



## ***"JAMES BOWIE AND THE BOWIE KNIFE"***

### ***"America's Excalibur"***

**I**t started suddenly and broke the peaceful quiet of the early morning. A rapidly building staccato of musket fire, cannon shots and the thunder of a thousand feet pounding the earth. The sounds of battle; cannon fire, trumpets, men shouting, men screaming their death...all built to a thunderous roar. In a small room near the back of the mission, faint moonlight shone through a tiny window upon a feverish man laying on a small wooden bed. He listened to the angry shouts and the moans and cries of the wounded and dying drifting into the baptistery along with the smoke that was now filtering in through the window. Only days earlier he had been told of the red flag, the symbol that no quarter, no mercy, would be shown to the men in the mission...only a painful death. He knew it would be soon now, and he knew what he must do. It took all of his strength, all of his will, but he managed to raise himself to sit upright. His belt hung from the bedpost. He reached out and grasped the handle of the knife and pulled it from the sheath. Slowly, he worked his way to the end of the bed, forced himself up and braced his back against the corner of the room. And then he waited.

**T**hey came on slowly. Shuffling really, as they carefully picked their way down the narrow hall, uncertain what awaited them in the labyrinth of tiny rooms within the mission's low barracks. Their long muskets with mounted bayonets were unwieldy in close quarters, and made searching and clearing the rooms a very dangerous proposition. They were trained for battle on open plains in large ranks, facing an enemy likewise formed for battle, and not at all like this. Slowly, the lead *Soldado* pushed open the door to the room and beheld the man in the corner, not five feet from him. It was dim, but nonetheless he could see the man was ill, sweating with fever, weak and barely able to sit upright. Slowly a smile came to his face. This will be easy he thought. Raising his bayonet, he stepped forward to add his weight and thereby maximum inertia to the thrust. Easy.

Bowie Knife, continued:

He had not seen the knife in the man's hand however, held out of view, slightly behind his leg. In fact, the *Soldado's* first awareness of it came when he saw the brief glint as light from the window reflected off of the blade. It startled him, and time now seemed to slow down. He saw it all so clearly. It was a very large, long blade with a wicked needle-like point. Though badly ill, the man had timed his move perfectly, and had parried the bayonet aside by striking it with the spine of the heavy knife. As he did so he transitioned the parry into a circular thrust, simultaneously throwing himself forward. The energy behind the blade, while not tremendous, was enough, combined with the razor sharp edge. The point of the knife slid effortlessly through his uniform and into his solar plexus, just beneath his sternum. It continued upward, scraping the bottom side of his ribs a scant fraction of a second before the point pierced his heart sac. Just for a fleeting second, their eyes met. The man's eyes were strange; almost calm in appearance really, and yet a bit sad too. Yes, sad. How strange he thought, as he grew tired, just before everything went black.

Seeing their friend's fate, the *Soldado's* companions pressed on the attack and burst forward, filled with resolve to kill the hated *Tejano* who had killed their messmate and now lay on the floor atop his lifeless body. One of them fired his musket, the ball grazing the *Tejano's* head. They hacked and stabbed at him with their bayonets and swords. But the onslaught was not necessary. It had taken all of the man's strength to make his final assault and now he lay defenseless on the floor. Spattered with his blood, they pulled back and looked upon him. He was dying, and yet a smile spread across his face. His lips moved and worked to form a word. Curious, one of the *Soldado's* bent to listen. He caught a name from the man's lips just before he died. "*Ursula...mi Esposa*". "What did he say?" they asked their companion. "He is calling to his wife", he replied. They then pulled the evil implement from their friend's chest, cast it aside and removed his body outside for burial.

After the battle and a brief rest, they set about recovering and piling the bodies of the dead *Tejano's* in the courtyard of the mission, as per the Generalissimo's instructions. An officer then ordered them to heap fuel upon the bodies. This done, the officer stepped forward and set a torch to the pile. Soon, the heap of bodies was ablaze in a great, hot roiling fire. The smell of burning flesh was nauseating, and the soldiers backed away from the funeral pyre and watched as the smoke rose into the sky. Toward Heaven. Toward Freedom. The location was the Alamo, an Old Spanish mission in San Antonio de Bexar, Tejas. The date was March 6, 1836. The man was Colonel James Bowie. This is his story...

### *Early Life of James Bowie*

James Bowie was born in Logan County, Kentucky in April of 1796. In about 1802 his family moved to Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. There in the bayou, Bowie and his brother, Rezin Pleasant Bowie III learned to hunt and grew to manhood.

During this time an accident occurred which helped to start the legend of the Bowie knife. It was the practice in those days to "stick" the carcass of a deer or butchered animal to allow it to bleed out. According to a member of the Bowie family, a member of the family was performing just such a task and had blood on his hands, making them quite slippery. When he thrust the knife into the animal's carcass, his hand slid forward onto the blade, very nearly severing his fingers.

