



# SUSANNA

OF THE ALAMO  
*A True Story*  
by John Jakes, illustrated by Paul Bacon



## Teacher's Guide

Written By Kathleen Greenholdt

CLASSROOM  
FAVORITES

A Perma-Bound Production

### Synopsis

This book presents the story of the Battle of the Alamo from the perspective of a young woman who witnessed the massacre of her husband and other Texas men by the Mexican soldiers of General Santa Anna during the Battle of the Alamo in 1836.

The tale of courage, love, and sorrow begins with 22-year-old Susanna Dickinson and her toddler daughter, Angelina, hiding out with other women and children inside the Alamo, an old mission in San Antonio. The Mexican soldiers have come to slaughter the Texans, which they do. All of the men are killed.

Susanna, who is wounded, is then forced to meet the tyrannical Santa Anna. He tells her to carry a message back to the Texan rebels, threatening more deaths if they do not succumb to Mexican law.

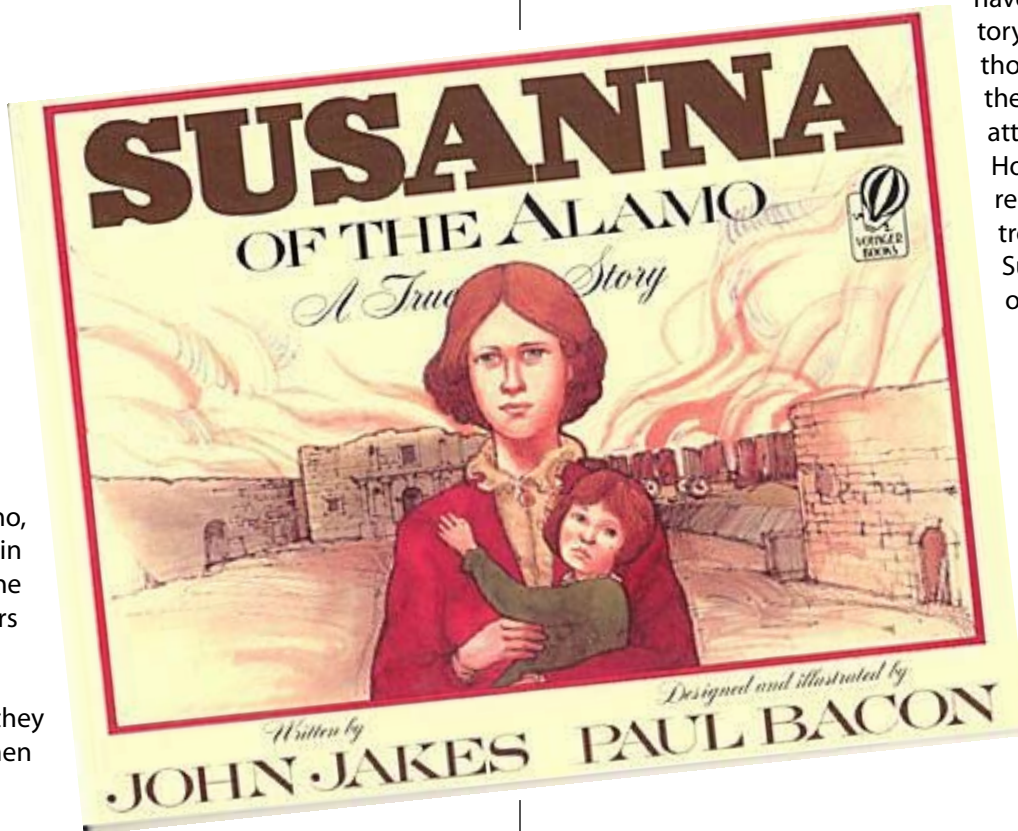
Filled with grief and anger, Susanna delivers the message. In the town of Gonzales, she is able to speak to relatives of the deceased and to General Sam Houston. But Susanna fears that General Houston will not fight on behalf of the slaughtered men because he tells everyone to flee from their homes.

However, she later learns that Houston was simply

executing a carefully planned attack on Santa Anna. The Mexican general got away, but the Texans caught up with him the next day and forced him to pull his army out of Texas.

When Susanna hears this news, she says that she wishes she could

have seen the victory. In one way, though, she was there: before the attack, General Houston reminded his troops of Susanna's tale of the Alamo.



