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Reprinting the Legend: The Alamo on Film

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Figure 1.

Alamo set from Errol Flynn's *San Antonio*. Courtesy of Film Archive

The battle of the Alamo is a mythic event.

One might be forgiven for thinking that it is a mythical event as well. As far as the movies have been concerned, it may as well have been.

Back when schoolchildren actually knew anything about history, the stirring and heroic saga of the siege and fall of the Alamo was as well known as Washington's crossing of the Delaware or Teddy Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill. To tell the story was to sing a hymn to gleaming, unassailable patriotism and, as Alamo Commander William Barret Travis wrote in his most famous letter, "everything dear to the American character."

The story that those schoolchildren knew was roughly this: in February 1836 a small but determined band of Americans holed up in the Alamo, a crumbling old mission-turned-fort just outside San Antonio, Texas. Texas was at the time still a part of Mexico, and the cruel and despotic Mexican dictator, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, felt that these Americans were interlopers and revolutionaries. He and his army of thousands lay siege to the Alamo. There were not that many defenders inside the walls of the Alamo, but what they lacked in numbers they

made up for in ferocity, bravery, and sterling goodness. Young William Barret Travis, a firebrand lawyer and revolutionary, was in command. His co-commander, Jim Bowie, was too ill to take an active role in the defense of the fort, but his legendary knife and exciting exploits were such that his presence was more important than his actions.

But even Bowie's fame paled beside that of a recent arrival—Davy Crockett of Tennessee. Crockett's fellow fighters in the Alamo were inspired by his colorful history as a bear hunter and Indian fighter. He was possibly the greatest living frontiersman, and he had cast his lot with the outnumbered Texans in San Antonio.

Santa Anna's cannon pounded the walls of the Alamo for thirteen days. Despite Travis' repeated pleas for assistance, only one group of thirty-two men arrived as reinforcements. Finally, knowing all was lost, Travis gave a stirring speech to his men, telling them that they would surely die if they continued to defend the Alamo. He drew a line in the dirt with his saber and invited every man who would volunteer to stay and fight to the death to cross over the line. Without hesitation, they all crossed over.

In the early morning hours of March 6, 1836, the Mexican army attacked. By sunrise the battle was over and every defender of the Alamo lay dead. But each Texan had taken scores of Mexicans with him into death. As Travis had promised in his letter of February 24, Santa Anna's victory was "worse than a defeat."

A few weeks later a vengeful Texan army under Sam Houston surprised Santa Anna at San Jacinto and defeated him in a battle that lasted a mere fifteen minutes. Santa Anna was captured and, in exchange for his life, gave Texas to Houston. Now the territory was an independent republic thanks to the martyrdom of the heroes of the Alamo.

Of course, as in all "true" stories, the actual event was far more chaotic and complicated than that pristine myth of patriotic sacrifice. Scholars and historians have spent decades uncovering new details, and, every

time they do, it seems that the legend of the Alamo is chipped away just a little more.

James Bowie was certainly an adventurer—but he was also a slave trader, land swindler, and a sometime partner of the pirate Jean Lafitte. And it appears that the famed Bowie knife was created by James' brother Rezin Bowie. William Barret Travis abandoned his pregnant wife to take up with a mistress and arrived in Texas under suspicion of having murdered a man back in Alabama. And David Crockett, while admittedly a fine hunter, did not have much of a career as a fighter of Indians or anybody...



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