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Letter could boost Alamo as historic site

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Friday's historic return of William Barret Travis' victory or death letter to the Alamo is seen by some as a rebirth for the state shrine - a new way to remember the Alamo.

What it could mean is more signs and better displays, storytelling and narration; holistic approaches to the site's evolution from a Spanish mission to 1836 battle site and U.S. Army depot; and reverence befitting an American Indian burial ground.

Despite being celebrated in movies and books as a symbol of freedom, where nearly 200 Texian rebels died as martyrs for independence, many have found the Alamo lacking as a historic site. Recorded visitation at the state-owned complex has fallen by at least 15 percent, to 1.6 million visitors annually.

In an online review, Frommer's lists the Alamo among its 100 Places to Take Your Kids, but warns, expect the kids to be let down at first. The review says the Alamo looks downright dinky, set smack in the heart of downtown San Antonio.

Frommer's then gives a shorthand version of history.

But the whole point of the Alamo is that it was such a tiny fort, and the valiant Texan volunteers never had a ghost of a chance of escaping the Mexican army's siege - and still they fought, they fought to the death. That's heroism, Texas style, the review states.

Alamo lore has become so engrained to those who grew up hearing the tales that some bristle when one questions whether Davy Crockett really wore a hat made of raccoon skin or if Travis actually drew a line in the dirt with his sword. But as researchers have tested legends against historic fact, even the portrayal of the predawn assault of March 6, 1836, as a courageous last stand has been challenged. In recent years, based on witness accounts, historians have concluded that at least 60 Texians, and possibly more than 100, fled the fort amid the chaos and darkness of the attack.

Portal of time'

Author Bill Groneman, who noted the breakouts in his 2001 book, Eyewitness to the Alamo, said the attempted escapes did not diminish the valor of the men who were badly outnumbered and awakened by the noise of battle. For 12 days, as the Alamo was under siege, they kept Mexican Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna and his army from marching to East Texas, where delegates were meeting to declare independence. Though Travis was prepared to die like a soldier, as he wrote in his letter, Groneman said the garrison was sending out for weeks to get help, and hoped to break the siege from the outside.

They met the enemy, and held them in place, he said. When the final assault began, their objective was done.

Martin Vasquez grew up with the movie image of John Wayne as Crockett but has come to appreciate the dedication of Mexican soldiers who marched through snow during the grueling Texas campaign and charged at the Alamo with ladders and bayonets, prepared to die for their homeland.

It's time for people to see both sides of the history, Vasquez said. From the Texan side, it has been presented as a fight for freedom, but it also was really a fight for opportunity - an opportunity to start a new

life.❖

Visitors often don't know that much of the Alamo's history occurred in the city-owned plaza, not in the park behind the church. Gary Foreman, a filmmaker producing a documentary on the Travis letter, said the plaza's uninviting pavement, traffic and amusement storefronts keep visitors from entering ❖ a portal of time.❖

❖ People come here to feel history. They're trying to recapture the moment that made this place significant,❖ Foreman said. ❖ They want to see interpreters communicate how we lived.❖

The land once occupied by the 1836 Alamo compound is carved up among various owners: the city, the state, private businesses and the federal government.

But the Texas General Land Office, which fully assumed custodianship last year of the state complex, supports nomination of the Alamo and other San Antonio missions for World Heritage status and seeks to interpret all eras of the site's past.

Land Office spokesman Mark Loeffler said the Travis letter exhibition reflects his agency's commitment to ❖ the kind of attention that needs to be paid to the Alamo, and to Texas history.❖

Valerie Hyatt Martin, a member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas who will travel here from her home in Arlington to see the letter this week, sees that commitment as a step forward. She's disappointed that the spot where Travis contemplated his situation and wrote his moving text has long been used commercially, for years as a Woolworth's/Burger King complex, and now as the site of Ripley's Haunted Adventure.

❖ That in itself seems tragic to me,❖ said Martin, who is working on a book about Rebecca Cummings, Travis' East Texas sweetheart. She wants the space used as a historic site honoring the Alamo commander.

Mission era

Interpreting the Alamo's 1700s origin as Mission San Antonio de Valero might be as tricky as sifting through conflicting accounts of the 1836 battle. Vincent Huizar, a Spanish mission descendant serving on a World Heritage advisory committee, believes that most or all mission inhabitants buried in front of the Alamo church were Spaniards, including master masons and other craftsmen.

❖ It was always the Spanish citizens who were buried in front of the church,❖ said Huizar, a six-generation descendant of Pedro Huizar, a surveyor and sculptor of the Spanish colonial period best known for his carved Rose Window at Mission San José.

Ramón Vásquez, executive director of American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, said the human remains buried inside, by the church and in the plaza are those of indigenous people who began settling the area in 1724.

❖ For the most part, they're all mission Indians,❖ **Vásquez** said.

Huizar and **Vásquez** agree that there should be more narration, markers and visual displays telling the story of the mission and the people whose hands built the walls of what would become the Alamo. The remains of several individuals unearthed when the Hipolito F. Garcia Federal Building was constructed in the 1930s were determined to be American Indian. In 1995, bone fragments were discovered under the floor of the Alamo church during a preservation project.

Huizar said he'd like to see the church's limestone façade - now cracked and crumbled with pieces broken off from years of wear - restored with carved native limestone figures of St. Francis and St. Dominic placed in the lower statue insets.

He seeks more recognition of the Spanish craftsmen and indigenous people who built the mission. ❖ If it wasn't for them, the Texians would not have had a place to defend, ❖ Huizar said.

Mary Rachel Sheeran, a lifelong Texan, said she doesn't have much of an opinion about changes at the Alamo. She thought the displays were ❖ a little boring ❖ when she took her grandsons there a few years ago. But the Alamo will always be a special place to Sheeran, 73. Creed Taylor, her great-great-grandfather, wanted to join the defenders at age 15, but was sent to Gonzales instead.

❖ If he'd gotten his way and made it to the Alamo, I wouldn't be here, ❖ she said.

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