The Last Days of

What really happened at the Alamo 175 years ago remains a hauntingly open question

By Stephen Harrigan

FIGHT TO THE DEATH
Robert Onderdonk's 1903 painting *The Fall of the Alamo* (above) depicts Davy Crockett swinging his flintlock rifle, "Old Betsy," in a last-ditch stand near the Alamo church. The church (left) is now a shrine to the Alamo defenders.

f David Crockett

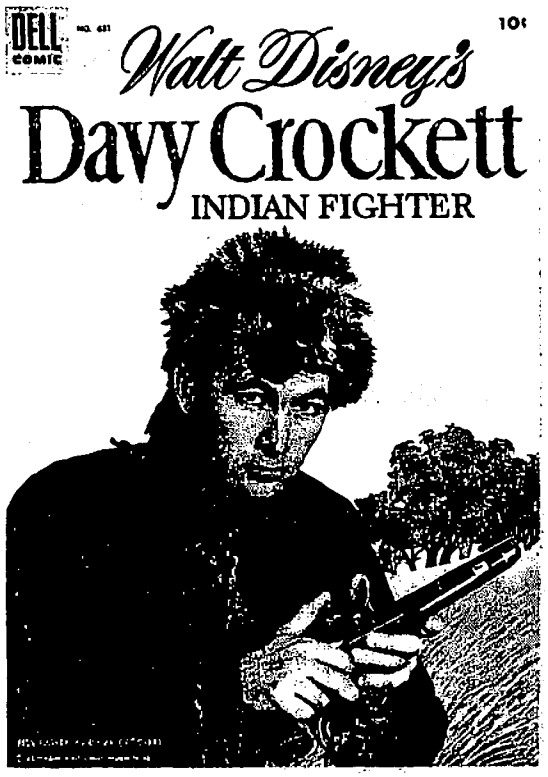
PAINTING COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION, AUSTIN, TX. CHURCH © WALTER BIDINOW/JAI/CORBIS

Do not be uneasy about me. I am among friends. I will close with great respects. Your affectionate father. Farewell

Those are, in a sense, David Crockett's last words. They are the closing lines of a letter written from the unstable Mexican province of Texas on January 9, 1836, the last remarks attributed to him that are not the product of hearsay or dim recollection. In less than two months Crockett would die at the Battle of the Alamo, but this letter to his daughter and son-in-law back in Tennessee carries an almost ecstatic tone of bright hopes and new prospects. Crockett reports his often-problematical health to be excellent. Everywhere he goes he is received as a celebrity, "with open cerimony of friendship" and "hearty welcome." Texas is bounteous, filled with plentiful timber and clear water and migrating herds of buffalo. He has joined the insurgent Texas army and has already picked out the land he will claim in exchange for his service in the fight against Mexico. He wants all his friends to settle here, and he fully expects to be elected as a member of the convention that will write a constitution for Texas. "I am," David Crockett declares, "rejoiced at my fate."

What was that fate? All that is known for certain is that Crockett was killed at the Alamo, a fortified mission on the outskirts of San Antonio de Bexar (now San Antonio) on March 6, 1836, along with the rest of a small garrison that had been besieged for 13 days by an overwhelming force personally led by the autocratic ruler of Mexico, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. But 175 years later the precise nature of Crockett's death remains a hauntingly open question. Did he die in the fury of combat, iconically swinging his empty rifle in a hopeless last stand? Or was he one of a group of men captured at the end of the battle and then quickly and coldly executed?

Of course, either way, Crockett was still dead—still, in the overcooked rhetoric of the time, among the "spirits of the mighty" who had fallen at the "Thermopylae of Texas." So what difference does it make? Well, as the endless and heated argument over the facts of Crockett's death reveals, it makes the difference between a man who is merely an interesting historical personage and one who is a character of legend, one of those rare names that doesn't just appear in American history but resides in America's core idea of itself.



KING OF THE WILD FRONTIER Kids clamored for comics, lunchboxes and toys based on Disney's 1955 movie, which immortalized an Indian-fighting, bear-killing Crockett.

