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Texas Ranger Captain Will Wright

Will Wright: Rangers and Prohibition

by Jim Coffey



In December 1917, the eyes of the world were focused with a death stare on the muddy fields of Flanders and France. That December, as in the previous three years, Great Britain and its allies faced Germany and the Central Powers. While the eyes of world focused on France, the eyes of Texas were centered on the 800-mile stretch of border shared with Mexico. This area had become the newest battlefield in an expanding world of conflict.

One Texas man was preparing for that border clash. William Leonidas Wright, sheriff of Wilson County, had just accepted an appointment as Captain of Company K, the newest Ranger unit. Wright had been a Ranger before and had not strayed far from this experience. Two months shy of his fiftieth birthday, he was five foot ten, wore glasses, and was often compared to a minister because of his demeanor and dress. He had an engaging personality and an infectious laugh, and he loved to tell stories and listen to them. Known as an honest peace officer, he also had a reputation as one of the fastest men on the border with a pistol. This standing had been created twenty years before in the rough country around Cotulla and Laredo.

At a time in his life when many men would have been thinking about rocking chairs and warm fires on cold evenings, Will Wright was going into one of the most dangerous parts of the state of Texas—the frontera, the border country of South Texas. The actions that were returning him to the saddle reached back into history.

The political considerations that caused Governor William Hobby to appoint six new Ranger companies in 1918 were both local and international in scope. At home, the banditry spawned by the Mexican Revolution caused unrest in the Texas Valley. By 1916, the activities of German sympathizers and agents in Mexico brought the worldwide conflict to the home front of Texas.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 was far from being over. It slowed from time to time but seemed to break out again with the emergence of each charismatic leader who promised land and liberty. As economics brought more Texans and non-Texans to the border, the original Tejano inhabitants began to suffer a variety of injustices that produced discontent on both sides of the Rio Grande. Land that had been in families for generations was traded, legally and

illegally. The Mexican Revolution produced armed bands of insurrectos, who roamed both sides of the river and fostered fear and unrest between the Anglos and Mexicans. The cries of “Tierra y Libertad (Land and Liberty)” quickly extended from the Mexican side of the Rio Grande to the Texas side. Bandits raided isolated ranches, and the ranchers retaliated. In a matter of months, beginning in 1915, the Revolution had swept into South Texas. Soon, the Plan de San Diego surfaced. This was an ambitious and far-fetched effort to retake Texas and form a buffer state consisting of most of the Southwest. Governor Jim Ferguson responded by expanding the Rangers with special and regular commissions and ordered them into the area with instructions that the depredations must stop. What became known as the Bandit War of 1915 had begun.

Unfortunately, caught up in the spirit of the times, some of the people hired on as part of an expanded Ranger force to put an end to the disorder actually created even larger problems. The Rangers, with the support of the governor’s office, had responded to the troubles on the border with a brutality that astounded many people. Among them was Captain Harry Ransom, who used methods that he had seen pioneered in the Philippines against the Moros. W. W. Sterling later commented that Ransom, because of his previous experiences, had “place[d] little small value on the life of a law breaker.”[1] To say that civil rights were violated would be an understatement. Sterling commented further: “Captain Ransom held the belief that he was an instrument of justice and that he had a definite mission to perform. He said, ‘A bad disease calls for bitter medicine.’”[2] While Ransom and his company resolved some of the lawbreaking in the Valley, their actions exacted a heavy price on the prestige of the Rangers. Public opinion was strongly influenced by the acts of a few Rangers who acted without proper leadership. The reputation of the entire force suffered because of the excesses, which were ignored and, to some extent, encouraged by the political system in Austin and in the Valley. Accounts of drinking and abuse of power made the newspapers all over the state, and the reputation that the Rangers had been earned at great cost began to tarnish.

A new administration led by Governor William Hobby then took over Austin. One of the assurances that Hobby gave the electorate, not only on the border but in the rest of the state as well, was that he would reform the Texas Rangers. By December 1917, he saw the need to expand rather than reduce the size of the force. In doing so, he needed to appoint men who had proven leadership capabilities and a level of integrity that would be recognized by the citizens. Will Wright was called to Austin and offered a commission as captain of the new Company K. For Will, it was a homecoming.



Will Wright was not a rookie in the world of law enforcement; his family had been involved in it for years, to one degree or another. His father, L. B. Wright, had served as sheriff of Karnes County for an incomplete term before the Civil War. Mr. Wright had resigned the office to become part of a militia unit that allowed him to move cattle belonging to his father-in-law, Jo Tumlinson, to a more protected site in South Texas during the war. He next moved to Lockhart, where he opened a store.

William Leonidas Wright was born to L. B. and his wife Ann on February 19, 1868, in Lockhart. (The name William Leonidas shortly became Willie Lee or Bud.) The family moved to Sutherland Springs, near Floresville, to be closer to Ann’s family, the Tumlinsons. Ann was Texas royalty, being the daughter of one of the true legends of early Texas, Jo Tumlinson. Known as a man who

settled his own accounts, Tumlinson had killed his first man at fourteen and had ridden to the Texas Revolution with his comrade Creed Taylor. He had also played an almost Shakespearean role in manipulating people and situations during the Sutton-Taylor feud. That bloody misunderstanding was between the family of his old comrade-in-arms Creed Taylor and the Sutton family, who were cousins of the Tumlinsons. The feud had expanded from a series of family killings to a local war that, in scope and ferocity, predated some of the Mafia disputes of a later time. After killings between the Sutton and Taylor families had developed into general murder and hooliganism, the Washington County Militia unit was brought in to restore order. When Leander McNelly and the militia entered the area, things began to calm down. Order was restored, perhaps hastened by the death of Old Jo Tumlinson.

The militia camped on local ranches, made friends, married into the society, and brought stability. In the evenings, they recounted their daily adventures around the campfires. One of their listeners was Willie Lee Wright. If family stories are to be believed, he decided to become a Ranger during that time. He loved stories then, and that passion continued for the rest of his life.

