

A
TIME
to
STAND

The Epic of the Alamo

AUTHOR OF *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER*

**WALTER
LORD**



A Time to Stand

Walter Lord



To SIMMIE FREEMAN

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“Thermopylae had her messenger of defeat —the Alamo had none.”

General Thomas Jefferson Green, 1841

Foreword

THESE MEN WERE all kinds.

They were farmers, clerks, doctors, lawyers. There was a blacksmith ... a hatter ... a house painter ... a jockey ... a shoemaker ... a Baptist preacher. Very few were the frontier type, although one was indeed the greatest bear hunter in all the West.

They came from Boston, Natchez, New York, Charleston, Philadelphia. From Illinois ... New Jersey ... Tennessee ... eighteen states altogether. A few were from across the ocean, but only two or three had been in Texas as long as six years.

As a group, they had little in common—yet everything. For they were all Americans, sharing together a fierce love of liberty and a deep belief that the time had come to take their stand to keep it.

CHAPTER ONE

“To ... All Americans in the World”

IN THE BARE HEADQUARTERS room of an improvised fort called the Alamo, Lieutenant Colonel William Barret Travis picked up his pen and began to write. Travis was a rebel, commanding some 150 other rebels, in the insurgent Mexican territory of Texas. He was hundreds of miles from the United States border—two weeks from New Orleans, a month from Washington—but it never occurred to him that his words were of limited application. With bold, unhesitating strokes, he addressed his message “To the People of Texas & all Americans in the world.”

Outside, his men went about their duties. It was late afternoon, and some were already cooking supper in the large open space that formed the heart of the Alamo compound. Others hoisted the fort's best gun, a fine 18-pounder, onto a new mounting. Hot work, for it was surprisingly warm for this time of the year—February 24, 1836.

Still other men crouched behind the walls and barricades, squinting across the flat Texas landscape toward the hills to the north and east, some shanties to the south, or the little town of San Antonio de Bexar directly to the west. Here they could see a red banner flapping from the top of the town's church tower. And occasionally they also saw tiny figures moving about in the distance—soldiers of His Excellency General Antonio López de Santa Anna, President of the Republic of Mexico.

It was growing dark now—a good time for a courier to slip out unseen. Travis scribbled on, filling the page with dashes and hasty abbreviations, somehow in keeping with his quick, abrupt way of doing things. But there was always time to underline—once, three times a single phrase—and that too seemed in character, for he had a great flair for theatrics. Briefly, he explained his situation:

Fellow citizens & compatriots—I am besieged, by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna—I have sustained a continual Bombardment & cannonade for 24 hours & 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, & 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 & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid, with all dispatch—The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily & 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 & die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor & that of his country—Victory or Death.

A pause; then a short, moralizing postscript: “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 walls 20 or 30 heads of Beeves.”

No time for more. Now to get it out. A tricky assignment, which Travis gave to 30-year-old Captain Albert Martin. He came from Gonzales, the first stop some seventy miles away, and knew the country like a book.

The Alamo gate flew open, and before the startled Mexicans could move, the young Captain galloped off into the dusk. First south along the irrigation ditch ... then left, onto the Gonzales road. Up the hill, by the white stone walls of the powder house, and out into the country.

Across the dry, little Salado Creek he raced, and on over the bare, winter landscape. No more houses now, just the scrubby mesquite trees, the occasional live oaks, the endless, rolling prairie. The only sound: his horse’s hoofs, pounding through the silent, empty night.

All next day, the 25th, Martin rode on. Behind him he could hear the distant rumble of a heavy cannonade. They must be attacking, he thought, and rode harder. It was late afternoon when he passed Bateman’s—his first house the whole day—and headed down into the flatland, or bottom, of the Guadalupe River. He splashed across the ford, up the bank, and onto a straggling little street of one-story frame houses. He had reached Gonzales at last.

“Hurry on all the men you can,” Martin wrote on the back of Travis’ dispatch. Young Launcelot Smithers, who would relay the message on, didn’t need to be told. He had arrived from the Alamo himself the day before, bringing a brief estimate of the Mexican strength. Now he was rested, ready to ride to San Felipe, next stop to the east.

Smithers galloped off into the night. Ninety miles. The weather had shifted; a hard, icy wind now blasted his ears—one of the famous “northers” which Texans already boasted about with a streak of perverse pride.

It was early Saturday, the 27th, when Smithers finally reached San Felipe. He pounded down the main street—an uneven double row of houses, stores and saloons. This was the metropolis of Texas—the center of business and political life—and the news put the place in an uproar. At 11 A.M. the citizens held an emergency meeting and spent the next hour debating and shouting interminable resolutions. Smithers himself, a simple man, seemed closer to the heart of the matter. Adding his own postscript to Travis’ dispatch, he scrawled, “I hope that Every one will Randeves at Gonzales as soon as possible as the Brave Soldiers are suffering. do not neglect the powder. is very scarce and should not be delad one moment.”

More couriers sped the news on. Fanning out over the faint trails and roads, they headed north for the ambitiously christened new capital, Washington-on-the-Brazos ... east for the lively gambling town of Nacogdoches ... south for Columbia and the thriving Gulf settlements.

In ever widening circles, hurry and confusion, alarm and excitement. When the courier stopped

by Dr. P. W. Rose's place at Stafford's Point, Mrs. Rose read Travis' message aloud to the children and 11-year-old Dilue burst into a flood of tears. She recalled the time Travis had stopped at the place and sent her a little comb afterward.

