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# Texas Rangers Then and Now

By Robert M. Utley

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Byron Johnson, director of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame, distinguishes between “horseback Rangers” and “motorized Rangers” and rightly contends that the latter have not gained their due from writers. In seeking to correct the imbalance, I have dealt with both. My *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* spanned from 1823 to 1910 and was published by Oxford University Press in 2002. *Lone Star Lawmen: The Second Century of the Texas Rangers* covered the years from 1910 to 2000 and was released by Oxford in the spring of 2007. The *Texas Ranger Dispatch* editor has asked me to recall some of the differences I experienced in researching and writing about the Rangers, both horseback and motorized.



**Robert M. Utley**

First, as a historian of the American West, all my fifteen books deal with the nineteenth century, and only a few of my articles and other writings edge into the twentieth century. I have worked very little in the century in which I passed most of my years, and only once have I written about anyone still living.

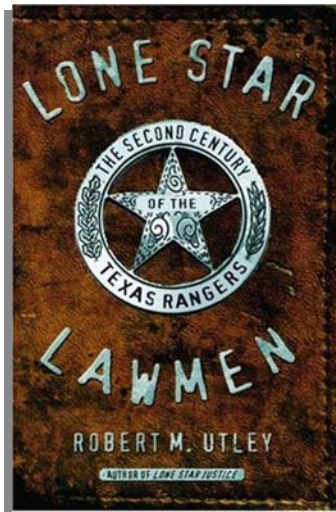
By the measure of experience alone, writing *Lone Star Lawmen* presented larger challenges. However, a more daunting obstacle impeded *Lone Star Lawmen*: the scarcity of documentary sources critical to every researcher.

After half a century as institutionally unorganized, sometime soldiers, the Rangers began their formal existence by legislative enactment in 1874. Originally conceived as a military unit of Indian fighters, they rightly fell under the control of the adjutant general of Texas. Although they turned out to be Old West lawmen with the administrative title of Frontier Battalion, they remained under the adjutant general until merged into the newly created Department of Public Safety in 1935.

Rangers always abhorred paperwork, and their reports to the adjutant general were brief—if submitted at all. Nevertheless, the official records of the adjutant general yield

an abundance of excellent source material about the horseback Rangers. These records are in the custody of the Texas State Library and Archives, and the incomparable archivist Donaly Brice guided me through the maze.

For *Lone Star Lawmen*, I found the adjutant general's records of continuing value as I worked through the period of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-20. When the Rangers transferred to the Department of Public Safety (DPS), they took with them all their records from 1920 to 1935. Moreover, the new leadership of DPS demanded a huge expansion of the paperwork the Rangers so disliked. Now, ran my hope, the motorized Rangers could be thoroughly documented.



Then came a stunning discovery: DPS or the Rangers destroyed or otherwise lost not only the adjutant general's records of 1920-35, but also most of the records for the rest of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, DPS deposited a body of twentieth-century records in the state archives. They include some valuable, although incomplete, material for the 1970s and 1980s. However, nary a shred is there for the vital thirty years of Homer Garrison, nor is there much for the 1990s. I am still astonished that an organization so proud of its history and tradition could allow almost all its records to vanish.

I met this quandary in five ways. Most important was the availability of research done on these records in the basement of DPS headquarters in Austin by three scholars during the 1950s and 1960s. (So the records went missing after that time.) Their dissertations and theses proved indispensable in filling the gaps because, in their text, they footnoted the relevant documents. Second, the governors' papers in the state archives—especially the Neff, Moody, and Stevenson administrations—often yielded excellent material. Third, many of the motorized Rangers donated their papers to the archives of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, where Christina Stopka and Judy Shofner were unfailingly helpful and supportive. Fourth, a few retired Rangers, notably Glenn Elliott, Ed Gooding, Lewis Rigler, and Joaquin Jackson, published their memoirs. These provided insights available nowhere else. Finally, the state's newspapers turned out many stories on the Rangers. Newspapers have to be used with caution, but they often carry direct quotations of or about key people and events in Ranger history. From these sources, I believe I have written as complete an institutional history of the motorized Rangers as possible.

Another influential difference between the horseback and motorized Rangers should be noted. Under the adjutant generals, the Ranger force suffered high turnover as politics intruded into personnel matters every two years. Many Rangers who wanted to stay were dismissed, and new recruits of doubtful competence were sworn in. After 1935, with the Public Safety Commission providing political cover, Horace Carmichael and Homer Garrison professionalized the service. Men who met the high standards prescribed by Garrison could make a career in the Rangers without worrying about job security. Thus, after 1935, the Old West lawmen quickly became modern policemen and

then elite policemen as the years went by. Therefore, I had to switch from telling Old West stories to telling modern cop stories. I think I succeeded. In any event, it was a new and enjoyable experience.

Finally, *Lone Star Lawmen* deals with living people—retired Rangers, some of whose service dates from the last years of Homer Garrison. Historians who address modern events customarily interview all the participants who consent, and oral history has enjoyed increasing prominence in researching and writing history. Some recent bestsellers rely more on interviews, sometimes in the hundreds, than on written documents.

I did not attempt oral history for what I regard as a compelling reason. I learned enough about the motorized Rangers to conclude that the Garrison Rangers and the generation that followed enjoyed a sturdy camaraderie, truly a “band of brothers.” Regardless of internal frictions or critical opinions of their comrades, they did not expose these issues to the outside world. Those yet living are still bonded by this rapport, and they still do not open themselves beyond the circle. In part, this results from an often critical press, and many former Rangers still look on the press with hostility and resentment. For me, however, the sense of unique fellowship is the overriding explanation.

At least this was the perception that motivated me to not even attempt to intrude into the private world of retired Rangers. I asked none for an interview. I am grateful to the few who provided dates and facts of importance, but I never tried to question them beyond those limits. Some indeed may have been willing to talk to me. So determined was I not to violate their professional privacy that I held to my resolve to the end.

I began this project in 1997, and it was originally contracted as a single volume. By the time I had reached the end of the nineteenth century, I had a book that was the length specified in the contract. Surmounting many difficulties, my editor at Oxford consented to another volume. Contrasted with biography, writing institutional history is very difficult. The past decade has been very hard on me. Now that I can relax somewhat and feel less driven, I can look back on a truly outstanding and inspiring part of my professional career. I hope that *Lone Star Justice* and *Lone Star Lawmen* add up to the comprehensive history the Rangers have lacked. Important as well is the hope that I have lived up to retired captain Jack Dean’s plea: “Just be fair.”