

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all – freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Fifty-Six

## Remember The Alamo!

### LESSON IDEA

To portray the valor and self-sacrificing courage of the men at the Alamo, and to show how their bravery inspired other Texans in the battle for independence.

### PREPARATION

Have a map of Texas available, so that family members can locate the cities mentioned and better understand the strategic importance of San Antonio and the Alamo.

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**T**HE TEXANS standing watch on the north wall of the Alamo blew on their chilled fingers, cold from grasping the metal barrels of their guns, cold from the raw bite of the north wind. It was February 27, 1836, the fifth day of a war of nerves being waged by the Mexican Army of over five thousand against the Texas Volunteer Army, which numbered less than two hundred. When the siege had begun, every Texan in the Alamo was confident that Santa Anna, the viciously brutal Mexican commander, would be forced to retreat within the week. Now they were not as sure. Couriers – more than a dozen – had ridden out of the Alamo to spread news of the Mexican threat and seek reinforcements; but none had returned, and no help had arrived.

Gun powder was running short, and the Alamo itself – originally built as a missionary post, not a military fort – offered its defenders little help. There were no moats or ditches, no bastions. The outer wall, three feet thick and from nine to twelve feet high, was not strong enough to withstand continued bombardment nor high enough to dis-

courage scaling. Riflemen had to stand with head and shoulders exposed and fire over the wall, since there were no slits through which a gun barrel could be poked. Obviously the Alamo could not be held for long by 150 men, no matter how expert their marksmanship. Reinforcements must arrive, and soon.

For the first four days, the men inside the Alamo buoyed their spirits with discussions of victory, when couriers would return with men and supplies; they imagined Sam Houston riding to join them, leading an army of volunteers. But the fifth and sixth and seventh day passed with no troops and no news from the outside world, and an uneasy feeling began to gnaw at their confidence. Even Davy Crockett, one of Texas' newest citizens and the Alamo's most experienced fighter, began to get edgy. Davy had come to Texas to earn his fortune; he enrolled as a volunteer in the Texas Army for six months, bringing some of his Tennessee boys with him, because they "liked a good fight" and had heard the Texans were having trouble with "old Santy Anny." But the delay and the silence made Crockett restless. "I'd rather go through the gates and shoot it out with the Mexicans beyond these walls," he declared. "I hate to be hemmed in."

In the beginning, none of the Texans had been hemmed in. Had they wanted to slip away and join Colonel James Fannin's troops in Goliad, eighty-five miles away, they could have done so. The road to freedom and allies had been open for two days after the Mexicans arrived in San Antonio. Now that escape route was blocked.

Texas was still a Mexican province; and Santa Anna, the Mexican dictator, was determined to crush the quest for independence. After he had driven the Texan army out of the province, or massacred it, he planned to execute the independence leaders, confiscate Texan property to pay for the expenses of war, drive all participants in the uprising from the province, take all non-participants (meaning women and children) back to Mexico, execute any citizen of the United States who came into Texas as part of the volunteer armed forces, and finally, to forbid future settlement to any Anglo-Saxon.

The Texans were just as determined to be independent of the erratic and dictatorial Mexican rule. They had worked hard to develop the land on which they lived – land they had been encouraged to settle, first by the Spanish, then by the Mexicans. [Review the issues and history given in Lesson #51.]

**I**N THE OPINION of Jim Bowie and William Travis, co-commanders of the Alamo forces, keeping San Antonio free was essential to gaining freedom for all of Texas. In a letter to Texas Governor Henry Smith on February 2, Bowie had said:

*The salvation of Texas depends in great measure on keeping Béxar [a shortened form of the full name San Antonio de Béxar] out of the hands of the enemy. It stands on the frontier picquet guard, and if it was in the possession of Santa Anna, there is no stronghold from which to repel him in his march to the Sabine [the river marking the Louisiana-Texas border]. Colonel Neill and myself have come to the solemn resolution that we will rather die in these ditches than give them up to the enemy.*

Bowie's fighting courage had made him a legend in his own lifetime. As a youth, he had broken wild mustangs and ridden the backs of alligators. As an adult, he had outwitted Indian marauders, Mexican troops, and Gulf Coast pirates. He had survived fierce fights – on one occasion a knife duel in which he and his opponent had their trousers nailed to a log, and they were then set adrift over a

swift stream. Only Bowie survived. Now, at forty years of age, his strong body was succumbing to tuberculosis – although he refused to admit it. He was still ready to take on the entire Mexican Army, single-handedly if necessary, to advance the independence of Texas.

