



The Alamo, in San Antonio, Texas. Home of David Crockett's rifle, "Ol' Betsy"? Maybe, and maybe not!



"The last moments of the fall of the Alamo." More than one artist has depicted Crockett swinging his rifle as a club before being overcome. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.

O! Betsy in the Alamo

Lynn M. Chenault

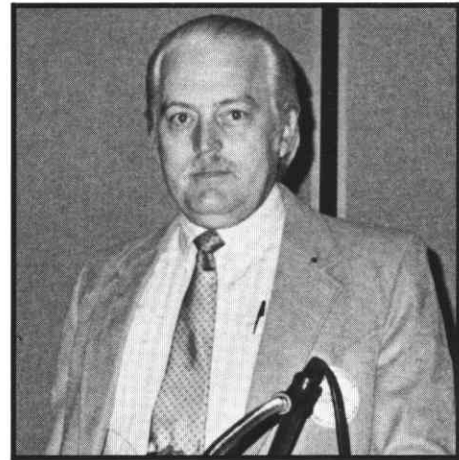
March 6, 1836 was a day that will live in infamy in the hearts of Texans forever. At the sleepy little Mexican town of Bexar, in the Mission San Antonio de Valero, the brutal slaughter of 189 brave defenders of liberty galvanized the disorganized Texas army into action and provided a battle cry to ring in their ears. The sleepy little Mexican town of Bexar is now known as bustling San Antonio. The mission is known as The Alamo. The rallying cry: "Remember the Alamo!"

The battle itself lasted but 1½ hours. It ended a 13 day siege of sporadic firing in a fury of hand to hand combat rarely equalled in intensity. Just 189 men, Texian and Mexican settlers and a handful of "Tennessee Boys," stood their ground for an hour and a half against Mexican General Santa Anna's 4000 troops. Nearly 600 Mexican soldiers died before the 189 Texans were wiped out. About a thousand more were wounded. Mexican Colonel Juan Almonte declared that "Another such victory and we are ruined." Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, the Napoleon of the West, shrugged it off as ". . . but a small affair." But Texas was infuriated as "Remember the Alamo" spread across the vast colony.

6 weeks later at San Jacinto, that cry would be the last words heard by another 650 Mexican soldiers as they fell in 20 minutes of pitched battle with Texan General Sam Houston. Houston lost only 9 of his 800 men, and captured General Santa Anna and about 800 survivors of his dwindling army.

The 189 men who perished in the Alamo had not died in vain. Texas independence was secured from Mexico. Among those 189 souls were men whose names are now familiar to most of us: Jim Bowie, William Barrett Travis, Jim Bonham, and David Crockett.

Crockett would have been well remembered even if he had not died an Alamo hero. He had served in the Tennessee legislature and in the US Congress twice, and was a well known and admired humorist and outdoorsman. He aspired to the Presidency, hoping to replace Andrew Jackson. He'd fought alongside Jackson in the Creek Indian wars and in the War of 1812, but was an archenemy of the President politically. He narrowly lost a key election in 1835, and bitterly declared: "You-all can go to Hell, and I'll go to Texas!" He hoped to rekindle his political career for a later Presidential bid. Had he gone to San Jacinto with Houston, it might well have worked. He stepped across the line in the sand with Travis at the Alamo instead. But his last act certainly assured him immortality in the imaginations of generations to come.



David Crockett's reputation as a hunter and marksman had helped elevate him to public attention. He must have owned a number of rifles; little is known of them, however. He traded a rifle to a Quaker named Kennedy for a horse in 1806, but he must have soon acquired another to help provide for his new bride, the daughter of the same Quaker. Crockett distinguished himself as a hunter by 1809 in Lincoln County, Tennessee, where deer and small game were plentiful, but the bear had been mostly hunted out. He moved to Franklin County in 1810 and came to like bear hunting best of all. He returned there after fighting with Jackson in the deep South, and hunted often with his flintlock rifle. In one year he killed 105 bears. He also hunted wolves with notable success. His hunting companions credited him with being a very good hunter, but not necessarily a great shot. In all of his writings he did not do much to describe his rifle or rifles, except to mention that he "primed" it, indicating flintlock, on an extended bear hunt in 1822. This is quite reasonable, since even a dozen years later percussion caps were still not readily available as far west as Tennessee.

