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James Bowie, Big Dealer

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JAMES BOWIE had the flavor, the mettle, the daring in gesture and deed, and the generosity of spirit that make certain actors on the stage of life go beyond themselves into other selves and thus do more and say more than they actually said or did. People used to name their horses, their oxen, their hounds after Bowie. That is fame. Bowie's impact on human imagination, which is to say on social history, was far stronger than on political or military history.[1] His name is kept green on three counts, each en-

[1]The primary sources on Bowie's early life are two sketches by his brothers. That by John J. is more extensive and detailed. It was contributed by "Dr. Kilpatrick, of Trinity, Louisiana," who evidently rhetorized it somewhat, to *De Bow's Review* (New Orleans), October, 1852, pp. 378-382. Rezin P. Bowie's letter, dated from Iberville, Louisiana, August 24, 1838, reprinted from the *Planters' Advocate,* appeared in *Niles' National Register* (Washington, D. C.), V, September, 1838—March, 1839, p. 70. Both are fully quoted, with unclear references, by Raymond W. Thorp, in *Bowie Knife* (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1948). This work, though lacking in orderly arrangement of materials, assembles much scattered and recondite material bearing on the Bowie knife.

Walter Worthington Bowie, *The Bowies and Their Kindred: A Genealogical and Biographical History* (Washington, D. C., 1899), is good on ancestry and on life of the Bowies in Louisiana. A long sketch of Bowie by John Henry Brown (a Texan) in *The Encyclopedia of the New West* (Marshall, Texas, 1881), 433-438, is laudatory in places and, therefore, false to reality, but contributes to a comprehension of the man.

The best assemblage of facts about the man in recent times is by Amelia Williams, in "A Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* XXXVI and XXXVII. Pages 90-103 of Vol. XXXVII are devoted to Bowie. Yet in this superb work on the Alamo, certain facts detractive to the character of Bowie, some of them apparently unknown to the historian, are smoothed down.

More realistic, but skimpy on biographical facts in contrast to fullness on knife lore, is Edward Gay Rohrbough, James Bowie and the Bowie Knife in Fact and Fancy (Master's thesis, University of Texas, 1938). Mr. Rohrbough, of West Virginia, had read my essay, "Bowie and the Bowie Knife," in the *Southwest Review* (1931), XVI, 351-368, or a slightly changed form of it entitled "The Knife That

larged by legend. He is remembered for the knife bearing his name; before he died and then on for decades he was in popular belief the supreme knife wielder of the old Southwest. He is remembered for a search, actually futile, for the Lost San Saba Mine that transmuted it into the Lost Bowie Mine, which still lures men on. Finally, his name remains indelibly linked with the fall of the Alamo. Three other names are so linked, but more—many more—stories sprang up on how Bowie died than on the ends made by Travis, Crockett, and Bonham combined.

Born in Logan County, Kentucky, in 1796,[2] of strong-bodied, strong-minded upper class stock, James Bowie was the eighth of ten children, four of whom died young. His father, Rezin Bowie, a Highland Scot by descent, was a planter. His mother, of keen intellect, piety, and a fair education, read to her children. The Bowies were married in Georgia in 1782, moved to Tennessee, where they lived six or seven years, and then to Kentucky; they tarried in the province of Missouri two years before settling down in Rapides Parish, Louisiana, in 1802. Here turbulent men were

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Was Law," in the New York *Herald Tribune Magazine* (syndicated), and came to the University of Texas to write a study on Bowie under my direction.

Bowie's part in the Texas Revolution is in virtually all histories of Texas, though his drunken conduct at the Alamo and quarrels with Travis are generally omitted.

Undocumented, but based entirely on archive material in San Antonio and on court records, Edward S. Sears, "The Low Down on Jim Bowie," *Texas Folklore Society Publications,* No. XIX, 1944, pp. 175-199, gives many facts. The essay is confused in composition, and the writer was highly prejudiced against Bowie, though I am positive that he did not fake alleged facts.

A farrago of material bearing on Bowie is contained in the W. W. Fontaine Papers, in the Archives of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, at the University of Texas. A large part of it was supplied in 1890 by John S. Moore of New Orleans, grandson of Rezin P. Bowie. He claimed to know a lot for which he supplied no proof. Wishing his ancestral kin to be respectable conformists as well as distinguished, he denied that they smuggled slaves.

C. L. Douglas, *James Bowie: The Life of a Bravo* (Dallas, 1944), is semi-fictioned journalese but contains valid quotations on and from Bowie. The best novel on Bowie is Paul I. Wellman, *The Iron Mistress* (Garden City, New York, 1951).

In "The Lost San Saba Mine," with appended notes, in *Coronado's Children* (1930), the writer has given some of the facts and told the legend of Bowie's search for Spanish silver, or gold. In a chapter entitled "Jim Bowie's Knife," in *Tales of Old-Time Texas* (1955), the writer has tried to assemble all the facts and tales pertaining to the Bowie knife. The sources for this chapter are extensively cited, though additional newspaper reprintings of some Bowie knife tales could have been added.

[2]John J. Bowie gives this date and place and is confirmed by good evidence, though the birth dates assigned by various writers are as divergent as accounts of his death.

made more turbulent by the confusion of land claims immediately following the Louisiana Purchase. In defending his land against a gang of squatters, Rezin Bowie killed one of them. He was arrested, charged with manslaughter, and jailed. Mrs. Bowie, accompanied by a slave, rode on horseback to the jail, demanded entrance, entered, and in a few minutes came out with her husband, each armed with a brace of pistols. While the jailer retreated, they rode away. Years later when Mrs. Bowie was told that her son had been killed by Mexicans in the Alamo, she calmly remarked, "I'll wager no wounds were found in his back."[3]

At eighteen Jim Bowie cleared a small tract of land for himself on Bayou Boeuf, in Rapides Parish. He may have farmed a little, but his chief income was from lumber that he sawed and barged down to New Orleans. At this time he was making a name for himself as a roper and tamer of wild horses, as a rider of alligators,[4] and as a hunter of wild cattle and other game. Land was going up. He sold his and was briefly associated with James Long's filibustering expedition into Texas.[5]

About this time, 1819, Jim Bowie and his brothers Rezin P. and John J. went to buying Africans from the pirate Jean Lafitte on Galveston Island at a dollar a pound, $140 per head on the average, and smuggling them into Louisiana. On one drive through the woods of East Texas thirty blacks escaped. Jim Bowie trailed them to the Colorado River without recovering them. The

[3]Walter Worthington Bowie, *The Bowies and Their Kindred,* 261-262.

