

6-2002

"Everybody's Alamo": Revolution in the Revolution, Texas Style

Linda K. Salvucci
Trinity University, lsalvucc@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/hist_faculty



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Salvucci, L. K. (2002). "Everybody's Alamo": Revolution in the revolution, Texas style. [Review of the book *A line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory*, by R. Roberts & J. S. Olson]. *Reviews in American History*, 30, 236-244. doi: 10.1353/rah.2002.0042

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

**“EVERYBODY’S ALAMO”:
REVOLUTION IN THE REVOLUTION, TEXAS STYLE**

Linda K. Salvucci

Randy Roberts and James S. Olson. *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory.* New York: The Free Press, 2001, ix + 356 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliographic essay, and index. \$26.00 (cloth); \$14.00 (paper).

In the fall of 2000, I did what once seemed unthinkable: I willingly began to teach a first-year seminar, “Remembering the Alamo: Myth, Memory and History.” Few veteran instructors of the U.S. history survey might question my desire to take a break from that always challenging responsibility. But why would a female “Yankee” whose research involves Atlantic trades and empires settle upon such an unlikely topic? To some extent, the answer is personal, and represents my slow coming to terms with the universal symbol of the city I have called home since 1985. Yet my intensified commitment to remembering the Alamo happily coincides with a development of much wider significance. In the last few years, scholars, curators, historical reenactors and self-styled “Alamoheads” have transformed our understanding of the Texas Revolution and with it, of course, the Alamo. Some readers of this journal may be aware of the shift through Stephen Harrigan’s best-selling novel, *The Gates of the Alamo*, published in 2000. His is a fine piece of fiction indeed. But the time was also ripe for a serious historical account of the first battle of the Alamo, along with a fresh assessment of the subsequent battles over preservation of the site and interpretation of its meaning(s). To offer both in one monograph is a formidable undertaking, but Randy Roberts and James Olson have succeeded admirably with *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory*.

Thanks to Walt Disney’s phenomenally popular TV series and film about Davy Crockett, most fifty-somethings, including Harrigan, Roberts and Olson, and myself, became acquainted with the Alamo rather early in life. As a kindergartener in Taunton, Massachusetts, I prowled around in a coonskin cap and, in the ultimate 1950s concession to gender, a *pink* vinyl fringe jacket. Years later, I would howl with laughter and recognition as I read Oscar Zanetti’s recollection of his nearly contemporaneous adventures as Davy Crockett—in the environs of Havana! Fidel, it appears, was not the freedom

fighter of first resort, even in revolutionary Cuba. Moreover, for our generation, the Alamo has continued to evoke a shifting set of emotions that complicate analysis. What the *King of the Wild Frontier* inspired, John Wayne's *The Alamo* helped to undermine, as many of us moved into antiwar adolescence and young adulthood. When Lyndon B. Johnson's "Alamo complex" ostensibly dug him in deeper in Vietnam, it seemed prudent to distance ourselves from that quintessentially Texan, if not American symbol.¹

My post-childhood Alamo amnesia lasted until I moved to San Antonio on the eve of the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986. Affirming my identity not so much as an outsider but as a "professional" historian and sensitive Mexiphile, I stayed away from the public commemorations. I laughed as a colleague remarked that the hundreds of "freaky" reenactors camped out in the Olmos Basin would have been run out of town had they not been involved in official Alamo ceremonies. When I did visit the Alamo with out-of-town guests in the late 1980s, I would nod grimly as my spouse, a Mexicanist, invariably alluded to "that stinking symbol of ethnic aggression." Following the formal and informal commentary of Josefina Vázquez, the distinguished scholar of nineteenth-century Mexico, he pointedly characterized the Texas heroes as "traitors" and even "pirates." Meanwhile, many local Hispanic activists (with the conspicuous exception of Henry Cisneros, who would never run afoul of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas [DRT]) remained deeply offended rather than inspired by the Alamo. Again, it still seemed something better to forget, or at least try to ignore.

However, the turning point for me came in the early 1990s when our five-year-old son simultaneously experienced a bad case of the chicken pox and his own Davy Crockett craze. One day, as I pulled into my Alamo Heights driveway after work, I encountered a coonskin-capped creature perched atop the jungle gym, firing away furiously and yelling at the top of his lungs: "Kill Mexicans!" The child's ever-indulgent Hispanic sitter said nothing, but I quickly asked: "Why do you want to kill Mexicans?" "Because they killed Davy" was the prompt reply. At that moment, I realized that the Alamo could no longer be ignored. Right across our own backyard, I drew my line in the sand—against history-as-hero-worship that, however unwittingly, demonized an entire culture. Like it or not, I could not run away from the Alamo anymore.

