

Misremembering the Alamo

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Ten things about the 1836 Texas battle every American knows—whether they happened or not.

The Alamo as the “Cradle of Texas Liberty” is a subject familiar to people nationwide. Still, after 175 years and countless books, studies, feature films and documentaries, misconceptions persist when Texans and other Americans (and Mexicans, too) remember the Alamo. Here are 10 of the more common myths:

1. **The Battle Was an Intentional Last Stand**

That the men of the Alamo deliberately sacrificed their lives for Texas is a popular conceit, especially in early novels and dramatizations. It helps assuage the fact that the Alamo’s commander, Lt. Col. William Barret Travis, lost his fort, flags, artillery and all of his men in less than two weeks. If he had *intended* to do these things with some greater purpose in mind, well, then the Alamo was not really a defeat.

Actually, Travis sent a series of messengers with requests for aid, not exactly the actions of a man bent on a kamikaze mission. Pre- and early-siege rhetoric by him (“I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due his own honor and that of his country”) and by his co-commander, Colonel Jim Bowie (“We will rather die in these ditches than give it [*sic*] up to the enemy”), were more patriotic posturing than suicidal strategy. Travis and his men did not *plan* to die for Texas, but they did not hesitate to put themselves in harm’s way in its defense.

2. **Travis and Bowie Fought for Command**

This is a favorite sidebar in Alamo films, adding drama to otherwise listless screenplays. It usually amounts to the “man’s man” Bowie and the “young upstart” Travis snarling at one another over several tiresome scenes. In February 1836, about 10 days before the Mexican army’s arrival, Colonel James C. Neill, commander of the San Antonio post, was called away due to illness in his family and/or to obtain much-needed supplies for his garrison. He placed Travis, a lieutenant colonel in the fledgling Texas cavalry and the highest ranking regular officer present, in charge pending his return. Some of the Alamo’s men objected, since they were volunteers and traditionally entitled to elect their own officers. Travis ordered a vote in which the men chose Bowie, a volunteer colonel. Another officer wrote later that only volunteers voted and not all of them. Travis stated that only two small companies voted.

Herein lies the misunderstanding. Travis offered the volunteers an opportunity to elect their own commander implicitly subordinate to Travis in the larger context of the whole garrison. Whether or not Bowie saw it that way, he exerted his newly acquired authority over not only the volunteers but also the garrison and the town of San Antonio itself. In other words, he declared martial law. Alcohol may have been a contributing factor in some of his actions. Travis and another officer complained in letters that Bowie had been drunk since his election.

The whole problem was resolved in about two days, with a minimum of snarling, when Travis and Bowie agreed to a joint command until Neill’s expected return. Illness incapacitated Bowie on the second day of the siege, and Neill never made it back, leaving Travis sole commander.

3. **Bowie Was a Drunk**

Bowie went on a bit of a tear after his election as commander of the Alamo’s volunteers (see myth No. 2). This has proven a popular theme in Alamo films. Somehow Bowie as an obnoxious drunk contributes to his tough guy persona in movies. One film actually depicts Bowie being carried around the compound on his sickbed while holding a jug, just so no one misses the point.

Another description of Bowie as a drunk, by Anson Jones, the Texas Republic’s last president, dates back to November 14, 1835, three months prior to the Alamo siege. Bowie had arrived at San Felipe, Texas, after five days on the road and fell in with Sam Houston, no stranger to the bottle himself. Writing about their meeting that evening, Jones described Bowie as “dead drunk” and Houston as “a brokendown sot and debauchee.” Jones biographer Herbert Gambrell says of Jones’ *Memoranda and Official Correspondence* (1859), from

whence the latter description comes, “Many of the annotations and some interpolations were made long after the events, when Jones’ recollections had become warped.” Jones’ later hatred for Houston also may have influenced his remembrance of the scene.

Bowie undoubtedly had a few on this occasion, but his condition may have been more “dead tired,” from his five days of traveling, than “dead drunk.” However drunk or tired Bowie may have been, he took to the saddle again at 1 a.m., riding through the morning hours with a group of couriers.