[4]In August, 1936, the writer asked E. A. McIlhenny, of Avery Island, Louisiana, who wrote an excellent book on alligators, conserved birds, and manufactured tabasco sauce, what he thought of the claim that Jim Bowie rode alligators. He replied: "I don't see why he shouldn't have ridden them. I used to ride them. The trick was to get on one's back, at the same time grasping his upper jaw firmly while gouging thumbs into his eyes. He couldn't see to do much and the leverage on his jaw would keep him from ducking under the water with the rider."

According to a footnote by De Quincey—prince of footnote-makers—in *The English Mail-Coach,* Charles Waterton (1782-1865), naturalist and author of *Wanderings in South America,* "publicly mounted and rode in top-boots a savage old crocodile, that was restive and very impertinent, but all to no purpose. The crocodile jibbed and tried to kick, but vainly. He was no more able to throw the squire than Sinbad was to throw the old scoundrel who used his back without paying for it."

[5]There are no details pertaining to Bowie's part in Long's Expedition. Among early writers who say that he was with it, is William Bollaert ("W. B."), "Life of Jean Lafitte." *Littell's Living Age,* XXXII, 441. See also Kilpatrick, "Early Life in the Southwest—The Bowies," *De Bow's Review,* October, 1852, pp. 378-382.

Louisiana law gave any informer on smuggled slaves half of what they brought at public auction. The Bowies would inform on themselves and then at the sale by customs officers buy the blacks they had delivered, in effect paying only half price. Subsequently their title was legal and they were free to sell the slaves anywhere. The average price on the Mississippi was $1,000 per slave.[6]

If—a very iffy if—Jim Bowie excelled in knife throwing and juggling as well as in knife-wielding, he must have reached his climax at this period of operations. Knife-juggling was mainly a tent-show stunt. J. O. Dyer, who habitually made slight distinction between romance and history, said that "Big Jim" Bowie in conveying smuggled slaves armed himself with three or four knives so that he could transfix any captive who tried to break away. Jerking a knife out was quicker than reloading a horse pistol at the muzzle. Both Jim and Rezin P., Dyer said, could keep several knives moving in the air at the same time without allowing one to touch the ground. "At twenty paces either could send a knife clean through a small wooden target."[7]

According to John J. Bowie, he and his brothers cleared $65,000 on slave-smuggling—"and soon spent all our earnings." The losses were not immediate. James and Rezin P., markedly devoted to each other, invested in Louisiana lands and developed, among other enterprises, a fine plantation named Arcadia[8] on Bayou Lafourche, installing the first steam plant for grinding sugar cane in that part of the country. Rezin P., later elected three times to the Louisiana legislature, managed the business. Jim never settled down anywhere, but for several years spent much of his time in New Orleans, where he got high enough in society to capture the imagination of Edwin Forrest, then rising on the American stage, and to have his portrait painted—not, as descendants of the Bowie family claimed, by Benjamin West, who died in London in 1820 without having been in America for many years.

[6]The best authority on slave-smuggling by the Bowie brothers is John J. Bowie, as cited. Homer S. Thrall says in his *Pictorial History of Texas* (St. Louis, 1878), 129, that the Bowies lost ninety blacks. See Eugene C. Barker, "The African Slave Trade in Texas," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association,* VI, 145-158.

[7]J. O. Dyer, "A Truer Story of the Bowie Knife," Galveston *News,* March 21, 1920.

[8]Kilpatrick, "Early Life in the Southwest—The Bowies," *De Bow's Review,* October, 1852, pp. 378-382; Walter Worthington Bowie, *The Bowies and Their Kindred;* W. W. Fontaine Papers (MS., Archives, University of Texas Library).

John J. Bowie shifted his operations to Arkansas and Mississippi. He named his Arkansas plantation Bowie, and in time went to the Arkansas legislature. About 1826 James joined him in what looked like a bonanza. This business entails a tedious explanation. By 1820 the federal courts had confirmed nearly all legitimate land titles over the vast Louisiana Territory. Then such a horde of claimants began clamoring for recognition of titles in Arkansas that Congress authorized the Superior Courts of the territories to settle new claims. In December, 1827, the Superior Court of Arkansas was confronted with 131 claims by individuals who had purchased them from John J. Bowie, James Bowie, or some other speculator. Most of the claims, each for 400 arpents of land (less than 500 acres), were based on alleged grants to one Bernardo Sampeyreac by the Spanish governor of Louisiana in 1789. The United States District Attorney saw fraud and asked for time in which to go deeper into the Spanish language, laws, and records. The court was bullied into confirming the claims.

Within a few weeks John J. Bowie had prepared twenty-four more grants of the kind, and then "with other parties" thirty more, and was selling them like hot cakes. Whether James was one of the "parties" is not known. The Attorney General in Washington was outraged at the Arkansas decision and demanded a review of the cases. On February 7, 1831, the Superior Court of Arkansas Territory reversed its decrees. It had clear proof that witnesses for the claimants in the first trial had been bribed, that Sampeyreac was a fictitious name, that the grants were forgeries, and that sales by the Bowies and other speculators were fraudulent. On appeal of a type case, the Supreme Court of the United States, in 1833, confirmed the opinion of fraud and forgery. Not an acre of ground had actually been conveyed to any "innocent" purchaser from the Bowies and fellow operators in Spanish grants.[9]

[9]United States *vs.* Sampeyreac, *et al.*, in Book 27, *The Federal Cases* (Case No. 16,216a), 932-946; Bernardo Sampeyreac and Joseph Stewart *vs.* United States, in Richard Peters, Jr., *Reports of Cases Argued and Adjudged in the Supreme Court, 1828-1842* (17 vols.; Philadelphia, 1828-1842), VII, 222-242. See also Josiah H. Shinn, *Pioneers and Makers of Arkansas* (Little Rock, 1908), 87-93; Frederick W. Cron, Bowie Land Frauds in Arkansas (MS., in possession of J. Frank Dobie, Austin). A typescript copy of Cron's manuscript, which cites authorities on Rezin P. Bowie's belated entrance into Arkansas land titles, has been placed in the Archives of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, at the University of Texas.