No time for weeping, she was told; she spent the rest of the day melting lead in a pot, dipping up with a spoon, molding homemade bullets. The older men in the family rushed to get ready for the army, and Mrs. Rose sat up all night sewing two striped hickory shirts—her idea of what a good militiaman should wear.

Now the news was at Columbia, thirty miles further south. Here the courier's horse broke down. No men around, so 15-year-old Guy Bryan jumped into his saddle and carried the word on to Brazoria and the Gulf. He reached Velasco late at night—probably March 4—feeling every inch a hero as he gave the message to the men at the little trading post.

Here the coastal schooners took over—spreading the story to the bustling cotton ports that dotted the Gulf Coast—Galveston ... Mobile ... Pensacola ... and, of course, New Orleans.

It was early in the morning of March 16 when Captain Flaherty's boat brought first word to New Orleans, but by that afternoon it was all over town. Crowds milled around the *True American* bulletin board, where Travis' dispatch was posted. That night there was talk of little else at Hewlitt Coffee House. "This town is like a barracks," a New Orleans businessman wrote a friend back East.

River steamers soon relayed the news up the Mississippi ... rickety little railways carried it inland ... coastal packets headed for the Atlantic ports. Everywhere the reaction was the same—intense excitement, indignation meetings, angry editorials.

New York heard when the steamboat *Columbia* arrived from Charleston on March 30. By the afternoon the *Evening Post* was hawking the story. "LATE FROM TEXAS," ran that journalist's innovation, the headline.

At 4 o'clock that afternoon the Providence steamer pulled out, and next day—only five weeks after Travis wrote his message—even faraway Boston knew. Again, excitement erupted everywhere—at the auction sales of coffee and spices, at the tables of the Tremont House, in the lobby of the Lyceum Theatre, where a new producer named W. Barrymore was putting on *Little Goodie Two Shoes*.

Washington learned the same day, and here, as always, the subject took on political overtones unknown to the rest of the country. What would this do, asked the hangers-on at Brown's Indian Queen Hotel, to the rumored negotiations for the purchase of Texas from Mexico? A new Mexican Minister, Señor Don Manuel Eduardo de Gorostiza, had just been presented to President Andrew Jackson—how would he take the news? The Whig paper *National Intelligencer*, against all such foreign adventures, happily prophesied an end to the scheme. But others saw it differently—these men in the Alamo were fellow Americans; they must be helped.

Whatever the reaction, the whole country was shaken. William Barret Travis knew what he was doing when he addressed his words to "all Americans in the world."

But how did he know? Travis was, after all, writing from a remote garrison in a distant land belonging to another country. And he himself carried no weight. Nobody even knew how to spell his name—the New York *American* called him “Travers” and the New Orleans *Bee* “Fravers.” What made this unknown man in a faraway fort intuitively realize that his message was immensely important to all Americans everywhere? The answer lay in the years just past—a brief, turbulent period that shaped not only the future of Texas, but that of America itself for centuries to come.

CHAPTER TWO

“I Am Determined to Provide for You a Home”

AMERICA WAS ALREADY CALLED the land of opportunity, yet it must have seemed anything but that to John Hubbard Forsyth of Avon, New York, on December 25, 1828. For him, nothing had ever gone quite right. His father had given him the best schooling—far better than most upstate farm boys got—yet he never made much use of it. Later, he studied medicine but didn’t do anything with that either. And now, his wife had died on Christmas Day.

There are times when every man longs for a fresh start, and at this point John Forsyth decided to move. He packed his gear ... left his baby son with his father ... and headed west.

There were thousands like him—all trying to take advantage of something that had never happened before. For centuries men yearning to better their lot could do little about it: few opportunities, poor transportation kept them glued to one place. Even the opening of the New World didn’t help much—travel remained as primitive and difficult as ever. Now suddenly all this was changing. Alongside the newspaper ads for candle tallow, sealskin caps and powder horns, strange new notices began to appear for things called boiler tubing, flywheels and steam presses. New inventions and new machinery—that whole complex miracle called the industrial revolution was bursting into focus, changing the ways of centuries ... waking people up ... getting them on the move.

“This is the age of locomotion,” marveled the Baltimore *American*. “For one person that traveled a hundred years ago, there are now not a hundred, but a thousand.” And it was true. Passengers swarmed over the flimsy new railroads that fanned out from the Eastern cities. Thousands more jammed the steamboats that puffed along the rivers and the coast—by 1830 seven lines served New York alone.

Time ceased to be an insoluble problem. The Boston-Philadelphia mail now took only thirty-six hours—against twenty-one days a few decades ago. The New York *Commercial Advertiser* found a Boston man who made a business trip to Manhattan and back in less than thirty-three hours.

Along with the commercial travelers went a growing tide of people with no set goal in mind. Discontented, disappointed, or merely restless, they regarded the railroads and steamboats as heaven-sent blessings that would let them escape from their rut. Often they went first to the big cities—New York grew 30 per cent between 1830 and 1835—but sooner or later, they usually drifted west. Here, in the new towns springing up—or along the vast, untouched frontier—hope and opportunity loomed brightest of all.

John Forsyth, crushed by his wife’s death on Christmas Day, was just such a man. So was John Flanders of Salisbury, Massachusetts. Working in the family business, he had fought with his father

over foreclosing a mortgage. Young Flanders lost ... the situation was impossible ... he cleared out.

Nor did it need a great family crisis to put a man on the road. When Dr. Amos Pollard felt his New York practice lagging, he simply took down his shingle and left. Dolphin Floyd, a carefree North Carolina country boy, found farm life unbearably dull. Gaily telling his family he was off to marry "some old rich widow," he sauntered westward and never returned.