### Timeline

**February 23, 1836** The army of Mexican General Santa Anna rides into San Antonio. More than 150 Texan settlers, including the family of Almeron and Susanna Dickinson and their toddler daughter, Angelina, move into an old mission-turned-fort called the Alamo. Santa Anna begins a siege.

**March 6, 1836** The Battle of the Alamo ends in the deaths of all the men defending the fort; the death toll is about 16,000 Mexicans and 188 Texans. The women and children are herded into the mis-

sion baptistery; a wounded Susanna is taken to San Antonio for medical treatment.

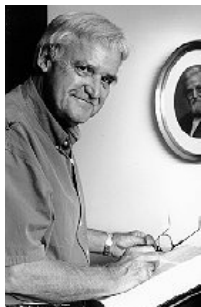
## Later

Santa Anna, in a show of "mercy," gives the women whose husbands were killed at the Alamo \$2 and a blanket; Susanna refuses hers, and instead is sent by Santa Anna with a message to rebel leader Sam Houston. Houston uses the information to rally his forces against Santa Anna.

**April 21, 1836** Sam Houston's forces defeat Santa Anna, ending Mexican rule in Texas.

## Author Sketch

John Jakes was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1932. He enrolled at Northwestern University, where he planned to study acting, but later transferred to the creative writing program at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, after catching the writing bug. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree from DePauw and an M.A. from Ohio State University. Mr. Jakes worked in the creative end of advertising for fifteen years, then became a full time writer. His adult novels include the bestselling *The Kent Family Chronicles*, and *North and South* and *Love and War*, two novels dealing with the Civil War. This book is Mr. Jakes' first children's work since *The Texans Ride North*, which he wrote as a college senior. He and his wife, Rachel, have four children and eleven grandchildren, and divide their time between South Carolina and Florida.



## Critic's Corner

*Susanna of the Alamo* was written in 1986. According to most history books, the majority of American heroes of the Old West were male. However, this book presents an historical account presented from a heroine's point of view. In addition, the storybook format of this "history lesson" creates a readable textbook. Also, the detailed pictures and portraits throughout the book bring alive the characters in the text, and the carefully rendered maps inside the book cover serve as excellent visuals for locating the events and places in the story. In 2008, Jakes received a Western Writers of America Lifetime Achievement Award for

his body of work on the west, including *Susanna of the Alamo*.

## Bibliography

"John Jakes' Official Website,"  
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<[http://www.readwest.com/news\\_2.htm](http://www.readwest.com/news_2.htm)> ("Western Writers Honor John Jakes")  
"Battle of the Alamo,"  
<[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Alamo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Alamo)>  
"Battle of the Alamo, San Antonio, Texas," <[www.lonestar.net/mall/texasinfo/alamo-battle.htm](http://www.lonestar.net/mall/texasinfo/alamo-battle.htm)>

## Objectives

1. To learn about the Battle of the Alamo and the people involved in the battle
2. To see the importance of women as contributors to historical development
3. To understand the meaning of courage and love

## Meaning Study

1. This story took place during the time when Texas was trying to gain its independence from Mexico. What caused the war?  
(Originally, the Mexican government encouraged Americans to settle in the Mexican province of Texas.

*"In 1834 General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna seized control of the Mexican government and became dictator. He did not believe in democracy, so he threw out the constitution that Mexico had adopted in 1824. Instead of granting more freedom to the people, as he had promised he would, he took away some of their rights. He refused to allow Texans to elect their own leaders. The Texas settlers paid little attention to these new Mexican laws, however.*

*"Determined that everyone would obey him, Santa Anna sent soldiers to take away the settlers' guns and collect taxes. But guns were among the colonists' most important possessions. Without them, they could neither fight raiding Indians, nor shoot game for food. Angry Texans finally had had enough of Mexican rule. Rather than give up their rights, they would fight for freedom from Mexico."  
-From *Texas* by Betty Lou Phillips and Bryce Phillips, Franklin Watts, 1987, page 41.)*

2. Who were the leaders of the Texan rebels?

*(The leaders included Davy Crockett -former Tennessee Congressman (the object of many tall tales about wild bears as well)--died at the Alamo; Jim Bowie, after whom the famous hunting knife is named--died at the Alamo; Colonel William B. Travis, a lawyer from Alabama and a strong leader --died at the Alamo; General Sam Houston, instigator of the Texas revolution and a former Congressman and governor of Tennessee; and Colonel James Fanning, the leader of the rebels who were slaughtered at Goliad, Texas on Palm Sunday.)*

