· *Three* ·

Looking for Davy

The memoir of Lieutenant Colonel José Enrique de la Peña is a rich and revealing document, written by a junior officer who witnessed first-hand both the decisions made by his superiors and the effects of those decisions on ordinary soldiers. De la Peña writes movingly of the hardships suffered by the Mexican army, in the costly "victory" at the Alamo as well as in the ignominious retreat following Santa Anna's surprising defeat at San Jacinto. Infused with both patriotism and a passionate criticism of the military's high command, the "de la Peña diary" offers a fascinating perspective on the inner dynamics of the Mexican side of the Texas Revolution.

Most American commentators on de la Peña, however, focused their attention on a single paragraph in Carmen Perry's 1975 English translation. Here is the passage that caused all the ruckus:

> Some seven men had survived the general carnage [of the Battle of the Alamo] and, under the protection of General Castrillón, they were brought before Santa Anna. 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 noticed a degree of resignation and nobility that did him honor. He was the naturalist David Crockett, well known in North America for his unusual adventures, who had undertaken to explore the country and who, finding himself in Béjar at the very moment of surprise, had taken refuge in the Alamo, fearing that his status as a foreigner might not be respected. Santa Anna answered Castrillón's intervention in Crockett's behalf with a gesture of indignation and, addressing himself to the sappers, the troops closest to him, ordered his execution. The commanders and officers were outraged at this action and did not support the order, hoping that once the fury of the moment had blown over these men would be spared; but several officers who were around the president and who, perhaps, had not been present during the moment of danger, became noteworthy by an infamous deed, surpassing the soldiers in cruelty. They thrust themselves forward, in order to flatter their commander, and with swords in hand, fell upon these unfortunate, defenseless men just as a tiger leaps upon his prey. Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers. It was rumored that General Sesma was one of them; I will not bear witness to this, for though present, I turned away horrified in order not to witness such a barbarous scene.

There were dozens of armchair zealots who weighed in against de la Peña's version of history by arguing that Davy Crockett would never have allowed himself to be captured alive. Some of the hate mail received by Perry and by Dan Kilgore (who published *How Did Davy Die?* in 1978) was especially vivid. A writer from West Anniston, Alabama, who wanted Kilgore's mouth washed out with soap (and who obviously felt a strong personal affinity for Crockett), concluded a long, rambling letter with the following declaration:

> If a diagnosis is in your opinionated anatomy you may write in your memo's [*sic*] several facts concerning white-Southern men, age 17 on: Countenance is excellent, keen eyesight, healthy, and indeed will battle it out with you fists, knives, guns or will climb up on the roof of a Texas-based church [and] fight in front of God, women & everybody. . . . [B]efore I would have allowed a pompous, filthy-mouthed dog-of-a-man such as "General" Santa Ana to capture me I'd shoot myself two to three times, vitally.

Other critics, whose views of the past were more firmly grounded in the documentary record, pointed to an apparent absurdity produced by the de la Peña narrative. One of the best-known Texan eyewitness accounts of the immediate aftermath of the Alamo battle is that of a Tejano, Francisco Antonio Ruiz, the *alcalde* (or mayor) of San Antonio at the time. On the morning of March 6, Ruiz was summoned to the Alamo by Santa Anna.* The general wanted someone familiar with the defenders to accompany him on a ghastly tour through battle site, "as he was desirous to have [the bodies of] Col. Travis, Bowie, and Crockett shown to him." Those who have questioned the de la Peña diary's authenticity have argued that Santa Anna would hardly have asked for Crockett's body to be identified if only moments before he had ordered this famous man to be killed as he stood before him. That Santa Anna knew whose death he was

*Santa Anna was probably unaware that Ruiz's father, José Francisco Ruiz, had four days earlier (along with his nephew José Antonio Navarro) signed the Texas Declaration of Independence. These two representatives from Béxar to the Convention at Washington-on-the-Brazos were the only native Texans among the fifty-nine men who affixed their names to that document. (Lorenzo de Zavala, who became the Texas Republic's vice president after signing the declaration, was a native of Yucatán.)

dictating is indeed the impression given by Carmen Perry's translation of the critical moment: "Santa Anna answered Castrillón's intervention in Crockett's behalf with a gesture of indignation and, addressing himself to the sappers, the troops closest to him, ordered his execution."

But this is not what de la Peña wrote. The exact words in his manuscript are: "*Santa Anna contestó a la intervención de Castrillón con un gesto de indignación y dirigiéndose en seguida a los zapadores, que era la tropa que tenía más cerca, mandó que los fusilaran.*" Perry added a reference to Crockett not present in the original sentence, and also altered the last phrase from "ordered that they shoot them"—meaning that the troops should shoot Castrillón's prisoners—to say instead that Santa Anna "ordered his [i.e., Crockett's] execution."

This insertion of Crockett at the center of both Castrillón's intervention and Santa Anna's execution order led most of Perry's readers to assume falsely that the Mexican president knew the identity of the illustrious prisoner he had condemned—a conclusion not supported by the Spanish text. Translators must always make difficult decisions, and perhaps Perry was trying to be helpful to her readers by clarifying Crockett's fate amid the profusion of Spanish pronouns. But the unintended result was to alter the scene in a way that brought it into apparent contradiction with the memoir of *alcalde* Ruiz. That contradiction disappears when de la Peña's original version is consulted.

A remarkable number of critics have challenged the authenticity of the de la Peña manuscripts while ignoring the actual text of the documents in question. In the case of this crucial passage describing Santa Anna's execution order, the discrepancy be-

tween text and translation could be observed without the necessity of a trip to San Antonio to examine the manuscripts in person, or even the need to seek out the rare Mexico City edition of *La Rebelión de Texas*. The original "Davy Crockett page" of the memoir was one of several facsimiles that illustrated the 1975 Texas A&M edition of *With Santa Anna in Texas* and was thus readily available to anyone who was willing and able to decipher the Spanish script.

Other discrepancies were not so easily resolved. Shortly after I submitted my critique of *Defense of a Legend* for publication, Bill Groneman and I compared notes in a lengthy telephone conversation. I told Bill of my discovery at Yale of the 1839 de la Peña pamphlet written from prison, which had to my satisfaction disproved his charge that the diary contained a fatal anachronism. I offered him the cold comfort of the centuries-old methodological wisdom of Francis Bacon: "Truth arises more readily from error than from confusion." Groneman had performed a great service, I told him, by advancing a flawed hypothesis that pointed the way to the truth, after so many other historians had merely spread their own confusion by repeating unsubstantiated claims about the diary.

