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Lon Oden The Rhymin' Ranger

by Karen Holliday Tanner & JohnD. Tanner, Jr.

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*In the words of an observer, a Texas Ranger could ride like a Mexican,
track like an Indian, shoot like a Tennessean, and fight like a devil.*

- Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers*

Nowhere is it written that a Texas Ranger need turn verse like a poet, yet Alonzo "Lon" Van Oden possessed a unique blend of strength and sensitivity. He bravely took on the responsibilities of Rangerhood by day; and in the evenings, he recorded his feelings with uncommon insight, intellect, and talent. This made him unique among those Rangers who were already distinguished by their uniqueness.

Lon Oden was born on March 15, 1863, in Dogtown, McMullen County, Texas. Located on the Frio River, the town was formerly called Rio Frio but was later renamed Colfax in 1871. The local residents, however, continued to use the colorful name of Dogtown. In late 1876, Colfax once again changed its name - this time to Tilden, in honor of that year's United States presidential candidate, Samuel J. Tilden. At the same time, it was designated as the county seat. Located in the heart of the brush country, Dogtown was a perilous place, as the Oden family discovered.

Lon's twenty-eight-year-old father, Aaron Van Buren Oden, was born August 31, 1834, in that portion of South Texas's Bexar County later organized as Frio County. Aaron had served several stints as a Texas Ranger when he became a father. Four months after his son's birth, Aaron, accompanied by Atascosa County rancher George Hindes, encountered Julian Gonzales, a noted horse and cow thief from Starr County, Texas. The ensuing gunfight took place about twenty miles south of Eagle Pass on the old trail between Los Ojuelos and Presidio on the Rio Grande. Aaron and Gonzales died simultaneously on July 22, 1863, each having been shot by the other. Hindes did not have the proper tools, so he was able to dig only a shallow grave in which he buried Aaron on the spot where he had fallen. Hindes, a nineteen-year-old bachelor, then had the formidable task of informing Martha Jane, also just nineteen, of her husband's death. The grieving young widow was left to care for her four-month-old infant son in the heart of this rough frontier land.

Lon's mother, Martha Jane Walker Oden, was born on April 11, 1844, and was the first child of Joseph (1818-1888) and Mary Walker (1821-1860). Martha Jane's parents had fled Shelby County, Texas, after Joe was involved in the killing of two men in the same day during the well-known Regulator/Moderator War. Joe, a member of the Moderator faction, and his wife hurriedly left town

and traveled through nearly a dozen counties in Texas before eventually settling in Atascosa County, where they were among the early pioneers of South Texas.

It was there that their daughter Martha Jane met and married Alonzo Van Buren Oden when she was eighteen years old. The following year, she gave birth to their son Lon. Later, Joseph Walker's day book revealed that his daughter, the young Mrs. Oden, passed away on August 31, 1864, one year after the death of her husband and birth of her son. The family speculated that it was a broken heart that took the life of this young mother so soon after her twenty-first birthday. Pragmatically, death by violence or disease was often the price one paid for living in this uncivilized heart of the rugged [ITALICS>] *brasada*.

When young Lon became an orphan at the age of one year, the Oden family and the Walker family shared the responsibility of raising him. Grandmother Oden had been a student of the classics in her native Sweden. Presumably, she imparted to her grandson an appreciation for the written word and was influential in developing his sensitive and refined nature, his love of poetry, and his ability to express himself on paper.

Lon's grandfather, Joseph Walker, had a total of nineteen children with first wife Mary and second wife Amanda, so there was no shortage of Walker aunts, uncles, and cousins. It is probable that from them, Lon learned the necessary skills of survival: riding, shooting, ranching, and hunting. When Lon was two and a half, Grandfather Walker gave him 150 head of cattle and registered the ODN brand for him. Also among the family living in nearby McMullen County were Lon's Walker uncles: James ("Bud"), age fourteen; and Tom, age eleven.

The Walker men were a rugged bunch. The *brasada* of South Texas required a toughness that they taught to young Lon. Bandits and outlaws from East Texas and Mexico sought the haven of the brush, while the Comanche and Kickapoo Indians found it the ideal launching point for their frequent and devastating raids. Grandfather Walker and his sons stood ready to defend their homes and their livestock. Lon was only two years old when he received his first lesson in the necessity of always being prepared to defend against attackers. On August 19, 1865, Comanche Indians raided McMullen County, seizing horses from the Walkers and a number of other families and killing neighbor John Hines.

