



Photo: Andrew Huynh

Lights, Camera, Action: Re-enacting One of the Most Important Battles in World History

by C. David Pomeroy, Jr.

Important historical events always happen somewhere else. That's what most people think. When asked about Texas history, even most Texans immediately reply, "The Alamo." Yet, tucked away among the petrochemical plants along the Houston Ship Channel is the San Jacinto Battlefield, where one of the most important battles in world history took place.

The battle at San Jacinto was responsible for the change in sovereignty of approximately one million square miles of land. Mexico lost land to the Republic of Texas and more land over a boundary dispute that led to the Mexican War of 1845. As a subsequent result of those events, nearly a third of the land mass of the present day lower forty-eight states of the United States came into the Union from Mexico and completed the United States' westward expansion to the Pacific Ocean. Because of the size of the ultimate transfer of land, that little eighteen minute fight is considered one of the most significant battles in world history.

Independence is a universal goal. Texas Independence is but one chapter in that history which began in the Ameri-

can colonies in 1776. The French followed with their revolution in 1789. The Spanish colonies began their revolt in 1810 when Mexico declared its independence. Central and South American colonies revolted in the 1820s. That struggle for independence and personal freedom continues to this day.

Although Mexico declared its independence from Spain in 1810, it took her twelve years to achieve that independence. And it took several decades to get the process right. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna fought for independence and supported the first president of the Republic of Mexico. When that president sought to establish an absolute monarchy, Santa Anna helped depose him. Several years later Santa Anna was elected president. Like his predecessor, he then turned away from democracy and effectively declared himself dictator. The democratic Constitution of 1824 was thrown out and several provinces revolted. Santa Anna led the Mexican Federal Army to suppress the revolt in the state of Zacatecas. The sacrifices of the rebels at the Battle of Guadalupe have been



Photo: Andrew Huynh

Texian Rebels resist General Santa Anna.

lost in the pages of history because Santa Anna annihilated the resistance.

Then Santa Anna turned his attention to the rebellion in Texas. With overwhelming and brutal force, the Mexican Army crushed resistance at the Alamo and at Goliad. However, the over-confident general was caught by surprise on the afternoon of April 21, 1836, when the untrained rebels for the Texian cause, shouting "Remember the Alamo, Remember Goliad," stormed the breastworks at San Jacinto. The battle lasted approximately eighteen minutes, and the Texans won. Were it not for that victory, the sacrifices made at the Alamo and Goliad would not be remembered. History is always written by the victor.

The lessons of history are lost unless they are taught, studied and understood. The challenge today is to offer a venue for learning that is attractive to the public, and in particular, to children. The re-enactment of the Battle of San

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: C. DAVID POMEROY, JR. IS A RETIRED OIL AND GAS ATTORNEY WHOSE PASSION IS TEXAS HISTORY, WITH A SPECIALTY IN EAST HARRIS COUNTY HISTORY. HE IS AN AUTHOR, RESEARCHER, LECTURER AND LIVING HISTORIAN. HE LIVES WITH HIS WIFE, CAIT, IN PASADENA, TEXAS.



Photo: David Pomeroy

Making corn dolls.



Photo: Texas Parks and Wildlife

Protecting home and family.



Photo: David Pomeroy

Texian volunteers assembled.



Photo: Karen Verschoor

Preparing meals from scratch.

Jacinto each April provides both a visual and a tactile opportunity for learning. The official Commemorative Ceremony is held each year on the anniversary of the battle, April 21st. In previous years, San Jacinto Day was an official State holiday. Businesses and schools closed, and families and students attended the ceremony, listened to great orators, and heard the Official Battle Report written by General Sam Houston. In recent years San Jacinto Day has been crowded off of the calendar in favor of other holidays, and the crowds visiting the ceremony have dwindled.

To give the public an opportunity to learn more about San Jacinto, in 1991 the Texas Parks & Wildlife Depart-

ment sponsored a re-enactment put on by the San Antonio Living History Association (SALHA) and the Crossroads of Texas Living History Association. Ninety-one participants entertained and educated approximately 1,000 visitors. To coordinate future events, the San Jacinto Volunteers was organized and now presents the battle re-enactment on the Saturday after April 21st of each year. SALHA and Crossroads continue to provide re-enactors. Jerry Tubbs began as a volunteer in 1998

and took over coordination in 2000. Under his leadership, the program has improved each year. San Jacinto Day fell on a Saturday in 2001, and both the official Commemorative Program and the Battle re-enactment were held as one event. The success was overwhelming and the partnership of the San Jacinto Volunteers, the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, the San Jacinto Museum of History, and the San Jacinto Battleground Historical Advisory Board proved to be the magical ingredient. On Saturday, April 22, 2006, approximately 25,000 spectators witnessed the re-enactment, visited the camps, con-



Photo: Karen Verschoor

A rare family meal together.



