

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-Seven

General Sam Houston

LESSON IDEA

To show the importance of Sam Houston's leadership in winning Texan independence from Mexico and in paving the way for Texan statehood.

PREPARATION

Be prepared to discuss the effect the siege of the Alamo had on the morale of the Texans.

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“REMEMBER the Alamo!” was the cry that sent Texans racing toward the Mexican barricades on the plains of San Jacinto, rifles loaded and bayonets ready. Though outnumbered and outgunned, they stormed the enemy stronghold, sending General Santa Anna's troops into confusion and terror. Leading the Texans' charge was General Sam Houston, the rugged frontier fighter whose love for freedom drove his army to victory.

But Sam Houston's story does not begin nor end at this battle, for at one time or another in his life, he was everything from the adopted son of a proud Cherokee Indian Chief to a United States Senator from Texas. Houston was a man who fitted well into the age in which he lived. He was a big rugged man — an adventurer — who was willing to risk everything for the cause in which he believed. From the beginning, Houston was restless, never content to stay in one place or work at one job very long. As a teenager he ran away from his Tennessee home to live with the Cherokee Indians, but later returned to become a schoolmaster. His fighting career began in 1813 when a group of

American soldiers marched into Maryville to recruit Tennessee men to fight the British in the War of 1812.

Almost immediately Houston took the silver dollar from the top of one soldier's drum — an indication in those days that you were willing to enlist — and ran home to get his mother's consent. Before he left, she gave him the family musket and a stern warning about its use in battle. “Never disgrace it,” she said, “for I had rather all my sons fill one honorable grave than that one of them should turn his back to save his life. Go, and remember that while the door of my cabin is open to brave men, it is eternally shut to all cowards.” In addition to the musket, she placed a ring on his finger with the admonition that he should always live his life according to the single word inscribed inside the ring. [Can you guess what that word was? We'll find out later in our story.]

SO WITH A MUSKET slung over his shoulder, a ring on his finger, and a shiny silver dollar in his pocket, Sam Houston marched off, expecting to be sent into battle against the British, who at that time were threatening our coastlines. As it turned out, Houston first saw action under the command of General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend against a band of Creek Indians who were fighting for the British.

In leading one furious charge against the savage enemy, Houston was struck by a Creek arrow, but this failed to stop him. A friend yanked the arrow out, bringing with it both blood and flesh, and

Houston limped through the rest of the battle, firing his pistol and swinging his sword. Later in the day, in another skirmish, one musket ball shattered his right arm and another hit him in the shoulder. Still, Houston refused to give up. His friends dragged his mangled body from the battleground; and although the doctors who examined him gave him up for dead, eventually he received proper medical care and served five more years in the army.

While in the service, Houston decided he would become a lawyer. So upon his release, he travelled to Nashville, Tennessee, to study law under the expert guidance of a prominent judge who outlined an eighteen-month study plan for him. Houston finished the course in only six months and became a lawyer in the town of Lebanon, not far from Nashville.

He soon became deeply involved in politics, and in 1823 he ran unopposed for the Congressional seat from his district. After serving as a U.S. Representative for four years, he gave up his seat in Congress to become Governor of Tennessee.

But the most exciting time of his life began when Houston moved to Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1833 to practice law. He immediately immersed himself in Texas politics. That was the same year that General Santa Anna overthrew the President of Mexico, established himself as dictator, and abolished the rights which Texans had enjoyed under the 1824 Mexican constitution. Houston and his fellow Texans were justifiably worried about Santa Anna's intentions toward them. They knew he was a depraved ruler — a man whose addiction to opium gave him delusions of grandeur — and a man who forsook his wife to pursue young beauties. This is the character of the man the Texans faced in 1836, when with an army of 5000 men he marched into Texas to crush their fight for independence.

Ultimately, it would be up to Sam Houston, as Commander-in-Chief of the Texas Army, to provide the leadership to destroy the hopes of this arrogant and immoral despot.

After the tiny Texan force at the Alamo was wiped out by Santa Anna's troops, many Texans were panic-stricken. They feared their bid for independence from Mexican domination had been lost. The government leaders had fled from their

temporary refuge at Harrisburg to Galveston Island to escape the rampaging Mexican troops. Meanwhile, General Houston was busily gathering recruits to face Santa Anna, the self-proclaimed "Napoleon of the Western World."

