

"And Remember the Alamo"

No Land More Lovely

There were Americans in Texas from about 1803, intruders who settled around Nacogdoches, one of the fortified outposts on the northern frontier of New Spain, which spanned a 2,000-mile arc from Texas to California. These Anglos were barely tolerated, but then in 1821 Mexico won her independence from Spain, and the new republic decided to swing open the doors of its Texas province to American immigrants, mostly to strengthen the local population base against Indian attacks.

A sheet-lead manufacturer by the name of Moses Austin was among the first to consider settlement. Born in 1761 in Connecticut, Austin had drifted into Missouri when it was still part of Spanish Louisiana, and begun business. After a severe financial reverse, Austin decided to move on to Texas, petitioning the governor to allow him to build a colony there. His petition was granted, mostly because he was a Spanish citizen by virtue of his residency in Missouri.

Exhausted by the journey to Texas, Moses Austin fell ill and died of pneumonia. His last request would be the inheritance and destiny of his eldest son, Stephen Fuller Austin, whom he asked "to go on with the business in the

same way." Although hardly in the classic mould of pioneer leader, the diminutive 27-year-old journalist and banker left at once for the far frontier.

Stephen Austin began his mission by exploring the central regions of Texas, eventually hitting on the deep, alluvial land between the Brazos and the Colorado rivers for the site of the American colony. Settlers proved easy to recruit; the hard times following the financial Great Panic of 1819 made many US citizens eager for free Texan land. Austin was able to pick and choose the founding members of his father's colony.

As with many new settlements, the colony suffered initial hunger and hardship, also drought and Indian attacks. Much the worst setback, though, was when Austin was informed by the Mexican government that the settlement needed the authorization of the republic's Congress. The almost destitute Austin was obliged to travel to Mexico City and plead his case. It took nearly a year to be heard, but his diplomacy eventually gained him the land grant he wanted. Under the terms of the Congressional approval, each family in the colony was allowed one *labor* (177 acres) of land for farming and 74 *labors* for stockraising. Austin was allowed to collect 12½ cents an acre for his services, and was promised a bonus of 65,000 acres on the arrival of the 200th family. There were a number of other clauses in the contract. The settlers had to accept the Roman Catholic faith; they had to be of good moral character; and they were allowed to bring in slaves, but not to buy or sell them within the state.

While Austin was absent in Mexico City, the colony was welcoming a steady trickle of newcomers. A town, St Felipe de Austin, began to take shape on the lower crossing of the Brazos. "It does not appear possible," one "Texian" pioneer wrote home, "that there can be a land more lovely." By 1823 the original 300 families (known to

Texas history as the Old 300) had arrived, and Austin was permitted to recruit another 500.

The success of the Austin colony as a bulwark against both the tribes and unofficial American landgrabbers led the Mexican government to encourage further immigration. The 1824 National Colonization Law joined Texas to its neighbouring state of Coahuila (so ensuring a Spanish-speaking majority), while allowing land-contractors or empresarios in rivalry with Austin to settle another 2,400 families. The number of US-born Texans grew dramatically. In 1827 they numbered 10,000; three years later, 20,000.

Friction with the Mexican authorities also grew steadily. It was at its worst in the eastern part of the province, where hardscrabble farmers, squatters and fugitives from US justice were staking claims to land. Few had legal titles, fewer still were inclined to follow the laws of far-off Mexico City.

Official settlers also had complaints. Few, with free land before their eyes, had paused to muse on their loss of religious freedom, and the small say in their own affairs that a Mexican feudal system of government would allow.

For their part Mexicans found the newcomers ill-mannered and bent on taking Texas over. Their fear was only confirmed by the "Fredonia Revolt" of 1826, when an empresario named Haden Edwards tried to remove squatters from his land grant at Nacogdoches. The Mexican authorities upheld the rights of the squatters and expelled Edwards from the province. Angered at the "injustice" done to his brother, Benjamin Edwards led a small band of men into Nacogdoches, unfurled a flag, seized the old fort and proclaimed the birth of the Republic of Fredonia. Edwards called on Austin for help. The father of Texan colonization, however, called out his own militia and helped the Mexicans put the revolt down.

