

# A HERO OF THE ALAMO.

## Origin of the Bowie Knife and How It Looked.

[Washington Herald.]

I am glad to see that the attempt made in Texas to raise funds for the erection of a suitable monument to Colonels David Crocket and Bowie and the other brave men who were treacherously killed in the defense of the Alamo, March 6, 1836, has been successful. A braver deed than that defense does not live in the annals of American history. Of Crocket much has been written, and but little of James Bowie, who was one of the most wonderful men of his day. The best account I have ever heard was related by Governor James Madison Wells of Louisiana returning board fame. He knew Bowie intimately in his younger days and was present with his brother, Colonel Jeff Wells of Rapids Parish, La., at one of the most brilliant fights in Bowie's life, which took place on Natchez island, almost opposite Natchez, Miss., in 1827. Governor Wells' account of the origin of the world famed knife called after Bowie is most interesting.

"In 1825 James Bowie was a large owner of claims to Spanish grants of land," said Governor Wells, "and as many of them were then occupied by planters who had to be ejected before he could get possession, Bowie was constantly in danger of his life. He was a small man, not weighing more than 150 pounds, five feet seven and one-half inches in height, but of wonderful physical strength, and as lithe and quick as a panther. At the time he was living with his brother Stephen in Louisiana, on a plantation situated on the dividing line between the parishes of Lafourche and Assumption. Near them there was a blacksmith and worker in iron and steel of great skill. He was of Spanish or Portuguese blood, and had been, according to local rumor, one of Lafitte's crew of pirates. The pistols of that day were not as accurate or sure of fire as they are now. They were flintlocks, as percussion caps were not in general use until about 1836. Bowie had great faith in a knife. He declared that it was the surest and most faithful of all weapons in the hands of a man who could rely on his nerves, but that he had never seen a weapon of that sort which came up to his ideas of the most effective pattern. One day he and his brother Stephen were riding down the road and one of the horses cast a shoe. They stopped at the blacksmith's mentioned to have it replaced. While waiting Bowie saw some fine workmanship on a sword, or rather a Spanish machete, and the thought occurred to him to have a knife made for defense and offense according to his notion by this blacksmith. There was a bundle of shingles near at hand and, taking one, Bowie whittled out of the soft thin pine a rough model in shape of what he wanted. The blacksmith had a long, worn out file, which was used in the heaviest iron work, and out of this he made the knife which James Bowie used in twenty-two bloody encounters and finally died grasping in his hand at the Alamo.

"I will describe it for you, for I have frequently seen and handled it," continued Governor Wells. "It was seventeen and one-half inches in the blade, two inches in width, until within five inches of the point, when it widened a half inch and then, curving backward a little, ran off suddenly to a point. In weight it was just three pounds. The handle was made of the lower part of a horn of an elk sawed in two halves and neatly riveted onto the shank of the blade, the handle and blade being twenty-three inches in length, with a handsome cross-piece where the two joined. The knife was ground down and then put on an oil stone until it was so sharp that it would shave the hair off one's hand, so admirable was its temper. The sheath was made of two pieces of this pine wood neatly covered with alligator skin. It could be used for both cut and thrust, and it never failed when Jim Bowie got a fair blow."

This is an accurate description of the Bowie knife, and as it has never been in print, a desire to preserve an interesting incident makes us produce it here.

There were three Bowie brothers—James, Stephen and Rezin. They were all "fighting men," as dangerous individuals were denominated in those times, but were not bullies. They never commenced a difficulty and in the ordinary intercourse with their neighbors were quiet and courteous, but always ready to defend the weaker side. An old Methodist minister, who died years ago, one of the pioneers of Christianity in the early days of the southwest, also told me a story illustrating this characteristic.

"I was holding a meeting at Church Hill, Miss., in 1830," said the venerable preacher, "when a lot of roughs, flatboatmen and others disturbed the congregation to such a degree that I thought there would be serious trouble. So, just before the evening service was to begin I called together several gentlemen to know what should be done if the trouble was renewed. Among those present was a small man, whom I had not met before, and about whom there was nothing remarkable except his low, soft voice and peculiar ringed gray eyes. 'I don't think there will be any more trouble, parson,' he said: 'I will stay to night and see you through.' I thanked him and, and in the bustle forgot to ask my friend who he was. The congregation was just beginning the first hymn when a brawny ruffian, half drunk, came staggering down the aisle of the church and, halting in front of the pulpit, gave an Indian war whoop. In a second the gentleman with the unusual eyes had him by the collar with one hand and an enormous knife raised above his head in the other. 'Sit down, you drunken devil, or by — I will cut your throat from ear to ear!'

" 'Why, who are you?' said the other in shaky tones.

" 'My name is James Bowie,' was the answer, 'and if I hear another whimper out of you or any member of your gang, I will waste no words, but come back to you. Now, go,' and the man went without a word, and Bowie then joined in the singing of the hymn with an air that was edifying in the extreme. There was no more trouble that night, nor ever after. The roughs had enough."

Rezin Bowie died in Arkansas about 1846, and his brothers in Louisiana outlived him only a few months. Thus ended one of the most remarkable families of their time.