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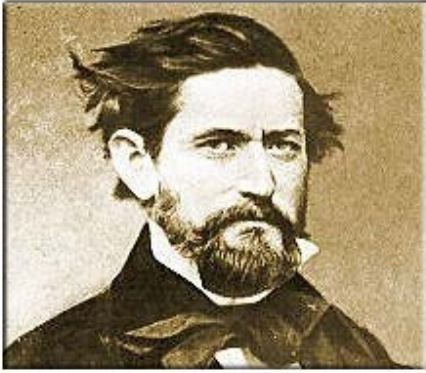
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## John Coffee Hays

by Robert Nieman

Jack Hays was a remarkable frontiersman who proved especially courageous and innovative in battling horseback warriors. A famed Texas Ranger, he also marched off to the War with Mexico, joined the California gold rush, and became a prominent leader in America's westernmost frontier.

John Coffee Hays was born on January 28, 1817, in Wilson County, Tennessee. In Tennessee he became an expert rider, hunter, and marksman. When Hays was fifteen, his parents were killed by yellow fever. Relatives took the remaining seven orphans into their homes, and Jack went with two of his siblings to the Mississippi plantation of an uncle. Jack soon struck out on his own, learning the surveyor's trade.

The teenaged surveyor had his first brush with Indians in Mississippi. Hays and his companion George Work were warned by a trapper that unfriendly Indians were in the vicinity. A morning or two later, Hays and Work were riding down a trail when they sighted a band of mounted Indians ahead. Work was unarmed and Hays carried only a single-shot pistol, so the two young men turned their mounts. The warriors charged, and Hays and Work galloped away.

One Indian raced close enough to shoot Work's horse. The animal collapsed, but Hays turned back to rescue his companion. "George," said Hays, "take my horse and lasso the first Indian that comes up." Hays sprinted behind a nearby rock while Work swung into the saddle. A moment later a brave rode onto the scene and Work dropped a lariat around him. Hays shot the Indian dead, vaulted astride his pony, and Hays and Work galloped away from the war party.

After two years as a surveyor, Hays had earned enough money to pay for a year's schooling at Nashville's Davidson Academy. In 1836, the adventurous Hays was attracted to Texas after hearing of the stand at the Alamo. He arrived too late to participate in combat, but en route he clashed with a bully and shot him to death in a tavern fight.

Hays enlisted in a company of Texas Rangers led by the famous scout Deaf Smith. Stationed near San Antonio, Hays skirmished against Mexicans, acquired land, and found time to resume his surveying activities. He became acquainted with Flacco, a Lipan Apache chieftain who provided Hays with many insights into Indian warfare. Hays learned that while Apaches preferred to attack from ambush, Comanches were far-ranging raiders, especially during periods of the "Comanche Moon." The Comanche was an open-field fighter whose favorite tactic was to charge and then to fall back in the center following a counterattack. But as their enemies would surge forward, unyielding Comanches on the wings would suddenly sweep in to flank the foe. Hays would frequently turn that maneuver against Comanche war parties during future battles.

On August 10, 1838, Hays was one of twenty Rangers under Colonel W. H. Karnes who were taking a midday break at the Arroyo Seco. Suddenly more than one hundred Comanche warriors rode into sight and charged the Rangers. The white men led their horses behind the creek bank and then scrambled to find cover in the brush. The Comanches rode in a circle, filling the air with arrows.

Hays aimed his rifle at the chief and felled him with an accurate shot. The Indians promptly fell back, demoralized at the loss of their leader. Halfheartedly they launched a second charge but were quickly driven back. Another barrage of arrows preceded a third advance. The fight had left the Comanches, however, and they rode in to retrieve the fallen braves. A score of Indians had been slain and another twenty wounded. The Rangers had suffered no fatalities, but most of their horses had been killed by falling arrows.

During surveying trips, Hays had become friendly with numerous Delawares and he agreed to accompany seventeen braves on a trapping expedition in the fall of 1838. The party went on foot, not wanting to bother with horses and hoping that horse-stealing Comanches would avoid them. But soon one of the party returned with the news that a large band of Comanches had slain his companion.

