

Chapter 1

Childhood Years on the Frontier

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6 KJV)

Two ladies chatted peacefully as they rode their horses across the Tennessee countryside. Having enjoyed a nice visit to the neighbor’s homestead, Mariam and her sister Fanny were now venturing the few miles home with a sack full of baby chicks in tow. Little did they know that their every step was being stalked by a large, hungry panther. Their pleasant ride ended when over the still sounds of nature they heard the hungry cat’s low guttural growl, and immediately they spurred their mounts and began to gallop away from the danger.

“Mariam, he’s after the chicks. Just drop ’em and let him have them. It’s not worth our lives!” Fanny pleaded. “No way!” Mariam replied. “I won’t be bullied by a panther . . . hungry or not!”

Their flight was successful until they rode within earshot of their cabin, where the horses had to slow down to cross the creek, giving the panther time to catch up. As they lumbered through the water, the panther pounced, sinking his front claws into Mariam’s back as his back claws pierced the horse’s flesh. Terrified, the horse bounded out of the creek while Mariam doggedly shook off the attacker—all the while clinging to her bag of baby chicks.

Shaken and bleeding, the ladies rode up to the house where Mariam’s brood of children, led by the oldest son Bedford, came scurrying out to see the cause of the

commotion. Though the panther could not have known, he made a grave error by singling out this pair of women to accost. For the fiercely stubborn woman's name was Mariam Beck Forrest, and her equally stubborn and resolute son was Nathan Bedford Forrest. The panther had come after his Ma, and Bedford would make the animal pay with his life.

In the 1800s, Tennessee frontier life was not a place for the faint of heart. Consequently, it was neither the weak nor the cowardly who abandoned the relative safety of the East Coast and set out to trailblaze west. Seeking land and a new life, many left New England, the Carolinas, Georgia, Virginia, and Maryland for the opportunities western pilgrimage offered. The Forrests of Orange County, North Carolina, were among these nomads. William Forrest, the father of Nathan Bedford, was eight years old when he arrived with his family in Middle Tennessee. William's father, Nathan Forrest, settled in Bedford County and made his living off the land. Eight children were born to Nathan and they all eventually made their living by selling livestock, except for two—William, who became a blacksmith, and another brother who became a tailor. Likewise, the Beck family migrated west from South Carolina in the late 1790s, eventually settling near Duck Creek, Tennessee, in 1796. Strong, hard-working Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, the Becks also made their livelihood by farming. In 1820 these two families merged with the marriage of William Forrest and Mariam Beck. Nearly six feet tall, Mariam was just a shade shorter than her six-foot, two-inch husband. Both were muscular, tough, hard-working, rough-hewn pioneers who had grown up accustomed to the adversity of frontier life.

In 1821, the Forrests had the first two of what would be eight children when twins were born on July 21. The daughter was named Frances, after her maternal Aunt Fanny, and the son was named after his grandfather and his birthplace. Nathan Bedford Forrest entered a world of abject poverty, born in a

tiny, one-room log cabin. He would know early the twin traits of hard work and firm discipline.

Not much is known of William Forrest, though neighbors described him as an honest and clean-living man. Apparently not one to succumb to the common temptations of liquor or violence, Forrest seemed to be content working his blacksmith shop and raising his family. Mariam was the more dominant personality in the home and the provider of an early religious foundation. Like most frontier families of that generation, the Forrests expected absolute obedience from their children, and a sound whipping would greet the child who stepped out of line. Mariam never lost her belief in firm discipline, as shown by the well-known account of her whipping her eighteen-year-old son Joseph, a private in the Confederate army, for refusing to get out of bed when she called him. Mariam set down her coffee, walked outside, cut some switches off of a tree, doled out the punishment, and returned to the kitchen, commenting, "Soldier, or no soldier; my children will mind me as long as I live."¹

When Bedford was thirteen, the family moved to Tippah County, Mississippi, and three years later, in 1837, William Forrest died, leaving sixteen-year-old Bedford as the male head of a household that included his mother and seven siblings. But the Forrests took the loss of William in stride and Bedford assumed the role of father figure and protector of the family. There was little time for sympathy, and no time for pity. Crops had to be planted. Animals had to be tended. And children had to be fed. He worked the land during the day, then came home and helped care for the children at night. His own recollection of this time was that "he would labor all day in the field and then at night sit up and work until it was late making buckskin leggings and shoes and coon-skin caps for his younger brothers."² He loved and protected his younger siblings. And he loved and protected his mother.

Mariam Forrest's panther attack occurred in the evening, near sunset, but that did not stop Bedford from whistling at

his dogs, grabbing his rifle from over the mantle, and taking off after the cat. His mother pleaded with him to wait until morning, but he argued that the panther would be long gone by then and he intended to rid the Earth of such a creature. Clearly, Mariam's stubborn determination was passed on to her son, who tracked the animal all night, then killed it with one shot to the head. After scalping the cat, he brought the "trophy" home, presenting it to his mother as a gift.

In all likelihood, organized religion played a very minor role in the Forrest children's upbringing. Houses of worship were few and far between in the sparsely populated pioneer country of what was then known as America's West. The most common occasion for congregational worship would have been those rare occurrences when a circuit-riding preacher came to the area and conducted a service. As populations increased, so did congregations, but the "church on every corner" reality of today's American South was not the world in which Bedford Forrest grew up.