In 2000 I published a novel called *The Gates of the Alamo*, and I knew when I began research for the book that I was going to have to come to terms with Davy Crockett. Crockett was arguably the most precious intellectual property of my generation. Walt Disney's 1955 television show (and later movie) *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* sparked a pop-culture flashfire. *Davy Crockett* was our *Star Wars*, our *Harry Potter*. Something about this character seized our collective imagination. His buckskin outfit, his coonskin cap and his prowess with rifle and knife and tomahawk all tapped into a child's unformed craving for personal power and independence. And the way Fess Parker played him—laconic, unhurried, amiable but unrevealing—made him come across as a favorite uncle, just the sort of patient, quiet-spoken role model children of the atomic age needed to soothe our apocalyptic fears.

We met him again a few years later, when John Wayne played him—rather well, I now think—in the 1960 epic *The Alamo*. Baby boomers would continue to have an ongoing association with Davy Crockett in movies, toys, comics and—when we reached our cynical, disillusioned years—in revisionist histories. But it would be a misreading of American culture to imply that the baby-boomer claim to Davy Crockett was an exclusive one. Crockett had been his own creation before he was ours. Beginning in the 1820s, when he first stepped onto the national stage as a duly elected congressional curiosity, he had the out-of-nowhere star power of a Sarah Palin. He fascinated the country because in some perceptible way he was the country: the rugged frontiersman, the unstoppable striver looking for success in business, for respect in politics, for ever-beckoning westward horizons.

Those of us who grew up on the movie portrayals by Fess Parker and John Wayne would not have recognized the pilgrim politician who arrived in Texas the winter of 1836. Crockett, whose preferred name was David, not Davy, was 49. Portraits painted of him a year or so earlier show a man with lank black hair, parted in the middle and worn long enough to spill over his high collar. His eyes are dark, his nose is severe and straight, but even with these striking features his face has a kind of dreamy mildness about it. In his only full-length portrait, painted by John Gadsby Chapman, Crockett seems a bit paunchy, but a woman who saw him at a ventriloquist's performance in New York not long after this image was made remarked that he was "quite thin."

Several people recalled that he wore a fur hat on his way to Texas, but their recollections came decades later, long after Crockett's coonskin cap and buckskins had become an iconographic outfit. In real life, he tended to play down the frontier caricature he otherwise cultivated. "He did not wear buckskins," insisted one witness, and a woman who saw

LEFT: LUNCHBOX COURTESY OF MAKES AMERICANA AND COLLECTIBLES; COMIC COURTESY OF HERITAGE AUCTION GALLERIES, DALLAS. OPPOSITE: PAUL ANDREW HUTTON COLLECTION

The real-life David Crockett dressed like a gentleman and tended to play down his frontier caricature

MILD-MANNERED MAN ABOUT TOWN
Crockett wrote that this 1830s lithograph, copied from a painting by S.S. Osgood, was "the only correct likeness that has been taken of me."

Crockett shortly after he arrived in Texas confirmed that he "was dressed like a gentleman."

He was one of the most famous men in America, but in the winter of 1836, celebrity was almost all he had left. Only a year and a half before, the nascent Whig Party had flirted with the idea of running Congressman David Crockett of Tennessee for president of the United States. Crockett was already a folk hero, a man who had carefully overseen the transformation of his backwoods biography—Creek War veteran, bear hunter, roving leatherstocking—into a new American myth of plain wisdom and restless self-reliance. He was a canny and resilient politician who had been elected, reelected, defeated and reelected again by the citizens of his west Tennessee district. He was also principled, steadfastly pressing the interests of his landless Tennessee constituents, clashing with Andrew Jackson over, among other issues, the president's heartless Indian Removal Bill. But in the end he could not play the game at a level that was shrewd or cynical enough to keep the Jackson forces from running over him.

When he lost his congressional seat in 1835 he had nowhere to land. He was in debt and estranged from his wife. The Whigs had tired of him, his former ally Andrew Jackson had squashed him politically, and his last two books—lazy follow-ups to his highly regarded and best-selling 1834 autobiography—were taking up space in his printer's warehouse.

"I told the people of my District, that, if they saw fit to reelect me, I would serve them as faithfully as I had done," he said to one of his adoring crowds in Texas, "but, if not, they might to go to hell, and I would go to Texas."