Some of Houston's army was stationed at Goliad under the command of James Fannin. But Houston knew it was futile to defend the fortress, and ordered Fannin to evacuate it. Fannin, hoping to give Houston time to gather a larger army, refused to leave. Tragically, less than a week later, hordes of Mexicans under the command of General José Urrea forced Fannin to surrender. General Urrea had no intention of killing his prisoners, but soon received orders from Santa Anna to wipe out all of them. Reluctantly, he obeyed. On March 27, 1836, the unfortunate men were marched before a line of Mexican riflemen to be shot like cattle. During the chaos of the slaughter, twenty-eight men escaped to tell what had happened at Goliad. The 342 men who were killed were not even given a decent burial. Their bodies were placed in a pile and set afire — just as had been done at the Alamo. [*How does Santa Anna's treatment of prisoners of war compare with the atrocities by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong against our soldiers who fought in Vietnam?*]

WHEN WORD reached Sam Houston of the massacre at Goliad, he had managed to recruit approximately 800 men to pit against the thousands of troops under Santa Anna. It appeared to be a hopeless situation for the Texans, but fortunately for Houston and for Texas, Santa Anna's over-confidence and pride blinded him. Believing that the battle at the Alamo and the butchery at Goliad had all but ended the Texans' "rebellion," Santa Anna split up his forces, sending them off in different directions with orders to burn and pillage the countryside. He himself, with a force of 1200 men, galloped off toward Galveston Island, where he hoped to massacre the Texas "government."

Santa Anna's failure to take his entire force with him toward Galveston Island cost him the battle. He had no idea where Sam Houston was, but Houston's scouts were keeping a close watch on every move he made. As soon as Houston realized

where Santa Anna was heading, he and his men marched day and night to intercept the dictator's march on the island refuge.

When the weary troops reached the Buffalo Bayou, a creek which wound its way through the plain of San Jacinto, Houston ordered his men to halt and gave them his first and last speech. "Victory is certain," he declared. "Trust in God and fear not! The victims of the Alamo and Goliad cry out for cool, deliberate vengeance! Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

HHOUSTON'S WORDS inspired his men to victory. As one private wrote many years later: "I had been impatient, weary of wading through mud and water, often hungry and angry. Yet while General Houston spoke and towered with constantly ascending eloquence and earnestness. I was reminded of the halo encircling the brow of Our Saviour. Had General Houston called upon me to jump into the whirlpool of Niagara as the only means of saving Texas, I would have made the leap!"

After Houston and his men crossed the rain-swollen Buffalo Bayou, he chose a wooded area skirting the bayou as the place where he would make his stand for Texas. Stretching in front of him lay nearly a mile of grass-covered prairie.

Santa Anna's men arrived on the plain of San Jacinto on April 20 and set up barricades 200 yards away from Houston. It was another foolish move on the dictator's part, but even years later he wrote: "I could choose the location for battle. I had the enemy shut up in the low, marshy angle of the country, where retreat was cut off by Buffalo Bayou and by the San Jacinto River. Everything was favorable for our army and the cause we were defending." As usual, his officers vigorously disagreed. After the battle, one disgruntled officer wrote in disgust: "This camping ground of His Excellency's is, in all respects, against military rules. Any youngster could have picked a better one."

That day there were a few volleys of gunfire between the Mexicans and the Texans, but no battle ensued. Santa Anna was biding his time, calmly awaiting the arrival of 500 more men. Sam Houston, of course, was expecting no reinforcements, but to his surprise, nine recruits stole into

camp that night. One of these brave men described the Texan Army in these terms: "A scene singularly wild and picturesque presented itself to our view. Around 20 or 30 campfires stood as many groups of men: English, Irish, Scots, Mexicans, French, Germans, Italians, Poles, Yankees, all unwashed and unshaved, their long hair and beards and moustaches matted, their clothes in tatters and plastered with mud. A more savage-looking band could scarcely have been assembled. Yet many were gentlemen, owners of large estates. Some were distinguished for oratory, some in science, some in medicine. Many had graced famous drawing rooms. Their guns were of every size and shape . . ."