Will Wright entered law enforcement and served his apprenticeship under some of the best officers in Texas. He became a deputy under John Craighead in Wilson County in 1892 after serving as a justice of the peace. By 1898, his reputation was such that he was recommended to join the Rangers and was accepted into John Rogers's company. First stationed in Cotulla, La Salle County, he shot it out with local bad man Jim Davenport, who was killed. Will was with Rogers during the fabled shootout over smallpox vaccinations in Laredo, where the Rangers, outnumbered ten to one, fought in the streets. Again with Rogers, he was involved in the Great South Texas Manhunt in search of Gregorio Cortez. On that hunt, he sharpened his skills working with Atascosa County Sheriff A.M. Avant and Emanuel Tom, considered the finest tracker in South Texas. The Avant-Wright posse was only fifteen minutes behind Cortez when Rogers arrested him in sheep camp near the border.

Will's actions in that pursuit led to political attention from Wilson County. He was asked to run for sheriff, and in one of the most active races in years, was elected in November of 1902. When he took office, he received a telegram from his old captain, John Rogers, who had a bit of advice for him: "Make the people a Ranger sheriff, acting impartially without regard to nationality, color or wealth." [3] Will kept the telegram in his wallet for years, and retained the advice for the rest of his life.

Will Wright was a popular sheriff. Besides being related to a large part of the population in Wilson County, he made friends and moved among the members of the community with ease. His family, which included his wife Mollie, five sons, and one daughter, lived in the jail. The sheriff's living quarters were separated from the jail itself by a built-in hanging tower. This meant that the ultimate punishment could be administered just outside the family dining area. Mollie and the kids took over a variety of jobs around the jail, including serving as unofficial jailers and cooks for the prisoners. Will might have been described as a "sporting gent" if he had not been a peace officer. He kept a pen of fighting roosters beside the back steps and paid a great deal of attention to the excellent horseflesh found on the ranches in the county. He loved to talk to people and listen to their stories. If there was a group of men somewhere on the street in Floresville or Sutherland Springs, it was an even bet that Sheriff Will "Bud" Wright had collected the assembly and was talking about one of his own latest adventures or some scrape involving his tough old grandpa, Jo Tumlinson.

Will and his fellow sheriff, Calloway Seale of Karnes County, became the unofficial hangmen for South Texas. They journeyed over that part of the state to assist local officials who may have decided, for moral or political reasons, that they could not spring the trap on a local member of the electorate. Will had his own personal rope that he carried with him to the festivities. With his glasses and receding hairline, he did not look the part of a sheriff, but he was not afraid to fight with either a pistol or his fists. On at least one occasion, he faced down a mob of his fellow townspeople (including family, more than likely) who were intent on lynching a prisoner. He successfully kept his prisoner safe, only to have the man stab him with a sharpened spoon on the way to the hanging several months later. It did not delay the sentence. Will was carted off to the doctor and Will's brother Milam hanged the man. Will became a member of the Sheriff's Association, serving as president for several years. Throughout the entire period, he was known for his honesty and integrity.



It was Will Wright's reputation that was a major factor in bringing him to Governor Hobby's office for an interview with Adjutant General William Harley. The governor appointed Rangers, but the adjutant general made a lot of the operational decisions. In the conversation, Harley made it plain to Will that a new time was coming for the Rangers. The state was dealing with the need to change the image and reality of the organization, and Will was going to be part of the change. He later recalled that they also discussed drinking and the necessity of a no-tolerance position on it. What was probably left unsaid was that the Rangers would not be successful in an area if they could not fit into the social and cultural landscape of the counties they worked in. A number of sheriffs had requested that the Rangers in their areas be moved or at least not sent to their counties because they were not wanted. A major advantage that Will had was that he knew the people he would be working with. Most of the sheriffs were old friends or at least familiar enough to him that they were on good speaking terms. They knew his reputation and, more importantly, Will knew which sheriffs might be more inclined to nonstandard interpretations of the law. He knew the ones he could trust and also those who might be inclined toward political play rather than stricter law enforcement.

Bringing experience that reflected twenty-six years of law enforcement, Will Wright became one of six new Ranger captains on January 1, 1918. After fifteen years away, he rode back into service, and he did it with a certain amount of style. With him, he brought Jack, his own quarter horse from the Crawford Sykes ranch, and a saddle that he purchased from a bank robber that he had in his jail. Hanging from the saddle horn was a *morral* (pouch) in which he carried extra cartridges. His spurs were made by Bianchi in Victoria and had Mexican coins as rowels. Will's rifle was an 1895 Winchester with the barrel chopped to eighteen inches. His pistol was one given to him by the citizens of Wilson County in 1910. It was an engraved, Colt single-action .45 with pearl grips on which a steer head was carved.[4] He also carried some kind of backup gun, perhaps a 1903 Colt similar to the one his brother Milam carried. One thing was certain: he was always armed. His dress and attitude might indicate that he was off duty, but Will Wright was never without a gun.

Will ambled around Austin, armed with state warrants and purchasing what he would need to outfit his new Ranger Company K. The necessary equipment was varied: cooking utensils, bedrolls, a folding chair, and ammunition.

Handpicking his Rangers as he did his equipment, Will chose men who had

family ties to him or men who had worked with him during his sixteen years as the sheriff of Wilson County. He wanted officers that he could trust and those who would follow his orders and not make mistakes. His original company sergeant was John Edds, who had been Will's chief deputy in Wilson County before going to the Customs Service and then to the Rangers. Edds was scrappy man, a native speaker of Spanish,[5] and he was already establishing himself as a competent officer, although one who might be a little over zealous in his actions. At various times, Wright's Ranger company included the following: W. S. Peterson, Hubert Brady, Tom Brady, Ben Tumlinson, Hays Wallis, "Big" Jesse Perez, "Little" Jesse Perez, Sid Hutchison, Stanley Morton, Robert Sutton, John Hensley, Sam Chessire, Robert Brown, Roy Hearn, Juan Gonzalez, Don Gilliland, and Charlie Wright, Will's son.