In Disney's *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, Crockett's motivation in coming to Texas was marvelously simple: "Freedom was fightin' another foe," went the irresistible song, "and they needed him at the A-a-alamo." John Wayne, in *The Alamo*, was likewise an unambiguous freedom fighter with no goal other than to help the Texans in their noble overthrow of Mexican tyranny. But the real David Crockett was broken-hearted, embittered and in desperate need of a new beginning. Texas held the promise of financial gain, fresh political opportunity and a new audience for the semi-fictional character of himself that David Crockett had invented.

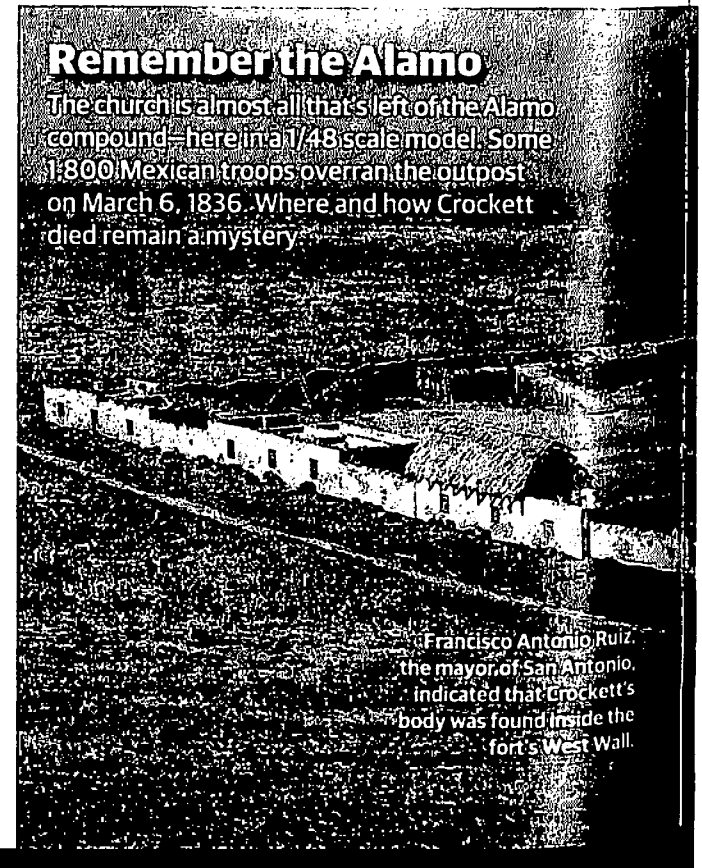
In the beginning, it seemed that promise might be realized. The Texian rebels had driven the Mexican Army out of San Antonio de Bexar, the Texas capital, in early December 1835, and soon after Crockett arrived the war entered an uneasy hiatus. With no urgent need to be anywhere in particular, he and the small group of men who accompanied him spent a month or so hunting buffalo and scouting out possible land claims in northeast Texas. When he showed up in the settlements, cannons were shot off in celebration, banquets were held in his honor and the delighted local citizens tried to enlist him for office. But Crockett knew he had to earn his welcome, and so he took the oath of allegiance to the provisional government of Texas and joined the army as a mounted volunteer.

He rode off to Washington-on-the-Brazos, the seat of the rebel government, to receive orders from General Sam Houston on where to report next. Though he held no rank, a small contingent of men went with him, apparently regarding him as their leader. Crockett's whereabouts for the next several weeks are not precisely known, though he did go to Washington and may have been on his way to the coastal stronghold of Goliad when he was ordered, or took a notion, to join up with the forces in San Antonio de Bexar.

Crockett rode into Bexar in the company of about a dozen men. Entering town on the La Bahia road, he might not even have noticed the broken-down old Franciscan mission that sat in relative isolation on the far side of the river, a forlorn outpost that would seal both his fate and his legend. But it would be another two weeks before the rebels found themselves trapped behind the walls of the Alamo. For now, they were in control of the whole town, though the men of the Bexar garrison were undersupplied and felt as though the Texas government had forgotten about them. John Sutherland, who was sent out as a courier the first day of the siege and hence survived the battle, remembered that Crockett's arrival cheered them considerably. He stood up on a packing crate in the main plaza and told them "jolly anecdotes," assured them he was there to help in their cause and that he aspired to no rank higher than private. A few days later his presence served as the excuse for a fandango that went on well past midnight, and was only briefly interrupted by the news that General Santa Anna and his army were already on the banks of the Rio Grande and headed for Bexar.