Usually these men had no particular destination in view—just something better than they left behind. Young Daniel Cloud, a struggling Kentucky attorney, headed for Illinois where he heard there were more clients. But he found the weather too cold, the fees too low, and the "Yankee lawyers" too inactive. He pushed on to Missouri—and found the same story. Moving on to the rich Red River Valley of Arkansas, he finally discovered the life that suited him. He felt he could stay here forever.

For others it wasn't so simple. By 1830 far more people were on the move than the bustling big simple towns of the West could absorb. The *Alexandria Gazette* warned that the tide of immigrants to the Southwest was far too great and rapid. The *New Orleans Bee* lamented that the city was glutted with lawyers, doctors and accountants.

Yet New Orleans remained an irresistible lure. The city was no longer the easygoing Creole town of ten years earlier—the steamboat had changed all that. Now the waterfront was always jammed with steamers from St. Louis, Cairo, Louisville, a dozen other river ports. And as gateway to the interior the harbor teemed with great sailing ships from all over the world. The shops bulged with New Bedford sperm candles, Richmond tobacco, New York lace goods, Swiss muslins, French cologne, water, Naples umbrellas. The population was soaring toward 60,000, the sixth largest city in America.

It was almost inevitable that Dolphin Floyd, the gay Carolina farm boy, should drift here. Likewise Amos Pollard, the wandering New York physician; and John Flanders, still smoldering over the fight with his father back in Massachusetts. Mingling with them in the crowded arcades and coffee-houses were others with even less roots—men like dark, brawny Robert Cunningham, who left a secure Indiana home to float down the river on flatboats.

Together, they helped compose the busy, cosmopolitan world of New Orleans; yet basically, they were still drifting, and the fresh start remained as far away as ever. For only shrewd insiders were getting rich in this lively city, where the banks were chartering railroads and the railroads were chartering banks. The unknown and the unlucky continued to roam, searching for chances that never came. Even the great open land farther west was no longer a way out. The federal government, harassed by its own financial troubles, had stopped selling homesteads on credit.

Then suddenly word spread of still another opportunity—a new hope brighter than all the rest—promised land just over the horizon: the Mexican province of Texas. It was said that the young republic was practically giving the place away—immense tracts for as little as four cents an acre. Perhaps here was that fresh start after all.

Hoping to develop her vast stretches of empty territory, Mexico had embarked on an ambitious

program of colonization. Under laws of 1824 and 1825 foreigners were invited to settle in Texas and live for ten years free of taxes and duties. Every family got 4,428 acres of land for a nominal payment of \$30—padded perhaps to \$200 by the time Mexican bureaucracy had taken its bite. In return, the colonists had only to take the Mexican oath of allegiance and promise to be at least nominal Catholics. The whole program was put in the hands of contractors, called *empresarios*, who received huge grants of land in return for establishing colonies and bringing in settlers.

Led by Stephen F. Austin, a tactful administrative genius who had received his grant even before the general law, the *empresarios* went to work. Newspaper notices appeared, describing the wonderful sites available. McKean's bookstore in New Orleans blossomed with maps, showing the best routes. Guidebooks sang of the future: "No sturdy forest here for months defies the axe, but smiling prairie invite the plough. Here no humble prices reduce the stimulus to labor, but the reward of industry is so ample as to furnish the greatest incentive."

Dolphin Floyd, Dr. Pollard, all the others quickly succumbed. The "Texas fever," as it was called, swept New Orleans and spread across the South. In Tennessee, a 26-year-old blacksmith named Almeron Dickinson told his bride to start packing. In Kentucky, Green B. Jameson, a lawyer with a mechanical bent, gathered his things too. Throughout the Mississippi Valley men scrawled "G. T. T." (Gone To Texas) on their cabin doors and headed for the border.

Soon the whole country knew. On a remote Missouri farm, Andrew Kent explained it all to his wife Elizabeth and began laying plans. Hiram Williamson, a footloose Philadelphia bachelor, decided there was room for him too. In Athens, Georgia, a wild 18-year-old named William Malone went on a drinking spree ... couldn't face his martinet father ... set off the following day. In Illinois, young Jonathan Lindley also got ready to go. His father had heard that the Mexican government gave families an extra 160 acres for every child—and the Lindleys had eleven.

Land was the magnet, but most of these people weren't just speculators hoping to turn a quick profit. Lewis Duel was a Manhattan plasterer ... Marcus Sewell an English shoemaker ... William Jackson a landlocked sailor.

They were, in fact, all types. Henry Warnell was as raucous a character as roamed the frontier. A freckled, redheaded little jockey, he drank hard, talked fast, and chewed mountainous wads of tobacco. Sometime in the early '30's he turned up in Arkansas ... married (or didn't marry) a girl in Sevier County ... found himself a father ... decided it was time to move on to Texas.

Micajah Autry was the opposite. An adoring husband, he wrote poetry, sketched pictures and played the violin beautifully. But somehow he could never make any money. Born well-to-do in North Carolina, he tried his hand at "literary pursuits," teaching and the law. In 1831 he brought his family and slaves to Jackson, Tennessee, where he practiced a little, then opened a store. Of course it failed. Deciding Texas might be the answer, he headed west once more, planning to send for his family later. He was one of the last to come, but a letter to his wife Martha conveyed a thought that might well

have been written by any of them: "I am determined to provide for you a home or perish."