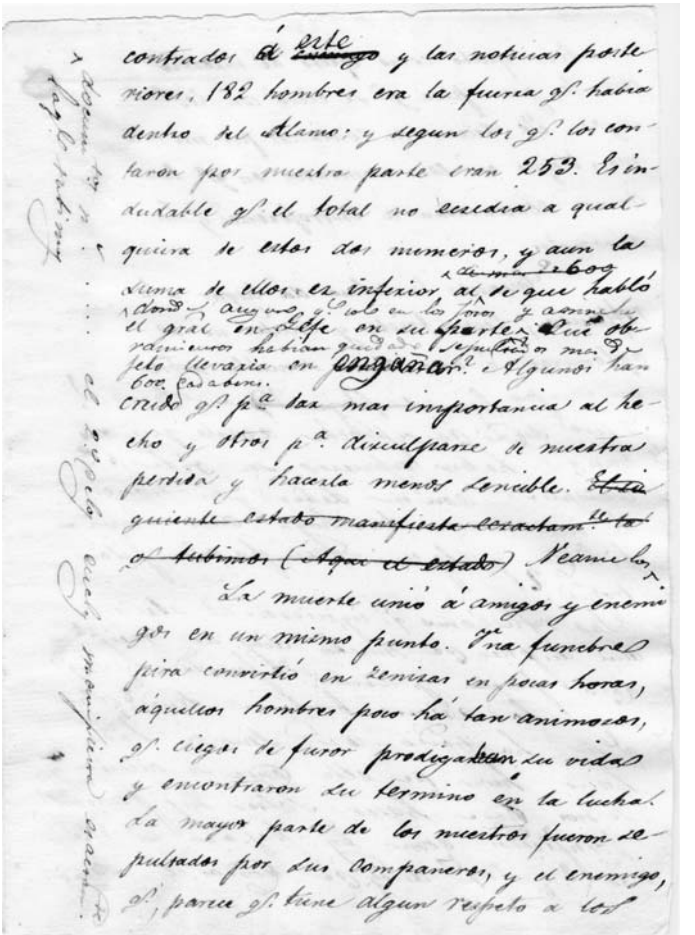
Bill returned the favor by letting me know that an even more serious anachronism had been found in the meantime, a possible "smoking gun" that might well prove his accusation of forgery. It had been discovered by Groneman's friend and fellow "doubting" historian, Thomas Ricks Lindley, a former military policeman living in Austin who has established a reputation as one of the most assiduous researchers into the documentary records of the Texas Revolution.

Tom Lindley recognized a paragraph within a footnote in the published de la Peña diaries (both the English and Spanish editions) that appeared to have been lifted *in toto* from the published memoirs of General Vicente Filisola—writings that appeared almost a decade after de la Peña's presumed death in the early 1840s. At first I tried to console myself with my own corollary to the dictum of Francis Bacon: "If it's the truth you're after, it's almost as much fun to be proven wrong as it is to be proven right." Almost, but not quite. Unready to throw in the towel, I seized upon an unexpected opportunity to return to San Antonio to see whether the manuscripts themselves were compromised by such a telltale flaw.

The "Filisola footnote" consisted of an accounting of the Mexican and Texan losses at the Alamo that contrasted the figures reported by General Santa Anna (600 Texans killed compared to only 70 Mexicans) with an official report compiled by General Juan de Andrade during the occupation of San Antonio. Andrade listed 60 Mexican officers and men killed, and Filisola added that just over 200 Texans had died.* (De la Peña himself claimed to have counted 253 Texan bodies.)

Both Perry and Mexican editor Jesús Sánchez Garza seemed to indicate that de la Peña himself was the author of the footnote containing language identical to Filisola's, but the manuscript showed otherwise. About a third of the way into his memoir, as he discussed the casualties suffered by both armies at the

*Perry's translation also inadvertently transposed some figures from Andrade's report, which had listed 8 Mexican officers dead and 18 wounded along with 52 Mexican soldiers dead and 233 wounded. The published English translation incorrectly reported (on page 54) these last figures as 252 dead and 33 wounded.



The "Filisola footnote" in embryo. From the de la Peña Papers, Packet II, quarto 36, page 3. (Courtesy of The Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.)

Alamo, de la Peña wrote this sentence: "*El siguiente estado manifiesta exactam.te la [pérdida] q.e tubimos (Aqui el estado).*" Or in English: "The following report shows exactly that [i.e., the loss] which we had (Here the report)." But this sentence has been scratched out in the manuscript, and the following note inserted in its place and along the side of the page: "*Veanse los documentos n . . . el 2.o de los cuales manifiesta exactam.te la [pérdida] q.e tubimos.*" The English translation is: "See the documents, n . . . the second of which shows exactly that [i.e., the loss] which we had." (This manuscript sheet is shown on p. 109.)

What do these textual changes show? Most plausibly, that the imprisoned de la Peña, not having the documents in question before him (or even being able to recall their exact names), was writing a note to himself to the effect that this is where the documents outlining the Mexican losses were to be placed in the published manuscript. At precisely this point in the text as published over a century later, in good faith if not with the best professional editorial technique, Sánchez Garza (followed closely by Perry) inserted into de la Peña's text a footnote referring to two appended documents: the 1836 reports from Generals Santa Anna and Andrade. And for good measure, though perhaps not with good judgment, Sánchez Garza (again followed by Perry) also threw into the footnote a paragraph on Texan casualties from the same part of Filisola's 1849 *Memorias para la Historia de la Guerra de Tejas* that contained Andrade's report. De la Peña's original page contains neither plagiarism nor anachronism.

I examined this page of the manuscript with considerable relief in October of 1994, just as my critical review of Bill Groneman's book was being published under the title "The Little Book

That Wasn't There: The Myth and Mystery of the de la Peña Diary." (The "Little Book" in the title was the imaginary 1836 edition of the diary.)

