

The Gates of the Alamo

by Stephen Harrigan
Curriculum Supplement

Introduction:

For 91-year-old Terrell Mott, it is difficult to remember when Alamo was just a word to describe an old, broken-down assemblage of buildings on the edge of San Antonio de Bexar. But it's now 1911, and for 75 years Alamo has been a word to describe the Texas holy of holies, a place where long ago an event occurred that was far more ghastly than glorious.

As Stephen Harrigan's novel The Gates of the Alamo opens April 21, 1911, Mott, the lone remaining survivor of that now-famous battle, is helping celebrate the 75th anniversary of a subsequent battle at the San Jacinto River when Texas won its independence from Mexico with revengeful shouts of "Remember the Alamo."

Most of the mission has been gone for decades, torn down to make room for meat markets and saloons. For Mott, the real Alamo resides only in his memory. Now there's only the old church, standing there in its strange, solemn primacy. "They could tear it down too," Mott says to himself. "Everything passes from the earth. Why not the sacred Alamo?"

Mott is one of the three primary characters created by Harrigan and inserted into this 19th century story to bring it to life in the 21st century. Steeped in historical research, The Gates of the Alamo treats readers to a compelling human story, not the mythical account of March 6, 1836, found in textbooks, television or movies.

William C. Davis, author of Three Roads to the Alamo, says, "Thanks to the author's synthesis of the latest and most authoritative Alamo research, readers will learn more about the real story of the Alamo from this book than from many of the histories that have appeared over the years."

Harrigan doesn't focus on historical Alamo figures such as David Crockett, James Bowie, William Travis and Santa Anna, although they are vividly represented, but he invents a cast of characters drawn into the conflict despite their ambivalence. "A lot of contemporary fiction just feels anemic to me," Harrigan said. "It's hard to get involved."

"Stories that have rich characters and a driving narrative are certainly what I most like to read," he added. "People are starved for real story-driven fiction. I know I am. I wrote the book that I most wanted to read."

Harrigan, fascinated by the Alamo story since he was a boy, spent eight years researching and writing his novel. "I spent two years researching before I started writing," he said, "and I never stopped researching as I wrote, not just about what happened at the Alamo, which is perpetually in dispute and will never be fully solved, but it was also important to convey a sense of the time in which these events took place.

"To do that, you have to know all kinds of weird stuff, such as when somebody puts their hands in their pockets, where are the pockets? Are the pockets in their pants? In their waistcoats? Are the pants even called pants, or are they called pantaloons? You have to search for period expressions and understand the entire context of the time. You're always looking for little nuggets of historical detail that are not always easy to come across."

He explained, "Stuff you know right off the top of your head when you're writing contemporary novels takes years to research."

There were times, he said, when he would need to verify 15-to-20 facts in one paragraph to ensure its accuracy.

Because of Harrigan's extended research, his novel presents a detailed picture of the roofless, old Catholic mission in 1836. He studied period politics, clothing, agriculture, family tales, weapons, fables of war, documents, diaries, maps and drawings. Writing the novel quickly illustrated to him that numerous facts were still missing, and only hunting them down would make his ambitious book a definitive novel about the Alamo.

His memorable characters combined with the tested literary themes of love, personal responsibility and ambition put The Gates of the Alamo on the bookshelf beside the best of novels about the Texas Revolution.

Summary:

Harrigan opens and closes his novel in San Antonio in 1911 observing Mott at a celebration marking 75 years of Texas independence. But his story actually begins in the spring of 1835 as American naturalist Edmund McGowan travels by

horseback with his dog Professor along the San Antonio River toward the Texas coast. He is on his way to the City of Mexico to renew his government commission to provide a botanical survey of the subprovince of Texas. An unlikely hero, he tries to avoid the political whirlwinds swirling through Texas and lead a solitary life on the trail of knowledge of the plant life of Texas.

McGowan stops at a boarding house in Refugio where he meets Harrigan's other two primary characters -- Mary Mott, a widow who has now been operating the inn for two years after the death of her husband, and her 16-year-old son Terrell, whom she is trying to raise despite the threat of attack by Karankawa Indians.

