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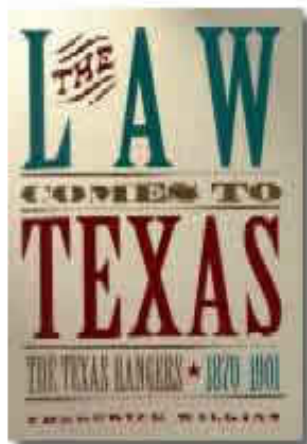
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**Book Review:
The Law Comes to Texas:
The Texas Rangers 1870-1901**

**by Frederick Wilkins
Reviewed by Chuck Parsons**

State House Press, P.O. Box 15247, Austin, Texas 78761. 416 pp., 6 x 9 inches, photos, bibliography, index. Paper cover - \$19.95, ISBN 1-880510-61-8. Hard cover - \$29.95, ISBN 1-880510-60-X

Most historians and western buffs have considered Dr. Walter Prescott Webb's *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (1935) the bible of Ranger history. Although it may be premature to label this new book a full replacement of that classic, this publication by historian Frederick Wilkins must be considered a major contribution to Texas Ranger history. The third in a series of four, *The Law Comes to Texas: The Texas Rangers 1870-1901* covers in detail the period from Reconstruction through the turn of the century.

To the general reader, the most popular era of Ranger history remains the "Wild West" period. This was a time when there were constant Indian raids on the Texas frontier, Anglo and Mexican outlaws to fight, as well as numerous family feuds in the eastern half of the state. With the Civil War demanding the strength of Texas on southern battlefields, the Indians pushed the frontier back eastward. This created a line roughly from Dallas through Austin, south to Corpus Christi. All the territory west of this imaginary line and El Paso was considered frontier.

Thanks to white outlaws and county feuds following the war, not only did Indian raids multiply but lawlessness in the settled portion of the state increased as well. All this activity pushed to the forefront such personalities as John Wesley Hardin, John Ringo, Scott Cooley, and the Horrell clan.

Wilkins devotes a sparse first chapter to the social situation from war's end

until the creation of the Frontier Battalion, and he dedicates only a few pages to the State Police organization created by Governor E. J. Davis. The election of Richard Coke as governor tossed out Republican rule and set the stage for a new type of law enforcement. Coke created the Frontier Battalion in mid-1874 and chose Civil War veteran John B. Jones as its commander. The six companies of the battalion varied greatly in strength through the years, originally mustering in fifty or more young men willing to fight Indians and outlaws. Lack of legislative support forced the company commanders to drastically reduce their numbers through the decades. The initial purpose of the force was to take back the frontier from the Indians to make the state safe for white settlement. It took a while to conquer the Indians, with the help of the U. S. Army, and it took longer to reduce the outlawry and bandit raids from across the Rio Grande. Nevertheless, by 1900 the frontier was gone, the railroad crisscrossed the state, the telegraph carried messages from Ranger camps to headquarters in Austin, and Rangers were often as much detectives as they were lawmen on horseback.

The gunfights and confrontations between Rangers and outlaws, such as the Sam Bass street fight in Round Rock in 1878 or the Ranger arrest of the Brassell murderers in DeWitt County in 1876, resulted in great publicity. However, the vast amount of Ranger work was less exciting: many a Ranger scout failed to produce even a sighting of an Indian trail. Before the days of fingerprints and other methods of determining proper identity, an arrested man often had to be released because of mistaken identity. Sometimes the pursuit of fugitives only resulted in tired horses and disappointed men. And paperwork seemingly increased unreasonably through the years: more than one captain complained of filling out all the necessary forms, filing endless reports, and keeping track of enlistments. All this they considered "administrativa." Every Ranger was more comfortable chasing a wanted man than filling out a form for the adjutant general!

Wilkins assimilates a great amount of material in preparing this history. Most of the original reports and letters written by Rangers to and for the adjutant general are still preserved in the State Archives in Austin, a wonderful source of material for writers of history as well as a gold mine of ideas for the novelist. A number of Rangers left their memoirs in later years, as well as even an outlaw or two such as John Wesley Hardin. Wilkins makes judicious use of all these source materials.

To this reviewer, the virtual absence of contemporary newspapers used as sources is a weakness. The reports from the Rangers in the field are disappointingly brief—sometimes no more than the name of a man captured or killed and the number of miles covered in his pursuit. The contemporary newspapers, although occasionally garbled and often biased, still provide a great addition to our knowledge of both the Rangers' work as well as the activities of the men they pursued. Even though it is time-consuming, carefully reading the files of the Galveston Daily News, the San Antonio Herald and Express, or the Austin Statesman, to cite but several, provides valuable additional material for a study of the Texas Rangers.

Attempting to cover such a huge subject as the Frontier Battalion is virtually impossible without occasional errors. The hard-core western buff will catch these without difficulty: the only Underwood in the Sam Bass gang was Henry, not John; Sergeant N. O. Reynolds did not ride into Round Rock alone within moments of the street fight—he came in two hours late with ten men; John Selman was not killed by George Scarborough in a dispute "over a card game."

Nevertheless, *The Law Comes to Texas* is an impressive work. It is a necessary book for any western buff or more serious historian to have. With the two preceding volumes by Wilkins, *The Legend Begins: The Texas Rangers, 1823-1845* (State House Press, 1996) and *The Highly Irregular Irregulars: Texas Rangers in the Mexican War* (Eakin Press, 1990), this multi-volume history will stand strong for many years.

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Top

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