

The Declaration of Independents



Remember Goliad!

by Celia Hayes

The Texas Revolution of 1835 initially resembled the American Revolution of some sixty years before. The Colonies and the Anglo-Texans both began as far-distant communities with established traditions of self-sufficiency, accustomed to managing their own affairs with a bare minimum of interference from the central governing authority. Colonists and Anglo-Texans also started off by standing on their rights as citizens until a heavy-handed central government provoked a response that spiraled into open revolt. "Since they're trying to squash us like bugs for being rebellious, we might as well give them a real rebellion and put up a fight," summed up the attitude of the Anglos in Texas.

The Mexican government, beset with factionalism and seeing revolt against its authority everywhere, sent an army to remind the Anglo-Texan settlers who was really in charge. One rumor was that among the baggage carried in General Martin Cos' train were 800 pairs of iron hobbles, with which to march selected Texas rebels back to Mexico. This did not win them any friends; neither did the widely reported remarks that it was time to break up the foreign settlements in Texas.

Cos' army, which was supposed to re-establish and ensure Mexican authority, was ignominiously beaten and sent packing. Over the winter of 1835-36, a scratch Texan army of volunteers held two *presidios* that guarded the southern approaches from another attack, while representatives of the various communities met to sort out what to do next. First they formed a shaky provisional government- and appointed Sam Houston to command the Army. Then, in scattershot fashion, they appointed three more officers to high

command. It would have been farcical if the consequences hadn't been so dire. With no clear command, with military companies and commanders pursuing their own various plans and strategies, the Texas settlers and companies of volunteers were not especially fit to face the terrible wrath of General Antonio Lopez de

thousand soldiers—a third of them heavy cavalry—to guard his eastern flank along the rivers and lowlands of the Gulf coast, and to mop up the Anglo-Texan garrisons at San Patricio and Goliad. A small force at San Patricio embarked on an expedition to raid Matamoros—a scheme which can only be described as half-



The presidio in Goliad as it still stands today. Photo courtesy of Al Past.

Santa Anna, the President of Mexico and a professional soldier who was considered the Napoleon of the West. Santa Anna intended to punish this rebellious province with the utmost severity. Under his personal command, his army reached the Rio Grande at Laredo in mid-February and laid siege to a tumbledown former mission garrisoned by a scratch force of volunteers ... San Antonio de Valero, known simply as the Alamo. But this story is about the other *presidio*, and another garrison of Texans and volunteers: Bahia del Espiritu Santo, or Goliad.

Santa Anna detached General Don Jose Urrea with a force of about a

assess—and was surrounded and wiped out. Then it was the turn of Colonel James Fannin with 500 men holed up at the *presidio* in Goliad. Three times couriers arrived from William Barrett Travis' tiny garrison in the Alamo, begging Fannin for help and reinforcements. The kindest thing one can say about Fannin is that he dithered indecisively. He was battered from each direction with bad news and the consequences of bad decisions—or even worse, decisions not made until they were forced upon him. He made an abortive attempt to march to the Alamo to come to Travis' aid, but turned back after a few miles,

assuming that relief of the Alamo was just not possible.

In the meantime, spurred by the knowledge that they must either fight or submit to death or exile, a new convention of settlers met at Washington-on-the-Brazos on March 2, 1836 and declared independence. In short time they had drafted a constitution, elected an interim government, and commissioned Sam Houston as commander of what army was left.

Houston went to Gonzales, intending to rally the settlers' militia there and lift the siege of the Alamo. He arrived there on the very same day news came that Santa Anna's army had finally broken through the walls. Travis' rag-tag collection of volunteers had held for fourteen days. They had bought time with their blood.