Yet it seemed easier to identify the problem than to address it in any meaningful way. As I began to read about nineteenth-century Texas, the conventional historiography appeared, well, provincial and one-dimensional; it came across as impervious to the revisionism that so enlivens mainstream American historical writing. To be sure, there were a few conspicuous exceptions and, as it later turned out, excellent work in the pipeline that would soon be published. Still, Paul Hutton's lament that there existed no

"adequate serious study of it [the battle of the Alamo] by a professional historian" rang true.² Moreover, in an era when many touted the merits of a biographical approach to history for children, pre-collegiate textbooks presented images that were dichotomized at best, and ethnocentric at worst. Students entered my survey of U.S. history with stereotypes of brutal, blood-thirsty Mexicans slaughtering valiant, freedom-loving Anglo-Texans in an us-versus-them contest that somehow "we" really didn't lose.³ Then, when I tried to incorporate an on-site visit to the Alamo into one of my courses around 1994, we (a dozen or so students, a widely published Texas historian married to a member of the DRT, and I) were pushed off the premises by an overzealous Liberty Ranger, for conversing in a huddle in a corner of the garden.

I offer this extended confessional to underscore the apparent challenges that Roberts and Olson faced when they began their project in 1995. Yet, revolution already was in the air. Inspired by factors as diverse as cultural spillover from the North American Free Trade Agreement, a rapidly expanding Hispanic middle-class eager to claim its share of the American story and dream, a new DRT leadership quite savvy regarding public relations, and the growing sophistication of the new western (or borderlands, or frontier) studies, the history of the Texas Revolution and the interpretation of the Alamo have literally done an about-face over the last few years. Roberts and Olson capture some of this in their final chapter and epilogue, and their work overall has certainly profited from these changes. But I suspect that we have not yet seen it all. In 2000, I attended sessions at the annual meeting of the Western Historical Association (WHA), the Eighth Texas History Forum of the DRT, a teacher in-service at the Alamo, and several reenactment activities. Scholars such as James E. Crisp and Ana Carolina Castillo Crimm are engaged in scholarship in art history and women's history, respectively, that is as cutting-edge and dynamic as it gets. Likewise, I witnessed a no-holds-barred and most moving exchange between Steve Hardin and Andres Tijerina at the WHA over the true meaning of "tejano" and the significance of the Alamo for Hispanic veterans.⁴ Above all, the first designated "Historian and Curator" of the Alamo, Richard Bruce Winders, Ph.D., has used his scholarly training and publications experience, his passion for historical reenactment, and his commitment to outreach (even to tourists via regular vignettes on Alamo history for San Antonio *Food and Leisure*) to open the Alamo to multiple constituencies. Thus, while the history of Texas is being rewritten in creative and challenging ways, the Alamo site itself is more inviting and more stimulating than ever. Even the gift shop boasts an enlarged exhibition area on the inside and a comprehensive wall of history on the outside.

So Roberts and Olson is, in short, a must-read, certainly for potential visitors to the "new" Alamo, but also for all those fascinated by the intersection

of academic and popular history. Along with the changes at the Alamo itself, this book supersedes a good bit of Holly Beachley Brear's often poisonous *Inherit the Alamo: Myth and Ritual at an American Shrine* (1995). The first half of *A Line in the Sand* lays out the events of 1835–36, but with an unprecedented twist for a book written by two Americanists. For most of the first one hundred pages, the heroic trinity of Davy Crockett, William Barret Travis and Jim Bowie is largely absent. Instead, the story starts in Mexico, with Antonio López de Santa Anna front and center. By page seven, readers are greeted with the uncommon observation that in the 1820s, the United States and Mexico were, "for all intents and purposes, equals on the world stage, possessing comparable landmasses, populations, natural resources, and seemingly, futures." Mexico had even banned slavery by then, and the Constitution of 1824 outlined an ostensibly federalist, rather than centralist government. Yet, as the saying goes, one individual can have a huge impact upon the course of history. Some Mexicanists have begun to argue that Santa Anna is credited with far more power than he actually possessed, but Roberts and Olson stress that by the mid-1830s, his ambition drove him to embrace centralism. The result was rebellion in Zacatecas, the Yucatán, the sprawling northern province of "Coahuila y Tejas" and, after the Alamo, most of the rest of Mexico. Viewed in this way, the uprising in Texas had a strong ideological component, not unlike the oft-referred-to American Revolution. This perspective also makes an obvious place at the table from the start for federalist tejanos, thus downplaying for the 1830s the racist impulses that intensify later on. Roberts and Olson's version of American history is truly bilateral, and thus inclusive at its very core.

