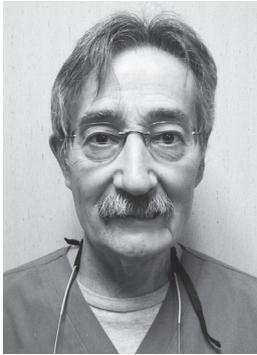


Defenders of the Alamo: Who Were They, and Why Did They Do It?

By Michael E. Anderson



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This paper was presented at the November meeting of the Hagerstown Torch Club in 2013.

This article concerns a group of men who, one hundred and seventy seven years after their deaths, still remain worthy of our awe and respect. Finding a match in history equal to their bravery and sacrifice would likely turn up only professional soldiers, which these men were not. I speak of the defenders of the Alamo during Texas's war for independence from Mexico in 1836.

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This event in American history is well known and has often been written about, glorified in books, television, and cinema. From February 23 to March 6, 1836, one hundred and eighty three men defended a broken down Catholic mission against a Mexican army at least ten times larger. (Modern historical research suggests that there may have been as many as two hundred and fifty defenders, but whether we accept the traditional or the revised headcount, they were vastly outnumbered.). The ending was a given: death by the sword. The defenders were reminded this nightly, as the Mexican army band played the *Deguello* (an old Moorish battle anthem, loosely translated as "cut their throats").

Two of the defenders became famous to modern times: David Crockett (he hated being called "Davy") and James Bowie. I still remember "The Adventures of Davy Crockett," with Fess Parker and Buddy Ebsen, on the television show *Walt Disney Presents*. But what about the other one hundred and eighty one defenders? Who were they? What were they doing in Texas? And most important: why were they willing to give their lives?

I write to introduce you to some remarkable men, mostly very young, who gave their lives for a cause. They were common men exhibiting uncommon valor, ordinary men exhibiting extraordinary bravery.

First, let us set the historical scene. Starting in the eighteen twenties, the Mexican government, which had won its independence from Spain in 1821, whole-heartedly encouraged colonization of its territory of Texas, in hopes of development and economic gain. For years, the mostly American colonists were given free grants of lush land, on which they prospered. All they had to do was obey Mexican law and pay fair taxes and fees.

But by 1830, new colonists were arriving uninvited, and they tended to show less respect for the Mexican government and its laws. For example, the new colonists usually ignored the requirement that immigrants convert to Catholicism, and some found ways to circumvent Mexico's 1829 abolition of slavery, such as writing contracts of employment with their slaves, signed with an "X," for 99 years. (To my knowledge, the only known slave owner at the Alamo was James Bowie.)

On April 6, 1830, the Mexican government passed a law forbidding future immigration from the United States and greatly curtailed the colonists' economic freedoms. The abrogation of civil and state rights throughout Mexico led to rebellion in two places in 1835: Zacatecas and Texas. After quelling the Zacatecas uprising, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna Lebron (the Mexican president and dictator, who envisioned himself as the "Napoleon of the West") turned his attention to dealing with the Anglos in Texas, who, by late 1835, had initiated a provisional government started to form militias.

Santa Anna decided that these uppity Texians (as they were called) needed to be taught a lesson. He sent his brother-in-law, General Martin Perfecto de Cos, to arrest troublemakers and fortify the garrison at San Antonio de Bexar. Cos was soundly defeated by 300 Texian volunteers. Thus began the War for Texas Independence.

The Mexican government sent out a circular throughout all of Mexico. In part, it read:

The colonists established in Texas have recently given the most unequivocal evidence of the extremity to which perfidy, ingratitude, and the relentless spirit that animates them can go [...] forgetting what they owe to the supreme government of the nation which so generously admitted them to its bosom. [...] active measures will be taken to rectify this crime against the whole nation.

Santa Ana had had enough. He personally led an army in to punish the defenders of San Antonio, arriving on February 23, 1836. With 2500 men, he immediately laid siege to the Alamo, a patched-up old Franciscan mission that could hardly be called a fort. Minimally defending its walls would have required 400 to 500 men. But,

right up to 5:30 a.m. on March 6, a group of defenders not even half that size gave it their best.

* * *

Who were these defenders? Most of them were very recent arrivals from the United States. They came from eighteen states and five foreign countries; twenty-six were born in Europe. Their occupations included merchant, surveyor, painter, farmer, shopkeeper, plasterer, glazer, jockey, and teamster. At least six were physicians, and six were lawyers. The average age was twenty-nine; the youngest was fifteen and the oldest fifty five. A diverse lot, but not one of them was a professional soldier. To a man, they shared the will to fight and die for what they believed was right.