After this incident, Rezin Bowie had a knife made by a plantation blacksmith named Jesse Clift. Rezin designed the knife with a "cross-guard" which would prevent the hand from sliding forward onto the blade. Rezin Bowie later verified this himself in 1838 when he wrote:

*"The first Bowie knife was made by myself in the Parish of Avoyelles, in this State [Louisiana], as a hunting knife, for which purpose, exclusively, it was used for many years. The length of the knife was nine and one quarter inches, its width one and a half inches, single edged and blade not curved."*

According to some sources, Bowie and his brother initially made their fortune from trafficking in slaves. After acquiring some financial capital, they began purchasing land in Rapides Parish. They developed a lumber mill business that they sold at a substantial profit.

### *Birth of a Legend: The Sandbar Fight*

In about 1826, James Bowie attempted to obtain a loan from a banker named Norris Wright, who was also the Sheriff of Rapides Parish. Wright denied the loan, causing Bowie some financial difficulties. This situation became further exasperated when Bowie became involved in local politics and supported another man who was running against Wright for Sheriff. Bowie later met Wright on the street. Words were exchanged and Wright drew a pistol. Bowie drew his own, but it "snapped" or failed to take fire. Wright's ball struck Bowie, but apparently was deflected when it struck a bone. After he recovered from his wound, his brother Rezin gave him his hunting knife. He is quoted as saying to James, *"Here, take old Bowie...he never snaps."*

Bowie was probably carrying his brothers hunting knife with him when, in September 1827, he and several other men were acting as seconds for a pistol duel between Samuel Wells and Dr. Thomas Maddox. Amongst the seconds on the opposing side was Norris Wright. The duel was being fought on the Vidalia Sandbar near Natchez, Louisiana. The combatants discharged their weapons twice, neither man striking the other. Their honor satisfied, they shook hands and declared the matter resolved. However, the seconds were not satisfied and a brawl broke out between them.

Once again, Bowie was wounded by a ball from Norris Wright and fell to the ground. Although some sources report Bowie giving chase to Wright, the most often told version reports Wright as producing a sword from his cane and approaching Bowie to finish the job. Bowie reportedly achieved a sitting position and was able to grab Wright, pull him in close and proceeded to kill him with his side knife. Word of this fight spread like wildfire and Bowie and his knife became national celebrities. Soon people everywhere were seeking to purchase "a knife just like Bowie's." In other words a Bowie knife.

Undoubtedly, much of this was due to fad, but many people recognised the practical value of a knife as a back up to the unreliable single-shot firearms of the period. Either way, it quickly became the fashion to wear a "Bowie knife" in addition to ones firearm. It was also the practice to carry "openly". Concealed carry of weapons suggested malevolent intentions. Schools also began to spring up which taught the skillful combat use of the Bowie knife, based on fencing techniques.

### **Life in Texas**

After the Sandbar fight, Bowie relocated to Texas. In about February 1830, Bowie took the Oath of Allegiance to Mexico and became a *Tejano*. Using the land speculator skills he had acquired in Louisiana, he soon began to acquire large tracts of land.

While in Texas, he allegedly had the blade polished and set in a fancy ivory handle with silver mountings and scabbard, this according to a blacksmith named Noah Smithwick, who operated a shop in San Felipe. Smithwick went on to say, "***I made a duplicate knife for Bowie, who did not wish to degrade it by ordinary use.***" A shrewd businessman, Smithwick made a pattern from Bowie's knife and began making copies of it. He stated he received from \$5 to \$20 each, depending upon the finish. In the winter of 1830-1831, Bowie had yet another knife made for him by blacksmith James Black of Washington, Arkansas.

In 1831, Bowie became romantically involved with Ursula de Beramendi, daughter of the Mexican Governor of Texas, Don Juan Martin de Beramendi and Dona Maria Josefa Navarro. On April 25, 1836, Bowie and Ursula de Beramendi were wed in San Fernando de Bexar by the parish priest, Don Refugio de la Garza. Bowie became heir to a huge land grant and entered into business with his father-in-law. Also during this time he was commissioned a Colonel and led ranging companies against raiding Comanche Indians.

Bowie is said to have had children with Ursula de Beramendi, some sources stating they had twin daughters. In September 1833, Bowie returned home from a business trip to learn that he had lost his wife [and children] to a cholera epidemic. Reportedly, Bowie was grief-stricken and became an inconsolable drunk over the loss of his wife and children.

### *The Alamo*

As was inevitable, James Bowie became involved in the cause of Texas independence. He was assigned by Sam Houston to evacuate the Alamo and mine it, lest it fall into the hands of Santa Anna and his army and become a base for conducting operations against the Texans. However, upon reaching the Alamo, he found the men well-entrenched and unwilling to abandon the mission. Their stubborn Commander, Colonel William Barrett Travis, had convinced them that relief was on the way and steeled their resolve to take on the Mexican army.