Only after the scene has been set thoroughly from the south do the authors discuss the accelerating American—and European—migration into Texas from the east. Drawing upon some of the same articles that they have included in their highly successful teaching anthology (*American Experiences*, now in its fifth edition), Roberts and Olson portray the new arrivals as "men with attitudes," "super-Celts" and "hyper-Jacksonians" who "drank too much, bickered too much and womanized too much;" violence was second nature to a number of these soon-to-be-rebels (pp. 2, 48–9). Worse yet by today's standards, they were slaveholders or aspired to be, at the same time that they espoused the cause of freedom. Yet the authors are careful to point out that this dual allegiance did not make them "hypocrites." Just as the ideology of the American Revolution allowed some patriots to commit to both slavery and freedom, it also provided Texan rebels with suitable rhetoric to "justify their insurgency and bolster their courage"(p. 55).

Still, the Euro-American land-grabbers "did not exactly confront in Mexico City a repository of political virtue" (p. 50). Although Roberts and Olson do not state so explicitly, they seem to understand that Mexican historiography

will never rehabilitate the reputation of Santa Anna. *Nuestro mejor vendedor* (our greatest salesman), as the modern folk singer Oscar Chávez's characterization goes, finally takes center stage at the Alamo. Thus, however uncivilized his opponents and unsavory his political world, Santa Anna must remain forever responsible for the carnage.

If Santa Anna steals much of the early limelight, then how should we view the three most famous American defenders, the "heroic" leaders who infuse the story of the Alamo with its transcendent significance? In this first section of the book, Roberts and Olson present Crockett, Bowie, and Travis as they probably were: individuals with checkered pasts and some immediate shortcomings, yet mostly capable of rising to the occasion, each in his own way, during the long siege and short battle on the thirteenth day. The authors offer short, but fresh appraisals that, while not ignoring the trio's personal weaknesses, do not engage in the hero-bashing that frequently serves today as the acceptable antidote to hero-worship. Their Travis in particular is a complex man, eloquent, clear-thinking and "determined to perform his duty to the best of his abilities" (p. 129).

But did he draw his infamous line in the sand, that element of the story that filmmakers especially find so hard to resist? Roberts and Olson point out that Travis had received a letter on March 1 that suggested additional Texans were rushing to the Alamo. If relief were on the way, then why would he have forced the issue? Why would Travis have insisted that his men *choose* to make their last stand? With a turn of the page, the authors offer the most poignant of judgments: "As much as he [Travis] wanted to believe Williamson's letter, he saw too many problems with it" (p. 150). Within two paragraphs their crisp, compelling narrative is chillingly back on track: "The timing of the defenders' deaths was the topic the next day in Santa Anna's headquarters" (p. 150).

Controversies surrounding the line are taken up in earnest a few pages later. Sources in support of this dramatic gesture hardly seem credible: one Madame Candelaria (who also claimed that Bowie died in her arms moments before Mexicans swarmed into his sickroom) and William Zuber (who waited until 1873 to share the tale that runaway Moses or Louis Rose supposedly told to Zuber's parents). Roberts and Olson rightly note that historians have traditionally regarded these accounts with hearty skepticism. Yet, in the end they also hedge their bets with the canny observation: "Not only was Travis capable of tracing a line in the sand, the action would have been a perfect expression of his character" (pp. 156-7).

If the line in the sand raises serious questions of interpretation, they pale in comparison with those regarding the deaths of the defenders. The most prominently quoted witnesses, Travis's slave Joe and Almeron Dickinson's wife Susanna, met after the battle on the road to Gonzales, and their stories

intertwined. It took three weeks for news of the Alamo to reach the East Coast, where Crockett's fate attracted the most interest. Rumors of surrender, survival, and sightings were published in American newspapers everywhere, as events in Texas were no longer regarded as "foreign" news. "The Alamo changed how all Americans viewed the Texas Revolution" (p. 181). Then, on April 21, the Texans had their revenge in the eighteen-minute battle of San Jacinto. Fleeing Mexicans begged for their lives: "*¡Me no Alamo! ¡Me no Goliad!*" But Alamo avengers killed and wounded hundreds anyway. Santa Anna himself was captured and forced to sign the Treaties of Velasco, which Texas chauvinists conveniently forget that the Mexican Congress refused to ratify. Sam Houston sent him packing, and critics at home reviled the now-disgraced general. Among them, of course, was the most famous Mexican "eyewitness" of the battle of the Alamo, José Enrique de la Peña.