The news of the Mexican advance precipitated an ugly command dispute between William Barret Travis and James Bowie. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the pacific Crockett played some role in smoothing over these tensions, but he refused offers by the volunteers to take on a formal

MODEL: MARK LEMON PHOTOGRAPH: GARY FOREMAN PHOTOSHOP: WILLIAM HAMILTON



Remember the Alamo

The church is almost all that's left of the Alamo compound—here in a 1/48 scale model. Some 1,800 Mexican troops overran the outpost on March 6, 1836. Where and how Crockett died remain a mystery.

Francisco Antonio Ruiz, the mayor of San Antonio, indicated that Crockett's body was found inside the fort's West Wall.

Crockett was one of the most famous men in America, but in the winter of 1836, celebrity was almost all he had left

leadership role. He was still Private Crockett when the Mexican forces swept into Bexar on February 23, 1836, and forced the rebels to barricade themselves inside the Alamo.

We know, of course, that Crockett endured the siege of the Alamo and died in the final assault, but hard information about his activities during those 13 days is maddeningly scant. John Sutherland states that on the first day of the siege Travis assigned Crockett and his men to defend the low palisade spanning the gap between the church and the gatehouse on the south side of the mission. But the notion that Crockett confined himself to one defensive position during the siege is subtly contradicted by a high-spirited letter Travis wrote to Sam Houston on February 25, after the defenders repulsed a probing assault by the Mexicans on the south side of the mission. "The Hon. David Crockett," Travis observed, "was seen at all points, animating the men to do their duty."

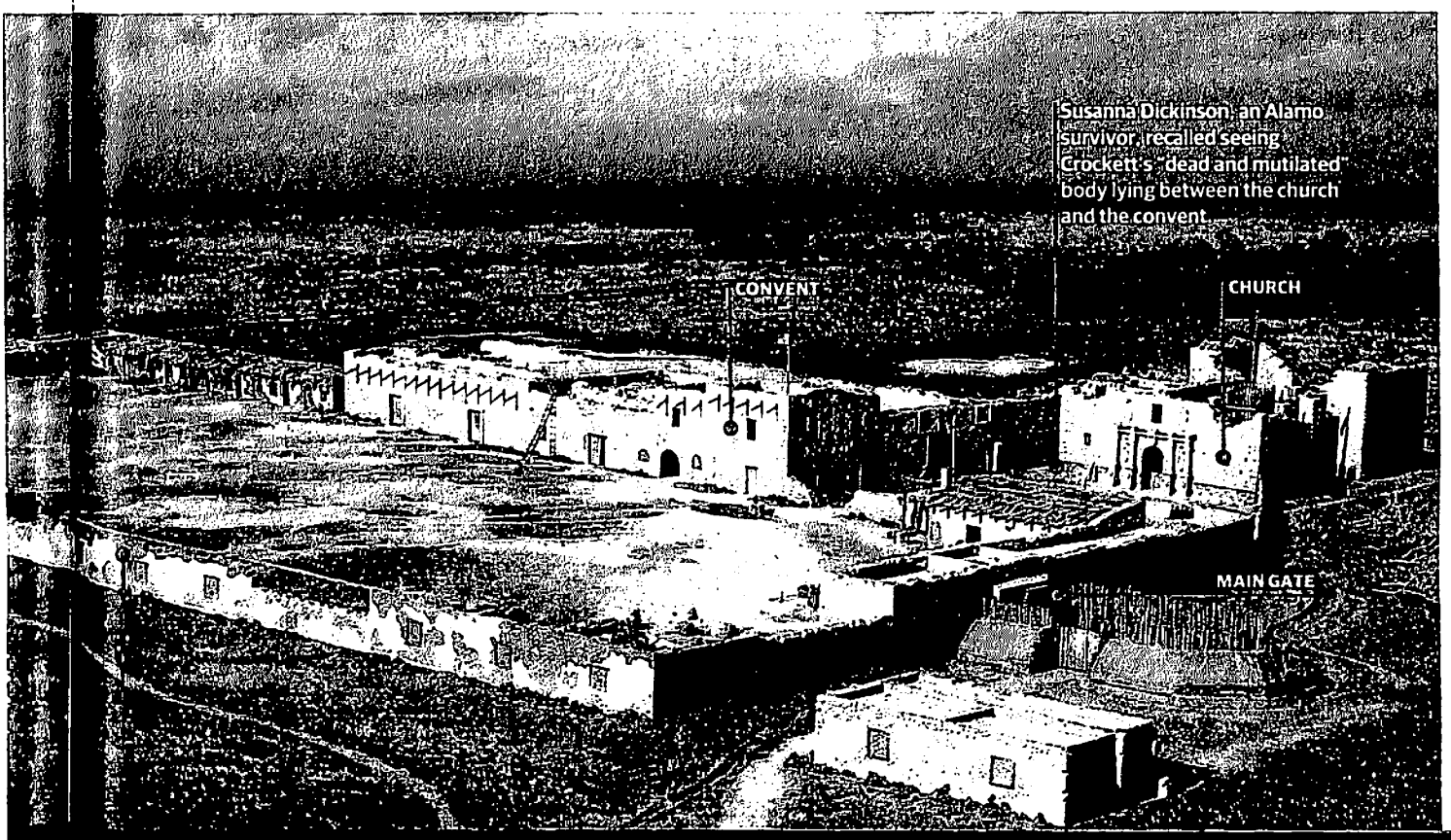
This terse observation is, in my opinion, the last really authoritative glimpse we have of the life of David Crockett. Unlike other accounts, Travis' statement was not set down decades later, when it was likely to be corrupted both by the passage of time and the ever-expanding Crockett legend. It was written instead immediately after the events it describes, by a commanding officer indisputably in a position to witness them.