A boozy Bowie was more an aberration than anything else. He may have had a drink on occasion and perhaps too many on other occasions, but there is no evidence he drank abusively or out of proportion to anyone else on the American frontier at the time.

4. **Travis Drew a Line in the Sand**

William P. Zuber spun this most famous tale of the Alamo in 1873 in what he termed “a phenomenal refreshment of my memory,” after reading about early Texas history in the *Texas Almanac*. He told of Travis receiving word there would be no help for the Alamo. Travis responded by assembling the garrison, explaining the situation and their somewhat limited options (every possibility included certain death) and then drawing a line in the sand, inviting all who chose to stay and die with him to cross over. All crossed except Louis “Moses” Rose, who fled to bring this fabulous tale to the world. Rose found his way to the home of Zuber’s parents and told them his story. They in turn told Zuber when he returned home from service in the Texas Revolution, and they repeated the story to him over the next 30 years.

Zuber never thought to tell anyone else until he published his story in the *Texas Almanac*. Texan officials and historians looked on his tale with suspicion. Zuber, under increasing pressure, later admitted he threw in one invented paragraph he thought typical of Travis and without which the story would have been incomplete. The belief Travis had given up hope because there would be no help for the Alamo is the key to the line-drawing scene, but we now know Travis did not receive a message of despair. The letter Alamo courier Major James Butler Bonham carried from Texas Ranger Robert M. Williamson in fact urged Travis to hold out, as several groups, totaling more than 600 men, were marching to his relief. Mexican troops captured this letter after the siege, and a Mexican newspaper published it shortly after the fall of the Alamo. It resurfaced around 1960, and historians have only cited it sparingly since.

But what about Louis “Moses” Rose? The late historian Thomas Lindley devoted three chapters of his book *Alamo Traces* (2003) to Zuber, the line and Rose and provided convincing evidence there was no Louis Rose at the Alamo.

5. **The Battle Was Fought in Pre-dawn Darkness**

The Alamo battle began in the morning, but just how early is up to conjecture. “Eyewitness” accounts give the time as anything from 2 to 6 a.m. John Wayne, in his 1960 epic *The Alamo*, filmed the battle under clear blue Texas skies. Apparently he felt that viewers, after sitting through two hours of Cold War metaphors, should actually see the action for which they had been waiting. Filmmakers since, in an effort to “de-Wayne” the Alamo and bring something new to the mix, have staged the battle at night in total darkness, the rationale being that Santa Anna would have sought the cover of darkness for his troops’ approach to the Alamo walls. But wouldn’t the soldiers have needed to see where they were going while crossing no-man’s-land? Wouldn’t they have needed *some* light to properly mop up the defenders once inside the unfamiliar fort? It is much more likely that Santa Anna launched his attack in the early dawn light, however feeble or dim it may have been.

6. **Reinforcements Were Scarce**

A certain “survivors’ guilt” that Texas failed Travis and his men plays a part in many renditions of the Alamo story. Travis sent out several appeals for assistance before and during the 13-day siege. He needed reinforcements to break the siege from the outside, not to fill the Alamo with more men to stretch their already limited supplies and provide more targets in a confined area.

The “Gonzales 32” has been honored as the only group to come to the Alamo’s aid, riding into the fort about a week before the March 6 battle. However, Williamson’s letter to Travis (see myth No. 4) made it clear that several groups (under James C. Neill, Juan N. Seguín, Jesse Billingsly, Sidney Sherman, Mosely Baker and others) were either riding to the Alamo or assembling at Gonzales as a united relief force.

Lindley, in *Alamo Traces*, provided evidence that at least one other group fought its way into the Alamo, under Davy Crockett’s personal guidance, in the early morning hours of March 4. Texians (as they were then known) had not forgotten the Alamo. But Santa Anna had a different timetable than those who rode to the fort’s aid.