In his memoirs, Colonel Davy Crockett described meeting James Bowie soon after arriving at the Alamo. In his autobiography, *"Davy Crockett's Own Story, As Written by Himself"*, Crockett described the encounter as follows:

*"...I found Colonel Bowie, of Louisiana, in the fortress, a man celebrated for having been in more desperate personal conflicts than any other in the country, and whose name has been given to a knife of peculiar construction, which is now in general use in the southwest. I was introduced to him by Colonel Travis, and 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 to be shot if the bare sight of it wasn't enough to give a man of a squeamish stomach the colic, especially before breakfast. He saw I was admiring it, and, said he, "Colonel, you might tickle a fellows ribs a long time with this little instrument before you'd make him laugh; and many a time have I seen a man puke at the idea of the point touching the pit of his stomach."*

Some accounts also hold that by this time, Bowie was a very sick man. Some have speculated that he was suffering from pneumonia and others "consumption" [tuberculosis]. Regardless, Bowie probably was not in the best condition for making crucial decisions and capitulated and threw in with the Alamo's 180 defenders, thus the mission was not destroyed as per Sam Houston's instructions. Soon thereafter, Bowie became so ill however, that he was bedridden and confined to a cot in a room in the low barracks of the mission and was attended to by a Mexican woman.

Santa Anna's army [variously numbered as between 1,500 and 4,000 troops] arrived in San Antonio de Bexar on the morning of February 23, 1836 and encamped within sight and sound of the mission. Santa Anna's troops paraded [probably for psychological effect] and once unlimbered, his artillery commenced sporadic bombardment of the mission. This display continued for twelve days until March 6, 1836.

In the early morning hours of that date, waves of Mexican soldiers assaulted the mission and breached the wall near the low barracks. It was probably one of the first building cleared by the Mexican troops and where they found Bowie and killed him. His body was later identified by a witness.

### ***The Great Mystery***

Perhaps the greatest mystery of all is what became of James Bowie's personal knives; that is, the knife he fought the Vidalia Sandbar fight with, the copy he had made by Noah Smithwick, and the knife made by James Black. And which did he have in his possession at the Alamo, as observed by Crockett? Several Bowies have surfaced over the years, each claiming to be Bowie's personal knife. One of the most well known of these is the "Bart Moore Bowie", which is on display at the Arkansas Territorial Museum in Little Rock.

The Bart Moore Bowie was given to a Texas Farmer in about 1890 by a Mexican who claimed to be a veteran of the assault on the Alamo and removed the knife from among a pile of bodies. This Bowie bears the initials "J.B." and incorporates an acorn design said to be James Black's maker's mark [Black's shop sat beneath the shade of an Oak tree]. Some have dismissed this however, stating it has characteristics of a "typical" Mexican Bowie.

Another possible Bowie knife is known as the "Juan Seguin Bowie", which is on display at the Texas Ranger Museum in Waco, Texas. Juan Seguin was a Mexican Tejano, who chose to ally himself with the Texas independence movement, and was a defender at the Alamo. It is a documented fact that on the eighth day of the siege, Seguin rode out of the Alamo on Bowie's horse to carry a message seeking reinforcements. It is possible that Bowie may have given Seguin at least one of his knives along with his horse.

The Seguin Bowie has a distinctive D-guard handle with an "Eagle's head pommel". An identical guard and pommel are visible in Bowie's left hand in his 19th Century portrait. It seems probable that Bowie, having made his reputation with this famous knife, would have wanted to have it depicted in his portrait.

### *In Conclusion*

For the past 176 years James Bowie's knife has been regarded as the definitive American fighting/hunting/utility knife. In recent years, historians have begun to debate whether the clip-point blade is in fact the original "Bowie" blade pattern. In fact, most blade historians now agree that the clip-point blade had long been in existence prior to the introduction of the Bowie knife. They also agree that there probably was no "one true" Bowie Knife, but rather, a succession of patterns which have ultimately resulted in the clip-point pattern which is today generally accepted as the archetypal Bowie knife.

Regardless of its origin or true design, the Bowie knife remains *America's knife*. Bowie knives were a must have tool for Argonauts traveling to the California Gold Fields in 1849. They have been incorporated into numerous hunting and military knife patterns, such as the Krag rifle bayonet and the U.S. Marine Corps fighting/utility knife [the vaunted Ka-Bar], to name but two examples. Even today, in the 21st Century, a Bowie pattern knife will undoubtedly be found on an American soldier's belt defending freedom in some far-flung corner of the World.

James Bowie's legacy lives on wherever and whenever American patriots, like those brave souls at the Alamo, take up the Bowie knife to defend our way of life, our homes and our country.

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