Though honest and hardworking, Bedford's father, William, was not known to be a religious man. We can not say with certainty that he was not a Christian; we simply do not have the information available. It appears that the majority of religious influence in the Forrest household would have come from Mariam. Mariam Forrest was devout, even though frontier life had left her a little rough around the edges. It was said that she "chewed tobacco, went to horse races, and spit as big as a man."³ Of course in that day and age frontier women frequently chewed tobacco, and horse races were a common means of entertainment among the country people, not having the gambling stigma attached to it that it has today. Others describe Mariam as a God-fearing and honest woman who believed wholeheartedly in raising her children by the Biblical mandate towards "fear and admonition of the Lord."

While modern society often promotes overindulgence as a means of showing children love, the nineteenth-century

rural world believed that firm discipline was necessary for a child's proper upbringing. Children were expected to pull their weight by working around the house and on the farm. They were to respect and obey their elders, especially their parents, and they could expect a swift whipping if they misbehaved. No doubt Mariam ruled her house with a rod of iron, but her children loved and respected her and knew that she loved them as well.

At the very least, the Forrest children were raised to have a healthy respect and fear of God. They were taught right from wrong, they were taught the righteousness of hard work and self-reliance, and they were taught that obedience brought reward while disobedience brought punishment. In many cases, frontier Christianity had a very simplistic, sometimes even superstitious nature and many believed that they were to simply do their best and God would reward them for it.

At this stage in his life, Forrest was forging a view that Christianity was for women. And while he later credited his safety in battle to the prayers of a faithful mother and wife, he took no active part in Christianity himself. If the ladies were praying for him, then God would protect him. If they were not, then he might not. At any rate, he was content for many years to live his spiritual life vicariously through his mother and wife.

While the young Bedford Forrest may not have modeled perfect piety, he does deserve respect for taking over the male leadership of his home at the age of sixteen and becoming a tremendous provider and protector. One well-known story involves a conversation Bedford had with a neighbor who could not seem to keep his ox from escaping and trampling though the Forrests' cornfield. Bedford confronted the neighbor over it, threatening to shoot the ox if it happened again. The headstrong and older neighbor promised to do the same to young Bedford if such action were taken. Not surprisingly, the ox escaped once more, and Bedford kept his word by gunning the animal down. The livid neighbor heard the shot and came running with gun in hand only to

find Bedford reloading and taking aim at him. As the shot whizzed inches over his head, the neighbor scurried home, never again to question the mettle of Bedford Forrest.

By all accounts, the family farm flourished under Bedford's resolute oversight. He and his younger brothers worked the land, tended the animals, and harvested bountiful crops. Not only was Bedford a hard worker, but he also possessed rare acumen for leadership and organization, no doubt largely due to the fact that he was required to take the male lead over the family when his father died. In the "sink or swim" world that he was suddenly thrust into, he swam—and he swam admirably. The farm became such a success that he felt comfortable leaving it in the capable hands of his younger brothers to head out on his own adventure.

In 1841, a group of Mississippians went west to fight in Texas's war for independence from Mexico. Bedford's younger brother John had already seen some action, having been wounded and crippled for life by an enemy round. Unfortunately for Bedford, by the time he arrived in Texas, the hostilities had ended and his services were unneeded. He found work mauling rails only long enough to save the money to return home. His military prowess would have to await a future conflict.

By the early 1840s, Bedford felt secure enough in his family's welfare to leave the farm for good and set out to make his way in the world. A combination of factors played into this life change. First, his younger siblings had grown in age and ability enough to manage affairs on the farm. Then, in 1843 Mariam chose to remarry, giving her hand to a man named Joseph Luxley. Undoubtedly the protective Bedford knew and approved of Luxley to the extent that he felt safe placing the farm and his family in Luxley's care.

It was also about this time that a business opportunity arose for young Bedford. Jonathan Forrest, an uncle living in Hernando, Mississippi, offered him a share in his horse-trading business and Bedford jumped at the chance to make a better life for himself. Applying his well-honed traits of organization

and hard work, he steadily increased the business's income and year after year improved his financial standing.

The young Bedford Forrest seemed to have a knack for three things: business, family honor, and violence. And these three converged on a fateful day in 1845. The Matlock boys rode into Hernando that day with revenge on their mind. Apparently, Jonathan Forrest owed the family money and either had not been able to pay or had not agreed on the amount. At any rate, they strolled into his establishment that day with plans to settle the score in blood. While the twenty-four-year-old Bedford had no desire to get sucked into a money squabble of his uncle's, he also refused to stand by and watch four men rough up sixty-five-year-old Jonathan. He made it clear that if a fight ensued, it would at least be four against two, rather than four against one. As tensions and words became more and more heated, one of the Matlocks pulled a gun and killed Jonathan with one shot to the chest. Unflinchingly, Bedford pulled a pistol and shot two of them where they stood. Still outnumbered two to one, and with no more bullets in his gun, Bedford appeared to be in over his head as he tussled with the remaining assailants. Then a bystander tossed him a bowie knife. He promptly attacked, injuring one before they fled the scene.

A subsequent trial found Bedford innocent of any wrongdoing. The court rightly determined that he was defending himself, but in so doing he had made quite an impression on the citizens of Hernando. In addition to being a local merchant, he was now also given the responsibility of being the town's lawman. That rare combination of physical skill and obvious leadership qualities had not only won him respect, it had won him another role as protector. But this time it was not just his family, it was the entire community.