Down through the timber and across the prairie, the new recruits noticed the flickering campfires of the enemy. But what a contrast! The Mexican officers were partying, drinking, playing cards, and laughing with no concern for the battle they would face the next day.

It was not until 3:30 the next afternoon when General Houston gave his men the command to prepare for battle. His mangy-looking, ill-kempt, and untrained soldiers spread out across the prairie in a line two men deep and 1500 yards long. Slowly they walked through the grass toward the Mexican barricades. Other men loaded Houston's two cannons with broken horseshoes and black powder, awaiting his signal to fire.

General Houston was mounted, riding back and forth in front of his men yelling orders. When they were within fifty yards of the barricades, Houston gave the order to fire. The battle was on! The

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

In studying any important historical event, or the life of an individual who had a significant impact on history, it is wise to consult several different sources for discussions of either the event or the individual. In this manner, the student can hopefully obtain differing viewpoints on the same subject and thus learn to sort out fact from fiction in his study of history. In studying the life of Sam Houston in more detail, we recommend: *The Raven* by Marquis James; *The Day Of San Jacinto* by Frank X. Tolbert; and *Sam Houston* by George Creel. For younger students we recommend *Sam Houston: Boy Chieftain* by Augusta Stevenson, available for \$2.95 from your local American Opinion Bookstore or directly from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

Texans began running toward the barricades, firing at every Mexican in sight, and shouting, "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

The ferocity of the attack terrified Santa Anna's troops. Within minutes Houston's men had breached the perimeter of the camp, engaging in hand-to-hand combat and clubbing the Mexicans into submission. Santa Anna promptly decided not to wait for the outcome of the battle. He fled the camp on horseback as soon as he realized Houston's men had broken through the barricades.

The Battle of San Jacinto, as it was later to be called, lasted only twenty minutes. Yet during that brief moment of history, more than 650 Mexicans died and several hundred were wounded. Texan losses were surprisingly light — only nine dead and 200 wounded. One Mexican later described the defeat in these words: "Imagine our being surprised at 4:30 in the afternoon in the middle of an open plain, with nothing to obstruct the view of the enemy to the front! They succeeded in advancing to within 200 yards of us without being discovered. And from there spread terror and death among our ranks!"

After the battle, the weary Texans herded 750 Mexican prisoners into a makeshift enclosure. That evening, the Texans lit a huge bonfire, as a means of both keeping warm and lighting the enclosure. The bonfire terrified the Mexicans; one Mexican officer explained that he and his men thought "we were to be burnt alive in retaliation for those who had been burnt in the Alamo. Oh, the cruel and bitter moment. So we felt considerably relieved when they let us go to the fires to warm ourselves and to dry our wet clothes."

The Republic of Texas had been saved, but General Houston's business was unfinished: Santa Anna was still at large. The Mexican dictator had fled camp without even bothering to get dressed. He galloped off wearing nothing but white satin drawers, a linen shirt with diamond studs, and red velvet slippers. That night he discovered an abandoned shack and dressed in some old clothing which he found on the floor. But in his frantic effort to escape, Santa Anna lost his sense of direction. When one of Houston's scouts finally found him, he was creeping through the grass *toward* the Texan's camp.

Back at camp, General Santa Anna formally

surrendered to Houston. The defeated dictator told Houston, "You may consider yourself born to no common destiny, for you have conquered the Napoleon of the Western World. I ask generosity for the vanquished." To which Houston sarcastically replied, "You should have remembered that at the Alamo."

After his victory over the Mexicans, General Sam Houston laid down his sword. He became the first President of the Republic of Texas. He later served as a United States Senator from Texas, and still later in life, as Governor of the Lone Star State.

Sam Houston died on July 26, 1863. Following his death, his wife removed a ring from his finger — the same ring his mother had given him years before when he had first gone off to fight for his nation. When she saw the single word inscribed inside, Houston's wife recalled the story of his mother's admonishing him to live by that word. The word was "Honor." Sam Houston had done so.

DURING THE WEEK

After the victory at San Jacinto, the Texans set up the Republic of Texas as an independent and sovereign nation. But the young republic still found itself threatened by General Santa Anna a few years later. Check your library for references to the Mexican War and find out what eventually happened to Santa Anna. How did Texas become a state? Were all Texans in agreement that it should become part of the United States?

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