One and all, they poured across the Sabine River and into the promised land. Some with great fanfare—like Sam Houston, the brilliant ex-governor of Tennessee. Houston had resigned in disgrace after mysteriously parting from his bride ... brooded for a while among the Cherokee Indians ... finally decided that Texas held the key "to grace his name for after ages to admire." But most came unnoticed, quietly putting up with immense hardships for this great new chance. It was August, 1835 when Jacob Darst piled his wife and two children on an oxcart and creaked away from his Missouri farm. Crawling over the faintest trails, lurching along dry stream bottoms, they took nearly six grueling, painful months to reach the Texas border.

But it was worth it. For once, the glib promoters were not exaggerating. Texas proved to be an eye-opening, breathtaking sight.

"It does not appear to me possible that there can be a land more lovely," wrote William Dewees, one of the first arrivals. "No language can convey anything adequate to the emotion felt by the visitor," echoed David Edward, another early traveler.

And indeed it did defy language, judging from the efforts of Mary Austin Holley, whose handbook became almost a bible: "One feels that Omnipotence has here consecrated in the bosom of Nature and under Heaven's wide canopy, a glorious temple in which to receive praise and adoration of the grateful beholder."

The sheer abundance of everything staggered the imagination. No drought or falling water table had yet taken its toll. The prairie was an endless sea of waving grass and wild flowers—dahlias, geraniums, primroses, carpets of violets. The fresh green river bottoms were thick with bee trees, dripping honey. Deep, limpid pools lay covered with lilies. The streams were full of fish, and game was everywhere—bear, deer, rabbits, turkeys, prairie chickens. Mustangs and buffalo roamed at will there for the taking.

It was enough to give birth to a Texas penchant for superlatives that was destined to endure. Travelers described sugar cane that grew twenty-five feet in a single season ... pumpkins as large as a man could lift ... a sweet potato so big that a whole family dined on it, and there was enough left over to feed the pigs.

Exaggerated or not, the reaction was immensely significant. It meant that at last these restless people had found what they wanted. Old sorrows were forgotten in the discovery of this great new land, and from the very beginning, they were determined never to lose it again. "We're here all united together," wrote William Dewees, "bound together by an indissoluble tie. As the past has been full of bitterness, we of course look forward to future happiness. ..."

Some moved in among the Mexicans, settling in the sleepy mission towns, the lazy Gulf port and especially the old provincial capital of San Antonio de Bexar. Often known simply as Bexar, the town had been an important center in the days of Spanish rule. But with Mexico's independence,

became merely a neglected outpost and soon crumbled into decay. In ten short years, half the population left.

Yet, the place still had undeniable charm. During the hot, sunny day, brightly dressed Mexicans lolled against the flat-roofed adobe houses that lined the narrow streets. Others bathed in the sparkling little San Antonio River on the eastern edge of town, or gossiped in the two central squares whose names, Main Plaza and Military Plaza, carried a trace of past grandeur. In the evening, fires glowed in every yard, and guitar music drifted from half-closed doorways. Nobody worked very hard in San Antonio—just enough to stay comfortable.

It was hard for an American not to fall under the spell of this pleasant life. Nat Lewis, a shrewd young man from Falmouth, Massachusetts, opened a store on Main Plaza; by 1832 nearly everybody owed him money. John W. Smith, a versatile Missourian, became the town's leading carpenter, engineer, entrepreneur and boardinghouse keeper.

But of them all, Jim Bowie was the one who really stood out. To the settlers in Texas, this tall, sandy-haired man was a living legend. He had grown up in the tough sugar cane country of Louisiana. He had roped and ridden alligators. He had fought in that most famous of all frontier brawls, the San Bar Fight, where his big knife killed Major Morris Wright in one fierce thrust. He had used it in other fights too, so it was said, and although the details were hazy, nobody cared to take issue with him. He had made vast fortunes—\$65,000 slave trading with the pirate Jean Lafitte ... \$20,000 on Arkansas land titles that already smelled of fraud ... huge speculations in Texas; by now he was said to own a million acres. He had gone to San Antonio in 1828, turned Catholic, become a Mexican citizen and married the richest girl in town—blond 19-year-old Maria Ursula de Veramendi. He had made still more money, survived countless adventures—like the fabulous Indian fight near the San Saba mission where he and ten friends fought off 164 Indians for two days.

A typical performance, for Bowie was the toughest of fighters. But never in a rough-and-tumble way. On the contrary, he was smooth, polished, rarely raised his voice. But this very coolness somehow made him seem, when aroused, all the more lethal.

Such moments were rare, for Bowie was quite used to getting his way. Once, returning on an exhausted horse from deep inside Mexico, he fell in with Sam Houston. Bowie's greeting was brief and to the point: "Houston, I want your horse."

"You can't have him. I have only one and I need him."

"I'm going to take him," said Bowie, and left the room for a moment.

"Do you think it right," Houston asked a friend, "for me to give up my horse to Bowie?"

"Perhaps," answered the friend quietly, "it might be proper under the circumstances."

"Damn him, let him take the horse."

Yet Houston liked the man. Unlike Austin, who always sniffed at Bowie as an impossible adventurer, Houston saw in him the admirable qualities of a born leader, a good friend.

And Bowie was all this. Generous, even extravagant, he gave much to his friends and expected much in return. Once in San Antonio Bowie got into a fracas and asked a companion why he didn't offer better support. "Why, Jim," the man said, "you were in the wrong."

"Don't you suppose I know that? That's just why I needed a friend."