Photo: Karen Verschoor

Texian General Sam Houston and aide.



Photo: Karen Verschoor

Canon crew resting before battle.



Houston addressing the troops.

Photo: David Pomeroy



Students discussing history.

Photo: Cait Pomeroy



Learning to grind corn.

Photo: David Pomeroy



He walked from Gonzales to San Jacinto.

Photo: Karen Verschoor

versed with volunteers, and enjoyed the all-day festival nearby.

Three “camps” are set up the night before the re-enactment. The Runaway Scrape/Civilian Camp focuses on the plight of non-combatants who were fleeing their homes for safety in the United States. In the camp you will find women, children, servants and a few men (assigned to guide and protect the evacuees) demonstrate soap making, candle making, cooking and other domestic skills of the 1836 period. Visitors help make corn husk dolls, spin cotton, card or weave. They grind corn, haul water or gather firewood. Children of today are fascinated with the chores children of the past were required to do. Men are intrigued with how the spinning wheel works. And women are amazed at the amount of work the women of our past had to do everyday.

Nearby is the Texas Army Camp. The Texas Army was an army in name only. The volunteers lacked discipline, training, uniforms, weap-

ons, tents, and other equipment. Captain Benjamin C. Franklin and eight volunteers joined the Texas Army on the morning of April 20, 1836. Franklin later wrote:

Around some twenty or thirty camp-fires stood as many groups of men, English, Irish, Scotch, French, Germans, Italians, Poles, Yankees, Mexicans, all unwashed, unshaven for months, their long hair, beard and mustaches, ragged and matted, their clothes in tatters, and plastered with mud. In a word, a more savage band could scarcely have been assembled, and yet many – most indeed, were gentleman, owners of large estates, distinguished some for oratory, some for science, and some for medical talent, many would have, and had, graced the drawing-room.

The modern day “volunteers” are also from all walks of life, with as many different outfits as there are persons. They appear a bit cleaner than our ancestors—despite strong urging by their leaders, few re-enactors agree to roll in the mud before they show up! However, some do come with torn clothes, stains and unshaven faces. Volunteers must be approved in advance in order to participate in the re-enactment. No “walk-on” volunteers are accepted. Authenticity and experience is a requirement. Safety is one of the highest priorities and each volunteer is required to attend safety meetings before the event begins. The re-enactors choose which side they want to fight

on, but sometimes they are recruited for a specific camp in order to balance the numbers. Over the years many volunteers have fought on both sides. However, the final result is always the same: The Texas Army wins!

Each volunteer brings his or her own outfit which, with other equipment and gear, can be worth upwards to a thousand dollars. Many travel from New Mexico, Louisiana and far-off parts of Texas to participate. Like the variety of volunteers in 1836, the re-enactors are doctors, lawyers, welders, carpenters, small business owners, teachers, housewives, secretaries, managers and retired persons. Despite their background difference, each has three objectives in mind: first, know their history; second, share that history with the public; and third, have fun. Early Texas volunteer Noah Smithwick summed up the attitudes of the 1836 volunteers: “The citizens had taken up arms in self-defense; another class had come through sympa-



Texian cavalry chasing fleeing Mexicans.

Photo: Andrew Huynh

thy with their struggling countrymen; others, still, for love of adventure..."

In the Texian Army Camp spectators visit with the soldiers and inquire about their clothing, weapons and reasons for fighting for Texas. Gunsmithing, black powder cartridge making, blacksmithing, musket ball molding, leatherwork and whittling are demonstrated. Young spectators are pressed into service as a militia where they are trained in the manual of arms and marching. Some are even selected to man the famous Twin Sisters cannons. Periodically, the re-enactors are mustered and fire salutes, either with black-powder muskets, pistols or cannon. This is always a delight for the spectators.