At this point, Roberts and Olson decide to pick up another storyline. Fast-forwarding to the early twentieth century, they introduce Adina de Zavala and her efforts to restore the Alamo, which had fallen into considerable disrepair. In the years after the battle, locals hauled away stones from the ruins for \$5 a wagonload. The Catholic Church rented the chapel to the U.S. Army, which, in the evocative language of Eric von Schmidt, first "tacobelled" it and then used it as a warehouse. In 1886 the state of Texas bought the chapel for \$20,000, while a San Antonio businessman purchased and remodeled the convent, or long barracks, and turned it into a grocery store. That same year, the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of the Alamo passed without any official notice. However, the situation soon changed as de Zavala mounted a preservationist crusade. Affiliating with the newly formed Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT), she and her friends were poised to respond once it seemed likely that the convent would be razed by developers eager to build a hotel on the site. De Zavala sought out the wealthy heiress Clara Driscoll, who dipped into her own deep pockets to purchase the building. In a deal brokered by de Zavala in 1905, the Texas legislature reimbursed Driscoll; she then transferred title to the state, and the DRT was named custodian of both the convent *and* the chapel.

Common cause soon turned to controversy, as de Zavala and Driscoll participated in the "second battle of the Alamo." "Both women had made a religion out of Texas history," but had competing visions of how to preserve the Alamo (p. 219). Ultimately, Driscoll's European notions of beautification prevailed. Most of the remaining convent structure was demolished to make way for a park and focus commemorative energies upon the chapel. While many have characterized this struggle as a conflict that pitted Mexican American against Anglo American, Roberts and Olson again downplay the ethnic antagonisms, arguing that such a view victimizes de Zavala, demonizes Driscoll and trivializes both (pp. 218–9). In this assessment, they are

probably correct. Yet even they point out that the 1910s were a time of intensified and violent racism. Perhaps Driscoll triumphed for reasons beyond her superior political skills after all.

Clara Driscoll devoted the rest of her life to making the Alamo a symbol of heroic patriotism, not just for Texas, but for all America. If Roberts and Olson offer up a kinder, gentler "savior," their Driscoll was also presciently inclusive: "The Alamo, she believed, was for everybody a symbol of courage and sacrifice that transcended time, space, and ethnicity" (p. 223). For the centennial celebrations in 1936, she orchestrated an interfaith service that featured a Jewish choir chanting Kaddish to honor the dead.

In some ways, Walt Disney picked up where Driscoll left off, irrevocably "nationalizing" (internationalizing, no?) the Alamo in 1954–55. Yet while Roberts and Olson's Driscoll possesses certain heroic qualities, their Disney emerges as a villain. His search for a usable—and profitable—past led him to showcase Fess Parker, who portrayed "neither the Crockett of history nor the Crockett of legend" (p. 241). The Crockett craze is less than fully explained as the authors move on to John Wayne's monumental efforts to use Davy to *his* own ends. Their analysis of LBJ's relationship to the Alamo likewise has a rushed, almost sad quality. Or is it I who finds it difficult to reconnect with my own youthful experiences?

In any event, the last two chapters of *A Line in the Sand* are most entertaining and relevant. Roberts and Olson regale readers with recent efforts to remember—and appropriate—the Alamo. Most famous is the lingering controversy over the authenticity of de la Peña's diary, published in English translation in 1975. This Mexican lieutenant claimed that Davy Crockett was among seven Alamo survivors who surrendered, only to be executed on Santa Anna's direct order. Roberts and Olson succinctly summarize what has become the most hotly debated issue in recent Texas history. As usual, they offer another shrewd, but unelaborated appraisal: "Although the diary is almost certainly not a forgery, it is a highly charged political document" (p. 289). They are much less guarded in discussing the "third battle of the Alamo," inextricably connected to our larger culture wars. Throughout 1970s, Senator John Tower held D.C. barbecues where Texas expatriates could "pay homage 'to what is probably the greatest event in human history—Texas independence'" (p. 295). But not all Southwestern politicians were of a similar mindset. Bruce Babbitt single-handedly derailed his national political ambitions by targeting the Alamo as "a symbol of the problem of our relationship with Mexico, . . . a nation plundered by overbearing gringo inhabitants" (p. 296). Mexican American activists applauded, but Texas traditionalists (including his wife's relatives) were appalled. More striking, however, was a curious "disconnect" in the Hispanic critique. While some intellectuals still condemned the Alamo as an icon to imperial-