Almost immediately, Wright's Rangers were tested—not by bandits, but by the legislature. Representative J. T. Canales represented the seventy-seventh district, which consisted of Cameron and Wallacy Counties, and he had long been a supporter of the Rangers. He had formed the Canales Scouts, a group dedicated to the collection of intelligence and scouting against the bandits who operated against the outlaws during the Bandit Wars of 1915. His brother had held a Loyalty Ranger commission. Despite that background, Canales became incensed over the abuses of the Rangers and led an investigation in the legislature to determine the answers to nineteen charges he had brought against the law enforcement body on January 31, 1918. The charges centered on allegations of murder, prisoner abuse, unlawful uses of power, and general misconduct by a limited number of Rangers. Although Canales stated later that it was not his intention to do away with the Rangers as an organization but rather to reform it, questions remain as to the viability of the Rangers had the original suggestions been legislated.

New Ranger Captain Will Wright became involved in the Canales affair because of his loyalty to his friend John Edds, who was implicated in three of the charges in the investigation. Edds had killed a man he had believed to be a draft evader. It was, unfortunately, the wrong man. He was also involved in the deaths of two more prisoners who had been killed in Ranger custody or under his supervision. Edds was called to testify, and Will was also summoned because he was the serving captain, although he had not been in the force at the time of the killings. Will's defense of his ex-deputy was a powerful statement of his own integrity. In testimony, Canales himself described Wright as "a prince." Will emerged from the investigation as perhaps the only Ranger captain who kept his reputation intact. He was in a strong position to be one of the officers who would lead the Ranger force into a new era.

The investigation had turned a spotlight on some of the most disreputable activities of the Rangers, but it did not result in substantive changes for the force. There was a reduction of many of the Special Ranger commissions that had been passed out like party favors and an increase in salaries in an attempt to draw higher quality individuals into the force. The power to appoint and relieve captains and men remained with the governor's office, which made the Rangers a group particularly vulnerable to political intrigue. The power to select the men remained with the captains, under the supervision of the adjutant general. The standing force was to be reduced in 1919, but that may have been due more to economics than to any desire to lessen the power of the Rangers. Company K was cut to fifteen men in March of 1919.[6] The political battles had been fought to a standstill, but the issue of protecting the state began almost immediately.

Right away, Will began to buck the system. Rangers were always short of funds. It had been common practice for the Ranger captain to receive subsistence allowance for his men and the horses. If the men were stationed on a ranch and the rancher supplied the forage, the captain kept the money. This had been considered a common practice for years, and there is the possibility that the use of these funds from this source formed a kind of contingency for emergency situations. To Will, it was a violation of trust, and he would not be a part of this practice. "I don't like the looks of this deal," he said.[7] The problem was that when one man refused to follow the custom, it became difficult for all of the other captains to continue. Also, government had a way of expecting conformity even if it was a bending of the rules. At the risk of alienating the other captains, Will refused to be a part of a system he considered at best irregular, at worst illegal. The reaction from the other captains is not recorded, but the practice gradually disappeared.

What had not disappeared for the area were the ongoing bandit raids, and Will and his company turned their attention back to the border. Early on, Will set up scouting expeditions up and down the river and stationed men at various locations, usually on ranches that were friendly to the Rangers. Near dusk on March 7, 1918, a group of about thirty men drifted up to the headquarters of the Tom East ranch. At first, these men asked W. L. Franklin, the ranch foreman, if they could buy groceries from the ranch store. The strangers' intention quickly surfaced, however, and the store was raided, saddles and tack were stolen, and the car of Sheriff Oscar Thompson was commandeered for transportation to support a raid on Hebbbronville.[8] The bandits added insult to injury when one of Tom East's best horses was saddled and ridden off by the leader of the *banditos*. Several hostages were also taken, and the gang moved toward Hebbbronville. Somewhere between the ranch and the town, a distance of about thirty miles, the plan, the automobile, and the hostages were abandoned, and the gang headed for Mexico.

Wright and a group of five Rangers had been scouting in the area and spent the night in Hebbbronville. Will was awakened about 5:00 a.m. by a telephone call reporting the robbery at the East ranch, and he immediately decided to pursue the bandits. He knew he did not have much time to intercept them, so he turned to the best friend he could have at that time—the automobile. Feeling fairly certain that he could borrow horses at the East ranch, he found cars to transport the men, slung the saddles onto a borrowed truck, and headed south. When the Rangers got to the ranch, they expanded their group with a few more volunteers and headed into the *brasada*. Almost immediately, the brush closed in on them, and they were forced to ride single file. The bandits, not anticipating any pursuit, were resting their horses when Will's posse encountered them. The bandits broke into groups, and the Rangers pursued. It was a horse race, as much as it could be in the thick underbrush. Wright and his men called out to the Mexicans to surrender, but firing continued on both sides. Wright reported the incident: "They were all on the ground...their horses standing beside them. They commenced shooting at us and before you could snap a finger they were running and we were after them." [9] The pursuit ended with the deaths of a number of the bandits. Exact numbers were difficult to determine since several of the wounded disappeared into the underbrush. In the pursuit, many of the outlaws dropped stolen material they had with them, and much of it was recovered, including the stolen horse that the leader had been riding.

It is likely that this was the first horseback gunfight for any of the men in their careers. With this incident, Wright set a standard for his new company, and the Rangers showed that they had the capability and tenacity to pursue and deliver a deadly blow as successfully as their predecessors. The persistence demonstrated by Wright and his men probably led to his being known as "El

Capitan Diablo” (the Devil Captain), the man who wouldn’t quit on a scout.

In June 1919, the Ranger force was reduced in size, and Company K became Company D. The force settled in for what some thought was an uncertain future. One more incident in 1919 served notice that the world was still a very unsettled place for Will Wright. He was a cigar smoker and was seldom without some of his favorites. On a recent scout, however, he had run out of cigars, and some of the Rangers had supplied him with a bag of Lobo Negro smoking tobacco. Will may have loved to smoke, but he was not very good rolling his own. Frequently, one of the boys helped him.

When the Rangers finally got to Brownsville, Will made his stop for cigars and then walked down the street to pick up the company mail at the post office, which shared a facility with the Customs Office. It is doubtful that anyone would have recognized him as a Ranger. There were no badges worn at that time and, when in town, Will discouraged his men from wearing the heavy, three-inch-wide border belts that supported both pistol and rifle ammo. As Will walked along, he must have looked like a small man in glasses going to get the mail.