Meantime James Bowie had G.T.T. (Gone to Texas) and was passing as a rich man.

Beating the government out of land was not at this time—and later—regarded as more felonious than getting around it on income taxes now is. Selling a forged title might be something else, but plenty of the buyers were collusive. In 1836 Rezin P. Bowie went to Havana, Cuba, and purchased—on credit—from the widow of the last surveyor-general of Louisiana under the Spanish government a large quantity of land titles and other documents. He tried, without success, to peddle them out; after his death, in 1841, the widow retrieved what papers had not been taken off.

Several years before the land cases were settled by court, Bowie had an experience that gave him more prominence than any other of his life with the possible exception of dying. For years he made Alexandria, on Red River, business headquarters. One of the times while he was pressed for money, he learned that Norris Wright, sheriff of Rapides Parish and director in the bank from which Bowie borrowed, had thwarted a loan of money for which he was asking. There was already bad blood between the two over political differences. Many prominent citizens of the Old South were in constant ferment over politics—most of the not-prominent ones not voting. One day when Wright and Bowie met on the street, Wright fired a pistol at him, but the bullet was checked by a silver dollar in Bowie's vest pocket. Bowie's pistol snapped and he would have killed Wright with his hands if men had not withheld him. The two parted expecting to meet another day.

That day was September 19, 1827. The place was a sandbar, a kind of peninsula noted as a dueling place, on the west bank of the Mississippi River across from Natchez. Bowie was one of four seconds, plus a surgeon, on the side of a principal in a duel. There were six men, likewise including a surgeon, on the other side. Bowie had told his brother Rezin of the trouble with Norris Wright and of his pistol's snapping, whereupon Rezin had given him a knife made by his blacksmith, saying, "Here, Jim, take old Bowie. She never misses fire."

The Sandbar Duel turned into a general fight in which two men were killed and two badly wounded. Bowie had emptied

his pistol and was down, shot in four places and cut in five. Norris Wright had emptied two dueling pistols. Without taking time to reload, he rushed against Bowie with a cane sword. Bowie, a ball in one hip, rose to standing position and stabbed the knife into his enemy, "twisting it to cut his heart strings."[10]

The fame of the Bowie knife was made, and thenceforth for many years Bowie's reputation spread—out of proportion to established facts—as a knife man. A single example of the reputation must suffice here. Gideon Lincecum (1793-1873) of Mississippi and Texas, naturalist, medicine man, fiddler, outspoken skeptic, was the grandson of Miriam Bowie, grandaunt of James Bowie. In a delectable autobiography, written about 1871 and published by the Mississippi Historical Society in 1904, Lincecum refers to his kinsman as "the celebrated desperado who originated the Bowie knife."

When Bowie, aged thirty-two, came to Texas in 1828, he found that reputation of his knife had preceded him. He stood six feet tall and was all muscle. He was pleasing in looks, speech, and manner to both men and women, though it is said that he seldom smiled. Letters and other writings by him and Rezin P. Bowie are in clear, sinewy English. After he had been in Texas a while, he spoke Spanish as well as French. He was not a ruffian, though he could be rough. He comprehended the cutthroats and gamblers of Natchez-under-the-hill while he dined in patrician houses on the hill or sat in the New Orleans theater. He was at home with bellowing alligators in the marshes, with mustangs and mustangers on the prairies, and with lawyers who "would circumvent God." In Texas he fought Indians and Mexicans. He could pass from frontiersmanship to urbanity, moving

[10]A score or so of accounts of the so-called Sandbar Duel have been published. One in the Fontaine Papers, copied from the *Concordia Intelligencer* of March, 1860, seems to be reliable. The fight was in Concordia Parish of Louisiana. G. P. Whittington, "A History of Rapides Parish, Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly,* XVI, 628-634, is good on details. So is Robert Dabney Calhoun, "A History of Concordia Parish," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly,* XV, 638-643. This contains a statement made in 1880 by Dr. Maddox, one of the participants, and a letter from Colonel Robert A. Crain, another participant, dated October 3, 1827, soon after the fight. Both of these accounts specify Bowie's big knife. Meigs O. Frost, "Bowie and His Big Knife," *Adventure,* June 15, 1935, pp. 110-116, explains particularly well the hostility between Bowie and Norris Wright. On October 19, 1827, exactly one month after the duel, *The Ariel* (Natchez) published statements from several participants.

as a well-bred gentleman in the best society of New Orleans, Natchez, San Antonio, and Saltillo. He was convivial and loved music. He was impetuous and, concomitantly, generous. He was ambitious and scheming, but seems to have been more eager in the game of gaining than for gain itself. He played cards for money, and considering the facts, especially the debts, of his plunging career, one must deduce that he at times lost heavily.

Unlike most emigrants from the States, Bowie rode past the Texian settlements along the Brazos River until he reached San Antonio—in "the Spanish country." In June he was baptized into the Roman Catholic church. His sponsors were Don Juan Martín de Veramendi and Doña María Josefa Navarro de Veramendi, who had united by their marriage the chief families of Spanish Texas and were the parents of lovely Ursula. Don Juan Martín was about to become vice-governor of Texas. Bowie looked towards Ursula, looked over the land situation, and looked for leads to Spanish silver.[11] He rode back east, but early in 1830 was in Texas again.