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Why had they come to Texas? Some were drawn by stories of vast acres of land that could be acquired for little money. The dream of agricultural riches was very alluring. Some came to escape family and/or financial problems—a quick and easy way to leave a broken marriage, a pregnant girlfriend, a hangman's noose, or an

unrepayable debt. They were not saints, nor a bunch of wallflowers. On trees all over Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and South Carolina was whittled "G.T.T." —Gone To Texas.

William Barrett Travis shared command with James Bowie at the beginning of the siege and assumed full command when Bowie became seriously ill. He was an attorney/school teacher/merchant, born in South Carolina and raised in Alabama. What was he doing in Texas? One story has it that he killed a man that made advances towards his wife; another that he was running from debts. He was absolutely convinced that the defense of the Alamo would slow the advance of Santa Ana's army, giving Sam Houston more time to organize the Army of Texas. One of Travis' many pleas for Texians to come to their aid shows the nature and depth of his commitment. In part it read:

The enemy has demanded surrender at discretion, otherwise, the garrison will be put to the sword [...] I have answered the demand with a cannon shot [...] I shall never surrender or retreat. Then, I call to you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid, with all dispatch. [...] If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier. Victory or death.

Travis was among the first, if not the very first, to die during the final Mexican assault, of a bullet through the forehead while defending the Alamo's weak north wall.

A defender who exemplifies the overall spirit of these men is a twenty-one-year-old lawyer from Kentucky named Daniel Cloud. He had arrived in Texas only on February 11, seeking to help "the cause." History remembers him best for his letter to his brother,

dated December 26, 1835. Among other things, he explains his views of the Texas Revolution and his reasons for wanting to join it. The following is an excerpt:

Ever since Texas has unfurled the banner of Freedom and commenced a warfare for Liberty or Death, our hearts have been enlisted in her behalf. The progress of her cause has increased the ardor of our feelings, until we have resolved to embark in the vessel which contains the flag of Liberty and sink or swim in its defence. Our Brethren of Texas were invited by the Mexican Government while republican in its form to come and settle, they did so, and endured all the privations and sufferings incident to the settlement of a new frontier country and have surrounded themselves with all the comforts and conveniences of life. Now the Mexicans with unblushing effrontery call on them to submit to a Monarchical, tyrannical, Central despotism, at the bare mention of which every true hearted son of Kentucky feels an instinctive horror followed by a firm and steady glow of virtuous indignation. The cause of Philanthropy, of humanity, of Liberty & human happiness throughout the world call loudly on every man who can, to aid Texas. [...] If we succeed, the country is ours, it is immense in extent and fertile in its soil and will amply reward all our toils. If we fail death in the cause of liberty and humanity is not cause for shuddering. Our rifles are by our sides and choice guns they are; we know what awaits us and are prepared to meet it.

Twenty-one years young—idealistic, brave, archetypal. For his principles, he gave his life at the Alamo.

Albert Martin, a twenty-eight-year-old storeowner from Gonzales, Texas,

left the Alamo in the late evening of February 28 to deliver Travis's message. Despite being out of harm's way, he chose to return to the Alamo with twenty-nine other volunteers from Gonzales, ultimately giving his life for the choice.

James Butler Bonham, a twenty-nine-year-old South Carolina aristocrat and lawyer, was another defender who eschewed his own safety. Twice Travis sent him out with dispatches. At great personal risk, he returned both times.

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Courage did not begin or end with men in their twenties. The youngest defender was William Philip King, age fifteen, from Gonzales. When his father prepared to ride to the Alamo with the Gonzales volunteers, William successfully persuaded his father that his mother and younger brothers needed him more than William Barrett Travis did, and took his father's place. He reportedly gave his life manning a cannon.

Robert B. Moore, fifty-five, was the oldest defender. He got to the Alamo by way of the New Orleans Grays volunteer unit in 1835.

Almeron Dickinson, a twenty-six-year-old blacksmith from Gonzales, was an artillery officer for the garrison and one of very few defenders to move their families to the Alamo. According to Mexican Army accounts, Dickinson was among the last to die, while defending the chapel area. His wife and daughter were spared by the Mexican soldiers. By his wife's account, Captain Dickinson rushed to her in the chapel and cried, "Good God! The Mexicans are inside our walls! All is lost. If they spare you, love our child!"

A thirty-six-year-old Irishman who came to Texas by way of New York City, Robert Evans, attempted to torch the powder magazine in the chapel near the end of the battle. He was shot and killed by Mexican troops before reaching his objective—bravery in the shadow of futility. But, had he succeeded, no woman or child seeking protection in the chapel would have survived, and there would have been fewer witnesses to tell of the battle.