Underneath this hard, uncompromising approach ran a streak of curious gentleness. To people in distress he was instantly helpful. Once he intervened in a marriage ceremony to save a girl from a well-known charlatan. On another occasion he brought order to a rowdy congregation so that a frightened young Bible student might be heard. And in his relations with women he was positively courtly.

Perhaps it was this gentleness that made his marriage such a success. He was the most devoted of husbands, and Ursula a perfect wife. As the daughter of Vice Governor Juan Martin Veramendi, a proud aristocrat of pure Spanish blood, she might have been impossibly sheltered and aloof. Actually she was wise, tactful and immensely helpful in Bowie's myriad business deals. She seemed especially useful in fending off various Mexicans who had given Bowie unsecured funds for investment. She would write him tactfully that "here they have another way of thinking." But whatever the problem she would always close her letters: "Receive thou the heart of thy wife."

All this ended in 1833. When cholera broke out that summer, Bowie packed Ursula and their two children off to the safer climate of the Veramendi summer home at Monclova. Then he took off himself on a business trip East. He was in Mississippi when he got the shattering news—the cholera had swept Monclova too; Ursula, the children, her father and mother were all dead.

Bowie couldn't get over it. For months he grieved in Louisiana, then returned to San Antonio where he tried to pick up the strings again. More dealing, but his heart was no longer in it. He lived a lonely life in the big empty Veramendi house on Soledad Street, surrounded by odds and ends of the past—Ursula's black dress, Ursula's apron. People noticed that he was drinking more than before.

Bowie's career was of course anything but typical. Few other Americans, even in San Antonio, mixed as deeply in Mexican affairs. Most of the new arrivals took the opposite course—they stayed clear of the Mexicans completely. Instead, they formed new towns of their own, or settled in the American-dominated communities flourishing in eastern Texas. John McGregor, a jaunty Scotsman devoted to his bagpipes, moved to Nacogdoches near the Louisiana line. This was the convivial center for gamblers, smugglers and other shadowy figures who found it convenient to operate near an international border.

The more ambitious flocked to San Felipe, center of Stephen Austin's colony. Here Green B. Jameson set up a legal practice in 1830. He soon found he had anything but the town to himself. The place swarmed with lawyers, surveyors and investors of every sort. Everyone had a scheme to make money. Small deals involving a calf or two; big deals that made men giddy—like the huge land speculations of Samuel Swarthout, Collector of the Port of New York, who preferred Eastern life but

had local lieutenants. They all played the game—Houston himself was Swarthout's man.

But the real strength of Texas lay not in the nimble minds of San Felipe; far more important were the sturdy families beating back the wilderness in little American settlements like Columbia, Brazoria, Gonzales. These people too loved their deals and swaps, but basically they had come to work, to farm, to build a new life in a new country.

It was not easy. One night at Gonzales Mrs. Isaac Baker barely escaped from a wildcat that sprang out from the dark and mauled her dog to death. Far worse, it might have been Indians—whooping and howling, stealing the horses, raiding the crops. When a party of Comanches murdered a French trader near Gonzales, the men of the town decided to act. Next day, Jacob Darst, Wash Cottrell, Jesse McCoy and Almeron Dickinson helped avenge the killing with a raid on the Indian camp. No wonder these men found themselves gradually drawn together by tighter bonds than they ever dreamed possible.

Life was a challenge even when nothing was happening. The crude log cabins, with the puncheon floors and glassless windows, were anything but comfortable. Homemade stools and plain tables graced the rooms; gourds were used for glass and china. Clothes were buckskin or homespun and had to be, for it was astronomically expensive to bring anything in. If Almeron Dickinson paid only four cents a pound for pork, he had to spend five dollars for a razor and two dollars for even a pencil.

It was hard on the women especially. The very roughness of the life gave a man satisfaction—hunting, fishing, riding the prairies, even the occasional “shooting scrapes.” But the women put in long, lonely hours of drudgery—pounding corn into meal, spinning cotton, pouring soap, molding candles in cane stalks. There was more than a little truth in pioneer Noah Smithwick's observation that “Texas was heaven for men and dogs; hell for women and oxen.”

But the good part made up for everything: the land ... the spirit of sharing ... decent neighbors ... even a government that let a man alone. “A live mastodon would not have been a greater curiosity than a tax collector,” remarked John J. Linn, another early arrival.

There seemed no limit to the Mexicans' easygoing tolerance. “So reasonable are all the parties in Mexico of the dependence on public sentiment,” explained Woodman's *Guide to Texas Immigrants* “that none have even ventured to attempt any change in the fundamental principles of government. Neither do the feuds of the different parties in Mexico reach Texas, or have any influence over the minds of the people there. The colony is too far off to feel the throes of political convulsion in Mexico.”

It wasn't quite that simple. Mexico had gone through many political upheavals since the Colonization Law of 1825—and the government was indeed preoccupied with troubles closer to home—but down underneath was a growing, deep-rooted fear of “Anglo-American” expansion in Texas.

There was much to worry about. By 1830, Americans made up over 75 per cent of the population

American syndicates illegally controlled huge blocks of territory. American traders engaged in wholesale smuggling. American planters disregarded the government's stand against slavery. American settlers refused to pay taxes—only 1,665 pesos collected in two years. American families ignored the religious requirement; many openly called themselves “Muldoon Catholics” in honor of genial San Felipe padre who didn't care what they did. To top it all, the American government itself was offering to buy the province, and each overture somehow conveyed the impression that if Mexico didn't sell, she would lose Texas anyhow.