The Fredonia Revolt was a risible affair but, already fearful over the intentions of the Anglos, Mexico interpreted it as positive proof that America was determined to appropriate Texas. The noisy Anglo resentment over the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty (the US-Mexico boundary settlement), and the offer of expansionist President Andrew Jackson to buy Texas for \$10,000, provided additional evidence.

The Texan Revolution

Matters inched slowly but surely towards war. Mexican general Manuel de Miery y Teran, sent to report on the state of Texas in 1828, was appalled by the influence of the Anglo-Americans, and concluded: "Either the government occupies Texas now, or it is lost forever." Teran's gloomy prediction fitted well with the prejudices of the conservative, anti-American Centralist government which had just seized power in Mexico City. Customs duties were imposed, Mexican troops were garrisoned in Texas and a Colonization Law passed prohibiting American immigration. The result was the opposite of what its authors intended. The ban only kept out law-abiding Americans. Hot-headed squatters continued to cross the border, with the US population in the province leaping from 20,000 in 1830 to 30,000 in 1835. Among the illegals were frontiersmen Sam Houston and William B. Travis, both of whom would play major roles in days to come.

Then, in January 1835, Mexico installed a venal tax collector at the port of Anahuac. Anglo resentment grew into a local rebellion. The Centralist President Santa Anna led an army north to cow the Americans and put down risings by the Mexican opposition party, the Federalists. News of Santa Anna's march stirred those Texans intent

on self-government to desperate action. On 29 June 1835, a band of 40 radicals under W. B. Travis marched on the garrison at Anahuac and obliged it to surrender.

Santa Anna's response was to order the arrest of Travis and his men, to reinforce the garrison at San Antonio, and threaten military rule in Texas. Even moderate Texans were outraged. Stephen Austin put his name to a proclamation which declared: "There is no other remedy but to defend our rights, ourselves, and our country by force of arms."

While Spanish reinforcements under General Cos marched to San Antonio, a Spanish cavalry detachment was sent meanwhile to the town of Gonzales to seize an aged brass six-pounder cannon loaned to the inhabitants to ward off Indians. The inhabitants, instead of handing the cannon over, hung a sign on it that read "Come and Take It!" Then, on 2 October, they fired a shot of scrap iron at the Mexicans, who retreated to San Antonio.

The Texan revolution had begun. The men of Gonzales, flushed with victory and with Stephen Austin at their head, assembled an "Army of the People" and marched on San Antonio, where they settled down for a lengthy siege of Cos's army. To oversee the war effort, the Texan settlers appointed a 12-man ruling council, with Sam Houston made commander-in-chief of the Texas forces. Houston, born in Virginia in 1793 but brought up in Tennessee as the adopted son of an Indian chief, had a lifetime's worth of experience under fire. His persistent gallantry during the war with England had seen him rise to the rank of lieutenant. After the war he had entered politics, becoming Governor of Tennessee. Difficulties with Indian agents he had accused of fraud had caused him to leave the United States for Texas.

As commander-in-chief Houston found himself constrained by Texas's cautious provisional government. His

advertising campaign in US newspapers ("Let each man come with a good rifle, and come soon") brought a host of volunteers but the provisional government was loath even to let him have control over the settlers ringed around San Antonio.

Consequently, it was on the settlers' own initiative that they stormed the town on 5 December. After four days of close-quarters fighting, with the settlers moving from house to house, breaking through the adobe walls with crowbars and making a mad dash inside, Cos and 1,100 garrison surrendered.

Santa Anna determined to put an end to the Texan rebellion. Raising an army of 6,000 men and placing himself at its head, Santa Anna started for San Antonio. The town was nearly abandoned, with the exception of a skeleton force of 187 men holding the ancient mission station of San Antonio de Valero: the Alamo.