Exactly what happened next is up for question, to some extent. Will came out of the building and down the stairs to the sidewalk, smoking his cigar. He noticed a man named Davilla, who had been variously described as drunk, high on marijuana, or just cross. Davilla may have been throwing rocks at someone or something because Will, after looking around for a police officer, told him to “calm down and to behave himself.”[10] Davilla pulled a short knife and stabbed Will with it. The blade hung up in the bag of Lobo Negro tobacco, which Will would normally never have carried. Shocked, but still puffing on his cigar, he pulled his pistol and fired one time, hitting Davilla in the body. The heavy slug knocked the man down, but he got back up. Will fired again, striking him in the head and ending the encounter. Will later stated, “I don’t know why that crazy scoundrel jumped on me? I never saw him before.”[11] Will was not indicted, but the incident was typical of the degree of violence found on the border. And this violence was about to increase.

In 1917, Congress passed the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution, and it was ratified by the states in 1919. By January 17, 1920, the law was in place that forbade the manufacture or sale of alcohol in the United States. This was followed by the Volstead Act, which defined intoxicating liquor and forbade its consumption. The enforcement of the act proved to be extraordinarily difficult.

The attempt to legislate morality required that liquor and sin had to go somewhere else. In Texas, it went to Mexico. Several distilleries and breweries moved their entire operations south of the border and, almost immediately, the complexity of crime on the border changed. For the first time in recent memory, alcohol was being smuggled into the United States.

There was a need to increase the manpower of the various police organizations that enforced the law. When that happened, a number of men were recruited into law enforcement who were very good, but there were others who should not have chosen that line of work. Some of them considered themselves underpaid, which made them prone to bribery, and some did not believe that liquor should be banned. Additionally, there was the issue of public attitude. While the citizens voted “dry,” they frequently lived “wet.” This led to a general disrespect for the law and the acceptance of bootleggers as, if not useful members, certainly necessary members of the

community. Whatever the attitudes of individuals were, one thing remained clear: the Rangers had a law to enforce.

For the Texas Rangers of Company D, the first month of 1920 began a time of work such as they had never seen before. The company was stationed at Laredo and had most of the lower border to patrol. At its largest, the enrollment of the company was sixteen men. The makeup of the group changed when some members left to serve in other law enforcement bodies or other assignments were made. The leadership, however, remained stable, with Will Wright as captain. From 1920 until mid-1922, Will's sergeant was John Edds. By February 1922, Edds had been replaced by Jack Webb.

Company D was arguably the most successful of the Ranger companies employed against the smugglers, who were a vast collection of experienced criminals. Many of these offenders had plied their trade for years and were known on both sides of the border through wanted posters and *corridos*, the border ballads dedicated to the men who fought against the law. The Americans called them bootleggers or horsebackers. Depending on the part of the state you were in, you might hear *tequileros* or *mescaleros*, names originating from the product they hauled. These smugglers could be ten or seventy-five years old. They could be hiding one or two bottles under their coats or bringing fifty quarts wrapped in *tules* (broadleaf grasses) on the back of a horse.

Smuggling became a major moneymaking operation. For the average worker in the United States, the per capita income in 1925 was \$1,236.00. Whatever the income was south of the border, it was definitely less. Tequila, mescal, or a suitable substitute sold for twenty-five to fifty cents a quart in Mexico, and it would be sold in the United States for four to fifteen dollars a bottle. The profit from one trip could exceed a year's income for a Texas farmer. For a Mexican farmer, the profit was almost unimaginable.

Of course, all of the money made wasn't profit. Funds had to be spent on stock, bribery of local law enforcement and ranchers, protection provided by *pistoleros*, bribes to ranchers, and ammunition. Initially, smugglers would rarely fight it out with law enforcement but, as the profits rose, use of *pistoleros* to guard the train also began to increase. The profits increased as the demand in the United States increased. Even with greater costs, one trip could still provide more money than a person might see in a lifetime, and the return trip could be equally profitable. On the trail back, supplies from the States were smuggled into Mexico. When a successful smuggler returned home, he came back with not only money but also flour, sugar, ammunition, guns, or anything else that was scarce in Mexico.

The major operators generally followed a pattern. Contact would be made with bootleggers on the American side, generally as far north as Freer, San Diego, or Benavides. San Diego was a major distribution point, known as a prime source for gambling and bootlegging. Much of the distribution occurred outside of San Diego at a place called El Alto. From there, the liquor would be transported by car to San Antonio, Dallas, or Fort Worth. The most frequently used crossings were found in Hidalgo and Starr Counties. The *tequileros* utilized low-water crossings near La Grulla and Roma, as well as others near the village of Zapata in Zapata County. While these were the most commonly used, any crossing was fair game.

Horses or mules were used in these crossings, and this provided a seldom-acknowledged problem for the ranchers. The animals from Mexico had usually not been dipped for ticks, while the animals on the American side

generally had been. The movement of large groups of animals brought disease back into pastures that had recently been cleared. In an attempt to placate ranchers, many of the smugglers would leave a few bottles of booze at the sites where they had pulled staples to lay down a fence so that they could cross a pasture. Less willing to make friends, others cut fences, leaving the stock to wander and mix with that of the neighbors. The reaction from the ranchers was mixed toward the tequileros who crossed their places, but cooperation between law enforcement and the ranchers improved after shootings occurred that involved smugglers and cowboys on some of the remote ranches.

While liquor was the key element in the smuggling, the other essential was water. Transporting the illegal booze required horses and mules, and they needed food and water. The average trips ranged from between 125 and 250 miles, depending on how much circling and backtracking was necessary to avoid the law enforcement. Therefore, smugglers had to know the locations of water tanks, creeks, springs, and seeps in order to provide the animals and men with drink. It was impossible for the law enforcement to station people at every water source, so it was a constant case of watching and cutting for sign. Both sides used people who knew the territory. Every band of horsebackers who crossed the river had a *guia*, or guide, who knew the country. Many had cowboied in the area, and quite a few had been part-time cattle and horse thieves, so they knew the ins and outs of the pastures. They could locate the water tanks, windmills, and water troughs that could be used to sustain life in the *brasada* (brush country). For the Rangers, an experienced tracker was a necessity as important as their rifles.