And underlying everything was the difference in background and temperament. It hadn't mattered in the early days, but as the Mexicans realized they were losing control, the idea became an obsession. They bitterly pictured a host of Viking invaders, “possessed of that roving spirit that moved the barbarous hordes of a former age in a far remote north.”

The first distant rumblings came in February, 1830, when the influential Mexican Minister of Relations, Lucas Alamán, blurted out his pent-up feelings on the subject. Action quickly followed. Under a new law that April, no foreigner could settle in Mexican territory bordering the country he came from—a clear slap at American immigrants. In addition, the law suspended all unfilled colonization contracts ... ended the colonists' monopoly on coastal shipping ... banned future slavery ... required all foreigners to have passports issued by the Mexican Consulate at their place of residence. Most trying of all, the colonists lost the duty exemption which Mexico had given them on essential goods and materials.

Things moved slowly in Mexico, but by 1831 General Manuel Mier y Teran was stationing troops all over Texas to see that the law was enforced. He jailed two minor officials ... dissolved the council or *ayuntamiento* at the town of Liberty ... closed all the ports except Anáhuac.

The Texans were indignant. They believed they were guaranteed self-government under the Mexican Constitution of 1824. Now it was being scrapped in favor of “centralism.” They thought there was a tacit understanding about little things like smuggling and slavery—and suddenly this easy tolerance was gone. They felt cheated and deceived. Protest meetings were held; incidents erupted. A growing number of American settlers were sure that Mexico had finally shown her colors. The only course was for Texas to break free. Of this group, none was more vocal than William Barret Travis.

In many ways Travis was typical of these men who had come to Texas for a fresh start in life. Like so many others he came from the South—born 1809 near Red Bank, South Carolina. When he was nine, his family joined the great trek west, finally settling in southern Alabama. Here Travis grew up—a tall, raw-boned young man. He studied law in nearby Claiborne, taught school on the side to earn his way. This proved unexpectedly rewarding: in 1828 he married one of his pupils, Rosanna Cato, daughter of a prosperous farmer. They soon had a son, another child on the way. With a promising legal practice, Travis seemed heading for a smooth, if uneventful life.

Then came the crushing blow. The marriage blew up early in 1831. No one ever knew why, but

Travis certainly considered Rosanna unfaithful. Loose tongues said he even killed the other man. In any case, he stormed away and headed west alone.

He turned up in Texas in May, 1831. Applying for his headright, Travis quickly fell in with the Texans' knack of burying the past. He listed himself as "single," later as "widower." He settled first in the little port of Anáhuac, then moved to San Felipe, where he plunged into the town's wildly varied legal practice. He wrote wills ... recovered a stolen rifle ... fought the sale of a blind horse. He took on anything and accepted any fee—once a yoke of oxen.

Socially, he was now very much a bachelor at loose ends. He lived out of a satchel at Peyton's boardinghouse, inveigling Mrs. Hamm to mend his shirts. He drank a little and gambled a lot—far niente, monte, brag, poker—usually losing more than he won. He liked racy clothes; his white hat and red pantaloons were quite a sight in this buckskin community. And of course he had girls—casual affairs noted briefly in Spanish in the diary he meticulously kept. He liked wild evenings, and the dance after Christmas, 1833 must have been terrific. In his diary next day, all he could say was, "Hell among the women about party."

But that very night he fell in love again. She was Rebecca Cummings, a lively, capable girl who managed her brother John's inn at Mill Creek. Travis pursued her with schoolboy ardor. He bought her a brooch, took a lock of her hair. He gave her brother tobacco and legal advice. He explained about Rosanna and his plans for divorce. And she said she was willing to wait.

Meanwhile his practice prospered. No more stolen rifles and blind horses, he was now deep in the land. By May, 1834 he needed a law clerk. And still the clients came: "Williamson retains me to represent the Alabama Company ... retained by Hoxie to defend title ... retained by Major Reynolds to defend eleven-league claim." Yet true to the Texas tradition, he could never resist even the smallest deal: one day he carefully wrote in his diary, "Gave a bad dollar for 50¢."

Typical, yet in many ways so different. Despite those gay evenings, Travis usually seemed formal and proper; it was no coincidence that his name was used as reference for a girls' boarding school. He was quite religious; he actively tried to persuade clergymen to come to Texas. He was intellectual—read Herodotus, Disraeli, Addison, Steele, Scott, even owned bookplates. He was farsighted: one of the first to back a steamboat for Austin's colony. He was moody, touchy, easily offended, given to long spells of reverie that once led a friend to write, "I almost think sometimes that was you with me, you could enjoy some pleasure."

Above all, he was ambitious. Intensely self-centered, by the time he was twenty-three he had already written his autobiography. He liked to dramatize himself and had a deep, almost mystical sense of mission. Perhaps the most significant line in his whole diary came the day after mud and high water kept him from visiting Rebecca: "*The first time I ever turned back in my life.*"

Such a man might never be popular—yet still be born to lead. Sheer ability and determination could do a lot; and Travis had plenty of both.

From the start his heart was with the American colonists in the growing friction with Mexico. By May, 1832, he felt it was time to act. When Colonel John Bradburn, the Mexican commander at Anáhuac, began using high-handed tactics to stop smuggling, Travis and his friend Patrick Jack warned Bradburn that a hundred angry colonists had risen in arms. The Colonel stayed up all night waiting for the onslaught, and it didn't help when he learned it was all a practical joke. He arrested both Travis and Jack.

Now the colonists really rose. Hundreds of them marched on Bradburn, demanding that the prisoners be released. They found Travis and Jack pinioned to the ground, with Bradburn threatening to kill them both if anyone fired a shot. It was a moment made for Travis. Dramatically he called on his friends to fire: he would rather die a thousand deaths than permit this oppressor to remain unpunished.