Although there were a number of physicians at the Alamo and one medical student, no one is sure that they actually practiced medicine during the siege. Dr. Amos Posad may have been the only surgeon. Doctors Edward Mitchason, John Reynolds, and John Thompson were most likely riflemen/volunteers for the same reasons as the rest of the defenders. The medical student, William dePriest Sutherland, was only seventeen years old. Dr. Reynolds, a graduate of Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College, gave his life one day short of his thirtieth birthday.

Six defenders were not American colonists, but rather, Tejanos---natives of Texas and citizens of Mexico. For three, San Antonio was their hometown. Juan Abamillo, Juan Padillo, Gregorio Esparza, Antonio Fuentes, Andres Nava, and Damacio Ximenes all gave their lives for their belief in a free Texas. By their actions, they committed treason. Gregorio Esparza

is the only defender who escaped Santa Ana's funeral pyres. His brother, Carlos, was a soldier in General Cos' battalion. He asked for, and received permission to give his brother a Christian burial.

So far, I have given you examples of courage for a cause. There were more than one hundred and seventy others who also gave their lives, but are less known to history: Isaac Baker, Daniel Bourne, Jerry Day, George Nelson, Henry Thomas and others whom you have never heard of, but all heroes, all, all extraordinary.

* * *

One definition of "glory" is "an achievement that brings admiration, praise, honor, or fame." In perusing history, I have found five events that seem to me particularly deserving of the word: Thermopylae in 480 B.C., the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava in 1854, Pickett's advance at Gettysburg in 1863, the 54th Massachusetts assault on Fort Wagner, S.C., also in 1863, and the defense of Rourke's Drift in the Natal in 1879. All five, however, were conducted by disciplined soldiers under orders to stand or advance. The defenders of the Alamo had no such obligation, no such orders.

Sam Houston, commander of the Army of Texas, ordered that the Alamo, with all its cannon and powder, be destroyed to keep it out of Santa Ana's hands. James Bowie believed that guerilla attacks on the marching Mexican column by Texian cavalry would do more damage than a garrison defense (much like the minutemen's offensive against the retiring British troops after the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775). Travis boldly ignored Houston's order and scoffed at Bowie's suggestion.

Legend has it that on March 3rd or 4th, Travis, seeing the hopelessness of the situation, called the defenders together. Advising them of the situation, he supposedly drew a line in the dirt

with his saber, and asked that all who wished to stay cross the line. All crossed but one—Louis Moses Rose, an illiterate French national who had fought with Napoleon. He just was not ready to die yet, for any cause. While no defenders judged Louis' choice, today he is remembered in Texas history as "the coward of the Alamo".

In the 1987 made-for-TV movie, *Thirteen Days of Glory*, there is a scene in which two defenders lay against a wall, dying of bullet and bayonet wounds. One asks, "How much we getting' paid for this?" The other answers, "Nuthin!" The first replies, "Well, it ain't enough... it ain't enough." Though fiction, I agree—it wasn't enough.

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Were these men fearless? The answer is no. Heroism is not a lack of fear, but rather, accepting and dealing with it, then going forward. Historical research has found evidence that some of the defenders, near the end of the battle, leaped the walls and tried to run to safety. Mexican lancers rode down and killed them all. Supposedly, one defender escaped, but Henry Warnell, a twenty-four-year-old hunter and jockey, received severe wounds and died of them three months later.

In death and defeat, the one hundred and eighty three ultimately won. The battle ended, Santa Ana made a huge mistake in judgment that would come to haunt him: instead of treating the defenders' bodies with respect and honor, he had them thrown on pyres, like so much cord wood, and cremated them. The stench of burning flesh hung in the air for days. When news of this reached Sam Houston and the Army of Texas, it fueled rage and a thirst for revenge. On April 21st, on the battlefield of San Jacinto, the Texians attacked the encamped Mexican Army. Their battle cry—Remember the Alamo! The Mexican Army was destroyed in eighteen minutes. Later that day, Santa Ana was captured, posing as a common infantryman. The war was over and the Republic of Texas emerged. In 1845, Texas became the 28th state, the only "country" to do so.

When I remember the Alamo, I remember the character and values of men who had courage, commitment, and a stubborn streak. Texas historian and author, Stephen I. Harden, said: "In war, all give some and some give all. But at the Alamo, all gave all." Texas's unofficial motto is: "You are not going to tell me what I can or cannot do!" Now you know where it came from.

Remember the Alamo!

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*The publication of this article is funded by
The Torch Foundation*