There were a number of police organizations working on the Texas border, including the Border Patrol, Mounted Customs Service, prohibition officers, local sheriffs, and police. The Rangers of Company D were assigned to four counties: Jim Hogg, Starr, Hidalgo, and Zapata. These counties represented the primary area of smuggling for South Texas, and Company D was the mainstay as far as state law enforcement was concerned.

The Rangers looked like anyone else in the heavy brush country. They dressed like cowboys of the area, with jackets of duck and heavy leggings or chaps. They did not wear badges, but they carried state warrants in folding leather wallets as their authority. The absence of uniform and badge may have had a down side since anyone could claim to be a Ranger. This may have led to some of the civilian abuses, which have been piled at the door of *los Rinches* (Rangers) for generations. Will worked with his men to impress upon them the importance of avoiding bloodshed as much as possible in the enforcement of the law. Despite the training, Company D was involved in a lot of gunfights.

Interdiction of the smugglers would take careful planning, and Will Wright was professional enough to realize this. He created a system that would allow him to be successful in a large territory. By keeping his men inland, away from the border, he was able to pick and choose which trails to follow. Ignoring the smaller groups and concentrating on the larger smugglers, he would be able to maximize the impact of his tiny force. Staying on the isolated ranches, he could limit how much the smugglers' intelligence network could pick up about his location. Both Rangers and horsebackers learned the backcountry between the isolated ranches, oil camps, water tanks, and tiny settlements with no names.

Headquarters for the company was wherever Will was. It could be the clearing

that the men found themselves in at night or the rented buildings on isolated ranches.[12] The Rangers in Company D set up a procedure that they followed with little variation for the first few years of the interdiction process. They set up camps on ranches in the area: Los Ojuelos in Webb County, the San Antonio Viejo ranch in Jim Hogg County, and the Agua Dulce southwest of Hebbronville. From these sites, the Rangers could move with a degree of confidence because they knew the land, had access to telephones to keep in contact with each other, and were close to roads that allowed them to be supplied by the one-ton Ford truck that Will had somehow acquired to act as a combination chuck wagon and supply vehicle. The men were subject to the appropriations of the legislature and, as such, seemed constantly running short of ammunition and supplies. They hunted deer on their scouts to supplement rations.[13]

Both smugglers and law enforcement used informers. From the information they received, the Rangers decided that it would be more productive to try to pick up the smugglers further inland, allowing them to make an entry and commit themselves to a particular direction and plan of action. Will sent men in pairs to ride east and west to cut for sign on the smugglers' tails. ("Cut for sign" is a commonly used expression describing the process of tracking.) Trackers watched for brush with broken branches, fresh animal waste, evidence of a number of shod or unshod hoof prints in column, and indications at water tanks that a large number of animals had water.

Several men worked as trackers for Company D, but usually it was Frank Smith,[14] a member of the Customs Service, whose brother Warren was a Company D Ranger. Smith had an extraordinary ability to read the subtleties of the land disturbed by the outlaws' passing, and his skill brought the Rangers into contact with the tequileros a number of times. When the trail was located, the Rangers gathered as many of their number as they could. They then loaded the pack mules and set out in pursuit, not knowing how long the trail might be or how much food and ammunition it might take before finding the bandits. It was not unusual for them to run out of both.

Beginning in February 1920, Will and Company D began a rigorous pursuit of the horsebackers. Despite being unable to count on a constant supply of ammunition or state warrants to pay for food and lodging, Will pressed hard. On September 21, 1920, he got into a running fight with twelve tequileros near Conception, leaving four of the outlaws dead. Following both his training and his desire that enforcement be carried out to the letter of the law, he left the dead in the field until a justice of the peace could arrive on the scene and make a legal pronouncement. As for the captured liquor, the policy adopted in the field was that the bottles were examined, counted, and then destroyed where they had been taken. This was generally accomplished by throwing the bottles on the ground, breaking them against one another, and setting fire to the tules and packing material.[15]

In addition to working the backcountry, the Rangers began to stop automobiles, which led to a protest from the district attorney from Alice, S. H. Woods. He declared that the stops were illegal. Will responded to him, but no action was taken. However, there are no other records of the men of Company D having problems of this sort with local law enforcement.

For the remainder of the year, the Rangers scouted the backcountry and had multiple run-ins with the outlaws. Both the smugglers and the Rangers continued to sharpen their skills. The opposing sides began to recognize each other and to comment about what would happen if a chance encounter might take place. On February 25, 1921, Company D came across a group of smugglers. Captain Wright reported: "There wasn't a shot fired by anyone. We

were told they would never give up alive but when they saw us, all that talk went up in smoke.”[16] The Rangers were getting a reputation, and the reputation was going to get bigger.

In March 1921, Company D responded to problems in Rio Grande City, moving almost en masse to shut down a prostitution ring and to arrest twenty bootleggers. The men then moved on to Weslaco to reduce the levels of sin and vice in that city. But it was in November 1921 that the company made what may be the largest interception of bootleggers in Texas history. Perhaps acting from a tip or from his scouts, Will and a group of his men hit the brush. Riding with Captain Wright were Rangers Bill Miller, Juan Gonzales, Charlie Wright, Jack Webb, John Edds, and Hubert Brady, and tracker Frank Smith. On November 17, 1921, the men were involved in a running fight with smugglers sixty miles west of Hebbronville at a place called Colorado Chiquita. After a five-mile chase, they captured three of the horsebackers and eighteen horses.

On November 18, two Rangers, two customs agents, and Will fought with a group of smugglers near Brunei, forty miles east of Laredo. Two smugglers, eight hundred bottles of tequila, and seventeen horses were captured, all being taken to Laredo. Almost immediately, the Rangers picked up another trail.