ism, many others "complained that the DRT had not given tejanos *enough* credit for their role in the defense of liberty" (p. 302). A Mexican American state representative opened hearings into DRT finances, and all sides got the message. The DRT could retain custodianship of the physical site only if it shared ownership of the symbolism. Today, nearly everyone gets the point, except for that "Anglo graduate student from the University of Texas" who serves as the foil in what is now my favorite Alamo story. Roberts and Olson recount an episode from March 6, 1999, when this character showed up to "convert laymen to the New Western History." He targeted a visiting Hispanic family from the border for his passionate diatribe that the Alamo "represents the rape and destruction of your people." The father, "a CPA with a Wharton degree," was eventually pushed beyond exasperation. " 'Escúcheme, bolillo [Listen to me, white bread], he said sharply. 'If Santa Anna would have won the war, this whole city would be a shithole just like Reynosa. Soy tejano [I'm a Texan]. Mind your own goddamned business. It's my Alamo too'" (pp. 319–20).

Roberts and Olson cover much ground in a little more than three hundred pages. At several points in the narrative, I wish that they had slowed down and offered more sustained analysis. Yet, for practicing historians, this book is well worth reading. The authors both begin and end with the same quotation from José Enrique de la Peña: "Be very careful because it is very difficult to be a historian" (frontispiece and p. 348). But they make it seem easy, enjoyable—and most enlightening. ¡*Buen provecho!*

Linda K. Salvucci, Department of History, Trinity University, is coauthor with Richard J. Salvucci of "Cuba and the Latin American Terms of Trade: Old Theories, New Evidence," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31: 2 (Autumn 2000): 197–222, which received the 2001 Conference on Latin American History Prize. With Sterling Stuckey, she has coauthored Holt, Rinehart and Winston's *Call to Freedom* series (2000–2003) of U.S. history textbooks for middle-school students.

I would like to thank my favorite Texan, Martin Salvucci, for his reluctant but vital contribution to this essay, as well as my Trinity University colleagues Allan Kownslar, Char Miller, and Richard Salvucci.

1. Oscar Zanetti, "American History: A View from Cuba," *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 530–531; David Weber, "Refighting the Alamo: Mythmaking and the Texas Revolution," in *Myth and the History of the Hispanic Southwest* (1988).

2. Eric von Schmidt, "The Alamo remembered—from a painter's point of view," *Smithsonian* 16:12 (March 1986): 54–67; Paul D. Lack, *The Texas Revolutionary Experience: A Political and Social History, 1835–1836* (1992); Steven L. Hardin, *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution* (1994); and James E. Crisp, "The Little Book that Wasn't There: The Myth and Mystery of the de la Peña Diary," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 98:2 (October 1994): 261–

296, are excellent examples of what I regard as the "new" Texas history. Paul Hutton's comment appears in his "Introduction" to Susan Prendergast Schwoelwer, *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience* (1986), 4. That same year, he published "The Alamo: An American Epic" in *American History Illustrated* 20:11 (1986): 12–26, 35–37.

3. Linda K. Salvucci, "Mexico, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Secondary-School U.S. History Textbooks," *The History Teacher* 24:2 (Feb. 1991): 203–222 (analyzes books approved for 1985–1991); and "Getting the Facts Straight: New Views of Mexico and Its People in Recently Adopted U.S. History Textbooks in Texas," *The Public Historian* 14:4 (Fall 1992): 57–69 (analyzes books approved for 1992–2002).

4. James E. Crisp, "An Incident in San Antonio: The Contested Iconology of Davy Crockett's Death at the Alamo," paper delivered at the panel on "(Re)Constructing the Texas Revolution in the Early Twentieth Century," 40th Annual Conference, Western History Association, San Antonio, Oct. 13, 2000; this is also the session where the Tijerina-Hardin exchange occurred. Ana Carolina Castillo Crimm, "The Economic Impact of Hispanic Family Structure: The Families of Petra Vela de Vidal Kenedy and Patricia de la Garza de León," paper presented at the Eighth Texas History Forum of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, The Alamo, October, 27, 2000.