Crockett was presented a fine caplock rifle by John Sanderson on behalf of his congressional supporters in Philadelphia in 1834. He bragged on its beauty in speeches, along with its accompanying leather case, tomahawk, and razor-steel butcher knife. However, when he set out for Texas in 1835, he was carrying an old flintlock he reportedly dubbed "O! Betsy." Percussion caps were still hard to come by in Tennessee and even more scarce in Texas. He'd orated that the presentation rifle would remain in the hands



The younger David Crockett, politician, outdoorsman, and a legend in his own time. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.

of his sons to further distinguish itself. But he hadn't shot well with it on its first outing in the East. Perhaps he simply preferred a familiar arm he'd used for years to put meat on the table as well as to win shooting matches and the admiration of many outdoorsmen. In any event, it was probably Ol' Betsy, a long flintlock Kentucky style rifle, that he carried to Texas from Tennessee.

On the way to Texas, Crockett threw in with other Tennesseans, including adventurers like himself and families in ox wagons on their way to new farmland. At a camp in Northeast Texas, which is now called Honey Grove, Crockett apparently traded rifles with a settler named Andy Thomas. Thomas reported that Crockett wanted his shorter, lighter gun for horseback and fighting. They parted there, with Andy Thomas settling near Whitewright, Texas to farm. Two other Thomases pushed on south with

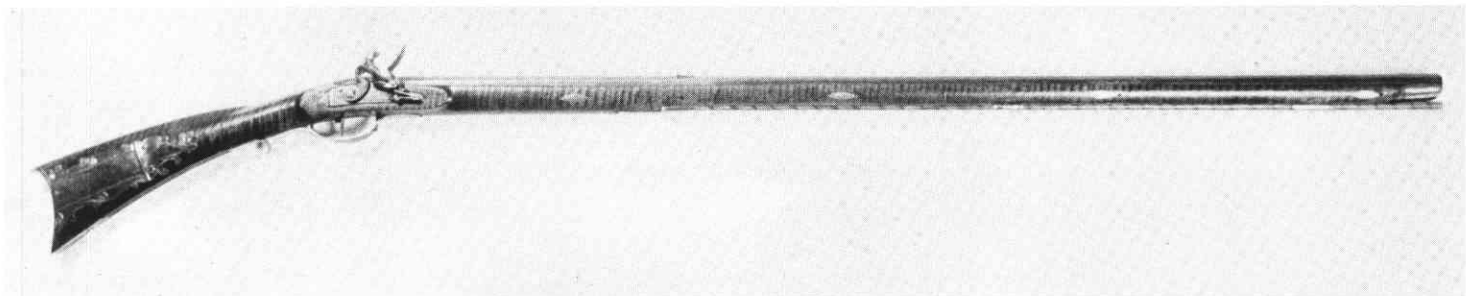
Crockett and died in the Alamo. So it is very likely that Ol' Betsy was replaced by a shorter, lighter flintlock rifle for the Alamo fight.

Contemporary paintings depict Crockett swinging a rifle as a club in his last moments as Mexican soldiers swarmed around him. Of course there is a high likelihood that the rifle Crockett used in the Alamo was smashed in the clubbing, and discarded by those who cleaned up the rubble. Or he may have gotten separated from it in the final moments as his loader was killed. Or it may have been snatched by a wily souvenir scavenger.

Over the years, many rifles reportedly belonging to Crockett have surfaced. In fact, it seems you can find a Crockett gun in every closet in the country since publicity has shrouded Crockett, and particularly his guns, in such myth and mystery. Obviously, Crockett must have owned several rifles during his 49 years, and probably used several at once with the help of loaders during the battle. Where are they now?