In the years that have followed, it has sometimes seemed as if Tom Lindley, Bill Groneman, and I have been emulating the endless mutual recriminations hurled at one another by the leaders of the Mexican army in the aftermath of San Jacinto. Bill and I published five dueling essays in the academic journal *Military History of the West* in 1995 and 1996, and in the same years Tom and I debated the accuracy and authenticity of the de la Peña manuscripts through six long parry-and-thrust articles in *The Alamo Journal.*

In many cases, the attacks on de la Peña have been based on both the differences and similarities that have emerged between his memoir and those of the other Mexican officers, most notably Filisola, who offered their own post-war explanations of who lost Texas and why. In the midst of these modern debates, I have sometimes felt that de la Peña has been caught in a kind of *Catch-22* dilemma: if his narrative disagrees with another source, it falls under suspicion because its "facts" are wrong; if his narrative agrees too closely with another writer, the charge is plagiarism against the alleged "forger." In every case so far, however, each supposed "smoking gun" has itself gone up in smoke when the original sources are examined in detail.

Material evidence can also be brought to bear on de la Peña's reliability. In 1996 I received a call from an intense pediatrician in Wharton, Texas. Dr. Gregg Dimmick was the leader of a team of amateur archaeologists that also included a cattle rancher, a railroad worker, and an airplane mechanic. They were using

metal detectors to dig up artifacts left behind when the Mexicans retreated across the mud flats of Wharton County, and they had run into a problem with de la Peña, whose description of the retreat they were trying to square with the facts on (or under) the ground.

As de la Peña described the efforts of the Mexican army to extract itself from the *Mar de Lodo* (the "sea of mud") he noted that the retreat turned back upon itself when the Mexicans reached a swollen river (today known as West Bernard Creek) that could not be crossed. Narrating the army's march back toward the east as it retraced its own muddy footsteps, de la Peña (as translated by Perry) wrote: "Passing by the place where we had camped on the 26th [of April], we made a 45 degree turn to the left and continued our march, crossing an immense lagoon, for the whole march has been through a swamp . . . "

The problem, said Dimmick, was that the trail of Mexican artifacts his team was extracting from the muck did not follow this forty-five-degree turn to the northeast. With commendable caution, the doctor did not immediately conclude that the de la Peña diary was a fraud, but instead called me to ask whether this passage accurately reflected the Spanish original. It did not. A quick check showed what de la Peña had written: "*dimos un cuarto de conberción por la izquierda*" ("we made a quarter turn to the left"). Not a forty-five-degree turn to the northeast, but a ninety-degree turn to the north. Perry's slip (in either geometry or translation) had sent the amateur archaeologists off on the wrong track. However, when they moved north, toward the ultimately higher ground that the Mexican officers had been seeking in order to head west again toward

the Colorado River, Dimmick's team found the artifacts they were looking for.

Today the pediatrician and his colleagues are the co-authors of two technical articles on the Mexican retreat published by the Houston Archaeological Society, and they have amassed through their mucky labors the largest known collection of Mexican military artifacts from the Texas Revolution. The team and their newfound prizes were the subject of a History Channel feature in March 2001. Among the howitzer shells, epaulets, cannon balls, canister shot, and trigger guards that they have unearthed (many of which are now on loan for display at the Alamo), are a few nails found together in parallel arrangement. The only known source who mentions that the Mexican army, stuck in the mud and desperately trying to lighten their wagon loads, were throwing away not only the military items but also "*clavazón*" (sets of square nails cast in parallel rows) is de la Peña.

Gregg Dimmick has become a genuine authority on the Mexican retreat across central Texas (teaching himself to read Spanish in the process), and his recently completed scholarly analysis of the documentary and archaeological record of the crossing of the *Mar de Lodo* has been accepted for publication by the Texas State Historical Association. It is noteworthy that while comparing the many written accounts of the retreat to the archaeological evidence of the Mexicans' campsites and marching routes, he has found de la Peña's narrative to be the most accurate of the lot.

This convergence of archaeological and documentary evidence is what the nineteenth-century philosopher of science William Whewell called a "consilience of induction," or "coin-

cidences of results drawn from distant parts of [a] subject." It is the means, quite simply put, by which we determine what it is that we believe to be true. When various lines of inquiry—forensic, archaeological, linguistic, documentary—converge toward the same conclusion, their cumulative power of persuasion is immense. When, on the other hand, different methodological approaches to a question yield opposing results, it is time to develop a new hypothesis that will better satisfy all of the available evidence.

Not all other lines of inquiry into the de la Peña narrative are as unambiguously supportive as Dimmick's archaeology. Critics such as Bill Groneman and Tom Lindley have examined the manuscripts and noted several problems with the key passage describing the death of Crockett.

Remember, first, that there are two parts to de la Peña's manuscripts: the "clean copy" of the 1836 diary and a longer second narrative, apparently composed in the three or four years following. As it happens, there is no mention whatsoever of the Alamo executions in the first de la Peña document (the 1836 diary). Only in the longer, second narrative does the Crockett story appear, and there it is found on a single two-sided page inserted between the more usual "quartos" (the four-sided folded sheets of paper favored by the creators of the manuscript). Significantly, one must say "creators" because, as the critics have pointed out, the handwriting in the de la Peña manuscript clearly changes from time to time within the second "memoir" portion of the papers, where at least four different hands can be distinguished. The handwriting changes, moreover, just as the Crockett tale begins.

It should be noted that in 2002 Tom Lindley made public his revised opinion that the "diary" portion of the de la Peña papers is authentic. He based his conclusion on a comparison of the manuscript with samples of José Enrique de la Peña's handwriting found in Mexican military and judicial records. But because of the aggregation of different handwritings in the longer memoir (as well as other problems with its contents), Lindley continues to denounce the second section of the manuscripts as a fake.

The multiple handwritings in the de la Peña papers, which are noticeable even in the few pages of the original that were reproduced in Carmen Perry's published translation, raise interesting and at first baffling questions. Would a skillful forger use four or more different handwriting styles in crafting a hoax as elaborate as this is alleged to be? How could de la Peña himself, working alone, have produced such a motley document?

To answer this conundrum, we must understand de la Peña's personal circumstances as he worked on his memoir between 1837 and 1839. One of the letters that he sent during this period is from Guadalajara, dated June 11, 1838. Today the letter may be found at the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, among the papers of the prominent Mexican politician Don Valentín Gomez Farías. The letter is in a handwriting markedly different from those visible in the diary or narrative manuscripts. Could this be proof that the "real" de la Peña had nothing at all to do with these manuscripts? Not at all: the letter states that de la Peña is so physically ill in prison that he cannot write for himself. He has been forced to use an amanuensis, and neither the body of the letter nor the signature is from his own hand.

