### TEXAS MONTHLY ARTICLE BY: Gary CARTWRIGHT

### THE BATTLE OF SAN JACINTO

**Location:** La Porte  
**Date:** April 21, 1836  
**Casualties:** Approximately 640 killed

**THE TRIUMPH OF SANTA ANNA’S ARMY AT** the Battle of Coleto Creek and the deadly efficiency with which the Mexican dictator’s wishes were carried out at Goliad led him to believe he really was the Napoleon of the West, a military genius on the cusp of quelling an annoying little rebellion. At the Battle of San Jacinto, he learned how wrong he was.

Santa Anna led seven hundred Mexican troops toward Harrisburg to capture officials from the Texas government. But when he arrived, he found that everyone had fled to Galveston, so he burned the town and headed toward Lynchburg. Santa Anna considered Houston a rival of no consequence. He was wrong about that too.

Houston, on the other hand, seemed destined to lead a rebellion. A man of intrigue and daring, he was intemperate, grave, and absorbed in his own vision of Manifest Destiny. He had resigned under a cloud of scandal as the governor of Tennessee; lived for years with the Cherokee, who knew him as Big Drunk; and come to Texas, like other rowdies and misfits, seeking redemption. But by San Jacinto, his troops were close to mutiny: Many of them thought Houston gutless, more interested in retreating than fighting.

“San Jacinto was not so much a battle that Houston won but rather one that Santa Anna squandered,” explained Stephen L. Hardin, a professor at the Victoria College, who showed me around the battle site. A robust man with a silver beard, Hardin is the author of a history of the revolution titled Texian Iliad. He is firmly convinced that Houston is an overrated military leader, and he spent much of our afternoon together making his case.

We were sitting on a park bench on an elevated bank overlooking Buffalo Bayou, at the edge of what would have been the Texan camp on April 20, 1836. Just behind us were paved walkways, statues, and granite markers identifying sites where various units of Houston’s army camped. One marked the spot where Santa Anna surrendered to a wounded Houston. Off to our right, rising out of the marsh like a black hulk from hell, was the battleship Texas,which is berthed near where Juan Seguín’s men would have pitched their tents. Except for the misplaced battleship, the park seemed to be an attractive and friendly place to contemplate history, here among a thick grove of oaks that gave the Texan army an advantage over the Mexican cavalry. Hardin is a battlefield purist, however, and he was disgusted by the way the site had been turned into a patriotic shrine. “This isn’t a monument, though that’s what everyone calls it,” he fumed. “It’s a damn battleground!”

Directing my attention to the bayou, Hardin reminded me that the waterway was much narrower in 1836. “I think Houston was trying to find a way not to fight this battle,” Hardin told me. “I think it crossed his mind that he had time to build a bridge for his retreat across the bayou. United States Army units were stationed on the Sabine, and if Santa Anna got too close, they would move into Texas to defend U.S. sovereignty.”

“Wouldn’t that have changed the whole dynamics of the revolution?” I suggested.

“You’ve heard the expression ‘I’m a Texan first and an American second’?” Hardin replied. “Well, that applies to me. Houston, on the other hand, was an American first. If U.S. troops had entered the battle, Texas would have joined the Union immediately, and we never would have been a republic. Those ten years as a republic explain the exceptionalism that is the core of the Texas character.”

Hardin believes that all great battles have a crossroads. Houston’s army came to just such a point soon after marching away from Groce’s plantation, on the Brazos River. The men were spoiling for a fight; Houston had other plans. Meanwhile, Santa Anna and his troops were headed for the coast.

Houston’s fateful crossroads was an intersection near the town of Hempstead. The north road led to Nacogdoches and safety, the south road to Harrisburg and the enemy. As they approached the intersection, men began shouting, “To the right, boys! To the right!” The small band of musicians leading the column made the turn without waiting for Houston’s orders.

“Old Sam knew that if he took the north road, he would travel alone,” Hardin told me. “The army led him toward the enemy against his will.”

So that I could better appreciate what it was like to be part of the battle, he walked me along the swampy path the Texan army took as it advanced on the Mexican position. Crossing Battleground Road, we headed in the direction of the San Jacinto Monument (as Miss Bayless never tired of reminding us, at nearly 570 feet, it is the tallest masonry column in the world). It rises from the crest of a ridge that gave cover to the advancing rebel army. The grounds crew had mowed a wide strip along the route, but Hardin insisted that we thrash through the tall grass, as Houston had.

I also wanted to appreciate the battle from Santa Anna’s point of view, so we headed toward the far side of the field. There were no walkways or statues at the Mexican camp, no gravestones marking the 630 soldiers who were killed.

The Mexicans never saw the Texans coming. Santa Anna had expected Houston to attack on the evening of April 20, so he kept his troops up all night building barricades and breastworks. He then prepared for an attack at dawn, but that didn’t happen either. At about nine o’clock in the morning on April 21, Mexican reinforcements arrived, hungry and exhausted. As shadows began to fall across the field late in the afternoon, Santa Anna gave an order to stand down. The men collapsed on their blankets, and according to legend—which Hardin disputes—Santa Anna went off to his tent to entertain a mulatto beauty who later became known as the Yellow Rose of Texas.

“It drives me crazy to hear people say that Houston held off his attack until the Mexicans took their siesta,” Hardin told me.

“Yeah, I remember my Texas history teacher telling us, ‘Isn’t that just like a Mexican?’ ” I replied.

The battle began at about four-thirty with a deadly shower from the Twin Sisters, a pair of cannons donated to the rebel cause by the people of Cincinnati. At the same time, Mirabeau Lamar’s horsemen charged on the Mexicans’ left flank, and a four-piece band broke into its version of “Will You Come to the Bower?” Houston, mounted on his great stallion, Saracen, led rebel infantrymen as they swarmed the camp, mowing down the Mexicans before they could reach their weapons. Santa Anna had made the mistake of positioning his troops with their backs to the marsh, so there was no retreat.

The battle lasted just eighteen minutes, though the killing went on for hours. With memories of the Alamo and Goliad still searing, the bloodthirsty rebels committed atrocities every bit as deplorable as the Mexicans had. Mexicans fleeing into the woods were hunted down and slaughtered. Some were scalped. Others ran into a shallow pond called Peggy Lake. Rebel soldiers pursued and stood at the water’s edge, shooting them for sport.

Hardin and I stood on the banks of the water for a time, trying to reconcile the price of liberty with the horror of this kind of warfare. As my friend Stephen Harrigan once observed in this magazine, “The Texas Revolution, for all its airs, was in its darkest aspects a mean little race war.” It didn’t start that way. It started as a rebellion against Santa Anna’s rule. But Harrigan was right: In time it became something else.