Will moved his men quickly. He traveled light and moved his supplies by truck, reducing the amount of weight on the horses and allowing the men to concentrate on the opposition without concern about supplies or surviving in the rough country. The bandits they were pursuing were moving quickly as well, leaving a broad trail. Will estimated that there must be twelve to fifteen smugglers with their horses, meaning the odds favored the smugglers over the Rangers. Company D cut through the country to the Bernaina Ranch in Duval County. Years later, Will’s son Dogie recalled how his father described the time leading up to the fight: “They [the Rangers] had a lot o’ fun, you know, when they get on a trail that a way and they’ brag a little what they’s gonna do and they’re gonna ride right among ’em and whip ’em with a quirt.”[17]

The men crossed on to the Jim Gibson ranch, and the mood changed quickly when they realized how close they were to the smugglers. Most of the ranchers used a float system to control water levels in horse troughs, and the Rangers found the trough had not filled. They knew then that the end of the pursuit was near. As with any combat situation, the bravado disappeared, and the men focused on the business at hand. A constant worry involved being hurt far from any medical care. Will assured his men that he would take care of them, and they knew he was a man of his work. Dogie recalled those moments before a fight: “You begin to think about your families a little bit, but after the first shot is fired, all that’s gone and those men demonstrated their ability as real guerilla fighters”.[18]

Those abilities were needed. In the fight that followed, the Rangers moved into position and found the tequileros resting, not expecting a fight. As was Will’s custom, he called out for the smugglers to surrender. The fight started immediately. When it was over, the Rangers had collected 3,700 quarts of liquor and 37 horses. The bandits all escaped to Mexico. “I am very sorry all those men escaped, Will reported, “but they will have something to remember from the Rangers.”[19]

Between November 17 and 22, the Rangers had collected over 5,000 quarts of alcohol, more than 45 horses, and an unrecorded number of weapons. There

were no Rangers lost. Will and his company were able to head into a New Year feeling proud of their accomplishments. But more were on the way.

When 1922 dawned, it brought the usual assortment of scouting and reassignments, so Company D must have been busy throughout the spring. Will requested rifles from Captain Roy Aldrich in Austin, and he asked some modifications, which certainly included cutting back the barrels to sixteen inches or less to make them more manageable in the brush. Acknowledging the great number of Jo Tumlinson's descendents in the Ranger organization, Aldrich later commented, "Have shipped the three guns to Captain Wright and trust that they will reach you promptly. Petmecky has named them the 'Tumlinson Carbine'." [20]

Business continued to pick up for the Rangers. On July 1, 1922, a strike was called on all railroads in Texas by the Federated Shop Craft Union. Because the strike reached all across the United States, the railroad ownership requested help from both the federal and state governments. Due to the unrest and violence associated with the walkout, martial law was declared on July 26 in Dennison, and the entire Ranger force was assigned there. The men of Company D arrived, and their roles changed from those of horseback warriors in a near guerilla campaign to that of city policemen facing people who could very well be their neighbors. Despite the change in surroundings, most of the men enjoyed the trip because they got away from camp cooking and were exposed to the seductions of clean clothes and regular baths.

Will now had a new sergeant by the name of Jack Webb. Webb was a large man with little tolerance for people who did not show the proper respect for the Rangers or his captain. When the company moved to Cleburne to reduce the strike-related violence there, Webb made an impression on at least one striker. The Rangers ate at a boarding house near the Pullman car they slept in. The strikers had established themselves on a corner near the boarding house with the intent of intimidating the U.S. marshals, who were also providing security. Will and the company were told to avoid the strikers' corner in order to avoid trouble, but these were men whose jobs involved trouble every day. The Rangers walked to the boarding house by a route that brought them directly by the strikers. Several of the protesters began to taunt the men, who had Will and Jack Webb as the first pair in the column. Will never said a word, but Jack pulled his single-action Colt and slammed it across the head of the man doing most of the talking. There is no record of any other problem faced by the Rangers from then on as they went back and forth to eat.

The Rangers and the Texas National Guard initially camped out in Dennison. Before all the controversy was over, they had set up in twenty different towns. Literally overnight, the Ranger force increased from 46 men in July to near 500 in August. This number was reduced by the end of September to 386 men. The politics continued to bother Will, who insisted to anyone who would listen that the place for his men was on the border.

Events in Mirando City proved him correct. The company moved back to the border to deal with the lawlessness brought about by the discovery of oil and the influx of bootleggers, gamblers, prostitutes, and other folk who followed the money. Will decided quickly that the local law enforcement could handle the flood of evildoers, and he returned the company to life in the backcountry.

Captain Wright went back to the life of the horseback Ranger and, as usual, brought some innovation with him. He continued to use his small truck to provide flexibility for the Rangers, but he also elected to utilize captured

equipment. When the state had provided three pack mules, Will used captured bootlegger mules. He also bought one at auction and was given another that had been captured in fights on the border. He was as particular about his mules as he was about anything else. He oversaw the packing of these animals, taking great care that they not be abused. The mules carried most of the foodstuffs and ammunition and, by 1922, they were also packed with a little extra ordinance: two Thompson submachine guns.[21] The state government had apparently come to believe the truism that there is no practical substitute for firepower.

Will, Sam Hensley, and Jesse Perez slipped into Corpus Christi in October to provide backup for Frank Hamer and Headquarters Captain R.W. Aldrich in disturbances that threatened to lead to mob violence. In a dispute over election politics, the county sheriff had shot Fred Roberts, a local businessman alleged to have Ku Klux Klan connections, and a standoff ensued between factions supporting each group. Hamer and the other Rangers were able to effect arrests and put an end to the problems before any kind of violence exploded.

In November, Company D took part in a joint operation with Customs Service personnel. They fought against horsebackers forty miles east of Laredo and then turned south of Corpus Christi for a special assignment. This time, they did not go against bootleggers; they faced organized gambling and prostitution interests. The Rangers' primary interests, however, were the bootleggers on the border. This was made clear in December.