De la Peña laments his ill health repeatedly during the years of his imprisonment—both in his published letters to the newspaper *El Cosmopolita* in Mexico City and in his pamphlet *Una Víctima del Despotismo*. Thus it is hardly surprising that he would need help in producing a narrative of over four hundred handwritten pages. Neither the change in handwriting nor the inserted sheet of paper markedly differentiates the Crockett passage from other parts of the memoir. In fact, one of the most convincing aspects of the de la Peña papers is the evidence that the narrative is very much an arrested "work-in-progress" that adverse circumstances never permitted the author to finish.

It was only in 1995, during my second summer visit to Special Collections at the University of Texas at San Antonio, that I realized just how "unfinished" the narrative was. While comparing entries for specific dates in the "clean copy" of the diary and the larger memoir, I discovered that a week of entries for June 12 through June 18 was missing from the memoir. These entries in the diary covered de la Peña's difficult journey with the Mexican army across the near-deserted territory between the Nueces and the Río Grande. These anguished commentaries detailed the hardships endured by the starving troops during their final week of retreat. The entries were overlooked by Perry and Sánchez Garza alike, who both apparently failed to realize that the "short" version of the narrative actually contained more daily entries than the longer one.

On another return trip to San Antonio the following summer, I found a little booklet of footnote texts that matched the mysterious numerals scattered by de la Peña throughout the body of his shorter "copied" diary. Each numbered note had been care-

fully crossed out except for the last two—and these matched the two numerals found in the final "missing week" of daily entries—the portion of the diary that de la Peña never had the chance to rewrite. All but these two entries in the notebook had been incorporated into the observations recorded in his longer, edited narrative. The booklet of crossed-out notes thus forms a kind of organic link between the two versions of the narrative, strongly suggesting that the "memoir" is every bit as authentic as the "diary" that Tom Lindley now accepts as genuine.

Reading through the remaining scraps of de la Peña's determined efforts to tell his story, I found several more booklets, some crudely made in the prison cell with torn and folded paper. One held the "*Modelo de la conclucion*" (described in the previous chapter) that editor Jesús Sánchez Garza employed to bring closure to de la Peña's "unfinished" narrative. Another booklet bore the title "Important additions to the diary for organizing the editing of it." On its first page, in a hasty scrawl to himself, de la Peña had written: " . . . *es importante huir de . . . [parcialidad] si quiere uno ser creido. Mucho cuid.º para que es muy dificil ser historiador.*" The handwriting was so poor—spread out in a nearly flat horizontal line across the page—that it took me several minutes to tease out the last word, which the writer had hyphenated from one line to another. I felt goose bumps on my arm when I realized what he was saying: " . . . it is important to avoid partiality if one wants to be believed. Be very careful because it is very difficult to be a historian."

I felt at this instant a flash of recognition as well as admiration—recognition of a fellow historian working to preserve and convey the truth as best he could determine it, and doing so while

he was ill, imprisoned, and without the means to publish the history that he believed every Mexican should read. Because of moments like these, when I could sense the man behind the words on the page, it is difficult for me to believe that either an obsessive or a merely mercenary forger had created these rich and complex manuscripts. These papers are imbued with the messiness of real life, reflecting de la Peña's fierce struggle to complete his *Reseña y Diario*. And yet, ironically, it is this authentic strength of the papers that is also their greatest weakness. De la Peña depended upon others, not only to assist him with the physical act of writing but also to provide him with the additional material that helped to quadruple the size of his work. These additions can detract from both the immediacy and the integrity of his own eyewitness narrative.

This problem is evident, for instance, in de la Peña's descriptions of the Alamo's defenders, both those who died in combat and those who were executed. Colonel William Barret Travis, he relates, was a handsome blond who bravely traded shots with Mexican soldiers in the open plaza of the Alamo after the walls had been scaled—a scenario very much at odds with other accounts of both the way Travis appeared and the way he died. There is good evidence that the Alamo's commander was killed on the north wall of the fortress in the first minutes of the assault, with a single bullet to his forehead.

De la Peña would not have been able to recognize either Travis or Crockett on sight, and he gives no indication in his manuscript of who identified these men for him or who informed him of Crockett's alleged "alibi"—the claim that he was an innocent

visitor who had taken refuge in the Alamo "at the very moment of surprise . . . fearing that his status as a foreigner might not be respected." This is certainly unlike the Crockett described by William Barret Travis, who declared in a letter to Sam Houston written from the besieged Alamo on February 25 that "the Hon[orable] David Crockett was seen at all points, animating the men to do their duty."

De la Peña's description of Crockett's last moments has been taken by some writers (most notably Jeff Long in his iconoclastic 1990 book, *Duel of Eagles*) as proof that Crockett "quit," and then "lied" and "dodged" in his efforts to save himself. This may not seem to be in character for a man who had stood up to the president of the United States: Crockett had famously clashed with Andrew Jackson over the latter's unfair treatment of the Indians, and bolted the Democratic Party for the Whig opposition. Yet it is not impossible that David Crockett was enough of a champion storyteller (and "sly politician") to attempt to talk his way out of a serious jam.

De la Peña's description of Crockett's "alibi" has nevertheless given doubters their best argument for plagiarism and fraud. The only other account suggesting that Crockett pled for his life using such an alibi was supposedly told to George Patrick, a veteran of Sam Houston's army. Following the Battle of San Jacinto, Patrick had asked the captured Mexican General Martín Perfecto de Cos how Crockett died. "When we thought that all the defenders were slain," reported Cos, he had found a well-dressed man locked in one of the rooms of the barracks. When Cos asked who he was, the man is said to have replied:

> I am David Crockett, a citizen of the State of Tennessee and representative of a district of that State in the United States Congress. I have come to Texas on a visit of exploration; purposing, if permitted, to become a loyal citizen of the Republic of Mexico. I extended my visit to San Antonio, and called in the Alamo to become acquainted with the officers, and learn of them what I could of the condition of affairs. Soon after my arrival, the fort was invested by government troops, whereby I have been prevented from leaving it. And here I am yet, a noncombatant and foreigner, having taken no part in the fighting.

Cos said that he took the man to Santa Anna, repeated the man's story, and requested his release. Cos continued:

> Santa Anna heard me through, but impatiently. Then he replied sharply, "You know your orders"; turned his back upon us and walked away. But, as he turned, Crockett drew from his bosom a dagger, with which he smote at him with a thrust, which if not arrested, would surely have killed him; but was met by a bayonet-thrust by the hand of a soldier through the heart; he fell and soon expired.