On February 13 he, as a single man, applied at Nacogdoches for one-fourth league of land on Galveston Island, stating that he had 109 "dependents" (interpreted as slaves). This could hardly have been a fact. He did not wait long enough to learn that the land he applied for had already been granted. He rode on to San Antonio and then, in company with Governor Veramendi and family, down into Mexico. On September 30, the Coahuila and Texas legislature at Saltillo passed an act making him a Mexican citizen, with the understanding that he would finance a textile mill to be built in Saltillo. Full citizenship gave him the right to buy up to eleven leagues of public land—at from $100 to $250 per league—a right withheld from colonists. A league contains 4428.4 acres. According to Samuel M. Williams, who was for years Austin's trusted secretary but who turned land speculator himself, Bowie returned to Texas with titles—or options on titles—for fifteen or sixteen eleven-league grants that he had induced Mexican citizens to apply for and turn over to him.[12] No researcher

[11]Baptismal records of San Fernando Church, San Antonio. Amelia Williams, without citing authority, says that in 1828 Bowie "spent several months of fruitless search" for legendary silver mines.

[12]Records in the General Land Office of Texas show Bowie's applications for

has found in the General Land Office of Texas records of transfer of these lands by Bowie. Some of the options, worthless, were in Bowie's papers when they were inventoried the year after he died.

On April 22, 1831, preliminary to marriage, Bowie signed at San Antonio a dowry contract, in the nature of a bond, drawn up as tight as Spanish legalism could make it. Herein he bound himself to pay to his wife within two years after marriage $15,000 either in money or property to that value. In guarantee of his ability to pay he made a manifest of his chief assets as follows: 60,000 arpents (roughly acres) of land in Arkansas valued at $30,000; 15,000 arpents of land in Louisiana valued at $75,000; notes payable at Natchez, Mississippi, $97,800; in the hands of Angus McNeill (who will appear later) for the purchase of textile machinery in Boston, $20,000, making a total of $222,000—besides "various chattels, lands and contracts entered into in this country which for the present cannot be valued."[13] This was a vast fortune for anybody in Texas at the time. In his manifest Bowie failed to mention that titles to land he claimed in Arkansas were forged and that notes on fraudulent sales are not collectible.

On April 25, James Bowie and María Ursula de Veramendi were married in San Fernando Church at San Antonio, where record of the marriage is preserved. She was nineteen and he was thirty-five, though he gave his age as thirty. As a married man he received a headright league, and seems to have received a certificate for a *labor* (177 acres) that was not patented until long after his death.

Following the marriage he made a note to Ursula's grandmother for $750, borrowed $1879 from his father-in-law, and took his bride on a honeymoon trip to New Orleans and Natchez.[14] In

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lands and grants to him. H. P. N. Gammel (comp.), *Laws of Texas* (10 vols.; Austin, 1898), I, 277, records Decree No. 159, October 5, 1830, whereby the Congress of the State of Coahuila and Texas granted citizenship to Bowie "on the supposition that he can establish a cotton and woolen mill, which he offers to place in the state." On speculators, including Bowie, and speculation in Texas lands, see Eugene C. Barker, "Land Speculation as a Cause of the Texas Revolution," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, X, 76-95. Amelia Williams, "A Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXXVII, 98-99, cites additional references on Bowie's land activities.

[13]Bowie's dowry contract was in the records of the Probate Court of Bexar County, at San Antonio, but is now in the land records room kept by the County Clerk. The writer used a certified translation of it made by R. S. Buguor in 1852.

[14]In examining the records of the Probate Court at San Antonio I did not find

November he and Rezin P. Bowie, with seven other Americans and two servants, set out from San Antonio for the fabled Spanish mine on the San Saba River. The expedition was halted only a few miles from the abandoned San Saba Mission by perhaps the most desperate Indian fight recorded in Texas history. Each of the Bowie brothers wrote an account of it, Rezin's much the more detailed and vivid.[15] Each implied in his narrative that he was leader.

One hundred and sixty-four Tawakoni, Waco, and Caddo warriors surrounded the Bowie men, who had camped for defense in a thicket near water. A number of the Indians had rifles. At one time grass fires they started drove the Americans to such desperation that they resolved to huddle back to back, fire their last shots and then "fight with knives as long as a single man was left alive." But they came through the fire and used knives and sticks to dig up dirt to add to rocks for fortification. After thirteen hours of siege, there were about forty dead and thirty wounded Indians, against one dead and three wounded white men.

Back in San Antonio, James Bowie was "granted permission" to raise an expedition against the Tawakoni Indians. He estimated that they had two thousand horses worth capturing. A rumor spread that the object of the expedition was to "further the views of speculators in mines." A hot advertisement against the rumor was published;[16] if the expedition was made, notice of it has eluded this searcher.

Bowie kept on riding, riding, riding, among the Indians, against

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record of these two notes, but Edward S. Sears, "The Low Down on Jim Bowie," *Texas Folklore Society Publications,* No. XIX, emphasizes them. I did find all the other court material adduced by Sears. Record of the Bowie notes could easily have been misplaced or stolen; further search might locate it. The writer is confident that Sears saw it.

[15]Rezin P. Bowie's account of the fight is in Mary Austin Holley, *Texas* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1836), 161-173; James Bowie's account is in J. C. F. Kyger, *Texas Gems* (Denison, Texas, 1885), 130-134, and in John Henry Brown, *History of Texas* (2 vols.; St. Louis, 1892), I, 170-175. James Bowie's account is in the form of an official report; the original should be in the Bexar Archives. In the first chapter of the writer's *Coronado's Children* will be found a full treatment of the Lost San Saba Mine legend, including Bowie's hunt for the silver.

[16]*Texas Gazette,* January 10, 1832. The communication against rumor-mongers is not signed but bears all the marks of having been communicated by either James or Rezin P. Bowie. Official "permission" for the expedition should be somewhere in official papers, but this newspaper announcement of it is all the writer has seen.

the Indians, down into Mexico, across the settled parts of Texas, back into Louisiana, up into Mississippi. He and Ursula lived with her parents in the Veramendi house, later called "palace." Here, as witnesses in a lawsuit over the league of land on the Navidad River testified a third of a century later,[17] Bowie was "treated as a son and furnished with money and supplies without limit," while, "without regular occupation," he hunted for "mines and mountains of gold or silver."[18] When he made trips east, he lived "like a man who had plenty of money. It was furnished by Governor Veramendi."