This scrap of information is crucially revealing. It confirms our wishful assumption that Crockett, in his final days, was a consequential man; that despite his insistence that he be regarded simply as a "high private" he was in fact a natural leader who men looked to for guidance or reassurance. In the last few years the bottom had fallen out of his life, but he was still a man of spectacular achievement who had risen from an impoverished frontier childhood to become a not-implausible contender for the presidency of his country. He was still in possession of his droll fame and easy humor, and as one of the oldest men in the Alamo he had a seasoned perspective that no doubt the 26-year-old Travis found useful.

Susanna Dickinson, who survived the Battle of the Alamo along with a number of other women and children, gave several accounts of the siege in the latter part of her life. In one of these, published in 1875, she recalled Crockett entertaining the garrison defenders on his violin, though he also had his fatalistic moments. "I think we had better march out and die in the open air," Mrs. Dickinson reported Crockett as saying. "I don't like to be hemmed up."

Enrique Esparza, who was 8 years old during the Alamo siege, decades later remembered Crockett as a "tall, slim man with black whiskers" whom the Mexicans called Don Benito. "He would often come to the fire and warm his hands and say a few words to us in the Spanish language." In Esparza's memory, it seems to be Crockett, not Travis, who is effectively in charge of the garrison and even calls the men together on the last day of the siege to inform them of Santa Anna's unacceptable terms for surrender.

Esparza's boyish recollections are certainly confused, but tantalizingly so. The impression they convey that Crockett



Susanna Dickinson, an Alamo survivor, recalled seeing Crockett's "dead and mutilated" body lying between the church and the convent.

MODEL: MARI LEMON PHOTOGRAPH: GARY FOREMAN, PHOTOSHOP: WILLIAM HAMILTON

Celluloid Crocketts

Hollywood's quintessential Crocketts—Fess Parker (top, *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, 1955) and John Wayne (center, *The Alamo*, 1960)—reign supreme over Billy Bob Thornton's more controversial portrayal (bottom, *The Alamo*, 2004), which ended with Davy on his knees.

played some sort of key leadership role in the defense of the Alamo does not seem to me to be off the mark. A decade or so ago, the late Alamo scholar Thomas Ricks Lindley hypothesized that there was a significant and previously unknown reinforcement to the Alamo in the last few days of the siege, and that Crockett himself slipped through the Mexican lines to meet this new force and guide it back into the Alamo. Among the scattershot clues that led Lindley to this supposition are an item that appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* several months after the battle claiming that "Col. Crockett, with about 50 resolute volunteers, had cut their way into the garrison, through the Mexican troops only a few days before the fall of San Antonio," and an otherwise puzzling statement by Susanna Dickinson in her 1876 testimony to the adjutant general of Texas. "Col. Crockett," she said, "was one of the 3 men who came into the Fort during the siege & before the assault."

