . I did not feel respectable, but I got a certain amount of satisfaction out of feeling safe.”

The formal dueling ritual in America lasted just over one hundred years, with attitudes towards it reflecting a transition from initial acceptance or indignation, to mockery and caricature, culminating in an intolerance to its application under any circumstance. The “Code of Honor” was no longer honorable.

“The Code of Honor: Dueling in America,” will continue through September 2, 1985, with interpretive presentations and gallery talks about the exhibit being given on Sunday afternoons at 2:30.
The Star of the Republic Museum continues to hold gallery talks each Sunday at 2:30 p.m. Throughout the spring they will focus on dueling in America. On April 14 and 21, the Museum will host Ms. Mildred Walker as “Jane Long.” The hour-long presentation will interpret the life of the “Mother of Texas.” The program will be at 2:30 p.m. and is free to the public.

Entertainment in the Texas Republic is the first in a series of new school programs produced by the Star of the Republic Museum. This activity package allows teachers and students to examine in some detail aspects of social life in this period. The unit is designed so that the individual teacher can determine the level of sophistication, interpretation, and involvement in which the students will participate. The kit examines cultural entertainment patterns of various ethnic groups, including ethnic group folktales and their significance, and lists and describes games played by children in the early nineteenth century. The small suitcase also contains several folk toys and directions for their use. This activity package is available for a one week loan period to schools and other institutions. There is no charge except for return postage and insurance. For more information or to make a reservation, please contact the Curator of Education.

Recently the Museum was honored to receive a Masonic record book donated by the Navasota Masonic Lodge No. 299. The book is from the Old Washington Masonic Lodge No. 18 and covers the period from June 27, 1854 to September 7, 1867. Mr. Matthews Rubenstein of Brenham donated two letters written by Washington residents in the 1840’s which describe social life and politics of the period. We would like to express our appreciation to Mr. Jim Flick and the other members of Navasota Lodge No. 299 and to Mr. Rubenstein for their willingness to preserve and share our cultural heritage.

Washington-on-the-Brazos will celebrate Texas Independence Day on Sunday, March 3, 1985. Along with the opening of the dueling exhibit, the Museum will host the awards ceremony at 1:30 p.m. for the fifth annual Republic of Texas Art Contest sponsored between the fourth graders at the John C. Webb Middle School in Navasota and the Brenham Intermediate School in Brenham. Their art will be on display in the Museum theatre through May. At 2:30 p.m. a program in the Park auditorium will feature Ms. Elspeth Rostow of Austin as the guest speaker. The Texas Army will be camped in the Park, and we hope that you will be able to join us for the day’s festivities.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE

The Code of Honor: Dueling in America
March 2 – September 2, 1985

Texas Independence Day Celebration
Sunday, March 3, 1985

MUSEUM SCHEDULE

Open Daily
10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Director . . . . . . . . . . D. Ryan Smith
Curator of Exhibits . . Sherry B. Humphreys
Curator of Education . . . . . Ellen N. Murry

Editor: Ellen N. Murry
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