Vengefully the Delawares and Hays took up the Comanches' trail, trotting tirelessly for days until their foes were located in a camp beside the Rio Grande. The Delawares and Hays crept near under the cover of darkness, surrounding the camp except for the river side. They dozed until dawn; but when the first Comanche brave stirred, he was shot down by a rifle slug. A volley of arrows and rifle balls followed. Then the Delawares sprinted in for hand-to-hand slaughter. Brandishing a knife and tomahawk, Hays joined in

the destruction of the stunned Comanches. Some of the Comanches found safety in the river, but most of the raiding party were slain.

In the fall of 1839, following the killing of eighteen San Antonio residents near the Alamo City, Colonel Karnes led a punitive party that included Hays. Near present-day Fredericksburg, Hays and three other scouts found the camp of thirty Comanche warriors under Chief Isomania. Karnes led his men in surrounding the camp, but the slumbering Comanches were roused by the sounds of a frightened pony. Karnes and the Rangers attacked, killing twelve horses before the warriors managed to fight their way to safety.

On August 12, 1840, Hays fought in the famous Battle of Plum Creek, where two hundred Texans under Felix Huston challenged five hundred Comanches returning from a devastating assault on Linnville and Victoria. The frontiersmen carefully trained their rifles on the charging Indians, but their fire took little effect. During a brief lull, however, Hays told his companions that the Indians were carefully employing their rawhide shields. He advised them to hold their fire until the braves had loosed their arrows and then to pour a volley as the Comanches wheeled about unprotected.

The Indians soon charged again, firing their arrows and turning their ponies. A hail of rifle balls swept several warriors off their mounts. The chief was among the dead, and the Comanches broke. The Texans pursued in a vicious running fight for a dozen miles. Nearly one hundred Comanches were slain, but not a single white man was killed. For his part in this triumph, the twentythree-year-old Hays was commissioned a captain by Republic of Texas President M. B. Lamar. He was also asked to raise a company of Rangers. Within a matter of weeks, Captain Hays led his Ranger company in pursuit of two hundred Comanche raiders who had stolen a number of horses and mules from settlements west of San Antonio. Hays, pushing ahead of his men, was the first to sight the Comanches at a crossing of the Guadalupe River. He ordered his men to dismount, tighten their saddle girths, and check their weapons before remounting. Then Hays led a charge through a hail of arrows. The Indian line was shattered, and when their chief was shot out of the saddle, the warriors turned their ponies to flee. Hays and his Rangers gave chase, inflicting numerous casualties before finally breaking off pursuit. A short time later Hays led thirty-five volunteers, including several Lipan scouts under Flacco, in search of Comanche encampments. A camp was discovered near the headwaters of the Sabinal, and Hays ordered a quiet advance just before dawn. Hays and his men charged while the Comanches still slept, and the startled Indians fell back. But when the chieftains observed how few their attackers were, they rallied their braves and pressed a counterattack.

Hays formed his men into a square, and they retreated slowly before the Comanche onslaught. At last, accurate fire drove the Indians away. Hays and his men turned on them, clubbing their rifles for the assault. The Comanches took cover on a nearby hillside, but Texan firearms soon drove them into a retreat to the northwest. The Indians were unable to recover sixteen dead; only one Ranger was wounded. Flacco testified to Hays' raw courage in battle: "Me and Red Wing not afraid to go to hell together. Captain Jack heap brave; not afraid to go to hell by himself."

On July 1, 1841, Hays and twelve Rangers had pursued a band of raiders from the San Antonio vicinity to Uvalde Canyon. The Rangers closed in on a camp in a thicket, and Hays led two men into the thicket to try to flush the Indians. The hostiles, numbering a dozen, alertly fired a volley of arrows. Hays' two companions were badly hit, and an arrow clipped Hays' finger.