Though I took Lindley's theory and ran with it in *The Gates of the Alamo*, I have to admit it's based on a fairly thin string of evidence and hasn't held up that well to scrutiny. But like Esparza's probably fanciful memories, it stirs the imagination in productive ways: Crockett had to have been doing *something* during those 13 days. He was too great an asset, too big a personality, to have mutely settled into the ranks of the rest of those trapped men.

The question of Crockett's activities during the siege of the Alamo pales before the all-consuming mystery of how exactly he died. The death of David Crockett has always excited a weird primal fascination. For kids of my age, there was something intoxicatingly otherworldly about the final scene in Walt Disney's *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, in which Fess Parker stood on the Alamo ramparts, swinging his empty rifle as an unstoppable swarm of Mexican soldiers crept ever closer with their bayonets. I remember my flabbergasted realization, at age 7, that Davy Crockett was not going to survive this. The death scene itself—or near-death scene, since the movie faded out before he actually met his demise—was shot on a soundstage, a bit of Disney cost-cutting that created a mood of claustrophobic doom. The shock of Crockett's fate evolved into a rhapsodic fantasy of rifle-swinging martyrdom that few American boys could resist.

With such potent imagery in mind it is easier to understand the howl that went up in 1975 when a narrative of the Texas Revolution written by a Mexican officer named José Enrique de la Peña was published for the first time in English. Peña, who participated in the assault on the Alamo, wrote that after the attack, "Some seven men had survived the general massacre....Among them was one of great stature, well proportioned, with regular features, in whose face there was the imprint of adversity, but in whom one also noted a degree of resignation and nobility that did him honor. He was the naturalist David Crockett."

In Peña's account, Santa Anna, over the pleas and protestations of several of his officers, ordered the immediate execution of these seven men. "Though tortured before they

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were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers."

Despite the fact that Peña was sympathetic to Crockett and went out of his way to credit his courage, the media promoted the new account as shocking evidence that Davy Crockett, the King of the Wild Frontier, had "surrendered" at the Alamo. The die-hard Swingin' Davy crowd could not abide such talk and bombarded Carmen Perry, the translator of the Peña account, with hate mail and outraged phone calls.

But the evidence the traditionalists needed to support their cherished version of Crockett's death consisted principally of a few hyperbolic recollections by supposed eyewitnesses that described Crockett fighting "like an infuriated lion" or surrounded by a "heap of dead." Meanwhile the evidence for the execution scenario continued to mount until most historians gradually accepted it without qualm. After all, the Peña account was not the only source. There were six others as well, though of wildly varying degrees of believability. The most important of them was a letter written in the summer of 1836 by a sergeant in the Texas army named George Dolson who relates an interview with a Mexican "informant" who was at the Alamo and claimed to have witnessed the execution of Crockett.

In the face of all this evidence, the Swingin' Davies appeared to have lost. The execution scenario had the stamp of orthodoxy. But then, in 1994, a lieutenant in the New York City Fire Department named Bill Groneman published a feisty little volume called *Defense of a Legend* that argued that the Peña account was a forgery. Groneman's argument was generally dismissed by professional historians, but he did raise serious questions about the provenance of the manuscript and credibly reopened the debate over the mystery of Crockett's death.

The controversy has since been the never-ending subject of even more books, dozens of learned articles, radio programs and documentaries. And when it came time to dispatch Davy Crockett (now played by Billy Bob Thornton) in Disney's 2004 film *The Alamo*, director and screenwriter John Lee Hancock did so in a Peña-esque way, with Crockett defiant but on his knees, his hands bound behind him.