Obviously, Cos's alleged account of Crockett's alibi, though much more detailed, sounds similar to de la Peña's brief mention of Crockett's claim to be protected by his "status as a foreigner." But Cos's account did not come to public notice until 1939, when the Texas Folklore Society published a letter about George Patrick's conversation with the Mexican general. In truth this was not even Patrick's own letter, but that of *another* veteran of the revolution, William P. Zuber, who in 1904 had recalled Patrick's telling *him* Cos's story of the captured Crockett. Zuber said that he believed Patrick, but thought that the story told by Cos was "a gross falsehood."

Tom Lindley has argued that Zuber—not Cos or Patrick—likely fabricated the story, given his "reputation for telling Alamo tall tales." Lindley goes on to assert that if we accept that de la Peña's description of Crockett as a noncombatant "has no basis in truth or honest error, then the only explanation for it being in the de la Peña account is that the creator of the de la Peña description obtained the element from the Cos account"—an account not published until 1939.

De la Peña's account and Zuber's do indeed contain elements that are tantalizingly similar, but is twentieth-century plagiarism the only explanation for the similarities? Lindley is asking us to believe that it is possible for Zuber to make up stories, but that no one else is capable of this—not de la Peña, nor anyone who gave information to de la Peña. Lindley is also telling us that it is not just unlikely, but downright impossible, for Crockett to have made such excuses to Castrillón, to Cos, or to anyone else in the last desperate moments of his life. Note that Lindley begs the question by simply assuming that Crockett did not make such a statement: as he puts it, there can be no basis for de la Peña's story in either "truth or honest error."

Lindley also dismisses too hastily the possibility that both Zuber and Patrick could be telling the truth. Indeed, Cos might very well have told such a story to George Patrick in 1836, because after San Jacinto the captive Mexican general was in hot water with the Texans. They were accusing him of having violated the parole under which he and his surviving men had been allowed to leave Texas following his surrender at Béxar in December 1835. It would have been very much in Cos's interest to disassociate himself from Crockett's death and the Alamo executions

in a way that would portray himself (instead of General Castrillón, who had died at San Jacinto) as the would-be savior and Crockett as a brave and tragic hero.

We simply do not know where de la Peña obtained his version of Crockett's unsuccessful Alamo alibi. But we do know that he spent three years in the wake of the Texas campaign reworking and expanding his diary, gathering material from multiple sources along the way. Even if the revised diary should prove to be tainted by these sources, it would remain a valuable window into the inner workings of the Mexican army. Moreover, we are fortunate that the "clean copy" of the original diary is intact, so that we may assess what has been added in de la Peña's editing process.

If de la Peña's memoir should repeat an unlikely story about Crockett, even a totally false one, this would not mean that the manuscript is not authentic. But as to *reliability*, the fact that de la Peña fashioned his longer narrative from multiple sources should make us cautious about accepting it as an authoritative account of how Davy died. Without corroboration from more reliable and immediate sources, de la Peña's story of the Alamo executions would have limited credibility.

For a basic description of the executions following the Battle of the Alamo, we do have a very credible eyewitness—one accepted even by Lindley and Groneman. Ramón Martínez Caro was a Mexican civilian who served as Santa Anna's personal secretary during the Texas campaign. In a memoir published in Mexico City in 1837, Caro was blunt in his criticism of his former boss's behavior after the battle:

> Among the 183 killed there were five who were discovered by General Castrillón hiding after the assault. He took them immediately to the presence of His Excellency who had come up by this time. When he presented the prisoners he was severely reprimanded for not having killed them on the spot, after which [Santa Anna] turned his back upon Castrillón while the soldiers stepped out of their ranks and set upon the prisoners until they were killed. . . . We all witnessed this outrage which humanity condemns but which was committed as described. This is a cruel truth, but I cannot omit it.

Caro, of course, said nothing about Crockett. Moreover, the ready availability of Caro's published memoir in Mexico as de la Peña was revising his diary means that these two cannot be taken as wholly independent sources. De la Peña could have easily lifted the story of General Castrillón and his prisoners from Santa Anna's secretary. Could de la Peña have borrowed and inserted the Crockett execution story as well? Certainly. As we have seen, newspaper accounts alleging the murder of the captive Crockett were circulating in the United States by the summer of 1836.

Walter Lord found that fragmentary information (or rumors) had reached New Orleans as early as March 27—only three weeks after the battle—claiming that Crockett and a few other men had tried to surrender "but were told there was no mercy for them." However, one of the fullest and most widely circulated of the accounts of Crockett's death, and one that closely matches the scene described by Caro and de la Peña, was in a letter written to the New York *Courier and Enquirer* from Galveston Bay on June 9, 1836, "from a gentleman who has been in familiar con-

versation with the Mexican prisoners there." Here is how this anonymous "gentleman" related the story "detailed by an *eye witness*":

> After the Mexicans had got possession of the Alamo, the fighting had ceased, and it was clear day light, six Americans were discovered near the wall yet unconquered, and who were instantly surrounded and ordered by General Castrillon to surrender, and who did so under a promise of his protection, finding resistance any longer in vain—indeed, perfect madness—Castrillon was brave and not cruel, and disposed to save them. He marched them up to that part of the fort where stood "his Excellency," surrounded by his murderous crew, his sycophantic officers. David Crockett was one of the six. The steady, fearless step, and undaunted tread, together with the bold demeanor of this hardy veteran—"his firmness and noble bearing," to give the words of the narrator, had a most powerful effect on himself and Castrillon. Nothing daunted he marched up boldly in front of Santa Anna, looked him steadfastly in the face, while Castrillon addressed "his Excellency"—"Sir, here are six prisoners I have taken alive; how shall I dispose of them?" Santa Anna looked at Castrillon fiercely, flew into a most violent rage, and replied, "Have I not told you before how to dispose of them? Why do you bring them to me?" At the same time his brave officers drew and plunged their swords into the bosoms of their defenceless prisoners!! So anxious and intent were these blood thirsty cowards to gratify the malignity of this inveterate tyrant, that Castrillon barely escaped being run through in the scuffle himself.