Indian depredations ended in McMullen County in 1872, but another source of violence had already arisen: the infamous Sutton-Taylor feud. On November 3, 1869, Captain Jack Helm led a party of the Sutton faction to the McMullen County ranch of William B. Morris on San Miguel Creek. The ranch was located about four miles upstream from the confluence of the San Miguel and the Frio River. Morris and his son-in-law, Martin Luther Taylor, were taken at gunpoint with the alleged intention of placing Taylor in the Oakville jail. Taylor was a cousin of William P. "Buck" Taylor, whose 1868 Christmas Eve killing was considered by many to be the beginning of the feud. Taylor submitted voluntarily, while Morris went along to help his son-in-law make bond. Near Calliham, in Live Oak County, Taylor and Morris were murdered and buried where they fell. On May 30, 1873, at the height of the feud, Lon's Uncle Bud married Martin Taylor's widow, Sophronia, aligning Oden's Walker relatives with the Taylor faction.

Violence also stalked Oden's other uncle, Thomas I. Walker. Tom was a top hand, gambler, and gunman, and he had constant brushes with the law in

South Texas. Following several acquittals on charges of assault with intent to commit murder, he drifted to Seven Rivers, in the New Mexico Territory, and was soon involved with the Lincoln County War. In a dispute and subsequent gunfight, Tom was gunned down at Seven Rivers on November 23, 1879.

Amid the lawlessness of South Texas's brush country, Lon Oden grew into a strapping six-foot, two-inch, good-looking, rugged yet intellectual young man who dressed immaculately. He married in 1889. The reason for the termination of the brief marriage is unknown, but it may have been the impetus that caused him to enlist in Captain Frank Jones's Company D, Frontier Battalion, of the Texas Rangers on March 1, 1891. At this time, he began his journal with the entry:

I'm twenty-seven, and have just joined the ranger service. I am twenty-seven, and have just started a diary-I wonder why? I also wonder what kind of diary I shall keep. This book is large, and the leaves are blank.

Lon's handsome uncles, Bud and Tom, had carried a reputation among the girls of Dogtown as ladies' men. This heritage was continued by young Lon. One of the early entries in his journal, which may have been composed in his younger days, reads:

A Bachelor's Song

I'm a jolly old bachelor, blithe and jocose
 I'm as happy as June days are long
 How I pity you married men, dull and morose,
 Who can see now where you went wrong,
 I've had narrow escapes too myself, in my time,
 And my gratitude, now I express
 In sincerity if not in artistic rhyme
 to the dear girls who wouldn't say yes.

Katie, Jamie, Mollie, Lillie, Gertrude, Bell, Fanny, Florence. May, Jessie, Josie, Halley, Nell, and Rosa all caught the young man's eye and were worthy of poetic note later in this lengthy poem. It appears that rejection prompted the following entry:

Woman

Away, away, you're all the same
 A flirting, scheming, jilting throng
 Oh, by my soul, I blush with shame
 To think I've been your slave so long.

Lon remained in the San Antonio region through mid-1892 and then headed for West Texas, where he joined Ranger John R. Hughes. Corporal Hughes

was eight years older than Oden and though a native of Cambridge, Illinois, he had drifted into the Indian Territory while still in his teens. He had arrived in Texas in 1878 and was soon raising horses at Liberty Hill, in Travis County, north of Austin. His plans to devote his life to ranching were disrupted when, in 1886, a group of horse rustlers came through Liberty Hill and stole a number of the horses belonging to Hughes and his neighbors. Undaunted, Hughes determined to track down the rustlers. One year and thirteen hundred miles later, he succeeded. In the process, he joined the Texas Rangers. Hughes enlisted in Company D at Georgetown on August 10, 1887, and joined the Frontier Battalion, then stationed at Camp Wood, near Uvalde.



-John R. Hughes

Rangers Hughes and Oden went to Shafter, a silver-mining town in the Chinati Mountains of southwestern Presidio County. The gang of Antonio Carrasco and his brothers, active both in Texas and in Mexico, had been repeatedly helping themselves to the silver ore of the Fronteriza Mining Company of Shafter. Hughes devised a scheme whereby former Texas Ranger Ernest "Diamond Dick" St. Leon, an employee of the mining company, would infiltrate the gang and report its intended movements. Based upon St. Leon's report, on the appropriate night, Hughes and Oden secluded themselves near the entrance to an abandoned mine shaft where stolen silver ore had been hidden to await transport into Mexico. Cold and cramping, the Rangers waited several hours before St. Leon and three of the ore thieves appeared. As the thieves were moving a pack train toward the mine's entrance, they were ordered to surrender. Ignoring the command, the thieves proceeded to fire. Oden and Hughes, joined by St. Leon, returned fire. All three outlaws were killed, including Matilde Carrasco, brother of the gang leader Antonio. Oden's journal later reflected:

Men who lie and steal and cheat--men who murder--men who are so weak--men we hunt--men we shoot. Seems like this world is made up of two sets of men--each fighting the other. Can the weak ever grow strong, or the strong ever reach an understanding of weakness?