The manner of Crockett's death is now more than ever a mystery. Almost certainly, a handful of men were executed after the main fighting in the Alamo was over, but I don't share the conviction of the historians who still maintain without a doubt that Crockett was one of them. Although I have yet to hear a conclusive argument that the Peña document is a forgery, I am convinced that his rendering of Crockett's death is not much more reliable than the original Walt Disney version. Mostly this is because it just sounds wrong. Peña's almost hagiographic description of Crockett (his "great stature," his "regular features," his "nobility") seems suspect to me on its face, as does his equally overwrought description of William Barret Travis ("a handsome blonde, with a physique as robust as his spirit was strong").

Peña's narrative, like many historical accounts, is most likely a pastiche of direct experience, hearsay and bombastic opinions. I think the author added the Crockett passage to the story simply to heighten the drama and concoct a death scene for the Alamo's most famous defender. This is what I think is also going on in the other execution accounts. They *might be*, as some historians insist, mutually corroborative, but they might just as easily be mutually derivative, all of them passing along an overheard version of Crockett's last moments.

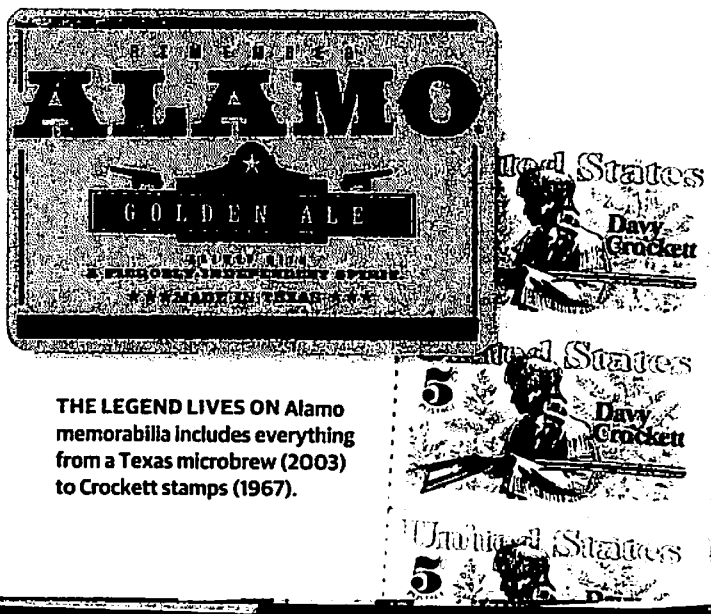
So what do we know for sure? We know that David Crockett died at the Alamo. Susanna Dickinson, many years later, recalled that as she was escorted out of the Alamo church as the battle was winding down, "I recognized Col. Crockett lying dead and mutilated between the church and the two story barrack building, and even remember seeing his peculiar cap lying by his side." But there are problems with Dickinson's account, too. It comes to us secondhand, having passed through the pen of an author named James M. Morphis, whose purple prose inspires not much more confidence than Peña's overblown death scene. I much prefer Dickinson's brief and to-the-point testimony to the adjutant general. Of Crockett's death, all that is reported is that "He was killed, she believes."

It took a while for the nation to process Crockett's death. "Colonel Crockett is *not* dead," cheerfully declared a New York newspaper, "but still alive and grinning." Another paper said he was on a hunting expedition and would be home in the spring, still another that he had received grievous wounds but was recovering nicely from them. As late as 1840, four years after the battle, there was a purported sighting of David Crockett near Guadalajara, where he had been taken after being captured at the Alamo and condemned to slave labor in the silver mines.

But he was dead. That is the one fact visible in the fog of his final days. The former congressman from Tennessee was disposed of with gruesome anonymity. His body was dragged onto a funeral pyre with those of the other Alamo defenders, and for three days the stench of burning flesh horrified the citizens of Bexar and brought in circling clouds of buzzards. It was a graceless end, but the beginning of an uncontainable legend. David Crockett, who had come to Texas in search of a new start, had found immortality instead.

Stephen Harrigan lives in Austin. His latest novel, Remember Ben Clayton, *will be published in May by Knopf.*

Adapted from an essay that will appear in the forthcoming book *Sunrise in His Pocket: The Life and Legend of Davy Crockett*, edited by Paul Andrew Hutton (University of Oklahoma Press)



THE LEGEND LIVES ON Alamo memorabilia includes everything from a Texas microbrew (2003) to Crockett stamps (1967).

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