Hays helped one of his men to safety; then he returned with a double-barreled shotgun to protect the other Ranger. Only one of the eleven braves was armed with a rifle, but the others were well equipped with bows, arrows, knives, and tomahawks. Hays allowed the hostiles to close to within fifteen feet. Then he arose and blasted two braves with the shotgun. He drew his pistol, but the Indians had fallen back, and Hays sprinted out of the thicket to obtain a rifle. His men remained mounted, surrounding the thicket while he returned to duel the warriors.

Back in the thicket Hays began to pick off Indians. After three hours, only the warrior with a rifle continued to offer resistance. At last the two men traded shots simultaneously. Hays was grazed in the shoulder while the brave fell, badly hurt. The other ten warriors lay dead, and a woman was taken prisoner. Soon thereafter Hays set out with forty Rangers on another scout for hostiles. Breaking camp on the Medina River, the Rangers rode into an ambush at Bandera Pass about half an hour before noon. A Comanche war party had concealed themselves along the brushy, boulder-strewn defile. Bandera Pass is one hundred yards wide, five hundred yards long, and fifty to seventy-five feet high. When the Rangers were in its middle, the Indians opened fire. Several Rangers were hit and their mounts became panicky. Hays ordered his men to dismount and tie the lunging animals to nearby trees. The Rangers formed in a circle as the Indians charged. The warriors were driven back, but their chief quickly launched another attack.

Peter Fohr was shot through the body with an arrow, and Sam Luckey went down. The Indians closed and the fighting became hand-to-hand. A brave shot Andrew Erskine in the thigh with an arrow, but the Ranger gamely charged,

brandishing his five-shooter. Then, as Erskine fired, the barrel of the flimsily made pistol dropped off. Luck was with him—the gun exploded enough to shatter the Indian’s bow. As the warrior tried to stab Erskine with an arrow, Creed Taylor shot the Indian to death.

The Comanche chief fired a ball into Sergeant Kit, and Acklin shot the chief with his pistol. Acklin and the chief drew their knives and grappled, hacking at each other with gleaming blades. At last a blood-covered Acklin stood up, triumphant over the Indian leader.

An hour of vicious fighting had passed, and the Indians withdrew. Hays had lost five dead and five wounded, and several horses were dead or disabled. Hays led his battered command back to San Antonio.

Hays immediately took the field again, leading four dozen men in search of Comanches. On July 19, 1841, at the head of the western branch of the Rio Frio, Hays flushed several Comanche hunters and pursued with twenty-five Rangers. After an eight-mile chase, an encampment was sighted. The hunters warned their tribe, and one hundred mounted warriors quickly formed a screen for their retreating dependents.

Though Hays pressed forward, the mounts of his men were tired and the Comanches successfully conducted a delaying action. As his horse faltered, Hays talked a well-mounted volunteer into a temporary trade of animals. The new steed surged closer to the line of warriors and Hays fired his pistol; then he tried to turn back toward his men. But the startled horse took the bit in his teeth and galloped toward the hostiles. Flacco, the Lipan scout, spurred to keep up, and the two men thundered into the midst of the Comanches. Hays triggered revolver balls into a warrior on each side; then he wheeled about with Flacco trailing just behind. One brave tried to block the way, but Hays shot him and the two men spurred into the open.

When he returned to his men, Hays decided he had no chance of overtaking the Comanches. Flacco muttered that his leader was "bravo too much." Hays concluded that ten Indians had been slain and several wounded. A Mexican prisoner was found murdered and hanging by his heels in the deserted Comanche camp.

Later in 1841, Hays and a party of surveyors and scouts encamped at Crabtree Creek. One morning Hays decided to inspect nearby Enchanted Rock. Armed with a rifle and two five-shooters, Hays rode to the precipitous landmark and climbed to the top.

While he was scaling Enchanted Rock, he was spotted by a large war party of Comanches. Hays kept them at bay for a time, but finally about twenty braves began to close in. Hays shot several warriors. He then readied his knife—he had lost his powderhorn and the loads in his gun were exhausted. But Hays' men had heard the sound of his weapons; as they rode to the rescue, the Indians called off their attack and withdrew.