Oden traveled on to El Paso, and his visit there was heralded by a trip to the city's most renowned sporting house. He made the acquaintance of Tillie Howard, El Paso's famed madam and owner of the elegant brothel. Born Mathilde Weiler, Tillie had arrived in El Paso in 1890 and promptly acquired the bordello located at 307 South Utah Street from Alice Abbott. Lon fell under Tillie's spell and devoted pages of his journal to his good friend. He wrote that she

. . . makes the place different. She is tall, and I imagine she doesn't need these artificial bosoms the ladies are using now; hers look natural enough--I'll ask her when I know her better. She seems to take a shine to me. She has the blackest hair, and she is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen.

Following a long conversation with Tillie, who was pleased to discuss any topic except herself, Lon asked if she had considered that she might someday be punished for the business which she maintained. Gazing blankly for a few

minutes, she turned to Oden and remarked, "Punished? Alonzo Oden, I know Hell." Oden left her establishment and later wrote that as he walked down the street, he kept hearing her voice saying, "I know Hell." He further wrote, "I think I know the scarlet sister Christ forgave. I can hear his voice cry: 'Let him without sin cast the first stone.'"

Oden had little time to ponder the fate of the world's Tillie Howards. Back home in McMullen County, there was another lady who had captured Oden's heart: Laura Erwin. Lon and Laura had been in love "off and on" for a long time, but had never gotten around to setting the date. One suspects that the handsome Ranger was reluctant to be reformed and confined. On one visit to see his aunts in Tilden, he wrote, "Laura wasn't as glad to see me as I hoped. I'll be damned if I'll become a monk. Maybe I wasn't so glad to see her, either." But, the relationship persisted.

To L G E

If death doth overtake me
Err I heard your last Godspeed
If friends should all forsake me
In the darkest hours of need
I hope you will never chide me
I hope you will never blame
Let other tongues deride me
Think kindly of my name.

Oden also formed a close friendship with Ranger Baz "Bass" Outlaw, born in Georgia about 1855. Outlaw had enlisted in Company E of the Frontier Battalion at Toyah, Texas, on August 11, 1885, and transferred to Company D in the spring of 1887. When he and Oden met, Bass was serving as a corporal. According to Oden:

Bass had one weakness that-at last-proved to be stronger than all his virtues. Bass couldn't leave liquor alone, and when Bass was drunk, Bass was a maniac; none of us could handle him, none of us could reason with him, we just stayed with him until he sobered up.

Years later, concurring with her husband's assessment, Mrs. Laura Carr Oden wrote:

Outlaw, was a true Southern gentleman, soft spoken, well-educated and courteous. We loved to talk to him and to have in our home but several drinks made a beast of him. When word got out that Bass was drinking, doors were locked, children brought in off the street and all of us kept silence and hoped for the best.

Outlaw's drinking resulted in his honorable discharge from the Rangers on September 18, 1892. However, Captain Frank Jones sponsored him as a Special Ranger in the Frontier Battalion, and Outlaw again took the oath on February 10, 1893.

About that time, the bandit Desidario Duran raided the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio railroad siding at Chispa, in Jeff Davis County. Oden, John Hughes, and Jim Putnam traveled to San Antonio Colony, a small settlement on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, to arrest Duran. After the arrest, they were returning home when they stopped for supplies at Jim Wyndam's store on the border and spotted three men attempting to get a

fourth man, who was drunk, on his horse. Recognizing one of the men as the outlaw Florencio Carrasco, another of the notorious brothers wanted on multiple charges - including murder - Oden and Hughes left Putnam with Duran and galloped off in chase. Carrasco killed Lon's horse from under him, but Oden leaped clear and began firing. Carrasco refused to be captured, and he fired simultaneously. Oden and Hughes together killed the second of the Carrasco brothers. Oden would later express a certain remorse:

I feel so inadequate when we've finished a battle, and I look on the bodies of dead men--men who were bad as the world see, but men who had been born into this world for a purpose--who are we to end that purpose?