William Travis, who shared the Alamo command with Bowie, was equally convinced that San Antonio was strategic to a Texas victory. When the first reports were confirmed that the Mexican Army was moving into San Antonio by the thousands, outnumbering the Texans more than thirty to one, Travis gave no thought to a retreat. Instead he immediately sent a plea for help to the mayor of Gonzales, a nearby town.

He also dispatched couriers to Colonel Fannin, the commander of the main Texan Army at Goliad, to officials of the Texas government, and to Sam Houston, who was waging his own war with differing political factions at a Constitutional Convention called to establish Texas independence. While Travis and Bowie waited for the help they were sure would come, Texan and Mexican cannon roared at each other; and the riflemen of the Alamo regularly picked off any enemy soldiers who ventured too close.

The only Texan to suffer injury was Jim Bowie. While straining to position a cannon on the outer wall, he was seized with a fit of violent coughing – a symptom of the disease that was sapping his strength; and in his struggle to keep the cannon from toppling off the wall, he plummeted to the ground. His ribs were crushed into his chest, and both of his legs were broken. The fallen warrior was carried to the hospital quarters in the main barracks, only dimly conscious that his days of command had ended.

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

How many soldiers did Santa Anna lose at the Alamo? What became of the Texas commander, Fannin, whose indecisiveness sealed the fate of the men at the Alamo? To the Frenchman who refused to cross Travis' line? To the women and children who were taken prisoner by Santa Anna? These are some of the questions answered by Lon Tinkle in *The Alamo*, available at most public libraries. We recommend it for your summer reading.

**T**HE BURDEN of leadership now fell on Travis, who sent out more couriers with appeals to Houston and to Fannin. But the only help that arrived came from the nearby town of Gonzales. It was a courageous group of thirty-two volunteers, who already knew that Fannin would not answer Travis' plea and guessed that Houston dare not leave the Convention until independence had been declared.

Historian Lon Tinkle described their bravery with these words:

*Theirs was a decision to die. These men, unlike those in the Alamo, had all the latest news of the colonies. They knew that without Fannin's help no other Texas army could be readied in time to save the Texans besieged at the Béxar fortress. They knew that Santa Anna had to be delayed in San Antonio as long as possible to let the Texans form a government and a new army. They knew that their home town of Gonzales would be next to be swallowed up. But they also knew with unmistakable clarity that they had a duty to the men in the Alamo .*

Their arrival at the Alamo was the cause of celebration. To the defenders, it meant that help was now on the way from many sources. The men from Gonzales spared them the truth. Even Travis continued to believe that Fannin would come to their rescue – until the courier returned with the news that the commander of Goliad, after making a halfhearted start, had turned back in fear.

Late in the afternoon of March 3, Travis assembled his men and broke the news. The bitterness and the sense of betrayal that he must have felt never showed in his voice or actions. He excused the Texas government, explaining that few men had expected Santa Anna to bring so many men and supplies so far and so fast during the winter months. He excused Fannin with the charitable explanation that the Goliad commander might be fighting Mexicans elsewhere; he apologized for having misled the men with hopes of reinforcements. Then he made the situation clear. Surrender was unthinkable, worse than death; escape was possible for only a handful. "All that remains is to die in the fort and fight to the last

moment," he advised. "We must sell our lives as dearly as possible."

But every man was to have a choice in the matter. And as the long line of buckskinned soldiers watched, their commander drew his sword and traced a line in the dust at their feet, extending from the right to the left end of the file. He said nothing until he had returned to his position in the center. Then, very solemnly he concluded, "I now want every man who is determined to stay here and die with me to come across this line. Who will be first? March!"

What would your thoughts have been? Would you have crossed the line and committed yourself to a sure death? [Ask each family member for an opinion. Emphasize the point that Travis was not asking for their loyalty, but for their lives.]

Men crossed the line eagerly. Within minutes, only two were left – one was Jim Bowie who, more dead than alive, had been carried to the assembly on a cot. "Boys," he said, "I am not able to go to you, but I wish some of you would be so kind as to remove my cot over there." He was promptly carried across the line. Now the only man remaining was a Frenchman named Louis Moses Rose, who had come to the New World to live, not to save it. He had no apparent interest in the cause for which the others were willing to die, and leaped the outer wall to take his chances on escaping.