He was on an extended trip east when, between September 5 and 8, 1833, his wife, their two infants, her father and her mother all died from cholera, at Monclova, where the Veramendis had a summer home. Bowie was not aware of the catastrophe when he executed his will at Natchez, on October 21 following.[19] In it he designated as his sole heirs Rezin P. Bowie and their sister Martha Bowie Sterrett and her husband; his wife, he explained, had already been provided for. He stipulated that $4,000 be restored to a friend who had advanced him that amount of money to invest in lands and $4,000 more to another friend who had secured a loan to him for that amount. He must have believed or hoped—with him somewhat synonymous—that his land deals would pay off, for he stipulated that a niece and nephew be educated out of

[17]For details on how Bowie lived with the Veramendis in San Antonio see testimony in the case of M. A. Veramendi, *et al., vs.* W. J. Hutchins. The full original record of the case tried in Colorado County is in the vaults of the Supreme Court of Texas, No. M—7968. Digests are in *Cases Argued and Decided in the Supreme Court of the State of Texas,* XLVIII, 531-554, and LVI, 414-422.

[18]"Many years" before 1900, A. J. Sowell discovered, between the Dry Frio and the Frio rivers, a shaft and near it a rough circle of rocks that looked to have been made for fortification. He connected the shaft and rocks with an account that his father heard Bowie give in Gonzales about 1831. Bowie said that "while prospecting for gold and silver in the mountains west of San Antonio he sunk a shaft where there were indications of silver. He had about thirty men with him, and, anticipating attacks from Indians, they fortified their camp by piling up large rocks," about a hundred yards from a spring of water. A. J. Sowell, *Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas* (Austin, 1900), 405-408.

[19]Bowie's attested will, which was recorded in Harris County, on August 11, 1852, though it had been acknowledged at Houston in 1839, was introduced in the case of Heirs of James Bowie *vs.* H. & T. C. Railroad Co., *et al.* A full report of the case, including a certified copy of the will, as tried in Travis County, Texas (1890), before it went to a higher court, is in the vault records of the Court of Civil Appeals in the capitol at Austin. For a digest see Case No. 133, Texas Court of Civil Appeals, *Southwestern Reporter,* XXI, 304-305.

the proceeds of his estate. He was lying ill at the home of Angus McNeill in Mississippi when word of the deaths in his family reached him.[20] The deaths made, "in the ascending order," Ursula's grandmother, a Navarro, inheritor of the whole Veramendi estate. She died in 1837, leaving other Navarros to inherit and to make claims against the Bowie estate.[21]

The sentimental have it that after the death of his wife and babies Bowie ceased to joy in life and that grief drove him into being "dead drunk" at San Felipe de Austin while a provisional government for Texas was being formulated, and to prolonged drunkenness with his partisans at San Antonio, where he turned all military prisoners loose and banged the doors of the town calaboose open.[22] He had never been a total abstainer. Whatever his feelings—and there can be no doubt that he suffered grief—he was on the go as usual in 1834; now in New Orleans, now at San Antonio, now down in Mexico. He sided with the Monclova faction against the Saltillo faction in a struggle for supremacy in the state government and "did everything in his power to bring on a battle."[23] What interest he had in the textile mill at Saltillo is unknown; whatever it was, he lost it. Claiming property "placed in the hands of his late wife," Bowie gave Oliver Jones, representative in the Coahuila and Texas legislature, power-of-attorney to recover it from the Veramendi estate.[23a] There is no evidence that Oliver Jones recovered anything. This, as Americans who have done business in Mexico know, does not prove there was nothing to recover. Relations between Bowie and relatives of his dead wife seem to have remained cordial.

As the chasm between Texas and Mexico widened, Mexicans

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[20]Testimony of Angus McNeill, in Veramendi *vs.* Hutchins, Supreme Court of Texas, No. M—7968.

[21]*Ibid.*

[22]On Bowie's drunkenness at San Felipe and the Alamo see Anson Jones, *Memoranda and Official Correspondence relating to the Republic of Texas* (New York, 1859), 12-13; J. J. Baugh (adjutant of the post of Bexar) to Henry Smith (provisional governor of Texas), February 13, 1836, quoted in Williams, "A Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* XXXVI, 282-283; Rena Maverick Green (ed.), *Samuel Maverick, Texan: 1803-1870* (San Antonio, 1952), 35-36.

[23]"Notes Concerning Trip to Mexico in 1834, Etc., Spencer Jack," in Charles A. Gulick, Jr., and others (eds.), *Papers of Mirabeau B. Lamar* (6 vols.; Austin, 1920-1927), V, 358.

[23a]Bexar Archives, June 29, 1843 (MS., Archives, University of Texas Library).

increasingly looked upon the public lands of Texas as almost valueless. The Coahuila *politicos* in 1834 and 1835 granted away, illegally, millions of acres of Texas lands for a song, antagonizing responsible Texans.[24] John T. Mason, representing a New York syndicate and also representing himself, acquired titles in 1834 to 300 leagues and in 1835 to 1100 leagues—more than 6,250,000 acres. He was a pompous, polite, canting land shark,[25] but was by no means alone among the grabbing North Americans.

Early in 1835 the Coahuila and Texas government made Santiago (James) Bowie special land commissioner to issue titles on the Mason grants. With grand flourish and rubric he signatured away, mostly in the month of September, titles to eleven-league tracts of lands aggregating toward half a million acres.[26] The trades were on slim margins and he could not have collected much money.

One of the first acts of the provisional government of Texas was to nullify titles to the Mason and other grants of land acquired "under suspicious circumstances." The Texas Constitution, adopted on March 17, 1836, declared "each and every grant" made to John T. Mason "null and void from the beginning."

Bowie's speculations in Texas lands were more ineffectual than dishonest. Many men grabbed and gained more successfully. As a minor illustration, before Sam Houston rose to the responsibility of office and became a powerful bulwark for the state against—in his phrase—"the cupidity and avarice of land claimants," he applied as a "married man" for a league of land in Austin's colony and got it and then applied as an "unmarried man" for another league in Burnet's colony and got it. After Texas cut off from Mexico and had unhampered disposition of

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[24]Barker, "Land Speculation as a Cause of the Texas Revolution," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association,* X, 76-95.