Houston sent word to Fannin, now holed up in the old La Bahia *presidio*, ordering him to retreat north. But Fannin had sent out a small force to protect Anglo-Texan settlers in a nearby town and refused to leave until he heard from them. When he finally decided to fall back and join up with Houston, it was already too late. Fannin and his men moved out of Goliad on March 19th, temporarily shielded by fog, but they were caught in the open by Urrea's column a little short of Coeto Creek. They fought in a classic hollow square, three ranks deep for a day and a night, tormented by lack of water and the cries of the wounded. By daylight the next morning, Urrea had brought up field guns and raked the square with grapeshot. Fannin signaled for a parley and surrendered. He and his men believed they would be permitted honorable terms.

They were brought back to Goliad and held under guard in the *presidio* for a week, along with some stragglers who had been rounded up in the neighborhood and a party of volunteers newly arrived from the States.

Fannin and his men all assumed they would be disarmed and sent back to

the United States. Three English-speaking professional soldiers among Urrea's officers assumed the same, and were appalled when Santa Anna sent orders that all the prisoners were to be executed. Urrea himself had asked for leniency and Colonel Portillo, the commander left in charge of Goliad, was personally horrified at this development—but he obeyed orders.

On Palm Sunday, March 27, 1836, those of Fannin's garrison able to walk—about three hundred of them—were divided into three groups and marched out of town in three different directions, before being shot down by their guards. Forty wounded Texans were dragged into the courtyard in front of the chapel doors and executed as they lay on the ground.

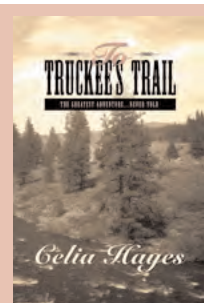
Fannin himself was shot last of all, knowing exactly what had happened to his men. Reportedly he asked only that he not be shot in the face, that his personal belongings be sent to his family, and that he be given a decent burial. Instead, he was executed at point blank range with a shot to the face, his belongings were looted, and his body was dumped into a trench and burned with other soldiers' corpses. Many other bodies were left where they lay.

A handful of men survived by escaping into the brush during all the confusion. Another handful of prisoners were kept out of the columns, either concealed in the *presidio* by one of Portillo's officers, or rescued by Francita Alavez, the common-law wife of Captain Telesforo Alavez who later came to be called the Angel of Goliad.

Santa Anna, who until then had been thought of as a competent soldier and a more slippery than usual politician, was thereafter branded a monster and—as Sam Houston decoyed him into pursuing the rebels farther and farther into Texas—an overreaching and arrogant fool. While Houston was falling back he was training all of the men who had gathered to him. After a month his

troops turned and fought. Santa Anna's grand army disintegrated as Houston's men shouted "Remember the Alamo!" and "Remember Goliad!" ■

Celia Hayes is an avid traveler and blogger, and the author of numerous books including To Truckee's Trail. Additional information on her work can be found at www.celiahayes.com.



Morse Code Myths

by Charles L. Lunsford

In the movies Morse Code is always sent by a man hunched over a small electronic device, using a finger to tap out the code. The movies rarely get it right. Most anything to do with radio or radio procedure is a joke, and it's common to see movie characters hear a couple of Morse characters and then quote a whole paragraph.

The picture on page 3 is the same telegraph key we radio operators used. Note the spring under the bar, and the knurled knob on the end of the bar. The operator pressed down on the key, making contact with the points to the right of the spring, and how long he held it down is what decided whether it was a dot or a dash. The knurled screw adjusted the distance between the points, and the faster the operator, the more closely the points were adjusted—about 1/16th of an inch. The spring was never fast enough, so not only did we have to press, we also had to lift the knob. So we didn't tap on it with one finger, the whole hand and muscles of the arm were involved. Maximum speed on the device was about twenty-five to thirty words a minute.

The average person would be a vegetable if he listened to recorded Morse code for three hours a day for six months. Those of us who were chosen for radio school could hear those little pauses between the dots and dashes that normal people can't.



Sample Morse Code telegraph key. Used by permission of photographer Lou Sander

But we didn't know that, so we acted as though we were normal.