Their decision now made, the men in the Alamo prepared for the final assault; they knew the Mexicans would attack soon, but not when or from what direction. Finally, on March 5, Santa Anna silenced his guns and summoned his staff. He realized that his constant cannon fire, especially during the long nights, and the real or pretended skirmishes, had exhausted Texan ammunition, and the nerves of the defenders. Now he wanted to give them a chance to sleep the sleep of exhaustion – and awake to find Mexicans scaling the walls.

The attack was set for four o'clock on Sunday morning, March 6. Four columns of infantry, one from each point of the compass, would simultaneously race for the walls, equipped with axes, crowbars, and scaling ladders. The cavalry would bring up the rear, preventing retreat. The assault began with a piercing bugle blast, the drumming sound of thousands of feet on the hard ground,

and the ghoulish music of an ancient Moorish battle march, the famed *deguello* (meaning "to slit the throat"), played by Santa Anna's regimental band.

Inside the Alamo, the first alarm came from Travis himself: "Come on, men! The Mexicans are upon us! And we will give them hell!"

A young Mexican soldier later wrote that "the fire from the enemy's cannon was fearful; we fell back; more than forty men fell around me in a few moments. . . . The whole scene was one of extreme terror." Less than two hundred Texans had stopped an army of thousands.

The second assault met the same fate, as Mexican casualties mounted. After two attempts, no scaling ladder stood in place long enough to permit entry over the walls. The calmest man, the Mexicans reported, was the Texan in buckskin who wore the peculiar cap — meaning Davy Crockett. One described him as a tall giant who stood up to reload his gun, indifferent to enemy fire, pouring scorn on the enemy with his great voice while leveling his rifle for another kill.

But the walls which separated the small band of Texans from the hordes of Mexicans could not stand forever under such an avalanche. In the third assault, the weak center of the northern wall, opened two days before by Mexican cannon, was breached. A stampede of enemy soldiers poured through the opening. Hundreds of Mexicans were slain by the murderous fire of Texas cannon and rifle and in the final man-to-man combat with swords, tomahawks, knives, and bayonets. But the result was inevitable.

Crockett, his right arm broken and bleeding, fired with his left until his gun was broken off at the stock and the barrel fell to the ground. Travis' last words were: "Don't surrender, boys. . . ." And surrender they did not. Crockett and his Tennessee boys died defending their assigned post near the stockade fence. Santa Anna's cook, Ben, found the fifty-year-old frontiersman surrounded by "no less than sixteen Mexican corpses," one laying across his body with the "huge knife of Davy buried in the Mexican's bosom to the hilt." Bowie died in the chapel, a pale and emaciated ghost of a man who used his last few ounces of strength to meet the enemy with blazing pistols and his deadly knife. The doorway to his room is said to have

been piled high with the bodies of Mexican soldiers.

Even after the last sign of resistance had been stilled, the Mexicans continued to pour round after round of ammunition into Texan corpses. As Santa Anna had decreed, there were to be no prisoners. Only a few women and children and two servant boys survived the slaughter. By three o'clock in the afternoon, the victors had separated Texan bodies from Mexican and had prepared elaborate funeral pyres. In burning the bodies of his enemy, Santa Anna hoped to break the will of his disobedient Texan subjects and crush their drive for independence. The bestial act was extremely effective, but not in the way it was intended. Even as torches were applied and flames rose, the names of Travis, Bowie, and Crockett were being carried to the cities of the north. Their courage galvanized Texas into a mighty resistance.

Three days after the defeat at the Alamo, the Constitutional Convention, which had been held in session by Sam Houston, adjourned, having signed a declaration of independence, elected an interim government, adopted a constitution, and reappointed Houston as commander-in-chief of the Texas Army. Less than six weeks later, the Texans defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto, near Galveston, and won their independence. "Remember the Alamo" was the battle cry that brought defeat to the Mexican dictator, who thought it would be remembered as his first victory. Next week we'll learn more about the victorious general, Sam Houston, one of Texas' most famous heroes and leaders.

#### DURING THE WEEK

Apply some of the points of the Alamo story to personal situations or to present-day political events. For example: how victory was the ultimate result of a few standing courageously against many; how an opponent may win a temporary advantage and yet, in the long run, be defeated; how the character of a man can be measured not only by those values for which he lives, but also those for which he is willing to die; how terrorism can backfire and strengthen resistance.

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