The colonists laid siege instead, and soon groups were rising all over eastern Texas. Ultimately the storm blew over. Bradburn was replaced, Travis and Jack were released, and an uneasy truce was restored. Peace seemed insured by news of another revolution in Mexico—the fierce President Bustamante was out, and the new strong man was General Santa Anna, a professed liberal who seemed sympathetic to the Texans. As a sign of good faith, customs duties were lifted for another two years.

Travis was not impressed, but a far more important Texan saw reason to hope. Stephen Austin, the original *empresario*, had always believed in co-operating with the government. In every way he tried to be a loyal Mexican citizen. Now he urged caution and patience with all his strength. The real source of Texas' troubles, he felt, lay in the poor local administration from distant Coahuila. The two provinces were run as one, but Texas had always been promised separate statehood as soon as it had enough people. Surely this new liberal government would agree that the time was ripe. He would go to Mexico City himself and persuade them to act. So, with a petition for statehood and a proposed constitution in his pocket, Austin hopefully set off for Mexico in the summer of 1833.

Travis remained unconvinced. By now he was a confirmed member of the so-called "War party," the group that saw no solution except rebellion and independence. By 1834 he was urging the Texans to set up their own government, whatever the Mexicans said. They would never get anywhere by waiting for Mexico to act.

And it certainly looked that way. Once entrenched, Santa Anna had turned into just another anti-American dictator. Austin, after getting the run-around for months, was now in jail in Mexico City. Yet times were certainly better than the stormy days of Bradburn, and in the end the Texans decided to wait a little longer. The "Peace party"—the group trying to get along with Mexico—was in the saddle, and Travis had to back down.

But trouble again erupted early in 1835. Santa Anna was now more hostile than ever. He reopened the Customs House at Anáhuac. He again slapped duties on the colonists. He sent a new man, Captain Antonio Tenorio, to Anáhuac to see that the Texans paid up.

Travis for once was quiet—jolted by an unexpected development that unnerved even the intensely determined man. Rosanna had suddenly turned up from Alabama. She was in Brazoria demanding that Travis either rejoin her or give her a divorce. It was an easy choice to make. He probably would have divorced her long ago, except that he was so absorbed in all these great deeds and ambitious projects. He quickly gave Rosanna her freedom but kept his little son Charles with him in Texas. He hardly knew the boy, but he dreamed of great things for him; he would give him fame and fortune someday.

Now he could concentrate on Texas. Conditions were worse than ever. The local legislature at Monclova was gone—closed down by Santa Anna after it tried to raise money by selling four hundred leagues of Texas land to hungry U.S. speculators. Most Texans were opposed to this step too—and no one liked being governed from Monclova—but Santa Anna's solution left them even worse off. They now had no government at all, and their representatives were under arrest.

Along the coast Mexican garrisons stepped up their campaign to stop smuggling and collect customs duties. At Galveston they seized the Texas schooner *Martha*, loaded with supplies for the colonists. A message taken from a careless Mexican courier hinted that even more troops were on the way. Angrily the settlers burned some lumber ordered by Captain Tenorio at Anáhuac.

Travis had a better idea. Late in June he raised a company of twenty-five men and marched on Tenorio's headquarters. He dramatically gave the Mexicans fifteen minutes to surrender or be "put to the sword." Tenorio quickly capitulated. He was then packed off to San Felipe, where he philosophically resigned himself to a pleasant evening at the Americans' Fourth of July Ball.

The colonists couldn't adjust that easily. They were shocked at Travis' audacity. This wasn't merely a case of smuggling, dodging customs collectors, or playing a practical joke on Colonel Bradburn. This was throwing out the garrison commander. Practically open rebellion. Few were ready to go that far.

Apologies ... regrets ... stern words for Travis. Repudiated, he lapsed into one of his mood spells. He published a note in the *Texas Republican* asking people to "reserve judgment." He morosely wrote a friend that he felt ashamed.

At this point, Santa Anna overplayed his hand. Deeming Travis' setback a sign of weakness, he decided that this was the time to finish off his enemies. During August he poured more troops into Texas and told his brother-in-law, General Martín Perfecto de Cós, to take personal command. Cós ordered the arrest of Travis and several other Texas troublemakers.

The Mexican leaders completely misinterpreted the situation. The Texans' real goal was to build a secure future without outside interference. They rebuked Travis because he seemed to be inviting a fight. Now they saw an infinitely greater threat—martial law, military occupation, the arrest of good friends. Almost overnight the pendulum swung the other way, and the people of Texas turned violent against Santa Anna.

Committees of Safety sprang up in every town. The highly influential *Telegraph and Texas Register* hammered away for liberty and freedom. Travis discarded his moody gloom; his letters now sang of “the hour that will try men’s souls.” Then on September 1 came an electrifying development—Stephen Austin suddenly reappeared from Mexico.

Next week a thousand people jammed the banquet given in his honor at Brazoria. The room fell silent as the trusted leader rose to speak. He had always preached moderation; after a year in Mexican jails, how did he feel?

He left little doubt. Santa Anna was destroying the people’s rights; a General Consultation must be held—clearly a call for a provisional government. And on the question of Mexican troops in Texas Austin was even more specific. The people had a strong moral sense that “would not unite with an armed force sent against this country; on the contrary, it would resist and repel it, and ought to do so ...”

