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# CITY|STATE

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NATIVE TEXAN

## San Jacinto — and a Sea of Mud — saved fledgling Texas

SAN FELIPE DE AUSTIN — “I have a passion for the Mexican army,” Dr. Gregg Dimmick was telling me last Saturday afternoon as we leaned over a glass museum case containing Mexican army artifacts from the year 1836. “My friends tell me it’s an obsession, my wife says it’s lunacy, but it’s always been my stress relief. I found out golf didn’t do it for me.”

The mild-mannered Wharton resident is a semi-retired pediatrician who calls himself an “avocational archaeologist.” Not long after learning how to operate a metal detector back in 1996, he



JOE  
HOLLEY

one of the most consequential events of the Texas Revolution, one that the history books had almost totally ignored. His book “The Sea of Mud” documents that discovery. A superb exhibition currently on display at the San Felipe de Austin State Historic Site Museum takes us back to

ventured into a rice field near the little town of East Bernard, not far from his home in Wharton, and began discovering artifacts that would illuminate

that momentous week in April, 186 years ago, when torrential rain and clutching mud in what’s now Wharton County helped determine the fate of fledgling Texas.

What the good doctor came to understand as his obsession with archaeology grew is that the remarkable victory of Sam Houston and his rag-tag Texan army at San Jacinto did not end the conflict. The 18-minute battle did not assure Texas liberty. Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna and hundreds of his men may have been in Texan hands, but other Mexican generals, with several

thousand soldiers under their command, were in the vicinity. Santa Anna may have signed surrender papers, but his cohorts had no such intention.

Houston knew that the bulk of the Mexican army, three times larger than his own, remained in the field. Gen. Vicente Filisola’s command was the closest and could get to San Jacinto within a day or two. Gen. Antonio Gaona was approaching from the northwest, while the largest force, under Gen. Jose de Urrea, also was within striking distance. Filisola had 2,573 men under his direct command. His men, plus

troops scattered across South and Southeast Texas, totaled more than 4,000, plus several thousand camp followers.

The Mexican generals learned of the shocking loss at San Jacinto within hours, but during the first few days after the battle they didn’t know whether Santa Anna had been captured, whether he had survived or what he would want them to do. They also wanted to hear from the central government in Mexico City before deciding how to proceed.

On April 25, Filisola convened a meeting of the senior Mexican

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officers at Elizabeth Powell's boarding house in what's now Fort Bend County. Although most historians until recent years were unaware of this "council of war," it was crucial, as the officers debated whether to retreat or withdraw to a defensive position near Victoria. There they would reorganize and regroup with the intention of fighting another day.

Dimmick, who taught himself Spanish to better understand letters, memoirs and official Mexican documents, contends they had no intention of retreating. They believed they could still defeat the Texas rebels and that the Mexican government would want them to stay in the field, regardless of what Santa Anna had told Houston.

"If they were fleeing in a state of panic, would the Mexican army have taken a whole day at Powell's to rest, reorganize and come up with a plan of action," Dimmick writes in "Sea of Mud." "Would General Urrea have held a review of arms on the morning of April 28? The truth is that there is ample evidence that, until their unfortunate entrance



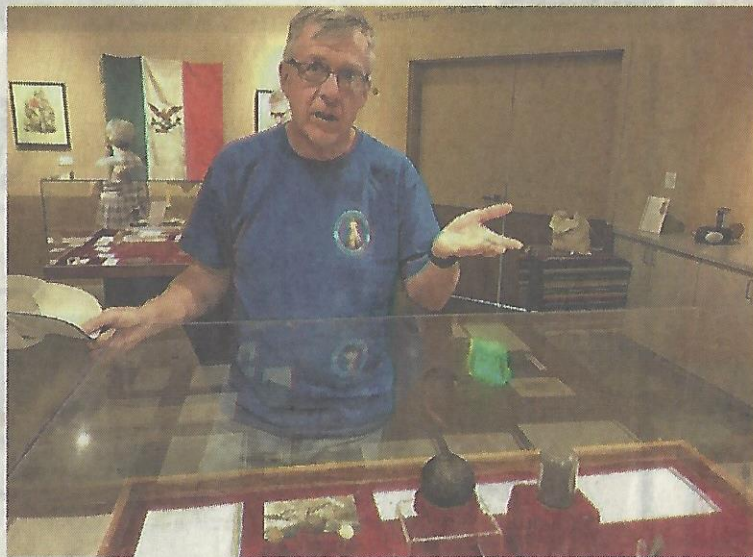
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A painting by Manuel Hinojosa, a Port Isabel architect, depicts the treachery of the Sea of Mud near the San Bernard River.

until their unfortunate entrance into the Mar de Lodo (Sea of Mud), the Mexican army was withdrawing in a disciplined and orderly fashion.”

With their units encamped on Turkey Creek near the San Bernard River – the site is a mile west of today’s U.S. 59 – the Mexicans began their withdrawal on April 26. As they were crossing the San Bernard that morning, the rains began. All that day, all that night and all the next day, the deluge continued, turning swamps, marshes and streams into a Sea of Mud.

Slogging through this hellish quagmire were 2,500 men and 1,500 wives, girlfriends and children, all of them hungry and exhausted, along with eight pieces of artillery, 120 wagons and between 1,200 and 1,500 horses and mules. Humans ended up carrying much of the equipment; pack animals bogged down up to their chests. Filisola offered a reward to any *zapadore* or grenadier who was willing to carry an



San Felipe de Austin State Historic Site Museum

**For nearly 25 years, Dr. Gregg Dimmick of Wharton has been uncovering Mexican army artifacts in the Sea of Mud.**

extra musket. Armaments, munitions, containers of nails and artillery equipment were thrown in the river or lost in the oozing mud. Mud sucked the boots off

men’s feet, and for days there was no dry place to rest.

The massive conglomeration of people, animals and equipment entered the prairie bog on

April 28 and didn’t finish crossing the Colorado River, only 20 miles away, until May 9.

“After extracting itself from the mud, the Mexican army was in no shape to even think about mounting an offensive against the Texans,” Dimmick writes. “They were now in a survival mode. They had left much of their armaments, supplies, etc. scattered in the mud to be discovered by avocational archeologists 164 years later.”

Dimmick is one of them. For the past 25 years, he and members of the Houston Archeological Society have been uncovering howitzer shells, cannon balls, musket pieces, eating utensils, uniform fragments and hundreds of other items that trace the Mexican army’s trek through El Mar de Lodo. A number are on display at the San Felipe de Austin museum.

“The Seat of Mud event was lost for most Texans for two reasons,” says Bryan McAuley,

site manager at the San Felipe de Austin State Historic Site. “It didn’t fit the story line of independence conclusively won at San Jacinto, and it wasn’t experienced or recorded by Texans. But it is a powerful story of personal struggle and offers perspectives on the Mexican army that we generally don’t contemplate.”

Dimmick, 66, isn’t doing much doctoring these days; he’s writing a two-volume history tracing the movements of the Mexican army during the Texas Revolution. There’s much to be discovered – in un-translated documents in Mexican archives, in Wharton County mud. He’ll be standing in a rice field, holding in his muddy hand a Spanish coin or a uniform insignia that’s nearly 200 years old.

“A Mexican soldier dropped this,” he’ll remind himself, “and I was the next person to hold it.”

[djholley10@gmail.com](mailto:djholley10@gmail.com)  
[twitter.com/holleynews](https://twitter.com/holleynews)