3. Describe General Antonio Lopes de Santa Anna.  
*(The Mexican dictator was cruel and power-hungry. His sword was worth \$7,000. He claimed to be humane, because he spared the women, children, and slaves at the Alamo, but he was not humane. After all he mercilessly slaughtered all of the men at Goliad and at the Alamo. He burned the Alamo rebels, rather than allowing a decent burial, and he held the Goliad prisoners until Palm Sunday and shot them to death.)*
4. What was the Alamo?  
*The Alamo had once been a mission built by Franciscan priests. Later, soldiers from Alamo de Parras in Mexico moved into the buildings. These were friendly soldiers, and the shelter was named after their home town. In the story, the Alamo became a fort for Texas rebels who wanted to lead the province to independence from Mexico. The Alamo fell to the Mexicans March 6, 1836, with not one rebel soldier living to tell the story of the battle.)*
5. Susanna showed great love for Almeron. How did she do this?  
*(She wanted to give him a decent burial. She also refused to accept Santa Anna's phony "peace" offerings. Finally, she overcame her grief to become a courageous hero by defying Santa Anna and delivering his "friendly" message in a way that would avenge the death of Almeron and the others who died at the Alamo. She wanted to defeat the cruel Santa Anna.)*
6. How did the Texas rebels defeat Santa Anna?  
*(General Sam Houston first ordered the rebel citizens of Texas to leave Gonzales. Eventually, many more Texas settlers moved back East. This flight was called "The Runaway Scrape." Then, Houston planned a sneaky military maneuver whereby he stayed in front of the Mexican army hoping that Santa Anna would leave the main part of his troops. The Texans*

*captured the Mexicans on April 21, 1836, on the Plain of San Jacinto. Santa Anna escaped, but the rebels caught up with him later. The Mexican dictator then pulled his army out of Texas. Before the attack, Houston and his men yelled "Remember the Alamo.")*

7. What does the phrase "Remember the Alamo" mean?  
*(The phrase was a call to fight to win Texan independence. The rebels were supposed to recall the merciless deaths that Santa Anna ordered at the Alamo, then seek justice by winning the Texas Revolution. Susanna Dickinson was a heroine for carrying this message to the Texan soldiers and providing them with inspiration.)*
8. In many of our history books, we hear about the brave acts and great contributions that men have made throughout time. This is mainly because women stayed at home while the men ran the governments and served as breadwinners. How did women contribute to the history of the Old West?  
*(Women took care of the children, made many of the household supplies (such as candles and soap), cooked meals, sewed clothing, did the laundry, among many other things. This very supportive role helped the men to attend to the more "glamorous" leadership roles of making laws, hunting, protecting their families, etc.)*
9. How have the roles of men and women changed from the time of the Old West to the present day?  
*(The industrial revolution and urbanization of the country lessened the need for women to stay at home. Household duties became easier, and women could enter the work force. When the men went away to war during the first part of this century, women became part of the labor force to keep factories operating. Gradually, more and more women chose to go to work, or needed to go to work for reasons of economic necessity. Today, men and women can choose if they want to work outside the home, inside the home, or both.)*
10. This story gives us a glimpse of Mexican culture. What language did the Mexicans speak?  
*(The Mexican people spoke Spanish as their native tongue. Several Mexican words are used in the book: viva, senora, deguello, el Presidente, etc.)*

## Word Study

The following are vocabulary words from the story, along with their definitions.

1. adobe - clay used to make buildings in Mexico and the American Southwest
2. artillery - large mounted weapons, such as cannons
3. baptistry - room where people are baptized in a church
4. bayonet - a steel blade attached to the end of a gun; used for stabbing
5. coonskin - a type of hat made of raccoon skins (worn by Davy Crockett)
6. orderly - a soldier who reports to a superior officer, much like a servant
7. palisade - a fence of wooden stakes with sharp tops; surrounded forts in the Old West
8. private - a lower ranking army soldier; not an officer
9. sacristy - room where the garments of priests are stored in a church
10. trenches - ditches dug by armies for protection while fighting