The rifle traded to his prospective father-in-law in 1806 has been traced to a family in California. Crockett's widow, Elizabeth, moved to Texas with her family. At least two contenders for the title of Ol' Betsy have emerged among their descendants in Texas. Publicity in 1955 described another Crockett family descendent in Lawrence County, Tennessee, who owned a rifle, horn, and mold said to have belonged to David Crockett. The Andy Thomas rifle stayed in that family until 1955. But Ol' Betsy may now rest in the Alamo Museum.

The rifle most prominently displayed in the Alamo chapel is an example of the craft of Jacob Dickert. Dickert's signature appears on the 45" barrel, and his predictable patchbox and furniture adorn the rifle. It now carries a Ketland flintlock. The rifle has apparently been restocked, probably during the period of use, although not in the Dickert style. If in fact Crockett did use it as a bludgeon in his last fight, it was very likely broken, which would have required restocking. The rifle is claimed to have been picked up by a Mexican soldier after the battle. When it was donated in 1947, with a long public provenance, it was heralded as Ol' Betsy returning home to the Alamo. However, it is unlikely that this rifle is Ol' Betsy.



The Jacob Dickert rifle. Not seriously considered to be Ol' Betsy any longer. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.

Another rifle with a claim of authenticity is now being reproduced by the Franklin Mint. This rifle was donated amid publicity as Ol' Betsy by a couple of heiresses from Carrizo Springs, Texas. It is a half-stock percussion with brass patchbox engraved with what appears to be a soldier. Texas stars and crescent moons in German silver also adorn the stock. The 30¾ inch barrel is marked in silver "Jas M. Graham 1822" (the last 2 very small). The brass side plate is crudely engraved "Presented to David Crockett at Nashville Tenn. May 5, 1822." Some of the records with the gun state that because of rust, the barrel was cut off and it was made into a half stock rifle in 1886. It appears that the gun has been extensively altered, and is of unusually late styling compared to its inscribed date. A similar late style halfstock percussion rifle is still in the hands of other Crockett descendants and it, too, is claimed to be both Betsy and the Philadelphia presentation gun.

The rifle ostensibly traded by Crockett to Andy Thomas on the way to Bexar may be the most likely claimant now residing in the Alamo. It was donated in 1955 by Thomas' descendants without public fanfare. My own choice for the title of Ol' Betsy is this .50 caliber fullstock Kentucky rifle, with 44" barrel and no patchbox. A five point star is now missing from its inlet on the left cheekrest. It has at sometime been converted to percussion. It appears a reasonable style to have been a frontiersman's rifle of the period, and has a good provenance.

Possibly, as one Crockett descendant remarked, he called all of his guns Betsy (including the one *she* has) and so it doesn't matter. His most noted biographer asserted he may never have named any of them! The reader can make up his own mind. A good way to do so is to visit the Alamo in San Antonio. Step into the Shrine, and step back in time 152 years, to the day when 189 Texans showed how important freedom was to them.



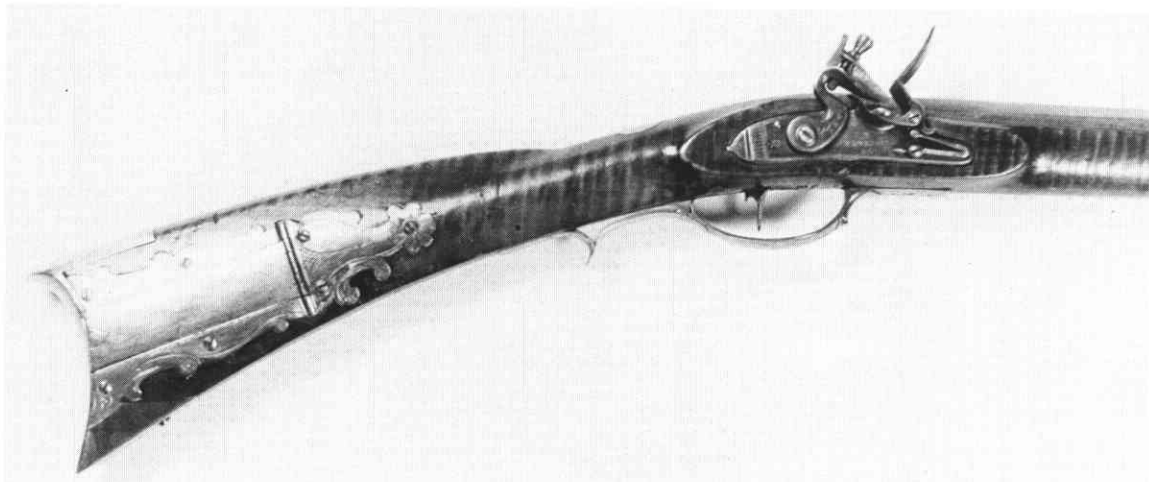
An older David Crockett, who earned the respect of most of his peers with his woodsman's skill, silver tongue oratory, and good humor. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.