From December 1 to December 19, seven members of Company D, Frank Smith of Customs, and Will Wright camped on the Jennings ranch in Zapata County.[22] They had scouted and cut for sign, and their diligence was rewarded when a large trail was discovered on December 19. The Rangers loaded up their pack mules and took to the trail. By two in the afternoon, they had found their quarry. The bootleggers had camped in order to rest for the night's journey, and they had unloaded most of their pack animals, leaving their saddle horses ready to run. The site was a horseshoe-shaped rise with the open part of the horseshoe facing the Rio Grande. Will divided his force so that the underbrush would shelter the two groups of Rangers, and the smugglers would be driven toward the closed end of the horseshoe. In the brisk fight that ensued, three of the smugglers were killed, including leader Severino (Silvano) Garcia, an experienced smuggler. During the conflict, Will stood up for a better shot, and he and one of the smugglers had it out. "I missed him," said the captain, "but he cut down on me and hit a rock right by me, stinging my face with fine gravel. I said, 'Good God, I've got to shoot,' and I went down on them sights." [23]

When the fight was over, Will and Frank Smith went to search for a telephone to get in touch with the local justice of the peace. What they found was an oil rig with a nervous driller. This man had spent the last few minutes on the ground, trying to figure out what kind of war had started in the oil patch, why no one had told him about it, and why everyone seemed to be shooting at his oil rig. Will and Frank calmed the driller, contracted the justice of the peace, and took stock. The fight resulted in the capture of 650 quarts of liquor, 3 mules, 5 horses, 3 new Winchester rifles, and 3 new Smith and Wesson pistols. In a short time, the clash also inspired a fairly famous corrido titled "Los Tequileros," which maintained, in expected fashion, that not all of the recently deceased were engaged in smuggling activities at all.[24] This conflict became known as the Las Animas fight, and it was the last one for the company in 1922. The long patrols were paying off, and the Rangers remained a problem for the smugglers, who soon decided to even the score.

Will was in Austin five days after the Las Animas fight. He, all of the Rangers, captains, and privates were to meet with Governor Pat Neff, who had spent time moving around the state as an ardent supporter of prohibition. The closed-door meeting that Neff had with the Rangers may have been an effort to encourage tighter enforcement of the laws that were already losing some of their luster. In one of the few reports from the meeting, Neff asked the captains to tell how much liquor they had captured. With his usual colorful language, Will responded that he didn't know exactly how much liquor he had confiscated, but he "[felt] safe in estimating that the amount [was] sufficient to fill a deep well and overflow some." [25] In summary, he pronounced that his part of the border was quiet. It did not remain so indefinitely.

One of the marks of success in combating crime on the border was having a bounty placed on your head. Will was very successful, and that brought at least two attempts on his life. In April 1923, Customs and Immigration officers pursued a group of horsebackers led by a man referred to as Pato de Palo, or Wooden Foot. The officers rode through an ambush set up by these bandits, who were convinced that Will and Company D were the pursuers. The horsebackers were divided on both side of a low wash with a clear view of their quarry. The lawmen did not see the bandits, so they did not fire. The bandits kept quiet and let the Customs men go on their way. Later in the year, Border Patrol agents captured one of the outlaws, who told the story to his captors. In a typed letter to Will, the inspector in charge said, "It is probable that this ambush was for you and your men and I quote this for your information." Scrawled across the bottom of the letter was the following handwritten note: "This is for your information=*mucho quidado*=but if they tackle you give them h—I." [26] Had the bandits been setting up an ambush for Will and the Rangers back in April? There is no way of knowing at this time, but the letter bears witness that at least other members of the law enforcement community recognized the high degree of efficiency that Rangers were bringing to the fight.

By November, either the bootleggers changed their methods or they became equally efficient. Rangers Juan Gonzales and Jesse Perez would have normally been in the brush with the rest of the Rangers, but they were assigned to work cattle theft cases. This seems to indicate that the booze business was cooling a bit, at least in that part of South Texas.

January 1924 brought one more story to add to the legend of Company D. The men received word that horsebackers had crossed the river and were headed north. At the same time, a norther screamed off of the plains and brought with it a drizzling rain that turned to sleet. A mixed company of Rangers and Customs men took to the field. Roy Hearn, Jack Webb, John Salder, D. A. Barter, Frank Smith, and Will Cotulla trailed the horsebackers through a desert that had turned to ice. Ahead of them, the smugglers and their leaders, Celso Garza Vela and Panteleon Villareal, were just as uncomfortable, but the bandits knew where they were going. The pursuers didn't. The Rangers followed the usual procedure of cutting back on their trail and circling every now and then. However, the time spent on this was reduced when the weather turned so bad that the Rangers thought few people would be trailing them. After two days, the bandits stole a calf from one of the outlying ranches, started fires, and prepared for their first hot meal in a while. On January 5, as they began to prepare their food, they heard an unexpected voice from the brush calling, "*Rindance!* (Surrender!)." The Rangers had caught up. They opened fire with the Thompson sub-machine guns that they had packed through the ice storm. When it was over, nine bandits had fallen, several had escaped, and another liquor cargo had been intercepted.

Successfully dealing with bootleggers was not the only task for the Rangers of this era; dealing with politicians was equally important. Bandits could kill you, but politicians could cut your funding. The political issues that were emerging in Texas at that time involved the charismatic husband-and-wife team of Jim and Miriam Ferguson. Jim had been elected governor in 1914. The issue of prohibition was a hot one, and Ferguson ran as an anti-prohibitionist, among other things. During his time in office, he was involved in several controversial activities, but the one that got the most attention was vetoing almost the entire appropriation for the University of Texas in 1916. He was eventually indicted by the Travis County grand jury on several counts of theft, and the Texas house brought impeachment charges against him. He was found guilty. Whether the combined house and senate would have upheld that finding is still up for discussion because Ferguson resigned the day before the joint meeting. Although the impeachment findings declared that he could not run for any public office again, he did attempt several campaigns. Then Ferguson made a decision that would bring him undying notoriety in Texas politics: he would let Miriam run for office, and he would be the advisor. It was the first "two governors for the price of one" package in American history. The election of 1924 developed as a race between pro- and anti-Ku Klux Klan factions. The Fergusons came down on the side of the antis, and they were swept into office by an electorate that was perhaps ready to try new directions in a number of areas.