## Student Involvement Activities

1. Teach your students about other women who had prominent roles in American history by asking them to research and write reports on some of these "heroines." Suggested personalities are: Jane Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, Shirley Chisholm, Helen Keller, Rosa Parks, Pocahontas, Eleanor Roosevelt, Betsy Ross, Sacagawea, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet Tubman.
2. After learning beginning Spanish grammar, ask students to pretend that they are members of the Mexican army. Have each student write a sentence that explains how he or she feels about the attack on the Alamo. Allow the students to draw illustrations to accompany the sentences.
3. The fall of the Alamo led to the eventual independence of the province of Texas. Have your class research the history, cultures, commerce, state symbols, government, cities, and natural resources of the Lone Star State. Then, place a large paper outline of the state on a wall, and let each student draw a crayon picture on the state to show one of Texas' special features.
4. Study the architecture of the American Southwest and Mexico. Then, help students to create a miniature adobe village using modeling clay and sticks.
5. Study Mexican culture, and incorporate some of the aspects of this culture into your class activities. Suggested activities are making and breaking a pinata; cooking and eating a Mexican lunch of beans, sanchos or other main dish, and sopapillas; creating costumes and learning a traditional Mexican dance; and listening to a record of a mariachi band.
6. Revolutions are occurring all over the world. As an exercise in current events, split your class into groups to make oral presentations comparing modern battles for independence with the Texas war for independence from Mexico. Students should consult periodicals for reference and should make their own visuals (maps, charts, etc.) to accompany their presentations.

## Related Reading

- The Alamo* by Leonard Everett Fisher, Holiday House, 1987  
*The Story of the Alamo* by Norman Richards, Children's Press, 1970  
*Texas* by Betty Lou Phillips and Bryce Phillips, Franklin Watts, 1987

## Vocabulary Test

Place the letter of the correct word beside the phrase that is closest to its definition.

- |   |              |
|---|--------------|
| ___ 1. cannons                                    | A. private   |
| ___ 2. room for baptizing                         | B. adobe     |
| ___ 3. low-ranking soldier                        | C. bayonet   |
| ___ 4. type of hat                                | D. trench    |
| ___ 5. clay used for building                     | E. coonskin  |
| ___ 6. fence of sharp wooden stakes               | F. artillery |
| ___ 7. room for storing holy garments in a church | G. palisade  |
| ___ 8. steel blade attached to a gun              | H. baptistry |
| ___ 9. servant-like soldier                       | I. orderly   |
| ___ 10. ditch dug by an army for protection       | J. sacristy  |

# Susanna of the Alamo John Jakes

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## Comprehension Test (40 points)

Fill in each blank with the correct word or phrase.

1. The heroine of the story was named \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Before it became a state, \_\_\_\_\_ was a province of Mexico.
3. The date that the Alamo fell to the Mexican army was \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The dictator of Mexico was named General Antonio Lopes de \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The name of the rebel general who defeated the Mexicans was \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The Alamo had once been a \_\_\_\_\_ built by Franciscan priests.
7. As the Mexican army moved through the province, settlers left to go East. This mass flight was called The \_\_\_\_\_.
8. The native language of the Mexicans in the story was \_\_\_\_\_.
9. On Palm Sunday, the Mexican soldiers shot 400 rebels in the town of \_\_\_\_\_.
10. The famous phrase that the rebels yelled while capturing the Mexicans was: \_\_\_\_\_.

## Essay Question (20 points)

Answer one of the following questions in paragraph form.

1. The tale of the Alamo was a story about freedom. How important was freedom to the rebels in the story?
2. What gave the heroine the strength she needed to carry her message to the town of Gonzales?

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## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY TEST

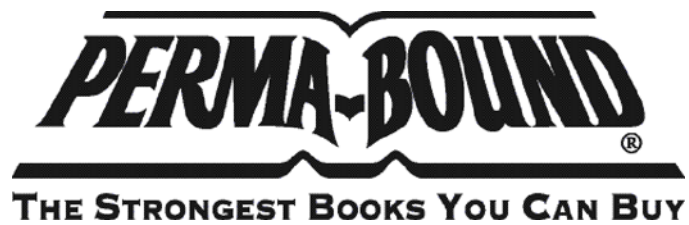
- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. G  |
| 2. H | 7. J  |
| 3. A | 8. e  |
| 4. E | 9. I  |
| 5. B | 10. D |

### COMPREHENSION TEST (40 POINTS)

- |                      |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Susanna Dickinson | 6. mission             |
| 2. Texas             | 7. Runaway Scrape      |
| 3. March 6, 1836     | 8. Spanish             |
| 4. Santa Anna        | 9. Goliad              |
| 5. Sam Houston       | 10. Remember the Alamo |

### ESSAY QUESTION (20 POINTS)

Answers will vary.



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