As Santa Anna neared, there was initially only confusion at the Alamo. The garrison demanded reinforcements, but Houston wanted them to abandon the station, so the Texan defence could be concentrated elsewhere. Then some of the men, objecting to the youth of the station commander, the studentish William Barrett Travis, staged a virtual mutiny. In democratic American fashion they were allowed to elect a leader. They chose the Tennessee Indian-fighter Jim Bowie, whose elder brother Rezin had invented the famed "Bowie Knife", a one-edged blade with a guarded hilt so perfectly balanced it could be thrown to killing purpose.

Jim Bowie was not a leader of men. He drank and cared nothing for discipline. When Bowie contracted pneumonia, Travis took over sole and unfettered command. For all their antagonism, Travis and Bowie were agreed that they would make a stand against the Mexicans when they arrived.

As a place to make a stand the Franciscan mission of the Alamo had drawbacks. Situated on three acres a little to the east of San Antonio, it had low scaleable outer walls, with no loopholes. Worst of all, there was a large 50-yard gap in its southeastern face which was secured only by a cedar-post stockade and an earth parapet. But the walled convent yard and the stone chapel, with its walls 22 feet high and 4 feet thick, offered good cover.

The first Mexicans arrived on 22 February 1836 along the Laredo road, the bells of the town clanging the alarm. The Mexican commander, Colonel Almonte, demanded the immediate surrender of the Texan post. As a reply, Travis shot a cannon ball at a group of waiting Mexican soldiers.

The siege operation that followed was conducted personally by Santa Anna, the self-styled "Napoleon of the West". He began by subjecting the post to a 24-hour artillery bombardment, which caused surprisingly few casualties inside the Alamo. During a lull afterwards, Travis drafted an appeal for help, which was sent out with a Mexican *vaquero* (cowboy) loyal to the Texan cause. The message read:

Commandancy of the Alamo
Bexar, Feby 24th 1836

Fellow citizens and compatriots,

I am besieged by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna - I have sustained a continual bombardment and cannonade for 24 hours and have not lost a man. The enemy has demanded a surrender at discretion, otherwise the garrison are to be put to the sword, if the fort is taken. I have answered the demand with a cannon shot, and our flag still waves proudly from the walls. I shall never surrender or retreat.

Then, I call on you in the name of liberty, of patriotism and everything dear to the American character to come to our aid, with all dispatch. The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily and will no doubt increase to three or four thousand in four or five days.

If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honour or that of his country.

Victory or death.

WILLIAM BARRETT TRAVIS
Lt. Col. Comd.

P.S. The Lord is on our side. When the enemy appeared in sight we had not three bushels of corn. We have since found in deserted houses 80 or 90 bushels and got into the wall 20 or 30 head of beeves.

TRAVIS

The next day, the 25th, the Mexicans received reinforcements, and attempted to set up a battery south of the Alamo. This was prevented by accurate fire from the fort's ramparts, to the cheer of the men inside. But the respite was short-lived. On the 26th, two of Santa Anna's batteries were sheltered behind earthworks on the northeast side of the river. From then on they kept up a slow, resolute bombardment. Hardly an hour went past without a cannon ball falling on the fort, and men rushing out with picks and shovels to plug the breach. By now, also, Jim Bowie, fighting despite the grip of pneumonia, had fallen from scaffolding supporting a gun emplacement and broken his hip. He was placed in a cot in a building beside the south gate of the yard.

The lines of earthworks grew around the men of the

Alamo. Each dawn the sentries found new entrenchments, until it was ringed by an unbroken Mexican circle.

Despite the encirclement, on the night of 1 March, a small reinforcement of 32 men crept through the Mexican lines to join the defenders. They were from Gonzales, a settlement which numbered only 30 split-plank cabin homes. Their arrival crowned a good day for the defenders. Earlier, a lucky round from the 12-pounder on the roof of the chapel had struck Santa Anna's lodging in the town.

But already the end was in sight for the men of the Alamo. The enemy were simply too many. Understanding this, Travis rallied the men during the sunset of 3 March. According to a drifter named Louis Rose, who escaped the fort that evening, Travis paraded the men in single file and then stood before them, almost overcome with emotion. He declared that he was intent on staying and fighting it out to the end, but that every man must do what he thought best. Then Travis drew a line on the ground with his sword and said: "I now want every man who is determined to stay here and die with me to come across this line." Almost before he had finished, Tapley Howard bounded across saying "I am ready to die for my country." He was followed by every man except the bed-ridden sick and Rose. "Boys," called Bowie from his cot, "I wish some of you would . . . remove my cot over there." Four men lifted him over. Every other wounded man made the same request, and had his bunk moved over.