McGowan arrives in the City of Mexico, where he meets Stephen F. Austin, leading empresario of Texas who had recently been released from prison, but still confined to the city and eager for news from Texas, and Santa Anna, the Mexican president who considers McGowan's request to continue his commission. The pace and intensity accelerate as Harrigan matches his Anglo characters with several Mexican figures, including Lt. Tenesforo Villasenor and Sgt. Blas Angel Montoya. The stories of military preparation lead back and forth across the border. All characters are eventually drawn together at the famous mission in Bexar where Santa Anna is determined to keep Texas under Mexican rule.

Along the way we also meet James Bowie, William Travis, Sam Houston and David Crockett. And despite the fact that we already know the bloody conclusion of this story, we become deeply interested in the lives of the fictional characters and want to know what will happen to them because their stories are strongly human. As if from a camera moving from spot to spot in the falling fortress, the siege of the Alamo is described by Harrigan in realistic language. The noise, the stench, the wounds, the fear and the bravery are all there, fully explaining this episode in history and making this a best-selling novel.

Theme:

Harrigan is more concerned with history than myth, and he re-creates the Texas of the early 19th century and puts into human terms the story of this struggle by Texas to separate itself from its mother country. Through the experiences of Harrigan's characters, readers witness the inevitable consequences when governments, ethnic groups and individuals cannot or will not understand each other.

Even if the real story of the Alamo is something less than the legend, to Harrigan it is no less powerful or inspiring. The Alamo story is part of America's heritage of fighting tyranny. "The Alamo as an icon speaks to an ideal that I think is very legitimate and very alive and transcends all sorts of cultural and ethnic boundaries," Harrigan said. "The ideal is that there is something worth dying for, there is something you would willingly give your life for."

"Whether that's the liberation of Texas from Mexico or the stealing of Texas from Mexico or any other enterprise is kind of irrelevant. What matters is that people have faith in that concept. That's why people remember the Alamo -- because that ideal is worth remembering."

Also part of Harrigan's novel is the tension between mythology and revisionism. He had been intent on writing a novel about the Alamo since he was a boy, but in the intervening years he discovered some myths he learned as a child were probably not true. Early in the book he dispels the story of Travis drawing a line in the dirt with his sword to challenge his men to fight to their deaths for freedom.

"That moment to me is the linchpin of the Alamo myth," he said. "Once that is gone and once that idea of deliberate self-sacrifice is gone, the Alamo story becomes a human story and not a mythical one. You realize these guys were not intent on dying. They were intent on living."

In the author's note at the end of the book, he writes, "Many find themselves surprised by some of the details in this book and assume that they are errors of fact or simply the careless filigree of a novelist's imagination...In the writing of this book, I have not been whimsical with the facts...When I began The Gates of the Alamo, I made a pledge of absolute fidelity to the truth of the events."

He joins the debate over the diary of Mexican Lt. Jose Enrique de la Pena, which tells of the surrender and subsequent execution of Crockett. Forgery or not, he says, it is a "document of dubious historical veracity. It becomes less impressive with every reading." The debate over this diary, Harrigan explains, is sometimes particularly heated because "it matters to people how Davy Crockett died."

And he sides with historian Thomas Ricks Lindley that the number of defenders at the Alamo should be amended from the traditional 183 to at least 254. There is evidence that Crockett left the Alamo late in the siege to meet reinforcements and guide them to the fort.

Harrigan wasn't satisfied with the folklore version of the Alamo. "I kept wondering what it was really like," he said. "What would it have been like to be there? To see the sights? To experience the cold, the pain, the illnesses, the bombardments, all the things these people went through on both sides of the wall?"

Characters:

Harrigan says the historical context in which his fictional characters are placed was constructed with care. Edmund, Mary, Terrell, Blas and Telesforo are imaginary, though their backgrounds may include a stray fact or two from the biography of an actual person. "Many of the other characters, including Joe, Travis' slave, really existed and are depicted as they seem to me to have been," Harrigan wrote.

Harrigan's characters have human flaws, but he still treats them with respect. He understands the complexity of individuals and groups involved in the political and social climate of Texas in the 1830s. And he maintains a reasonable degree of impartiality with characters from both sides of the battle.

"At this level of ambition, everybody is complex," he told the *Austin Chronicle*. "Everybody has mixed motives. Everybody has feet of clay. And what's exciting to me as a novelist is to depict people who are flawed and three-dimensional. I don't think there are any heroes in this book."

He added, "I'm not interested in characters that don't have some sort of internal conflict. It became necessary, for my interests, to have characters who were undergoing a battle of their own against themselves."