Thanks . . .

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Stock of the Jacob Dickert rifle. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.

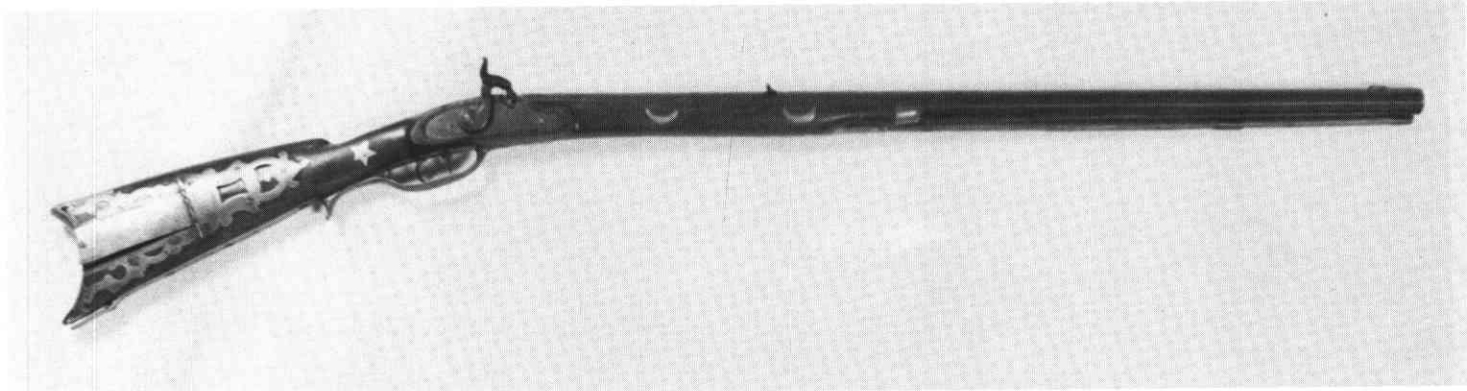
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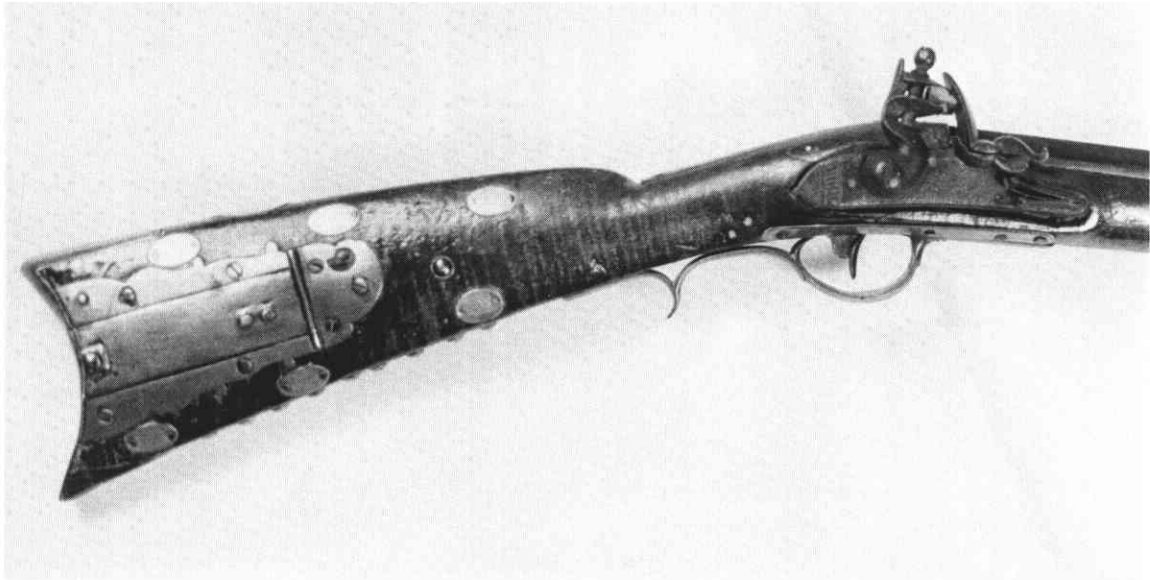
The James Graham rifle. Marked "Presented to David Crockett at Nashville, Tenn. May 5, 1822." Unusually late styling for such an early date, and extensively modified otherwise, but it COULD be Ol' Betsy. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.