On June 30, 1893, Ranger Captain Frank B. Jones was killed by a band of border desperadoes, led by Jesus Maria Olguin. The slaying occurred at Tres Jacales, on Pirate Island, a small unclaimed strip of land lying between the United States and Mexico. The popular captain's death was felt throughout the force, and Ranger Oden eulogized Jones in his growing journal:

To An Old Ranger Friend

There are businesses of all sorts,
In this world of ours,
Fetters of Friendship and ties of flowers,
And true lovers knots, I resist,
But there never was a bond, old friend, like this,
We have drunk from the same canteen.

We have shared our blankets and tents,
And have scouted and fought in all kinds of weather,
And hungry and full have been,
Had days of riding and days of rest,

But the memory I cling to and love the best,
We have drunk from the same canteen.

Ranger Sergeant John Hughes assumed the captaincy of Company D upon Jones's death, and Lon was transferred from Alpine to Ysleta, on the Rio Grande and located at a station of the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio railway.

Sometime in 1893, Lon learned of the engagement of Laura Erwin to Jonathan W. Preston, an Atascosa County attorney. Their engagement and subsequent marriage on November 19 depressed Lon. His thoughts and writings became increasingly morose. In 1894, he met another Laura: Laura Carr Hay, a young widow with three children and Ysleta's postmistress. Slowly, Lon's thoughts began to turn toward life after the Rangers. A Ranger's life was not one of comfort.

We crawl through underbrush, until our bodies are cut and bleeding; nights when we freeze, sitting so quietly waiting for a raid to take place; hours in the broiling sun, slowly walking our horses down mountainous inclines.

Then word reached Ysleta of the killing of Bass Outlaw.

On April 5, 1894, Outlaw, then a deputy United States marshal in Alpine, Texas, was in El Paso as a court witness. He was furious because United States Marshal Dick Ware was costing him fees by allowing Deputy Marshal

Bueff Cline to service papers in his area. Outlaw got progressively intoxicated as he drank his way up Utah Street, eventually meeting Frank Collison and Constable John Selman. After Outlaw announced his intention to kill Ware, Collison and Selman tried to get him to return to his room, but Outlaw insisted upon visiting his girlfriend Ruby at Tillie Howard's sporting house.

At Tillie's, Collison and Selman conversed in the parlor. Outlaw, meanwhile, proceeded to the back entrance, where he fired a shot. Tillie came running out of her house, blowing a police whistle. Ranger Joe McKidric, also in town to testify as a court witness, responded. When asked why he had fired the shot, the intoxicated Outlaw turned and fired twice at McKidric, killing the Ranger. Outlaw then turned his gun on Selman, fired, and missed, though the powder obscured Selman's vision and burned his face. Selman returned the fire, mortally wounding Outlaw.

The dying Outlaw fired twice more, striking Selman in the upper right leg with both shots. Retreating, Outlaw staggered around the house to Utah Street, where he surrendered to Ranger Frank McMahan. Taken to the Barnum Show Saloon, Outlaw died about four hours later. Oden wrote this tribute:

Bass, my friend is gone. Maybe all of us knew something like this would come to Bass-Bass, who was so brave and kind; who could laugh louder, ride longer, and cuss harder than the rest of us; and who could be more sympathetic, more tender, more patient than all of us when necessary.

Possibly despondent over the death of his close friend, Lon Oden left the Ranger service on May 18, 1894. On August 10, he entered in his journal what may have been his thoughts after the shooting of Outlaw:

In men whom men condemn as ill
I find so much of goodness still.

In men whom men pronounce divine,
I find so much of sin and blot,
I hesitate to draw a line,
Between the two, when God has not.

For the next two and a half years, Oden courted postmistress Laura Carr Hay. On January 17, 1897, they married at El Paso, and Lon settled into a comfortable life as a family man. He became a prosperous merchant in Sierra Blanca and later operated the Chispa ranch near Marfa, Texas. Lon Oden died at Marfa on August 11, 1910, of a lung ailment of undetermined origin.

A Final Note: Oden's diary and scrapbook, edited by his daughter Annie Laura Jensen was published in 1936 by Kaleidograph Press, Dallas, Texas, in honor of Texas's centennial celebration. A number of poems and letters that alluded to his numerous love affairs were excluded so as not to offend the sensibilities of Mrs. Alonzo Van Oden, who was still living. Fortunately, the scrapbook survives, and through the efforts of its owner, Lon's grandson George L. "Jack" Richards, the complete scrapbook and diary has since been made available to members of the family.

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Texas Ranger

DISPATCH