This left only Louis Rose. He wrote later in a memoir:

I stood till every man had crossed the line. Then I sank to the ground, covered my face with my hands, and thought what best I might do. Suddenly an idea came. I spoke their [the Mexicans'] language, and could I once get safely out of the fort might easily pass for a Mexican and effect my

escape. I stole a glance at Colonel Bowie in his cot. Colonel Davy Crockett was leaning over talking to him. After a few seconds, Bowie looked at me and said, "You don't seem willing to die with us, Rose." "No," I said. "I am not prepared to die, and shall not do so if I can avoid it." Then Crockett looked at me, and said, "You might just as well, for escape is impossible." I made no reply but looked up at the top of the fortress wall. "I have often done worse things than climb that wall," I thought. Then I sprang up, seized my travelling bag and unwashed clothes and ascended it. Standing on top, I glanced down to take a last look at my friends. They were all now in motion, but what they were doing I heeded not. Overpowered by my feelings, I turned away.

In the darkness Louis Rose made it through the Mexican lines and out of San Antonio without incident.

Somebody else escaped the Alamo that night. A woman Mexican non-combatant deserted and told Santa Anna's commanders how small the garrison was. Emboldened, they ordered a mass storm of the fort on the morning of the thirteenth day of the siege, 6 March 1836.

In the pre-dawn darkness of the 6th, the Mexicans approached the barricade surrounding the fort, forming an armed ring through which none could escape.

As daylight broke, Santa Anna sent 1,800 men against the sides of the Alamo while his band blared out the "No Quarter" call of the Spanish battle march, the "El Deguello". Twice the Mexicans charged, and twice they were rebuffed. Then Santa Anna sent in his reserves, and these breached the walls of the fort on the west and north-east. Colonel Travis died in the latter place, slumped next to a cannon, a bullet through his forehead. The outer walls were now abandoned and the survivors, fighting hand to hand, fell back to the convent and the chapel. Davy

Crockett apparently fell outside the chapel, using his rifle as a club (although some evidence suggests that he, and six of his Tennesseans, were captured and tortured to death).

What is known of the last minutes of the men of the Alamo comes from the non-combatants in the fort whose lives were spared, particularly the wife of Lieutenant Dickinson, Ham, the Black servant of Jim Bowie, and Joe, the Black servant of Travis. The rooms of the stone buildings were fought for one by one. Armed with his knife and a brace of pistols, Jim Bowie fought from his sickbed in the baptistry. The chapel was the last place to be taken.

At around 7 a.m. with the din of battle dying down, Santa Anna judged it safe to approach the fort. One of the handful of Texans still alive in the chapel fired a last defiant volley, and the dictator retired to his adobe-walled command post. Only when the last Texan was dead did Santa Anna again venture forth to the Alamo, directing that the bodies of the fallen Texans should be burnt in two great funeral pyres.

To capture the Alamo cost General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna over 1,000 of his men. He had also given the new Republic of Texas a battle cry which would bring it ultimate victory.

Victory for the Republic

The Republic of Texas had been declared on 2 March 1836, four days before the fall of the Alamo. Meeting in the village of Washington-on-the-Brazos, 59 delegates agreed a Declaration of Independence and a constitution borrowed from that of the United States. Slavery was legalized, and all Texans guaranteed an ample land grant. Almost as important as these acts, the delegates finally

agreed to let Sam Houston lead the Texan army in meaningful fashion.

Taking command of his rag-bag army in mid-March 1836, Houston began an elaborate, zig-zagging eastward retreat, always just out of Santa Anna's impatient reach. Thinking "Old Sam" was scared to fight, many settlers panicked and raced for the US border – an affair known as the "runaway scrape". Some of Houston's army wept in shame, others became mutinous. Texas's new government bombarded him with missives: "Sir: The enemy are laughing you to scorn . . . You must retreat no farther. The country expects you to fight. The salvation of the country depends on you doing so."