There were many more details concerning the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto in this very long letter, including the claim that three additional wounded prisoners had been discovered in the Alamo and ordered to be instantly shot by Santa Anna. If this anonymous letter were the only corroboration of Caro's ac-

count of the killings, it might be argued (indeed it has been argued by Tom Lindley and Bill Groneman) that it was the product of an imaginative New York reporter on assignment in Texas, trying to sell more newspapers by adding the celebrity appeal of Crockett to the already widespread rumors of executions at the Alamo.

But there is more. Another letter describing an eyewitness account from a Mexican prisoner of war was written on July 19, 1836, not by a reporter but by George M. Dolson, a bilingual Texan sergeant whose letter from Texas to his brother in Michigan was published the following September in the Detroit *Democratic Free Press*. Dolson was serving as an interpreter at Camp Travis, where most of the Mexican prisoners of war were being kept on Galveston Island after the Texan victory at San Jacinto. On July 18 he had been summoned by Colonel James Morgan, the camp commander, to take down an oral deposition from one of "Santa Anna's officers." This is how Sergeant Dolson described the prisoner's story in the long letter that he wrote to his brother the following day:

> He [the Mexican officer] states that on the morning the Alamo was captured, between the hours of five and six o'clock, General Castrillon, who fell at the battle of San Jacinto, entered the back room of the Alamo, and there found Crockett and five other Americans, who had defended it until defence was useless; they appeared very much agitated when the Mexican soldiers undertook to rush in after their General, but the humane General ordered his men to keep out, and, placing his hand on one breast, said, "here is a hand and a heart to protect you; come with me to the General-in-Chief, and you shall be saved." Such redeeming traits, while they ennoble in our estimation this worthy officer, yet serve to show in a more

> heinous light the damning atrocities of the chief. The brave but unfortunate men were marched to the tent of Santa Anna. Colonel Crockett was in the rear, had his arms folded, and appeared bold as the lion as he passed my informant (Almonte.) Santa Anna's interpreter knew Colonel Crockett, and said to my informant, "the one behind is the famous Crockett." When brought in the presence of Santa Anna, Castrillon said to him, "Santa Anna, the august, I deliver up to you six brave prisoners of war." Santa Anna replied, "who has given you orders to take prisoners, I do not want to see those men living—shoot them." As the monster uttered these words each officer turned his face the other way, and the hellhounds of the tyrant despatched the six in his presence, and within six feet of his person.

In *Defense of a Legend*, Bill Groneman argued that "there is enough nonsense in . . . [the Dolson Letter] to eliminate it as a credible source." It is, of course, not a perfect source—few ever are. No copy has ever been found of the officer's deposition. It is always possible that leading questions could have been asked, suggesting to the prisoner that Colonel Morgan was looking for evidence against Santa Anna for a possible trial for war crimes. But a family letter from a soldier in Dolson's position would have to be nonsensical indeed for us to simply throw it out of the historical court of inquiry! What is the "nonsense" that Groneman found in this document? The first is the identification of "Almonte" as the source of the story, based on the reference to "my informant (Almonte.)"

Was Dolson's "informant" Colonel Juan N. Almonte? That's what Rice University graduate student Thomas Lawrence Connelly took for granted when he stumbled across the Dolson letter in the Detroit newspaper. Connelly provided a bit of biogra-

phical material on Almonte when he published the letter in the prestigious *Journal of Southern History* in 1960, but nothing in this material placed Almonte at the scene of the interview. That would have been impossible—because Bill Groneman's claim that Almonte could not have been the informant is absolutely correct. Historians have been able to pinpoint Almonte's location in Texas from April 1836, when he was captured at San Jacinto, to late November of 1836, when he left Texas. Almonte was never held as a prisoner in Camp Travis, and certainly not on July 18, when the interview with Dolson's informant took place.

But even a cursory glance at Juan Almonte's biography should have made Connelly realize that Almonte could not have been the informant. The urbane colonel, reputedly the illegitimate son of the Mexican revolutionary hero José María Morelos, had been sent for his education to New Orleans, where he became fluent in French and English as well as his native Spanish. Moreover, Almonte's fluency in English was well known in Texas and the United States in 1836. He had spent much of the year 1834 on an inspection tour of Texas, and served for most of the following year in New York and Washington as a special representative of the Mexican government. If Almonte had been the "informant," he would not have needed Dolson as an interpreter.

So how could George Dolson have written such "nonsense"? The answer becomes clearer when we ask what Almonte was actually doing in Texas in July 1836, when Dolson wrote his letter. The Colonel was being kept as a prisoner of war with Santa Anna, Ramón Martínez Caro, and another senior Mexican officer at a heavily guarded plantation house on the Texas mainland. Almonte was serving there as Santa Anna's interpreter.

We also know from Almonte's correspondence with the Mexican government that he was familiar with the American politician and celebrity David Crockett as early as 1834, and almost certainly had seen Crockett's widely published portraits by 1836, even if he had not met him face-to-face. It's useful to remember that in Spanish, the verb "*conocer*" is used both to say that you personally "know" someone and to convey the idea that you are merely "familiar with" a personage. Dolson's informant was speaking Spanish, not English, when he said that Santa Anna's interpreter "knew"—or was familiar with—Crockett.

Finally, keep in mind that the Dolson Letter was published in a newspaper after it had been originally written out in longhand. If, as seems reasonable, Dolson realized only after writing the sentences quoted here that he had failed to identify Santa Anna's interpreter, he could have written Almonte's name in parentheses between the lines, just above its proper place in the letter. It would take only a very slight error on the part of the newspaper's typesetter to drop the name onto the wrong side of the period. When the name is placed on the other side, here is how Dolson's letter would read: Crockett "appeared bold as the lion as he passed my informant. Almonte, Santa Anna's interpreter, knew Crockett and said to my informant, 'the one behind is the famous Crockett.'" Dolson's "nonsense," in other words, can be attributed to a simple typographical error.

But Bill Groneman also points to another sentence from the Dolson Letter: "The brave but unfortunate men were marched to the tent of Santa Anna." This, he argues, produces another absurdity. Either Crockett and the prisoners were marched outside the walls of the Alamo to Santa Anna's tent, or else Santa

Anna had just set up a tent inside the walls, even before the dead had been removed from the fort. The second scenario is ludicrous, the first is demonstrably false. Several witnesses who saw Crockett's inanimate body on the morning of March 6 reported that it was lying *inside* the walls of the Alamo. How could George Dolson have written such nonsense? How could his informant, if he had truly been at the scene of Crockett's death, have said such a ridiculous thing?

