

San Antonio River may hide Alamo treasures

ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the heart of San Antonio's famous downtown Riverwalk, an unlikely group of adventurers hopes to discover precious treasures of Texas' past — actual cannons used by Texas defenders 153 years ago during the 13-day Mexican siege of the Alamo.

Basing their theories on preliminary tests and the little-known eyewitness account of a Texas army officer that the researchers "literally stumbled across," the group is convinced that many of the Alamo fighters' big guns are buried in the bed of the San Antonio River, just outside the back door of the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

Of course, neither the hotel nor the Riverwalk existed in May 1836 when Mexican Gen. Juan Jose Andrade began a hasty retreat out of Texas after receiving word that Mexican Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna had been captured at San Jacinto.

"But we know the course of the river has not changed. We've checked it out. . . . We've overlaid maps from just about every decade . . . on top of one another," said former Fort Worth resident Wayne Gronquist, part of the team that has been working quietly on the project since 1986.

"No one has ever searched the river for them," said Gronquist, who has been a history nut since attending old Birdville High School three decades ago.

Nothing is certain. But come next January, when the river level is lowered during its annual maintenance draining, Gronquist and his cohorts hope to bring in heavy equipment and dig out the cannons they believe have gradually sunk into the riverbed since they were dumped there by fleeing Mexican troops.

Twenty months ago, during an earlier draining of the river, the search team used a sensitive metal-detecting device called a magnetometer and determined there are, indeed, elongated metal objects deep in the riverbed.

But whether the device was picking up signals from old artillery or pieces of steel left during the construction of the Riverwalk, nearby bridges or debris from any number of buildings erected over the years is anybody's guess. Alton Briggs, an Austin archaeologist involved in the project said.

During that January 1988 effort, Gronquist, Briggs and their friends used hand shovels and sifters in calf-deep water, but could only explore about 18 inches into the mud.

This time, the crew is hoping San Antonio and the Texas Antiquities Committee, the obscure state agency that oversees archaeological projects on most public lands and waters, will give them permission to dig much deeper. Briggs won't venture a guess as to how many cannons might be found, or

how deep they will have to dig to find them. "All we can do is keep going until we hit bedrock," said Briggs, who says the \$18,000 project will be fun and worthwhile for its near-certain finds — even if none of the Alamo artillery is among the items recovered.

Although there are six cannons on display at the Alamo, historians say there is little, if any, hard evidence that any of them ever saw action in the famous 13-day battle. "Some of them came from private sources elsewhere, with stories about where

will have more historic validity than the ones the Alamo now has on display.

"It's a matter of just pure logic. If you find some, it is just a simple assumption that they were the ones," Bell said.

"That's probably true. The reason that the Texans didn't ever move the cannons themselves is that they didn't have transport . . . and there is no reason to believe that the Mexicans would have had transport for them either," says Bob Boyd, author of *The Texas Revolution: A Day by Day Account*.

"Just getting them to the San Antonio River would not have been that long a haul."

Representatives of the curator's office at the Alamo did not return repeated telephone calls by the *Star-Telegram*.

"All the artillery and ammunition that could not be carried off were thrown in the river."

— J.H. Bernard, Former Texas officer

The unusual urban expedition to find the real Alamo cannons is being sponsored by the National Underwater and Marine Agency, which despite its official-sounding name is a private, fun-loving, non-profit group headed by author and shipwreck expert Clive Cussler. The organization's name comes from a fictional spy agency in Cussler's adventure novels.

Gronquist, an Austin attorney, is secretary of the organization, which claims it has discovered or surveyed 55 lost shipwrecks worldwide since it formed in 1978.

The group undertook the task of finding

the 11 lost ships of the Texas Navy. Former Gov. Mark White gave Cussler the ceremonial title of admiral in the 1970s, which was disbanded long ago. That title has been admittedly disappointing to the adventurers thus far, although the group already has extracted a few artifacts from one Texas Navy vessel and Gronquist says there are promising clues or encouragement regarding the whereabouts of others.

But it was while searching for clues that the Texas Navy vessels that researchers ran across the succinct, clearly written diary of J.H. Bernard, a surgeon in James W. Fannin's command who had survived the Goliad massacre. On official duty in San Antonio two months later, Bernard spent several days observing the activities of the Alamo's Mexican conquerors.

In a May 24, 1836, entry, Bernard wrote that as the Mexicans were tearing down the walls and burning the famous fort, pickets while preparing to get out of the fort. "All the artillery and ammunition that could not be carried off were thrown in the river."

For years, there have been rumors that some of the Alamo's cannons had been dumped into the river. But searches gambling that the diary of Bernard, an educated man who wrote in precise terms, pretty good clue that some are really there.

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