In February 1842, Hays and a crew of six men were surveying a tract of land north of San Antonio. While they worked, they were surrounded by a war party that launched arrows from distant cover. Hays infuriated his attackers by continuing to run his line, pausing occasionally to snap off a shot whenever a brave crept too near. At last, rifle fire drove the frustrated warriors to retreat.

In March 1842, Comanche warriors executed a raid near San Antonio. Hays gave chase with fifteen Rangers and twenty-seven volunteers. On March 11, the trail became fresh after the pursuers crossed the Nueces River, and Hays sent a volunteer galloping ahead on his own horse as a solitary decoy. Within an hour the courageous decoy came racing back with Comanches close behind. Hays remounted his own horse and led a charge.

Close to one hundred warriors formed a line and loosed a volley of arrows, but Hays and his men did not falter. A hand-to-hand melee followed. The Texans exacted a toll with rifle and pistol fire, but several of their number were wounded before the Indians broke off the fight.

By this time, numerous admirers were convinced that Hays was the best Indian fighter in Texas. San Antonio thrived under the protection afforded by Hays and his Rangers, who often were feted by prominent citizens after returning from a successful scout. Hays fought against General Adrian Woll during the notorious 1842 Mexican invasion of Texas, and during the following years he was unusually active against bandidos.

In 1843, a boy rode into Hays' Ranger camp blurting that his family had been jumped by hostiles several miles away. Hays and his men galloped to the site. Two children lay dead, the father was seriously wounded, and a seventeen-year-old daughter had been carried off. The sobbing mother was in shock.

Hays left two men behind and then rode in pursuit. An hour later the Comanche camp was discovered near the Llano River. Hays waved a revolver in his right hand and led a charge. The startled Indians scrambled for weapons, but within moments the warriors broke for the river. After a running fight to the river, the surviving braves splashed across the shallow stream

and fled into a grove.

Hays reined his men in at the riverbank and counted casualties. Two Rangers were dead and five wounded. Five Indians had died. A search turned up the seventeen-year-old girl, dying among some trees near the camp. The murdered girl was buried at the crest of a nearby peak.

In April 1844, more than two hundred Comanche warriors charged Hays and fifteen Rangers in Nueces Canyon. Hays directed his dismounted men to keep their horses nearby and to hold their fire until he triggered a signal shot. Coolly, Hays waited until the galloping braves were almost on top of his command. The volley at close quarters decimated the Comanche line, and rifle and pistol fire sent the hostiles reeling back. Hays aggressively ordered his men into their saddles and pressed a counterattack. A flurry of revolver balls at close range toppled more warriors, and the Comanches dropped their lances and raced away at top speed.

After inflicting heavy punishment, Hays called off the chase. A recruit named Paddy stated that a wounded Indian had crawled into a nearby grove. Hays cautioned Paddy to leave the brave alone; pursuit into the thicket might prove fatal. Heedless of the warning, Paddy announced that he was unafraid of a crippled Indian. He plunged on foot into the thicket. Moments later he screamed in pain. Four Rangers leveled their pistols and moved in. The warrior was sighted and promptly shot to death. Paddy lay fifteen feet away, an arrow through his chest.

On a later occasion, the Comanche war chief told a friendly Delaware that he never wanted to fight Hays again. "Every one of his men had as many shots as I have fingers on my two hands. I lost half of my warriors in the battle, and many others died along the route when returning to my country." Colt's .36 Caliber Texas Patterson Revolver Hays again was called upon to raise a company of Rangers. He equipped fifteen experienced men with two new revolvers, an extra cylinder for each gun, a rifle or shotgun apiece, and various other sidearms. On May 31, 1844, after three weeks on the trail, two Rangers were robbing a bee tree near Sister's Creek when they sighted a Comanche war party arrayed in a battle line.

Hays led his men in a charge, but sixty yards from the waiting Comanches he saw a second and a third rank behind the first. Hays wheeled and ordered his men into a stand of timber to the side. As they approached the timber, concealed Comanches showered them with arrows. But Hays plunged into the position and a score of bowmen sprinted for their horses. Every fifth Texan now became a horseholder, and the others deployed to meet the Comanche



charge.