A week later General Cós landed at Copano with 400 men. “WAR is our only recourse” thundered a broadside from Austin. Unfazed, Cós headed for San Antonio. Here the garrison commander Colonel Ugartechea had his hands full, confiscating weapons ... searching houses ... disbanding suspicious groups that re-formed as fast as he broke them up.

Word had just come of a serious problem at Gonzales. The colonists there were shining up a cannon—an old 6-pounder given them years ago to ward off Indians. Ugartechea quickly sent Lieutenant Castaneda with perhaps 100 men to take it away. Castaneda reached Gonzales on September 29, found the cannon was now well hidden. But in very plain sight was a group of armed men—Albert Martin, Almeron Dickinson, Jacob Darst, eighteen altogether. They taunted him about the gun and told him to “come and take it.”

Parleys ... indecision ... shoot or hold fire? While the two sides dickered, the Gonzales Committee of Safety frantically issued a call for help. Volunteers rushed to the scene, and the little force mushroomed to 150 on September 30 ... 167 on October 1.

That night the Texans silently slipped across the Guadalupe; and in the fog-shrouded dawn of October 2, they groped toward the Mexican camp. They were sure Castañeda planned to attack the next day; they might as well hit him first. Quietly, very quietly, they edged through the fog. With them was the cannon, dug up from the peach orchard where Albert Martin had buried it.

Someone tripped ... a rifle went off ... shouts of alarm in the Mexican camp. The Texans halted uncertainly, and at this moment the fog lifted, showing the two sides facing each other about three hundred yards apart. It was almost like a stage curtain going up, but the audience numbered only one 16-year-old Johnny Gaston, who gaped with excitement, high in the branches of a live-oak tree.

Now more parleys. Again the Mexicans demanded the cannon; again the taunting reply, “Come and take it.”

Suddenly a rattle of muskets—no one really knew who fired first. Next the cannon roared

spouting a shower of nails and old horseshoes at the Mexicans. A few scattered shots in reply, the Castañeda's men broke for the road back to San Antonio.

Ironically, William Barret Travis wasn't on hand for this climactic moment. Great men catch colds too, and he was at San Felipe, in bed with a bad sore throat.

But the revolution had begun. The men of Gonzales celebrated all night long. Then another victory—on October 9 Captain Collinsworth captured Goliad, two cannon and hundreds of muskets. More celebrating. Finally on October 13 the little “army”—now 500 strong—set out from Gonzales to throw General Cós out of Texas. Their leader was Stephen Austin. Their artillery was the old 6-pounder, mounted on two slices of tree trunk and drawn by oxen. Their banner— a white cloth decorated with black paint. At the top was a lone star ... then a cannon barrel ... and underneath, the neatly lettered words: “COME AND TAKE IT.”

In San Antonio, General Cós grimly waited. The Texans would arrive soon, but he would be ready. He built barricades in the streets, stationed sharpshooters in the houses, even installed a small cannon on the church tower that commanded the area. Then he moved more guns and his own headquarters to a position that especially attracted him—an abandoned old mission with tough stone walls across the river just east of town. Occasionally used as a barracks, the mission had once sheltered a Spanish colonial company from Alamo de Parras in Mexico. The name carried over, and by now everyone called the place the Alamo.

CHAPTER THREE

“Come Forward And Assist Your Brethren”

“GET UP IF POSSIBLE a committee in your city,” ran the scribbled appeal from Nacogdoches in the *Philadelphia Gazette* of October 24. “Call on those friends of liberty who aided the Poles and the Greeks, and they will I trust hold out their help to their suffering countrymen. Furnish us cannon and ball, rifles, muskets, powder, blankets. Lose no time. ...”

The earthy Sam Houston was more specific. In a fervent letter planted in the Natchitoches Louisiana, *Red River Herald*, he urged: “Let each man come with a good rifle and 100 rounds ammunition—and come soon.”

Planning his new law practice in the rich Red River country, Daniel Cloud heard the call for help. He had hoped to stay here—at last the fees were fat and the dockets large—but this changed everything: “The cause of philanthropy, of humanity, of liberty and human happiness throughout the world calls loudly on every man who can, to aid Texas.”

Others felt the same. In Natchitoches crowds packed the Red River Exchange the night Houston’s message appeared. Cheering wildly, they passed a resolution to send the Texans “all possible assistance in their struggle for liberty.” In far-off Boston the *Morning Post* thundered: “BOSTONIANS! You who have so liberally contributed to the aid of the *Poles*, the *Greeks*, and others who have been fighting for liberty, come forward and assist your brethren. ...” In Pennsylvania farmer George Dedrick wrote his wife that he was off “to volunteer in aid of the cause of liberty.”

“Liberty”—that was the word. It was no idle catch phrase then. It had yet to lose its shine through misuse and overuse. Far from it—the very sound stirred Americans to the depths of their souls. In 1835—barely fifty years after Yorktown—there were many people still alive who knew the exhilarating call of freedom. Even some who had fought for it in battle. And many had a father, an uncle, or brother who had been at Breed’s Hill, Cowpens, Valley Forge. For these people, liberty—anybody’s liberty—had very real meaning. It was something to fight and die for.

To this legacy of their fathers these Americans added a touch of their own—a romantic rediscovery of heroic Sparta ... glorious Athens ... the chivalry of gallant knights. For this was the great romantic revival—the age of Byron and Scott. It was no coincidence that Travis borrowed three Scott novels in one winter ... or that the New York *Commercial Advertiser* featured the new Dearborn edition of Byron.

So when the Greeks rose against the Turkish Sultan—and the Poles against the Czar—American

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