Our first code instructor had a Morse key on his desk, and this was wired

to our headsets. He told us that he was going to teach us the alphabet, and he began with the letter "L." Di-dah-di-dit, he would slowly send on

his key. Then he would say "L, Lima." As I recall, that's all he did that day. We may have gone on to other letters, too, but I know that if I live forever, I will never forget that di-dah-di-dit is the Morse character for the letter "L" and that Lima is, or was at the time, the correct phonetic word to denote "L."

Each time he would send di-dah-di-dit, L, Lima, we would write an L on the paper. We didn't know it then, but what they were doing was teaching us the code by rote. A conditioned reflex, it soon became automatic. When I hear Morse code, I can't just listen to the code and tell you what it says. I have to write it down first and then read it. I have known one or two people who could read it just from listening, but damned few. That's only for the movies.

Soon they began sending us *two* letters at once, and I remember how hard we thought it was to copy two at a time. Then they plugged us into the recording machines and we got *three* letters at a time. We were now up to the blinding speed of about twelve words a minute by this time, and they started sending us *five* letters at a time. "Oh, God. I can't do this. I'll never make it," I thought. But we persevered, and were very happy when we found out that five at a time was as many as we would ever get. All they would do now was just keep cranking up the speed at which these letters came over our headsets.

We had to copy 25 words per minute correctly to graduate. It seemed impossible and for some, it was. Twenty-five words per minute is 125 characters per minute, just over 2 per second, and that's just about as fast as most people can print. There were a few people who had to decipher what they submitted to their instructor because they were writing so fast that it wasn't readable.

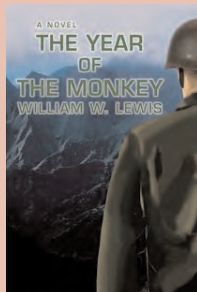
So after a couple of months we all knew the code. It was only a matter of increasing our speed so we could pass that damn test. All we did for three hours each morning was plug into the code machines and copy. That part of the building was used

BOOK REVIEW

The Year of the Monkey

by William W. Lewis

Full disclosure: I am a Viet Nam-era veteran (Navy), but beyond seeing Apocalypse Now and The Deer Hunter, I have been content to put the whole unpleasantness of that time out of my mind. Evidently, the great majority of my fellow Americans feel the same way. That's more than a shame: in view of current events, it's a tragedy. Now more than ever we need to be reminded of how important it is we know where we've been as a nation, where we've gone wrong, and, if we can only gain a few glimmerings of wisdom, where not to go in the future. Some think democracy is the great wave of the future. There's probably a better argument to be made that stupidity is the wave of the future.



That's why *The Year of the Monkey*, by William W. Lewis, is most timely. For me, it brings back memories long forgotten, and in sharp detail. It rings true. The story is set at the time of the Tet Offensive, when Communist forces mounted a surprise counterattack against Hue, a supposedly safe city in South Vietnam. The attack failed in the short run, but the

political ramifications it caused are viewed by many historians as the beginning of the end of our ill-advised and bungled adventure in Indochina. To tell his story Lewis interweaves the lives of four characters: a Marine Sergeant, a CIA operative, a journalist, and a seemingly humble Vietnamese barber, who is really a double agent and a devoted patriot. These threads are brought together with great skill and grace in cleanly-written, convincingly detailed prose. The resulting tale is one in which the reader cares for the characters, imperfect though they all are. At the end one can only shake one's head at the waste, the stupidity, and the cruelty which make savages of us all, including the ignorant and uncaring back home.

That sounds terribly somber, but the book is not, really. The editing is nearly immaculate. It's a page turner in the good sense: fun to read despite its serious subject matter. For those with super-delicate sensibilities, I should mention that the language of most of the characters is rough indeed. It is also accurate: I know! See the first sentence, above.

The Year of the Monkey is a terrific example of an independently-published book that is outside the norm, not below it! If Mr. Lewis has any more books in him, I want to hear about them.

Review written by Al Past, author of the Distant Cousin series.

only for code and it was as quiet as a mouse in there. Everybody was concentrating on copying. Every once in a while, a “God d*** it to hell” or a “dirty rotten son-of-a-b**** code” would erupt, followed by the angry crumpling of paper (which, of course, disturbed everyone else’s copy). But it didn’t happen very often.