[25]Kate Mason Rowland, author of "General John Thompson Mason," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association,* XI, 163-198, was a descendant and her sketch gives a better opinion of the man than his letters give.

[26]File (or Volume) 30, in the General Land Office of Texas records ten titles covering ninety-five leagues of land to various individuals signed with flourish and rubric by Santiago Bowie, at Nacogdoches, Texas, February—November, 1835. Bowie seems to have followed a custom of signing on blank pages to be filled in and dated by a clerk. He was at San Antonio or in that region on some of the dates attached to his signature. See statement by John T. Borden, Land Commissioner of Texas, in appendix to *House Journals of the Fifth Congress of Texas, 1840,* p. 356.

her vast public domain, she continued for years to give away land only a little less prodigally than franc-prosperous GI's in Paris at the end of World War II gave away their paper money.

Bowie's fidelity to the Texas colonists in their uprising against Mexico remains clear and uncompromising. If he considered that what was good for Bowie's land and military interests was good for Texas also, he knew from intimate experience that the Mexican system was not. He is constantly referred to as Colonel Bowie, but evidence that he held a military commission is lacking.[27] He did not need a commission to lead. He belonged to the "war party" before fighting actually began. He won the initial skirmish, called the battle of Concepción, at San Antonio in October, 1835. He is credited with having persuaded various Mexican citizens at San Antonio to side with the Texans. The simplicity and directness of fighting must have been a great relief to him after years of unsuccessful dealing with marked cards in the land game.

He had orders from General Sam Houston to demolish the Alamo and abandon it, but on February 2, 1836, he wrote: "Colonel Neill and myself have come to the solemn resolution that we will rather die in these ditches than give it up to the enemy." Neill left for the colonies, and then a bitter struggle began between Colonel Travis and Bowie for the supreme command. Austin, of refined integrity and unflagging devotion to the people for whom he felt responsible, but unfitted for military command, opposed Bowie as an adventurer out for personal gain. Primitive-fibered Houston valued him as a leader of "promptitude and manliness" and rated him above other subordinates in "forecast, prudence and valor." The volunteers voted for him over Travis, a "regular."

For a brief time Travis and Bowie shared the command, though Bowie became so dissentious that Travis and his command moved to the Medina River, a few miles south, and camped, temporarily. Bowie, according to an official report written by

[27]On January 12, 1836, a committee of the Provisional Council of Texas charged the provisional governor with having "directed the commanding general of the regular army of Texas to issue orders to James Bowie, ... said Bowie not being an officer of the government nor army. . . ." W. Roy Smith, "The Quarrel between Governor Smith and the Council of the Provisional Government of the Republic," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association,* V, 327.

Travis on February 13, "has been roaring drunk all the time ... interfering with private property, releasing prisoners sentenced by court martial and by the civil court and turning everything topsy turvy." The day after Santa Anna arrived, a severe illness, variously described as tuberculosis, pneumonia, typhoid fever, typhoid-pneumonia, and "a disease of a peculiar nature," put Bowie on his cot, helpless, leaving Travis in sole command.

For Bowie not to have his knife at the end would be unthinkable. David Crockett had arrived before Bowie became critically ill. In *Colonel Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas* a farrago of undetermined authorship that rings true to Crockett only in spots, is this passage:

> I found Colonel Bowie in the fortress, a man celebrated for having been in more desperate personal conflicts than any other in the country. ... He gave me a friendly welcome and appeared to be mightily pleased that I had arrived safe. While we were conversing, he had occasion to draw his famous knife to cut a strap, and I wish I may be shot if the bare sight of it wasn't enough to give a man of squeamish stomach the colic, especially before breakfast. He saw I was admiring it and said, "Colonel, you might tickle a fellow's ribs a long time with this little instrument before you'd make him laugh."

Nobody knows how Bowie died, though many have said.[28] After one hundred and eighty-odd Americans had withstood the siege of five thousand Mexicans for eleven days and nights, the final assault on Sunday morning, March 6, 1836, left not one alive to

[28]Some of the many conflicting statements on Bowie's death are to be found in: Charles Merritt Barnes, *Combats and Conquests of Immortal Heroes* (San Antonio, 1910), 33-34; John Henry Brown, *The Encyclopedia of the New West,* 433-438; Maurice Elfer, a journalese shyster, *Madame Candelaria, Unsung Heroine of the Alamo* (Houston, 1933), 16-18; Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker (eds.), *The Writings of Sam Houston* (8 vols.; Austin, 1938-1943), I, 363, IV, 18; Rena Maverick Green (ed.), *Samuel Maverick, Texan: 1803-1870* (San Antonio, 1952), 55, 56; John S. Moore ("J.S.M."). in Galveston *News,* September 8, 1875; R. M. Potter, *The Fall of the Alamo* (pamphlet reprint from *Magazine of American History,* January, 1878), 13, 20n; Milledge L. Bonham, Jr., "James Butler Bonham: A Consistent Rebel," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* XXXV, 134; Williams, "A Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* XXXVII, 36, 39, 43; A. J. Sowell, *Rangers and Pioneers of Texas* (San Antonio, 1884), 141, 145-149; Dr. John Sutherland, *The Fall of the Alamo* (San Antonio, 1936), 12-13, 40; Frank Triplett, *Conquering the Wilderness* (New York, 1883), 724; two unidentified newspaper clippings in a scrapbook given the writer by Mrs. Georgia Stenger in 1928. One clipping gives credit to the Washington *Post* and the other to the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* of 1868.

report a single detail. They had killed and wounded, according to credible reports, up to fifteen hundred Mexicans. A few women, cut off by walls from the climactic carnage, were left alive to tell varying anecdotes, especially in their dotage. It would have been in character for the dying Bowie to refuse, as he is said to have refused, the ministrations of women lest they contract his disease. He, like Travis, had a slave "boy," who presumably came out of the Alamo alive. Joe, who belonged to Travis, was officially interviewed, but not one word has come down from Bowie's Sam.