Across the battlefield is the Mexican Army Camp. This camp has a more traditional military look, with its neat row of white canvas tents and uniformed soldiers drilling. Young spectators are also drafted into the Mexican Army but must learn their orders in Spanish. General Santa Anna traveled with a red

and white marquee tent, fully furnished with silver and china. Visitors are encouraged to look inside. Flying outside his tent are several of the Mexican flags replicating those at the original battle. If you are lucky, a surgeon will be on duty and will demonstrate the tools and medicines of the day. Normally his presentation is interrupted by groans and yells of pretend pain at the primitive implements used in 1836. Nearby the wives, girlfriends, family, and other camp followers are cooking and mending clothes. The public is encouraged to sit and visit for a while.

At 3:30 in the afternoon, in 1836 and on re-enactment day, General Sam Houston calls his troops to attention and the program begins. Spectators line the battlefield five or six deep, trying for the best view of the upcoming battle. A narration explains the history leading up to this event. In 1836, the events were spread out over three days

and involved more than 2,000 combatants on a battlefield a mile long. The re-enactment is condensed to thirty minutes with 125 living historians on a field 200 yards long.

The brief battle of April 20 is re-enacted with sniper attacks and cavalry duels. That night in 1836, both armies waited restlessly for the other to make a move. Early the next morning, Mexican General Cos arrived with re-enforcements for General Santa Anna. Realizing that the Texas Army was now outnumbered and it was late in the day, Santa Anna assumed that the Texas Army would not attack and gave his troops permission to eat and rest. He thought so little of the Texas Army, because they were undisciplined, untrained, and constantly retreating, that he did not even post sentries.

General Sam Houston took advantage of the unguarded sleeping Mexican Camp and ordered his troops to approach stealthily to within 300 yards of the Mexican breastworks. Nearly 900 soldiers went undetected to the small



Photo: Karen Verschoor

Houston looking for opportunity.

Well dressed Mexican Army.



Photo: Karen Verschoor



Photo: David Pomeroy

Safte Muster before the battle.



Photo: David Pomeroy

Texians had no uniforms.



Photo: Karen Verschoor

Out of step but ready to fight.

Making musket cartridges.

Photo: David Pomeroy



Photo: David Pomeroy



General Santa Anna traveled in comfort.



Photo: Texas Parks and Wildlife

The Mexicans were caught by surprise.



Photo: Andrew Huynh

Texians skirmished on the 20th.



Photo: Jeff Wilson

Texians breeched Mexican breastworks in 18 minutes.

ridge overlooking the Mexican Camp. On command, the soldiers leapt into action, yelling "Remember the Alamo!" and "Remember Goliad!" The surprise created confusion in the Mexican camp and before the troops could be put into formation and ordered to fire, the Texians breached the breastworks.

The re-enactment utilizes pyrotechnics to simulate cannon fire with great affect. Soldiers on both sides fire at will with black powder muskets. The battlefield is shrouded in smoke and the struggle at the breastworks is almost ghostly in appearance. Spectators yell and gasp as the battle moves quickly into, over, and through the Mexican Camp. In 1836, Santa Anna escaped on horseback only to be captured the next morning and returned to the Texian Camp. For the re-enactment the famous surrender scene is portrayed that same day and Texas is given its Independence.

At the end of each battle re-enactment, a moment is taken to honor all of those who died on this field. The Texians fought for their freedom and the Mexicans fought to put down the

revolts in the provinces and preserve their nation. Yet, all gave their lives, and for that, they are recognized.

The course of history was changed that day, 171 years ago. The settlers returned home and the Republic of Texas was created. After being exiled for his loss of land to Texas in 1836, Santa Anna returned to Mexico and was again elected president. When Texas was accepted into the United States, a boundary dispute developed between Mexico and the United States. In the Mexican War of 1845 Santa Anna lost and was forced to give up even more Mexican land. Some of the same Texas soldiers who defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto in 1836 helped to defeat him again in 1845.

The spirit for freedom endures today. From the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the United States was formed. From the

Declaration of Independence in 1810, the Republic of Mexico was formed. From the Declaration of Independence in 1836, the Republic of Texas was formed. As Texans, we have the unique opportunity to celebrate all three of these Independence Days as part of our heritage. At San Jacinto, the battlefield represents the struggle, the monument honors the price that is paid for our freedom, and the Battleship *Texas* reminds us that freedom must be continually protected and defended. ★



Photo: Karen Verschoor

In memory of those who won our independence.