The warriors absorbed a rifle volley; then raced to the attack as the white men supposedly reloaded. But the Texans stood up and poured a hail of pistol balls into the startled Comanches. Warriors and ponies were felled and the Indian charge was shattered. The chiefs assembled their discouraged braves at a distance for a council, but Hays remounted his men and led a counterattack.

The Comanches fired arrows and hit three Rangers, but companions rode near and kept the wounded men in their saddles. Hays and nine men thundered through the Comanche line, knocking warriors off their ponies with pistol balls. The Indians fell back, ducking behind their shields and riding zigzag to escape the hail of revolver fire.

One brave rushed Sam Walker. The Ranger shot him, but a second warrior lanced Walker from the rear. John Carlin shot the second warrior in the head; another Ranger pulled out the lance and helped Walker reach a nearby thicket. At the edge of the thicket, Ad Gillespie tumbled from his horse, pierced by an arrow. The Comanche chief leveled his lance and galloped toward the fallen man, but Gillespie killed him with a shot in the head. Two Rangers sprinted on foot to Gillespie's side and dragged him into the trees. When their chief fell, a number of warriors charged Gillespie and his companions. Hays and several other Rangers drove them back, but they retrieved the corpse of their leader and withdrew, wailing a death chant. The Rangers tried to tend their wounded, and three men extracted arrows from each other. Hays ordered his able men into the saddle and led seven Rangers in a tenacious pursuit. Revolver fire emptied several more Indian saddles, and a running fight disintegrated into a rout. The chase continued until darkness began to fall. Hays turned his men back toward the thicket, where eight injured Rangers were readied for the return to San Antonio. It was estimated that three dozen warriors had been slain, and Hays credited the revolvers with the triumph over heavy odds.

On June 8, 1844, Hays and fourteen Rangers encountered a large war party of Comanches near Walker's Creek. The Indians rode to the crown of a steep hill, formed a battle line, and began shouting taunts at the Texans. Leading his men forward at a slow trot, Hays cupped his hands and roared insults at the chief. Hays maneuvered his men into position, formed a V, and charged. The Indians surged toward the Rangers, who fired a rifle volley and broke the Comanche attack.

The hostiles quickly regrouped, and Hays directed his men to drop their empty rifles and draw revolvers. The Indians pressed in and employed lances and bows and arrows. The Rangers popped away furiously with their

revolvers. Within fifteen minutes more than a score of Indians had been slain, and nearly all the Texans and numerous warriors were wounded.

The Indians broke off the fight, but with his customary tenacity, Hays rode after the retreating foe. A running fight lasted for two miles before the chief rallied his braves for a counterattack. Hays directed his outnumbered men to fight in relays: several would ride ahead and fire their pistols; then another squad with reloaded revolvers would replace them.

At last the chief organized another assault within sight of the Rangers. Hays asked if anyone still had a loaded rifle. Ad Gillespie, although reeling from a wound, dismounted and drew a bead. When the chief was just thirty yards away, Gillespie shot him in the head. The chief fell dead and the demoralized Indians broke. Hays led a brief pursuit but called a halt after killing a few more braves. Four Rangers were wounded and Peter Fohr lay dead on the field. Twenty-three unrecovered Indian corpses were counted, and perhaps thirty braves had suffered wounds.



Colt's .36 Caliber No. 5 Texas or Holster Model Patterson Revolver

A notable change of pace took place in San Antonio during the spring of 1844. Hays and his Rangers competed in a rodeo against fifty vaqueros and an equal number of peace-seeking Comanche braves under Chief Buffalo Hump. In March 1846, six hundred Comanches raided below San Antonio, and Hays pursued with forty men as the Indians headed north with their stolen livestock. From their route, Hays deduced the Indians would pass near a landmark called Paint Rock. Hays led his men cross-country and reached Paint Rock about midnight. The Rangers slept a few hours in the thicket and were well rested when the Indians rode into sight just before dawn. A volley of rifle fire struck unsuspecting warriors, who wheeled their mounts and rode out of range. The Indians greatly outnumbered the white men, and they formed for a charge. Hays allowed the Comanches to gallop within fifty yards of his position before ordering a volley. The Indian line staggered and fell back.