Here's a brief look at 10 (five historical, five fictional) of the key characters in [The Gates of the Alamo](#):

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna -- Governor, president, general and dictator, even Santa Anna receives careful, nonstereotypical characterization. He is not the small, dark, brooding figure usually portrayed, but the Santa Anna we first see is elegant and sophisticated. Later he becomes the obsessive 42-year-old military leader who orders the deaths of the Alamo prisoners, the Santa Anna of history.

James Bowie -- The Mexican government called Bowie, Travis and their Texian cohorts "pirates," and Harrigan gives readers little reason to disagree. Loud and boisterous, a braggart and a bully, Bowie, 39, is also presented as a man who loved

his Bexarena wife and cared for her family. He wrestled alligators and wielded his famous knife in the opening pages, but in the end he's too ill to fight and relinquished command of the Alamo to Travis.

David Crockett -- Perhaps the most interesting of Harrigan's historical characters is Crockett, a former U.S. Congressman from Tennessee who joins the Texians in February 1836. Large, loud and political, he is a man with humor and sensitivity, not completely a backwoods lout. A review in the *Austin Chronicle* calls him "something like Opie's dad with a Kentucky rifle and a heavy heart." Harrigan told the *New York Times*, "What a good guy he seems to have been."

Joe -- The Negro slave of Travis who is spared from death by Santa Anna's army. Slavery was forbidden in Mexico, and since Texas was part of Mexico, Joe "lived half in hope and half in anxiety that someday a boatload of Mexican soldiers was going to come up the Brazos River and tell him he was a free man."

Edmund McGowan -- A 44-year-old botanist in the sometime employ of the Mexican government, McGowan roams the unspoiled land in one of the book's great pleasures. Harrigan's choice of McGowan is particularly apt since through him Harrigan is able to use his considerable talents as a nature writer. But McGowan's wanderings have led him to a self-imposed monasticism that prevents him from ever fully connecting with people, including Mary, who falls in love with him. Will they or won't they survive the Alamo and make a life together in the new Texas?

Blas Angel Montoya -- A quietly dedicated sergeant, he commands a company of sharpshooters in Santa Anna's army that is ordered to travel north to Texas in anticipation of the coming battles.

Mary Mott -- She is as earthy and practical as McGowan is aloof and intellectual. Widowed two years earlier, this 36-year-old proprietress of an inn in Refugio is fighting the Karankawa Indians as she is introduced. Her parental love and search for Terrell and her romantic love and pursuit of McGowan dominate the emotional life of the novel to the final pages.

Terrell Mott -- Harrigan paints a convincing portrait of a teenager, 16, cutting ties with home to grow up and become a man after a shattering experience with love. It just so happens that in his march into manhood, he finds himself hurled into war at the same time feeling disgraced in his mother's eyes. Harrigan opens and closes

his book 75 years later with Terrell as the 91-year-old former mayor of San Antonio.

William Travis -- Travis and his Texian cohorts are motivated as much by lust as by idealism. Harrigan's Travis is called a fornicator too fond of Texana girls, but he is also a loving father and a man concerned about ending his marriage properly. An attorney, he wrote deeply passionate letters from inside the Alamo to suggest a magnetic leader enthralled with his presumed destiny. His most famous letter of Feb. 24, 1836, is addressed to "the people of Texas and all Americans in the world" and expresses his convictions: "I shall never surrender or retreat." Travis, 26, took command when Bowie became ill.

Telesforo Villasenor -- Santa Anna's mapmaker, an ambitious lieutenant in the Mexican army, becomes a member of the general's inner circle through a display of valor.

Quotations:

Chapter 6:

"Mary and Edmund drove through fields of lantana and expanses of shimmering wildflowers -- cloth-of-gold and dandelion and lovely blue dayflowers that grew along the edges of the brilliant yellow blossoms like the border on a quilt. The air was thick with the fragrance of these flowers, and on the edges of the salt marshes flocks of shorebirds came cascading down from the sky -- pink spoonbills and willets and pelicans whose preposterous bodies were as white as bed linen.

Chapter 19:

"Somebody shut that mule up!" one of the cazadores cried. "Somebody shoot it."

"My hands are too numb to pull a trigger," someone else replied after a long silence in which the mule continued to torture them with its cries.