7. **The Defenders Fought to the Death for Every Square Inch of the Fort**

The traditional view of the Alamo battle is that of a “last stand,” in every sense of the term. Books and films portray a tenacious group defense followed by dramatic individual last stands by defenders once all hope is lost.

Actually, the men of the Alamo, as outnumbered as they were, had no prospect of victory fighting from a strictly defensive position. Their hope lay in holding the Mexican army in place until help arrived to break the siege from the outside. Once Mexican troops gained a foothold on the north and south walls on the morning of March 6, the Alamo ceased to be a defensive position of any kind.

The enemy advance through the compound forced defenders to abandon the walls. It mattered little whether they jumped inside or outside. An after-action report by Mexican cavalry commander General Joaquín Ramírez y Sesma, made public in 1998, describes three groups of Texans abandoning the Alamo walls to fight and die in the ditches and brush outside the fort. Vastly superior numbers had simply forced the defenders from an untenable position.

8. **There Were Fewer than 200 “Texian” Defenders**

The number of Texans who defended and/or died at the Alamo remains in debate, as does use of the word “Texians” itself. Only a few defenders were born in Texas. The vast majority hailed from the United States, others from Europe or Mexico. Historians typically place the number of defenders between 182 and 189. But Tom Lindley, who spent years of meticulous research on the Alamo defenders, insists there were as many as 260.

This in itself would be a welcome discovery but for the fact that Lindley’s new list not only adds names but eliminates some. The problem is that an official list of Alamo heroes etches names in stone, literally, on monuments, bronze plaques inside the Alamo shrine, in books and, more important, in family histories. Texans have boasted for years about ancestors “who died at the Alamo” with a pride usually associated with ties to forebears who arrived on *Mayflower*.

Then there is the emotional aspect. Traditionally, only 180- odd “Texians” held off the numerically superior Mexican army for 13 days. Somehow, the addition of 70 to 80 names upsets that delicate balance, even though the defenders would still have been outnumbered 5- or 6-to-1.

9. **Davy Crockett Entertained the Defenders with Fiddle Tunes**

Susan Sterling, granddaughter of Alamo survivor Susanna Dickinson, related stories her grandmother told of Crockett playing his fiddle to cheer the spirits of the Alamo garrison. A musical Crockett is also a popular figure in art and film. In *The Alamo* (2004), Billy Bob Thornton portrayed Crockett as a violin virtuoso.

Perhaps Davy did play the fiddle. However, his autobiography and other papers make no mention of his either owning or playing a fiddle. Nor did any contemporaries who wrote about Crockett’s time in Texas mention him carrying a fiddle.

10. **Davy Crockett Was Executed After Surrendering**

The alpha and omega of this tale is the handwritten diary of Mexican Lieutenant José Enrique de la Peña, part of the de la Peña papers at the Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. However, there is no record of this illuminating “diary” before 1955, and not one page of it is in de la Peña’s authenticated handwriting.

A number of colorful details in the narrative closely match those of other sources available only *after* de la Peña’s death in 1840. Among other documents in the de la Peña papers is a journal of the Texas campaign in de la Peña’s handwriting. The Alamo gets but passing mention; Crockett none at all.

Some two dozen descriptions of Crockett’s death appear in alleged eyewitness accounts. He dies fighting in some and is executed in others; no two agree on specific details. The fact is we don’t know how Crockett died. But if one buys into the Crockett execution story, then the question arises: How did he come to be taken alive in the first place? Some writers suggest Crockett surrendered, hinting with a cynical wink that he did so only after encouraging everyone else to fight to the death. Of course the de la Peña diary is the primary source for this conclusion.

Carmen Perry, who translated and published the diary in 1975, pointed out that the word “surrender” never appears in the document in relation to Crockett.

The Alamo is without question a great story of the American West. And there is little doubt some will continue to stretch the facts of its siege, battle and personnel to cover its position in Texas’ creation myth and the demands of revisionist history, film and literary drama.