One day we were all startled by a loud scream and then a big crash coming from somewhere else in the building. We all rushed to the door just in time to see someone sprinting by yelling, “I can’t stand it any longer. I can’t stand that God**** beeping. It’s driving me nuts!” Lying on the hall floor were the remains of a typewriter: the ground and intercept operators used typewriters instead of writing it down and they could copy much faster than we could.

Finally, just before I thought I would go code-happy and the white-coats would come and drag me away, I passed at 25 words per minute. It was an experience of special achievement for me. For a long time, I didn’t think I would ever be able to do it. We all felt good when we passed, and felt bad for the guys who were still fighting for 25. There were a few who never did make it. ■

Charles L. Lunsford served in the Air Force as an Airborne Radio Operator during the 1950s. He is the author of several books, including the non-fiction *Departure Message* and the fictional *Boxcar Down: The Albanian Incident*.



Write What You Know

by Melissa Strangway

After publishing my first book, *56 Water Street*, I have found myself repeatedly answering questions about where I got the idea for an invisible house that only two children can see. Usually, at this point, I am standing in front of a grade five or six classroom with twenty-four pairs of eyes staring at me, anticipating my answer. Sometimes the kids have hard questions; but this one is pretty easy.

Ideas come from anywhere and everywhere. Sometimes they just pop into your head, giving you no clue about where they came from. But as a writer I do understand one important thing—write what you know. That’s not always as easy as it sounds; but it’s a lot easier than writing about something you don’t know.

The idea for my invisible house probably came from my fascination with the supernatural. All those “what if” questions take up a lot of precious space inside my head. What if there is an invisible world living among the one we can see? What if spirits really do exist? What if we could change the past or the future? What if.... What if....

But the tragedy behind the house in *56 Water Street* is drawn from my own experience.

At the age of thirteen, I was the typical teenager—bored with school, and always finding creative ways to avoid homework. On one heavily packed homework night, I went to bed at seven o’clock. Early by normal standards, but extremely odd by teenage standards. It was the only way to avoid the ton of homework I had brought home that afternoon. It wasn’t a tough choice: pretend I was sick, or sit down in front of a pile of books.

So I quickly changed into my comfy pajamas and curled up under my soft covers. I was much more tired than I thought and fell asleep almost instantly.

Later that night, my family and I were victims of a house fire.

Hours later when the darkness was deep and still, a killer silently moved through the house. There was no warning of his arrival, and with terrible speed he tore through the house, leaving nothing but ashes and ruin.

– *56 Water Street*

It was I who discovered the house on fire. If I hadn’t gone to bed ridiculously early, would I have woken up? What would have happened if I

hadn’t awakened—would we all have perished? Would someone else have smelled the smoke and woken up? We were very lucky to have escaped.

Or was it luck?

These questions haunted me for years. Why were we spared when others sometimes aren’t? What would have happened if....

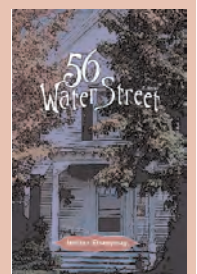
In *56 Water Street* I drew from my own experiences and ventured down the “what if” path.

In life, every one of us experiences a loss of some sort—a friend moving away, a family pet running away, the death of a loved one. In *56 Water Street* I brought all of this together: coping with loss, the importance of friendship, and the “what if” question. And I wondered if there are things in this world we cannot see.

Writing this book helped me cope with my past. Our house fire wasn’t just the source of a good idea for a book; it was something that had never left my mind. Writing about it brought it into the open for me, where I could look at it, and ask myself some of those questions out loud.

So my answer to what the school kids ask me so often is: I write what I know. I write what touches me. I write to touch others. And I write because I will always wonder “what if....” ■

Melissa Strangway’s *56 Water Street* is a supernatural novel for teens and tweens. Information on this book and the author can be found at www.melissastrangway.com.



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