"It can't breath," Blas said. Hurtado was sitting next to him, and he slid Isabella into his arms, then stood up on his stiff, cramped legs and grabbed a hatchet. He staggered through the snow-covered mounds that represented his men and approached the mule. The creature was still braying in panic, but it seemed to know enough not to run away as Blas reached out and grabbed its ear in one hand and with the other struck it on its frozen nose with the blunt end of the hatchet. The ice covering its nostrils broke like window glass, and the mule began to snort

and gasp and, intoxicated now with the miracle of breath, began to prance back and forth in the weak glow of the firelight."

Chapter 29:

"We're in the hurrying business here, Will, in case you haven't noticed." He stood in the manner of a powerful man declaring a meeting at an end. Will stood up with him, and Crockett shook his hand.

"I'll get back to the Alamo as soon as I can," Will said.

Crockett slapped his nephew affectionately on the shoulder and shooed him away. Terrell could see that the older man was fighting back tears and looked away. Terrell shook Will's hand himself and then sat down again in front of the tree while Crockett unfolded a sheet of paper and took out a pen from a writing case.

"What do you want me to do?" Terrell said.

"I want you to sit there while I write a letter."

Chapter 34:

Joe had some difficulty finding Crockett since he did not know where he had been during the battle, but finally located somebody in front of the church that looked like him, and when they wiped the grime off his face Joe saw a tight and perverse version of the easy smile he had worn in life, and that had drawn men to him in the dark times of the siege.

"He asked me to thank you," the officer said after Santa Anna had finished contemplating the body of Crockett, "and to remind you that you have nothing to fear from us. His Excellency looks forward to interviewing you about the situation in Texas when you have recovered a little from the stress of the battle."

Santa Anna took off his hat and lifted his face to the rising sun and looked around at the horrible sights within the Alamo compound as if they gave him satisfaction. Then he smiled at Joe again and said something in Spanish as he stared at the blood-streaked face of the church and the tangled bodies still littering the yard. Joe thought Santa Anna was still talking to him, and he asked the officer what he had said.

"He said it was but a small affair," the man replied.

Essay Topics:

1. Develop another fictional character to add to Harrigan's novel.
2. What does having a teenage character do for the story or add to the story?
3. Does Harrigan succeed in telling the story from both the Mexican and Texian sides of the battle?
4. Write about what it must have been like living in Texas in 1836. Could you have adapted and survived?
5. Since you already know the Mexican army wins at the Alamo, how does the author keep you interested in reading to the end?
6. If The Gates to the Alamo is used for the script of a movie, what character would you like to play? Why?
7. Put yourself in the shoes of one of the characters, perhaps your favorite one or the one you most identify with. What was it like for this person in this episode?
8. Why is the Alamo so important in Texas history?
9. What parts of Harrigan's novel are unrealistic to you?
10. Who are your heroes in Harrigan's book? Who are your villains?

Bibliography:

- Crook, Elizabeth. Promised Lands: A Novel of the Texas Rebellion. Dallas: SMU Press, 1995.
- _____. The Raven's Bride. Dallas: SMU Press, 1993.
- Davis, William C. Three Roads to the Alamo: The Lives and Fortunes of David Crockett, James Bowie and William Travis. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Fehrenbach, T.R. Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans. New York: Da Capo Press, 2000.
- Garza, David. "As Much Magic as Fact," *Austin Chronicle*, March 24, 2000.
- Hardin, Stephen L. Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.
- Harrigan, Stephen. The Gates of the Alamo. New York: Knopf, 2000.
- Holland, Dick. "The Alamo Brought to Life," *Austin American Statesman*, March 5, 2000.
- _____. "Unremember the Alamo," *Austin American Statesman*, February 25, 2000.
- Houston, Robert. "A Lot to Remember," *New York Times*, March 12, 2000.

- Huffines, Alan C. Blood of Noble Men: The Alamo Siege and Battle, An Illustrated Chronology. Austin: Eakin Press, 1999.
- Lindley, Thomas Ricks. Alamo Traces: New Evidence and New Conclusions. Lanham: Republic of Texas Press, 2003.
- Long, Jeff. Duel of Eagles: The Mexican and U.S. Fight for the Alamo. New York: Morrow, 1990.
- _____. Empire of Bones: A Novel of Sam Houston and the Texas Revolution. New York: Morrow, 1993.
- Lord, Walter. A Time to Stand. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961.
- Tinkle, Lon. 13 Days to Glory: The Siege of the Alamo. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958.