He didn't. One thing we know just as surely as we can know anything in history is that Dolson's informant did *not* say the words: "The brave but unfortunate men were marched to the tent of Santa Anna." He couldn't have said it in just this way because he didn't speak English. He said something in Spanish that George Dolson translated as these words, and Dolson, who had not arrived in Texas until after the battle of San Jacinto, was unfamiliar with the details of the Alamo and its fall. Dolson would not have realized the incongruity of the reference to Santa Anna's tent.

What might the informant have said? It must have been something that a fluent Spanish-speaker like Dolson could have interpreted as "tent." Could Dolson have mistaken some other word for "*tienda*" (the literal Spanish for "tent")? How about "*teniente*"? Could the men have been marched to Santa Anna's "lieutenant, deputy, or substitute"? Not likely. The context makes it clear that they were brought directly to the commander in chief. I believe that the similarity to "tent" was not in the *sound* of the word spoken by the informant, but in its *meaning*, that is to say, in one of its many meanings. The versatile Spanish word "*pabellón*" can mean many things: pavilion, field-bed, bell tent,

tent-like curtain, dais, bed canopy, summerhouse, national flag, bell of a wind instrument, stack of arms, or the external ear (among other things)!

If General Castrillón wanted to take his prisoners directly to Santa Anna in the immediate aftermath of the battle, as the commander in chief was striding into the Alamo, would he not march the men "to the flag of Santa Anna"? His excellency had entered the fallen fortress with a retinue, which under battlefield conditions would almost certainly have included a flag-bearer. And not just any flag. In Spanish, ordinary flags are usually called "*banderas*," but the official national flag displaying the "shield-of-arms" of governmental authority is called the "*pabellón*." Dolson's letter makes perfect sense if his informant meant that the men were marched "to the flag of Santa Anna" ("*al pabellón de Santa Anna*"). The second alleged piece of "nonsense" in Dolson's letter is most likely an innocent error of translation. The informant said "*pabellón*," meaning "flag," but Dolson heard "*pabellón*" and assumed it meant "tent."

Documents such as the Dolson Letter, which at first seem nonsensical or impenetrable, can, with greater contextual knowledge and the exercise of an informed historical imagination, be made to reveal some of their secrets. It is well to remember that with any historical document there is always a "text behind the text"—even if it consists only of the assumptions in the mind of the text's creator. In the Dolson case, however, there are quite literally "texts behind the text," with the longhand letter behind the newsprint, and the oral interview behind the letter.

What is most striking about the July 19 letter from Dolson and the earlier one written from Galveston Bay on June 9 is *not*

their obvious similarities, although they are close enough in tone and content to suggest that they are likely the result of separate interviews with the same Mexican prisoner of war. Even more impressive is the compatibility of both of these descriptions of the Alamo executions with the memoir published a year *later* in Mexico City by Ramón Martínez Caro. The congruence is not perfect. Caro said five men were executed in the group, the Galveston letters each said six. (De la Peña and many of the early reports from the Alamo spoke of seven.) Caro, of course, covered the scene quickly in his book and gave few details and no names. But these very similar stories of the hapless Castrillón and his doomed prisoners could not have been produced by coincidence. What is most likely is that tellers of these tales witnessed the same tragic event.

The discrepancy in the numbers—five, six, or seven victims—seems not unreasonable for people recalling a scene weeks or months after they've witnessed it. With such written historical evidence, as with the tossing of horseshoes or hand grenades, "close" is sometimes good enough. A *perfect* match of alleged facts from disparate sources or different eyewitnesses to an event should not be the required standard of historical truth, but should instead alert the researcher to the probability of fraud. Some documents really *are* too good to be true. As humans, our perception of events, our fallible memories, and the historical evidence they produce are all rather messy commodities that do not come in perfectly wrapped packages.

Given the fragmentary and imperfect nature of historical evidence, it is of course possible to develop alternative, if implausible, scenarios. Tom Lindley has theorized that George M. Dol-

son appropriated the basic story of Crockett's death from the earlier Galveston letter of June 9, 1836. Dolson, believes Lindley, arranged for his own version of Crockett's murder to be published in order to ingratiate himself with his commanding officer, a Texan general named Thomas Jefferson Green, who was eager to see Santa Anna hanged. Lindley argues in turn that the earlier letter describing the same scene had been concocted with the Crockett angle added to sell newspapers. Because of the similarity of both letters to the story told by Caro in 1837, Lindley claims that Caro must have spread his version of the Alamo executions when he was in Texas, though Lindley can offer absolutely no evidence for this assertion other than its necessity for the viability of his tenuous thesis.

In a similar vein, historian William C. Davis, author of *Three Roads to the Alamo* and *Lone Star Rising*, has speculated that Caro could have stolen the story from American or Mexican newspapers that had reprinted either or both of the Galveston letters. But why would Caro, who was writing in Mexico City for an audience that would have included other eyewitnesses to the events that he described, risk his credibility by aping an American account of executions in the Alamo if he knew it to be bogus?

Of course, if Davis and Lindley are *both* right, then all of these sources must have stolen the story from each other! The theoretical scenarios of Lindley and Davis appear to be strenuous efforts to avoid the far more likely possibility that both Ramón Martínez Caro and Dolson's informant were truthful witnesses to the same bloody event at the Alamo: the execution of David Crockett and a handful of other prisoners immediately after the battle.

For all their strained logic and misplaced faith in faulty translations, most of the the efforts of Bill Groneman and Tom Lindley to uphold the Crockett legend have at least been thoughtful and informed by the evidence. That's more than can be said for some of the barbs that have come my way since I entered the fray in 1994 with my defense of de la Peña. When my first critique of Groneman's forgery hypothesis appeared, I was warned by Kevin R. Young, "Well, you've really stepped in it now!" As an historical interpreter who had long worked in the contentious venues of both the Alamo and the Goliad presidio, Kevin knew what he was talking about when it came to controversies about the Texan past.

First, my telephone started ringing, mostly with media types from both sides of the Atlantic looking for a sound bite (which I wasn't going to give them) to the effect that "Crockett was a coward!" Then I started receiving my own hate mail. A brief article outlining the fruits of my detective work in *Sallyport* (the magazine of Rice University) produced this accusatory response from an irate alumnus:

> . . . how can you be sure that José Enrique de la Peña was not hiding behind a pile of rubble until the 1836 action at the Alamo had ceased then capitalized on his spare time while languishing in a Mexican prison by writing fiction on a popular subject of the times, the Texas Revolution?
>
> Indeed, there appears to be a considerable similarity of motives between de la Peña and Crisp, i.e., inventing, writing, and marketing a contrarian neohistory to suit their self-interests.

