

"Our ABC's in Texas" by Steven Campbell

Upon gaining our independence from Great Britain, much of North and South America were still possessions of France, Spain, Portugal, Holland and England. The American frontier pushed westward toward the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. In need of cash, Napoleon Bonaparte sold the United States over one million square miles of French owned North America in 1803. This opened up vast lands to eager frontiersmen, traders, entrepreneurs, and settlers. It was during our early westward expansion that the Mexican people won their independence from Spain. What now encompasses the states of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and southern California were part of the Republic of Mexico. Hoping to see the land prosper as well as to discourage American expansion into this region, Mexican officials opened up the lands of Texas to settlers under the agreement that they, along with local inhabitants, would be loyal citizens of Mexico.

Thus is the setting in Texas in the 1830's. Speculative and hard working Americans in this province prospered and their concerns of uncompromising rule from Mexico City fanned the thoughts of independence. In 1833 a 39-year-old Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, who helped liberate Mexico from Spain, suspended the government and seized power. Within two years, eight Mexican states rebelled. With European trained officers, Santa Anna crushed the rebels. The Mexican State of Coahuila y Tejas (Texas) rebelled in November of 1835. Several skirmishes took place between Mexican troops and the settlers. On March 2, 1836, under the political leadership of David Burnet, Brother Stephen Austin and others, the Republic of Texas was formed. A settler from Virginia, Brother Sam Houston, was placed in command of the Army of Texas. There was only one flaw in his appointment: with the exception of a few men, there was no Army of Texas. Houston would have to raise one. Meanwhile with an army of nearly 6,000 troops, cavalry and artillery, President Santa Anna marched northward, through severe winter weather, to crush the rebellion.

A - The Alamo. The 18th century Spanish mission is located in San Antonio, which in the 1830's was not much more than a village. Deserted as a church, it had been used over the years as a frontier post. Early in the Texas Rebellion, settlers had driven Santa Anna's soldiers from the fort. Realizing the importance of the few cannon and supplies at the post, Sam Houston ordered Col. James Bowie to San Antonio to remove those stores. Upon his arrival, Bowie, who assumed command of all volunteer forces in the region, decided to remain at The Alamo, as it was the only barrier between the Mexican Army and Houston's fledgling force.

B - Brother James Bowie, who was born in Kentucky in 1796, grew up in Louisiana. He received a basic education, hunted and trapped game. In 1813, he enlisted in the Louisiana Militia to fight against the British in the War of 1812. After the war, Brother Bowie moved to the east coast of Texas, where it is reported that he allied himself with the pirate Jean Lafitte (hero of the Battle of New Orleans) in a lucrative smuggling trade. Becoming a "man of means" Bowie returned to Louisiana. It was during this time that he gained his reputation as a highly skilled knife fighter. As a result of a duel (the Sandbar fight) near Natchez, Bowie was shot in the lower chest and run through with a sword cane. Though grievously wounded, he fatally

stabbed his assailant, Norris Wright. The legend of the Bowie Knife was born. In September 1829 his 24 year old fiancée died and a year later he immigrated to Texas, where he became a Mexican citizen. Bowie married the 18 year old daughter (Maria de Vermendi) of the wealthy mayor of San Antonio, and they had two children. Sadly, in 1833, Bowie's wife along with his young daughter and son died of cholera. For a time he served as a Colonel in a Texas unit and was in this capacity when he reported to The Alamo.

Brother William Barrett Travis was born in Saluda County, SC, in 1809. Young Travis became an attorney. At 19 he married Rosanna Cato. They had one son, and though their marriage was rocky, his pursuit for recognition continued as a local newspaper publisher and militia officer. Sadly he separated from his family and moved to Texas in 1831 where he set up a law practice. He was one of the first to join the Army of Texas when the Texas Rebellion erupted. Travis arrived at The Alamo with 30 regulars. Viewed as somewhat vain and egotistical, his leadership style did not coincide with Brother Bowie's.

C - Brother David Crockett was born in Limestone, Tennessee in 1786. He was a hunter, pioneer, militiaman, humorist/writer and politician. A bit of a self-promoter, he preferred to be called David. He could talk to anyone, rich or poor, and was plainspoken. At 20 he married Polly Finley and had two sons and a daughter. In 1816 he remarried to Elizabeth Patton and had four children. As a Tennessee Militiaman he fought in the Creek War (1813) and in 1815 was elected Lt. Colonel of the 57th Regiment of Tennessee. Elected to a Tennessee state office in 1821, Brother Crockett went on to win three terms in the U. S. Congress (1826-1834). While in Congress he was known to speak for the people and against big government. Taking issue with some of Brother Andrew Jackson's policies, he was defeated for re-election in 1835 and left Tennessee for Texas, writing "I want to explore Texas well before I return." (Crockett wrote several works: "Autobiography" in 1834, "Tour to the North and Down East" in 1833, "Sketches & Eccentricities, Etc".) Upon arriving in Texas he took an oath to join the Texas Volunteers, and in turn received 4,600 acres of land for his service, as did all volunteers. On February 6, 1836, Brother Crockett arrived at The Alamo with less than one dozen volunteers. He was greeted by Brother Bowie, with whom he lodged.

The Battle of The Alamo. For twelve days (23 Feb - 6 March 1836) less than 200 men withstood the siege of Santa Anna's army. Unfortunately, the crumbling adobe walls, though somewhat enhanced with wooden palisades, were no match for continual rifle fire, artillery and rocket barrages. When asked to surrender, Travis' reply was to order a single cannon shot in defiance. Santa Anna, wishing to crush the rebellion and to set an example, ordered that no prisoners were to be taken. A messenger did escape The Alamo with a request for reinforcements. The closest unit was met by Mexican troops and wiped out. Houston's Army of Texas was too weak to respond. It is reported that upon learning that no reinforcements could reach them, Travis "drew a line in the sand" with his sword stating any man who wished to escape could "leave without infringing their honor", otherwise crossing the line meant they would stay until the end. Sole command now rested with Travis, as Bowie was confined to his bed with a delirious fever (either from malaria or pneumonia). Tradition holds that Bowie ordered his cot be carried across the line to show his solidarity with Travis' order. Upon the

early morning (4 am) of the 13th day of the siege, four separate Mexican Army columns attacked the fort simultaneously. Crockett commanded the south wall in front of the chapel. Travis, commanding an artillery battery on the north wall, was killed by a single gunshot wound to the head just as the final attack began. James Bowie was killed on his cot. Overwhelmed by superior forces, The Alamo fell after 2 ½ hours of combat. All of the defenders of The Alamo were killed. About two dozen women, children and slaves were spared so that they could tell all what the fate of the men at The Alamo had been. Santa Anna ordered the bodies to be chopped into pieces and burned.

Wishing to defeat Houston's army, Santa Anna split his force into three wings. To his regret the wing he commanded was encountered by Houston's army at a place called San Jacinto and defeated in less than 20 minutes. President Santa Anna was captured, and in agreement for his release signed the Treaties of Velasco, in which Mexico "acknowledged the full, entire and perfect independence of the Republic of Texas." For nine years (1836-1845) Texas was its own nation until admitted to the United States as the 28th state.

(P.S. Whilst not well reported, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna too was a Freemason.)