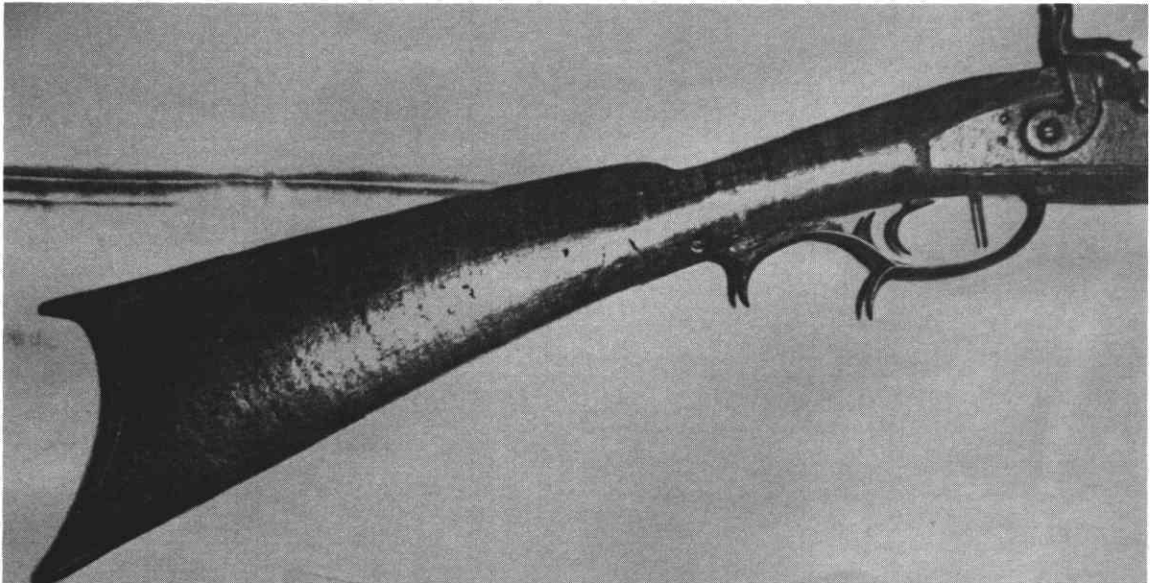
Stock of the James Graham rifle. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.



Inscription on the James Graham Rifle. Photo courtesy of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, The Alamo, Office of the Curator. (Editor's note: there is apparently no known historical verification of this presentation. In any event, the type style used in the marking is of a pattern approximately 100 years later than the possible presentation.)



The stock and lock of a Henry Deringer, Philadelphia, long rifle unearthed in the Alamo by workmen in 1874. Could this be Ol' Betsy? Possibly, but probably not. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.



The Andy Thomas' rifle. Most likely this is the "Ol' Betsy" that was slung over David Crockett's arm when he left Tennessee for Texas in 1835. Photo courtesy Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Alamo, Office of the Curator.