Soon after the Alamo fell, the alcalde of San Antonio, who had remained neutral, entered the fortress; he said that Bowie was found "dead in his bed" in a side-room. Walter Worthington Bowie, in his history of the Bowie family, says that he died delirious on his cot "about three o'clock in the morning," only a short time before the pre-dawn attack. Sam Houston believed that he was murdered in bed. In 1838 Dr. John Sutherland saw on a wall, so he said, near the spot where Bowie's cot had been, marks made by the splattering of his brains. Dr. Sutherland had it from Travis' slave boy and Mrs. Dickinson both that several balls went through Bowie's head while he lay "unable to lift it from his pillow." A Mexican officer wrote that he died "like a woman almost hidden under a mattress." A fifer in Santa Anna's band told W. P. Zuber, according to Zuber, that while soldiers were gathering the bodies of the slain for burning, four brought Bowie, still alive, on his cot to their captain, who reviled him as a traitor to his country and his dead wife. Bowie retorted, "in excellent Castilian," with such acidity that the captain ordered four soldiers to spreadeagle him and a fifth to cut out his tongue. Then he had him cast alive on the raging fire. A niece and adopted daughter of the Veramendis who had taken refuge in the Alamo told Mrs. Samuel Maverick only two years after its fall that she saw Mexican soldiers enter Bowie's room, to which she and other women had fled, bayonet him and then carry him, still breathing, upon their bayonets into the plaza. Another report is that Bowie, unable to rise and fight, shot himself.

It is generally believed that he died with Bowie knife in hand, still on the cot but sitting up, back braced against the wall at his head, victims of his valor and prowess strewn around him. But it

used to be claimed that at the last minute he rallied enough to stand up and meet with demoniacal fury the Mexicans coming into his room. One specifier has it that he killed two with his pistols and managed to knife into the vitals of three more before he was overwhelmed. Imagination and patriotic sympathy rebel at the idea of Bowie's dying except in the climax of hand-to-hand combat.

The year after Texas became a republic and some order in civil affairs was resumed, proceedings in the Bexar County probate court, at San Antonio, were initiated to liquidate the estate of James Bowie. Eugenio Navarro was appointed administrator, no doubt at his own instance, for as representative and joint inheritor of the Veramendi estate, he proposed collecting from the Bowie estate. On October 28, 1837, he submitted an itemized inventory of Bowie's personal effects, which, presumably, had remained in the Veramendi house. The list includes a dress coat of black cloth, "partly motheaten," another black coat "entirely moth-eaten," various other pieces of clothing, and several books, among them a Latin-Spanish dictionary, a Spanish-English grammar, an arithmetic, a work on machinery, and *The Revelation of Nature*. An axe, three saws, a machete, and a few other itemized tools were later sold at public outcry for $47.12½. The main listing in the inventory is of lease contracts on two eleven-league grants of land and power of attorney for disposing of concessions granted to several named Mexicans for a total of fifty-five leagues of land. So far as money value went, these instruments might have been lumped in with a "bundle of letters," two cases of "worthless papers" and "other papers not important enough to be inventoried." Eugenio Navarro stated that a coach in Monclova belonging to Señor James Bowie had been sold for $800 and the money credited to his account with the Veramendi business firm. Navarro, furthermore, preferred a note for $750 made by Bowie to Josefa Ruiz Navarro (Ursula's grandmother).

In June, 1838, Juan N. Seguin was empowered by Rezin P. Bowie to administer the Bowie estate, but Seguin resigned two months later. Joseph L. Hood, the next administrator, asserted that Bowie had left "debts to a considerable amount." One Thomas Gay asked the court to recognize his claim for $1000 that

Bowie owed him. In 1839 the moth-eaten coats were inventoried again. In 1840, F. L. Paschal, sheriff of Bexar County, became administrator. He had somehow got hold of a certificate for 640 acres of land donated by the Republic of Texas to the heirs of James Bowie. It was appraised at $50, and then sold at public outcry for $51. The court ordered the proceeds to be paid to the Veramendi estate for credit on Bowie's dowry bond, which was on file.[29]

The San Antonio probate court perhaps knew nothing of Bowie's will; certainly it ignored official proceedings at Houston and elsewhere to the east on the Bowie estate. On November 11, 1836, Major William Oldham, styled "Administrator," petitioned the Texas Congress to pay the Bowie estate for expenditures made by Bowie in a military capacity. Early in 1837 Oldham was advertising for claims against the estate and for payments due it. There must have been dissatisfaction with his administration. In January, 1839, the Texas Congress passed an act giving Reason [*sic*] P. Bowie and Alexander B. Sterritt (the executors named by James Bowie in his will) power to probate Bowie's will in Harris County, letters of executorship to be transferred to San Antonio "when the settled state of the country will permit the transaction of business in the usual way." At the same time, the Bowie petition of November 11, 1836, was withdrawn. Also, on January 29, 1839, Felix Huston acknowledged Bowie's will before a justice in Houston and on March 7 following, Edwin Morehouse added his acknowledgment of it. So far as can be ascertained by incomplete records, this will was not actually recorded until August 11, 1852, "at 9 o'clock A.M."[30] Parish records in Louisiana might

[29]Records of the Bexar County Probate Court, San Antonio. See also Edward S. Sears, "The Low Down on Jim Bowie," *Texas Folklore Society Publications,* No. XIX.

[30]The *Telegraph and Texas Register,* of Houston, regularly published official records of the proceedings of the Texas Congress. On November 23, 1836, it summarized the Oldham petition. On March 28, 1837, it ran Oldham's advertisement, repeated in the next two issues. On February 27, 1839, in a record of the proceedings of Congress, it published the fact that the 1836 petition had been withdrawn, the identical item being in the *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas,* January 24, 1839, p. 408. The act of January 26, 1839, making Rezin P. Bowie and Alexander Sterritt executors of Bowie's will is recorded in Gammel's *Laws of Texas,* II, 123. The writer is indebted to Andrew Forest Muir of Houston for the fact that Bowie's will is recorded in the Deed Records of Harris County, Q, 147-149. See also Note 19, *ante.*

reveal something of Bowie's purported property; the Texas records indicate that his heirs received nothing beyond the lands granted his estate for services in war.