On their second charge the warriors tried to advance in a half-circle, each brave dropping behind his horse and clutching hair rope woven into the mane. Few Comanches were hit, but several ponies were dropped and the attack soon was called off. A third charge came close before being repulsed by point-blank revolver fire.

Intermittent fighting continued through the day. That night the Indians camped nearby, creeping in under cover of darkness to carry away their dead. Occasional firing made sleep difficult.

At daybreak the Indians launched a furious charge. Warriors came in four waves and were held at bay only by the final revolver rounds. Several braves next climbed to the top of Paint Rock and ineffectively fired arrows at the Rangers. Texan rifles felled some of the snipers and drove the rest away. Sunset found the Rangers still pinned down, and for the second night in a row Hays shared most of the guard duties with Ad Gillespie.

On the third day, the Comanches hurtled forward at dawn. Several warriors came to within forty yards of the Texans before falling back. At about ten o'clock in the morning, the chief reorganized his men for another assault. When they again advanced, Hays drew a bead on the chief, whose rawhide shield already had turned more than one Ranger bullet. But the chief swung in the saddle and Hays shot him in the side. He fell dead and his warriors raced forward to retrieve his corpse. A hail of rifle fire forced them back, and Hays sent a Ranger galloping out with a lasso. The Texan threw a loop around the fallen chief and dragged the body back to the thicket.

The outraged warriors charged furiously, but the Rangers stopped them with accurate gunfire. The Comanches fell back, reformed their line, and charged again. The Texans fired, and the warriors promptly turned their ponies and galloped to the northwest. Within a few minutes, Hays led his men onto their trail. The Comanches had retreated so quickly that six braves had been left behind, guarding the stolen livestock and unaware of danger. Hays and his Rangers killed all six of those Indians and retrieved the settlers' animals. Ranger Emory Gibbons had been wounded in the forearm, while the Comanches had suffered perhaps one hundred casualties.

Hays was unusually busy during the Mexican War. He traveled to Washington, D.C., raised two regiments of troops, distinguished himself in combat, and married eighteen-year-old Susan Calvert. The couple had six children, but only two survived infancy.

After the war, Colonel Hays was commissioned to lead the "Chihuahua-El

Paso Pioneer Expedition." Hays and seventy-two men headed west to locate and open a wagon road between San Antonio and Chihuahua. In the barren country west of the Pecos River, the party ran out of food and water and was reduced to eating panther meat and grass. Hays served briefly as Indian commissioner for the newly acquired Gila River country and he was involved in several profitable business enterprises.

In 1849 Hays, like so many other Americans, was attracted to California. He promptly won the sheriff's post in the first county election conducted in San Francisco. Hays attracted votes with a spectacular display of horsemanship in the streets of the boomtown.

A Pauite uprising erupted in 1860 near Virginia City, Nevada. The worst incident was the ambush of Major William M. Ormsby. This resulted in the death of forty-six volunteers. Hays was asked to lead the "Washoe Regiment," a collection of somewhat unsavory citizens. The elusive Indians were reluctant to fight, but on May 29 the Battle of Big Meadows produced seven dead warriors. Hays knocked the chief off his horse with a spectacular shot at great range.

Some minor skirmishes followed, and on June 2 Hays led three hundred men against more than eight hundred Indians. In hand-to-hand fighting, Hays dislodged the hostiles from their position. Hays' group suffered eleven casualties. At least thirty Indians were slain and fifty families were captured during the three-hour battle.

Hays had a number of business interests, served as federal surveyor general of California for several years, and was one of the founders of Oakland. He installed his family at Fernwood, a splendid eight-hundred-acre ranch on the present location of the University of California. By the time he died in 1883, Hays had accumulated an estate of a half-million dollars, and he was acknowledged as one of California's leading citizens. His final words were, "It's San Jacinto Day!"