This critic went on to suggest that his efforts and mine were actually part of a larger battle about the meaning of the past:

> Just as the American people have elected [in 1994] a current congress that is well on the way to correct[ing] the excesses of the last forty years of political liberalism, so they are justly rebelling against legitimization and glorification of the murderous scoundrels of American history, be they Indians, Mexicans, or Japanese, at the expense of our traditional, completely documented, red-blooded, heroic Anglo ancestors.

Such attacks notwithstanding, there was also a happier sense in which Kevin Young's prediction was on target. I had also stepped directly into a strange and fascinating world of Alamo enthusiasts (and protesters) of every stripe: re-enactors, webmasters, movie buffs, kitsch collectors, political activists, military history fanatics, descendants of the actual Alamo defenders (both Anglo and Tejano), and connoisseurs of every variety of material culture associated with the Alamo—both the building and the battle—from architecture and artillery to the buttons and stitching of uniforms. Moreover, this was not a closed world. I found the level of popular interest in the Alamo as a significant piece of American history to be extraordinarily high, now made even more so with the renewed Crockett controversy, the fresh documentary discoveries, and the revived notoriety of the de la Peña diary.

Yet an undercurrent of tension remained. When Bill Groneman and I offered our conflicting verdicts on Crockett and de la Peña in March 1995 to gatherings of the Texas State Historical Association and the Alamo Battlefield Association in San Antonio, there were morbid jokes about my need for a bulletproof vest. On the Sunday following our speeches, a woman who rec-

ognized me from the previous day's events turned toward me as I walked past the Alamo. She blurted out, "I know who you are—and if I had my Bowie knife I'd gut you right now, because hanging would be too good for you!" I managed to deflect this woman's half-serious anger by engaging her in a discussion of the documentary evidence (she's since become a friend), but her passion as a self-described "Crockett loyalist" was indicative of the strong feelings that still enveloped popular memories of this long-ago battle.

De la Peña's version of events was featured in both History Channel and Discovery Channel presentations on the Alamo that aired in 1996, and in January 1997 the BBC sent a team to Texas to record a program for the radio series "Document"—the first time the series had focused on an historical document originating beyond the British Isles. Although the subject was ostensibly the de la Peña diary, the final edit of the forty-minute BBC documentary was mostly devoted to contrasting the dissenters and defenders of the traditional heroic story of Davy's death. Tom Lindley and I rehashed our arguments without shedding much new light on the subject, but there was one interview recorded by the British that stuck in my mind.

While I was with them in Austin, the BBC producers arranged a meeting at the Texas State Capitol with Andrés Tijerina, a leading Tejano historian. To my surprise (after all, this was a *radio* documentary), much of Tijerina's discussion centered on Texan historical art, and especially on the giant painting of the battle for the Alamo that hangs in the Senate Chamber of the Capitol. I remember Andrés pointing out the noble, white-shirted Crock-

ett figure in artist Henry A. McArdle's dark and violent work, *Dawn at the Alamo*. About to be overwhelmed by a sea of dusky, demonic Mexicans (perhaps some of those "murderous scoundrels of American history"), Davy stands out in bright and heroic contrast, an icon within an icon. How, the British commentator asked during the broadcast on March 6, 1997, could de la Peña's words possibly compete in the public mind with such powerful mythic imagery?

Mythic imagery was certainly the goal of Michael Lind's *The Alamo: An Epic*, a 274-page poem in the Homeric tradition that was published on the same Alamo anniversary day as the BBC broadcast. I had to be in Austin on March 6 when Lind (then a staff writer at *The New Yorker*) was signing copies of his epic in San Antonio, but three days later our paths figuratively crossed in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* when historian and critic Garry Wills explicitly cited my work on the de la Peña diary as he dismissed Lind's poetic defense of the Crockett legend. "Things not worth doing can sometimes be done well," said Wills, "[b]ut here is something not worth doing that is done ill . . . " He faulted Lind for accepting uncritically too many of the Alamo myths (including Crockett's heroic death in combat), despite the author's claim that he had "used plausibility, not dramatic value, as the criterion" for "choosing between varying accounts of what happened at the Alamo." Wills castigated Lind for accepting Bill Groneman's "desperate claim of forgery, though it has been definitively refuted by James Crisp" in the pages of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*.

This was heady stuff. I learned of the review as I was driving from Austin to San Antonio, when one of my North Carolina colleagues rang my cell phone to ask me if I knew that I was in that morning's *New York Times*. When a few days later CBS News anchor Dan Rather jumped to the defense of his fellow transplanted Texan Michael Lind in a long letter to the *Book Review* (denouncing the credibility of "testimony from a Mexican Army officer" but obviously having never read de la Peña's narrative), I couldn't help recalling what de la Peña himself had said in 1837 when he decided to intervene in the flurry of finger-pointing among the Mexican generals who were blaming each other for losing Texas: "I am a pygmy who is going into combat against giants; but, having reason on my side, I expect to come out victorious . . . " Perhaps I did share some of de la Peña's motives, after all!

That irate Rice alumnus was certainly right about one thing: whether I liked it or not (and whatever my actual motives), I was in the midst of a larger battle. And my hate mail was telling me that something sinister was involved in at least some people's ardent defense of the traditional Crockett story. I felt sure that the stubborn old issue of race was bound up with questions of myth and collective identity in the story of the Alamo and Davy's death. What I did not yet understand was why, as a historian who claimed, in essence, that the Mexicans had cruelly murdered Davy Crockett in 1836, I should be on the receiving end of hostile reactions that were laced with overtones of anti-Mexican racism.

Was there any logical (or psychological) connection between a defense of the traditional story of Davy's death in combat and

a racial loathing of Mexicans? My attempts to answer this question over the next two years followed a twisted trail from the archived hate mail of the late Dan Kilgore to the canvasses of artists such as Henry A. McArdle, whose dark visions of Mexicans portrayed an enemy to whom no civilized man would ever surrender. And it was in the midst of these paintings of an imagined Texan past that I stumbled across another mystery—involving a sharp blade, a slit canvas, and an Alamo story that had lain hidden for nearly a century.