None of this had any effect on Houston, who kept his men steadfastly marching east. Smelling victory, Santa Anna threw military caution to the wind. Dismayed by the slowness of his over-extended, poorly fed army, he pressed ahead with 900 picked troops.

This was the mistake Houston had hoped for. When Santa Anna turned aside to attack Harrisburg in the hope of seizing Texan officials, Houston fell in behind him. The hunter became the hunted. On 20 April 1836 Houston closed in on the Mexican force which was camped beside the junction of Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto River. Santa Anna, confident in his military knowledge, prepared his men for a dawn attack. Dawn came, but no Texan attack. In mid-morning 500 Mexican reinforcements arrived and Santa Anna, knowing his men were weary, ordered a hot noon meal and a rest. Only a small guard kept watch as the mass of the Mexican army enjoyed a siesta.

Houston pounced. His short speech to his troops contained just 16 words: "Victory is certain. Trust in God and fear not. And remember the Alamo – remember the Alamo!" The Texans slipped quietly through the tall prairie grass

and reached within 200 yards of the Mexican lines before the alarm was raised. Then, yelling "Remember the Alamo!" the Texans charged. Within 18 minutes the battle was won, though killing of fleeing Mexicans continued until night-fall. The prairie was littered with 600 Mexican dead, and over 700 of Santa Anna's "Invincibles" were taken prisoner – including the General himself, who had tried to escape disguised as a private. He was given away by the cries of "El Presidente!" by the other prisoners.

To secure his release, Santa Anna pledged independence for Texas. He soon repudiated this, but Mexico was never able to conquer the new Republic. Most of the 2,000 Mexicans who were in the country at the time of the battle left for Mexico shortly afterwards.

Settling Texas

For ten years after the battle of San Jacinto Texas remained a free and sovereign republic. Settlement expanded rapidly, swelling the population of Texas to 140,000. Of these a significant number were Germans, who came to represent the largest foreign-born element in Texas. At places like New Braunfels, Fredericksburg and Sisterdale, this industrious people built homes which were exact replicas of those they had left behind in Europe. They were also startlingly different from the rough-and-ready log cabins and "picket huts" (made of staked walls and with roofs of grass, bound with rawhide) of the American Texans. The writer and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead described the incongruity of these German houses in his *A Journey Through Texas* (1857):

I never in my life, except, perhaps, in awakening from a dream, met with such a sudden and complete transfer of associations. Instead of loose boarded or hewn log walls,

with crevices stuffed with rags or daubed with mortar, which we have been accustomed to see during the last month [elsewhere in Texas] . . . we were in Germany. There was nothing wanting . . . A long room, extending across the whole front of the cottage, the walls pink, with stenciled panels, and scroll ornaments in crimson, and with neatly-framed and glazed pretty lithographic prints hanging on all sides . . .

Aside from Germans and a sizeable French colony at Castroville near the Medina River, most of those settling in Texas were American farmers, thrown off their land by the Great Panic of 1837. "G.T.T" ("Gone to Texas") was found scrawled across cabin doors the length of the frontier and the width of creditors' books. With its generous land grants, the Texan Republic provided a second chance.

The men and women who went there were determined to take it. They inclined to play hard and drink hard, and displayed a fondness for settling arguments with fists, knives and guns. The social rank of the opponent hardly mattered. Sam Houston was challenged to no fewer than 24 duels during his two terms as Texas president. Much of the future lawlessness of the West would ride north from Texas.

Yet if most Texans saw themselves as a breed apart, they also considered themselves Americans. Under Sam Houston several attempts were made to secure annexation by the United States, but these were thrown out by Congress at the instigation of abolitionists who charged that the Texan revolution had been a "slaveocracy conspiracy" by Southerners. But by 1845 the mood of Congress had relented. European states were urging Texas to a dangerous sovereignty, and President Polk had just been elected US President on an expansionist ticket. On 29 December of that year James K. Polk signed the proclamation making Texas the 21st state of the Union.