It is difficult to tell how much all of this affected Will. During the first Ferguson administration, the Rangers had been expanded through the commissioning of a number of Special Rangers, many of whom proved to be incompetent at best or criminals at worst. It was Ferguson's rough handling of the problems on the border that contributed to the Bandit Wars of 1915. To make matters worse, the Rangers became a political tool under his administration. The Rangers had certainly been heavily influenced by politics before, but the impact of Ferguson on the rank and file was tremendous. Instead of communicating directly with a Ranger captain when help was requested, sheriffs and mayors found their appeals for aid going to the governor. The governor's office became the seat of Ranger power, and this was not a situation that could be tolerated by some of the older Rangers. It is likely that their decisions to resign were made long before the actual election of Ferguson's wife. When Miriam Ferguson (and Jim, unofficially) won and was inaugurated in January 20, 1925, there was no question about who was really in charge. However, there was a question about whom the couple would be in charge of. Will Wright would not be one of those people.

In his resignation, tendered April 1, 1925, Will made his position very clear: "I am proud that I have served my beloved state as captain of Company D. I am proud that I have served with some of the best men in Texas on the border."^[27] There is no record of how he left the company. It must have been an emotional time for those men who had faced danger and death together, but the old devil captain was going home. There were a number of things in which Will could take pride. In the time he and his men spent in the fight against tequileros, he had never lost a man in the field, never had a man wounded, and was never accused of abuse of a prisoner. Also, Company D had captured more illegal liquor than any other Ranger unit. In the end, it was not bullets but politics and pride that brought what Will thought was an end to his career.

Captain Will Wright left Laredo riding a tall sorrel horse given to him by Bob Sutton, a local rancher. He led his two pack mules, Rat and Lizzie, who had started out their lives hauling illegal liquor. Will rode to Cotulla, Fowlerton, Charlotte, Pleasanton, and then to Floresville. He returned to a home that he had not seen much during the past seven years. When he had left, there were

still children in the house; now it was quiet with only Mollie and him there. Will had to seek other employment because there was no retirement fund for heroes. He worked as an officer in Robstown and also ran unsuccessfully for sheriff. But the state that he loved was not through with him yet. When the Fergusons left Austin in two years, Will Wright was called back to the Rangers. And he went.

NOTES

1. W. W. Sterling, *Trails and Trials of a Texas Ranger* (Privately printed, 1959), 47.

2. Ibid.

3. "Ranger of Old Days is Dead," *Fort Worth Star Telegram* (March 8, 1942). Wright commented that this advice had been his creed, but he admitted that his "greatest misfortune" was his involvement with prominent people who had run afoul of the law.

4. Will carried a number of weapons, including at least two single-action .45s that were engraved. One was given to him by the citizens of Corpus Christi, and the other was presented at a barbeque in Sutherland Springs in 1907. Both had pearl grips which, despite the comments of an obscure four-star general in World War II, many real lawmen carried. Will's was a 5 ½-inch, engraved, single-action Colt. One of his rifles was an 1895 Winchester in 30-06, which he had cut down. He then switched to a chopped 1894 Winchester. This weapon had started out as a rifle-length firearm but was cut down to 15-16 inches probably about the time Will returned to the Rangers in 1918. Ammunition problems were simplified if everyone had the same caliber weapon. The '94 kicked a little less than the '95 in 30-06, which was a weapon reputed to "get meat on both ends." The '95 is in a museum in San Antonio, the .45 and the cut-down '94 are in the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame.

5. When Will was first sheriff, John Edds had been a supporter. He provided backup for the sheriff on several occasions despite the fact that he had a badly injured leg, the result of an accident that occurred while reloading ammunition. Will's son Dogie recalled that Edds had had to fight a lot and was not adverse to it. Edds' mother was Hispanic, and his ability with the language provided invaluable to Will. Unfortunately, Edds was involved in several incidents that resulted in at least one death of a prisoner and a civilian. In the 1920s, Will and he ended their professional and personal relationship. Edds continued in law enforcement in a number of areas, ending his career as a guard at Kelly AFB in San Antonio. He died in 1956.

6. Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler, *The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 471.

7. Sterling, 412.

8. "Rangers account for 5 of Robber Gang," *Dallas Morning News* (March 9, 1918).

9. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 510.

10. Sterling, 413.

11. Ibid.

12. Maude T. Gilliland, *Horsebackers of the Brush Country* (Brownsville, Texas: Springman-King Company, 1968), 46. The memoirs of Don Gilliland, one of the Wright Rangers, make up a large part of *Horsebackers of the Brush Country*. It is perhaps one of the best firsthand accounts of the Rangers and the tequileros

13. Wright to Captain R. W. Aldrich, Dec.10, 1920. Archives of the Big Bend, Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas.

14. Frank Smith had a long career in law enforcement, first in Customs and later as a game warden. In a conversation with this author in 2003, a friend of Smith's related that, in one of the gunfights with the horsebackers, Smith decided not to shoot. Instead, he roped one of the outlaws and presented him to Captain Wright. Wright was not amused.

15. Gilliland, 39.

16. Wright to Barton, February 28, 1921. Ranger Records. Texas State Archives, Austin.

17. E. A. (Dogie) Wright, *A Life in Law Enforcement*, (University of Texas at Austin, Center for American History). Tape 7.

18. Ibid.

19. Sadler and Harris, 499. Quotation from letter of Will Wright to Captain R. W. Aldrich.

20. Captain R. W. Aldrich to Hubert Brady, April 13, 1922. Archives of the Big Bend, Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas. The "Petmecky" mentioned was Jake Petmecky's Hardware on Congress Avenue in Austin. It is speculation, but the Tumlinson carbine was probably a '94 Winchester with the barrel bobbed to fifteen or sixteen inches.

21. Gilliland, 51.

22. Gilliland, 36. Gilliland lists the Rangers on this scout as Captain Wright, Ben Tumlinson, Jack Webb, Don Gilliland, Hubert Brady, W. S. Peterson, and Jesse Perez.

23. Webb, 556.

24. Homero S. Vera, "Los Tequileros," *El Mesteno* 3.29 (Feb 2000), 18. Vela makes the case that, in the corrido, at least one of the men had not been involved in smuggling.

25. *San Antonio Express* (December 29, 1922), 1.

26. John R. Peavey, *Echoes from the Rio Grande* (Brownsville: Springman-King, 1963), 226. The meaning of mucho quidado is "(be) very careful."