

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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THE 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.]

IN 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.