What relatives do over a dead man's body is not necessarily a judgment on him, but may be pertinent. In donating lands to veterans of the Revolution and their heirs, the Republic of Texas in 1840 and the state of Texas in 1860 donated land certificates for a total of 4657 acres to the heirs of James Bowie. The patents were scattered over several counties. In 1890 the descendants of Rezin P. Bowie and of Martha Bowie Sterrett and her husband, the legatees designated in James Bowie's will, sued the Houston and Texas Central Railroad Company for trying to survey out of existence 2097 acres of land patented in Hardeman County to the heirs of James Bowie.

At this juncture Martha Bowie Burns showed up. Formerly of Mississippi she currently lived in Dallas; she was the daughter of John J. Bowie, the star in the Arkansas land frauds. She and eight kinsmen not only joined in the suit against the railroad company but claimed to be joint heirs of James Bowie. A district judge ruled that the will had not been "properly probated." Then in a judgment confirmed by the Court of Civil Appeals, Martha Bowie Burns, *et al.,* were made joint owners of the land, and the railroad company was ousted. A total of sixteen Bowie heirs appeared in this case.[31]

Only ten years later, in 1900, Martha Bowie Burns showed up alone, except for the company of a jackleg lawyer, claiming to be the sole survivor of all James Bowie's brothers and sisters and to be the rightful heir to the section of Bowie land that had in 1840 been sold by order of the San Antonio probate court. It had been patented in La Salle County in 1860 and had been resold several times. The 1900 owner considered it cheaper to pay Martha Bowie Burns—and the attorney—$160 to quiet his title than to fight the case through court.[32] The owner of a section of land away down in the brush of La Salle County would not know of the existence

[31]Heirs of James Bowie *vs.* H. & T. C. Railroad Co., Case No. 133, Texas Court of Civil Appeals, *Southwestern Reporter,* XXI, 304-305.

[32]The complete history of the La Salle County section of Bowie land (Abstract No. 80) was prepared for the writer by Richard Dobie, attorney at Cotulla, Texas. A copy of this history has been placed in the Archives of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center at the University of Texas.

of all the other Bowie descendants. "Even unto the third and fourth generation."

The law suit throwing light on Bowie himself was over the headright league of land on the Navidad River. This suit, styled M. A. Veramendi, *et al., vs.* W. J. Hutchins, *et al.,* was instituted in Colorado County in 1869, went to the Supreme Court of Texas in 1878, was remanded and came again to the Supreme Court in 1882.[33]

Bowie had sold two hundred acres off the league while his wife was alive. On October 15, 1835, according to a belatedly recorded deed and bond, he sold the remainder of the league to William Richardson for $5,000. In the long drawn-out suit over the Bowie league, the Veramendi estate claimed that the land was community property and that an undivided half of it still belonged to the heirs of Ursula de Veramendi Bowie. The land, meanwhile, had been resold to various individuals, including W. J. Hutchins. The deed from Bowie to Richardson was attacked as fraudulent. Why should anybody pay $5,000 for a tract of land hardly worth $500 at the time of the alleged sale?

The chief witness put up by the Veramendi estate was Angus McNeill—the man named by Bowie in his dowry contract as holding $20,000 for investment in textile machinery. McNeill had served in the Texas legislature; his integrity had been attacked;[34] his memory seemed good. He testified that he became acquainted with Bowie in Mississippi in 1826 and knew him intimately from that time till the fall of 1835, when he came to Texas with him, accompanied by Dr. William Richardson. According to McNeill, Dr. Richardson had twice attended Bowie during dangerous attacks of illness, once in McNeill's own house. On the trip to Texas, Dr. Richardson carried $80,000 that a company of men had raised to invest in lands. This Dr. William Richardson, it may be added. served as surgeon in the Texas army.

Bowie, Angus McNeill testified, "was a splendid man of the

[33]Veramendi *vs.* Hutchins, Supreme Court of Texas, No. M—7968. See note 17.

[34]"Notice: All persons are hereby warned from purchasing a note drawn by the undersigned, in favor of Angus McNeil, on the 12th December '37, for the sum of $12,000 Government audited money, or $7000 in cash, payable on the 1st of March following, as I am determined not to pay the same in consequence of no value having been received. H. R. Allen, March 27 [1839]." *Telegraph and Texas Register,* April 17, 1839.

most fascinating manners, exceedingly lavish in the expenditure of money. He had an extraordinary capacity for getting money from his friends. Dr. Richardson was very much under his influence, as were most of his other friends." Richardson, a man of ample means, was liberal and generous. Bowie could easily have obtained $5,000 from him and then have conveyed the league of land to him as all he had to pay. Be all this as it may, the courts held that half of the league still belonged to Ursula's heirs.

James Bowie was an adventurer of the first order, but he was more. For one thing, he never indulged in cant. No man could say of him as Lord Birkenhead said of a piety-pretending politician: "I am not especially offended when my opponent cheats at cards, but I find it nauseating when, having cheated and won, he ascribes his success to intervention of the Most High." Bowie was as fearless as nature makes men, and always his deeds of bravery were coupled with the "art of daring." Take his last authenticated gesture. He was on a cot, sick unto death, the evening Travis drew with the point of his sword that immortal line across Alamo earth and invited all who would stay and die with him to step over.[35] "Boys," Bowie requested, "will some of you kindly lift my cot across?"

Bowie was a legend—a gaudy legend of gaudy violence—before he died. No *deus ex machina* in Greek tragedy ever extricated a character from peril more neatly than the Alamo extricated Bowie from defeat in life and from tarnish on reputation. For the popular mind, particularly of posterity, the Alamo blotted out all but the heroic and noble from the records.

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[35]Orthodox historians have discounted the story of Travis' drawing the line, based on a relation by Rose to Zuber. It is vindicated by R. B. Blake, "Rose and His Story of the Alamo," *Texas Folklore Society Publications,* No. XV, 1939, pp. 9-41.