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Texas Ranger Phil Ryan

Steam Whistle?



By **Lieutenant Lane Akin, Texas Rangers, Retired**

Quarried pink granite from Burnet County traveled by rail over the rolling hills northwest of Fort Worth in 1895. Each block was numbered before it was off-loaded beneath the highest point in Wise County, Texas. The blocks completed their 225-mile journey behind mule teams on a brief uphill wagon trek. At the end, the granite was carefully placed atop the summit of Decatur, the county seat.

The purpose of the granite-block transportation was the construction of the Wise County courthouse. It took more than one year to finish this building, at the cost of just more than \$100,000. Since its completion in 1896, it has presided over the center of Wise County as an eagle perched in its lofty nest, and it can be seen from the most distant reaches of the area. The courthouse is a testament to Wise County government and remains the most notable structure in the county even more than 100 years later.

As for the people of Wise County, characters have come and gone. In Decatur at the time of the courthouse construction, there were several citizens of note. One of the most significant was Tom Waggoner, the owner of the Waggoner Ranch and arguably the best cattleman in Texas. He built his ranch headquarters on an opposing hilltop just east of the courthouse square, and his mansion was an impressive structure that was used as a model for the home in the 1956 movie, *Giant*, starring Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor, and James Dean.

During the first third of the 20th century, Tom Waggoner was often seen visiting with local characters in the Decatur train depot. Legend has it that on one occasion, Tom and his circle of friends were gathered together verbally solving all manner of local and worldly problems. When a train pulled into the depot, a finely dressed, big-city salesman exited, toting his heavy luggage. He approached Tom and his entourage and asked the men if one of them might be interested in carrying his luggage to the hotel—for a healthy tip. Tom stood, grabbed the bags, and started up the hill. As they walked, the salesman looked to the east and spotted the Waggoner mansion.

He asked, “Who lives in that big house?”

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Tom, loaded and trudging upward, replied, "I do."

"How do you afford a house like that?"

Tom answered, "I carry my own damn bags."

A more recent Decatur notable is Texas Ranger Phil Ryan, who first walked the courthouse square in 1980. Local citizens soon realized their new Texas Ranger was a man of relentless dedication and confident ability. His unmatched quick wit was always followed by an easy, broad smile, and he won many admirers among the population and law enforcement community. Ryan was assigned three counties: Wise, Jack, and Montague. His sheriffs relied upon his expertise and availability, and Ryan became the face of responsible law enforcement.

Ranger Ryan had no adherence to any manner of a normal workday; when his phone rang, he responded. He might be found any time of day or night investigating criminal acts and pursuing those who were responsible. Much to the dismay of his wife, Ryan was a man on an unceasing mission: exposing and apprehending criminals. Prosecutors, sheriffs, and police chiefs sang his praises while Mrs. Ryan only shook her head in frustration. Even when her husband was at home, his mind was elsewhere, solving the unsolved and devising mental plans to disclose evidence and capture culprits.

In early November 1986, first baseman Bill Buckner was still shaking his head in disappointment, unsuccessfully trying to remove the images of his ground-ball error that had cost the Boston Red Sox the World Series. In Texas, an affluent businessman named Gabriel* was not in the least concerned about Bill Buckner or the Boston Red Sox. He was also not concerned with the Texas Rangers. He had heard of the organization, but he was not sure of its purpose. Gabriel lived in the Wise County town of Cross Timbers, part of Texas Ranger Phil Ryan's assigned area. As far as he was concerned, the horse and saddle days were a thing of the past. He had no need for the Texas Rangers, and he had never met Ryan. That was why he called the FBI in the midst of his most recent dilemma.

Gabriel had transgressed, and now someone out there was trying to make him pay. His sins were not unlike the wrongdoings of others—he was only human. Locally, however, the exposure of his indulgences could ruin his business. He was a trusted establishment man who seemed unlikely to let anyone down, and for years Cross Timbers citizens had turned to him in time of need. Gabriel owned the local funeral home, and his calm manner and well-tailored suits instilled confidence in those who gathered to bid their last farewells.

Gabriel's marriage and his business were in jeopardy because he had drifted repeatedly into the arms of another woman. Someone other than his mistress knew about this because extortion letters threatening to expose the affair were sent to Gabriel's wife Nicole. The letters claimed that there were photographs and other records that left no doubt as to Gabriel's guilt. He could not deny the affair, so he admitted everything to his wife.

Nicole was about ready to gut-shoot her husband, but her anger was overshadowed by her pending shame. In the vicinity of Decatur, the Gabriels were highly regarded, and

*Gabriel is the first name. I have not used the last name in order to protect the victim's identity.



now unmitigated embarrassment waited. She was not prepared to reduce her standing in the closely interweaved community—what would her Bunko club say? Then there were the rumors that would surely course through her Tuesday morning women’s Bible study. She could not imagine the humiliation.

The extortionist wanted only \$3000 for his story and the photographs. Nicole thought it a small price to pay in order to maintain her station in the community . . . and she could also make her husband pay in other ways.

Nicole was determined to meet the demands, but Gabriel thought it best to contact law enforcement. He could not notify the hometown sheriff because he might talk to the county judge, who spent too much time in the Kountry Korner Kafe drinking coffee and smoking with local gossip crowd. So Gabriel called the FBI, but they could not navigate the federal bureaucracy quickly enough for an effective response. Therefore, the FBI referred Gabriel to Texas Ranger Phil Ryan.

Unlike the FBI, the Texas Rangers were able to fight crime without prior approval from supervision. Ryan and the Rangers like him were hired because of their ability to make appropriate decisions in a timely manner, and they were in no need of close regulation. Ryan’s captain, Charlie Moore, was 280 miles to the west in Lubbock.

At his home, Ryan took Gabriel’s call and patiently listened to the plight. Gabriel’s wife Nicole had already agreed to meet that night with the extortionist west of Jacksboro where the Olney and Wichita Falls highways intersected. As Ryan hung up the phone and blurted a loud curse, Mrs. Ryan looked up from her *TV Guide*.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, even though she knew.

“Will it ever end?” Ryan posed. He continued, “There is a major extortion plot, and I’ve got to go back to work. I’m so sorry.” In conciliation, he offered, “Maybe we can drive to Fort Worth this weekend and see a movie.”

Ryan hurried from the room and pulled on his proper Ranger regalia. He fixed the Resistol covering his deeply receding hairline and started for the door, keys in hand. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

In truth, Ryan had been looking for a reason to be out of the house. His extended Texas Ranger hours tugged at Mrs. Ryan’s patience, and he was home tonight in an attempt at appeasement. She had been searching the *TV Guide* for something they could watch together. Ryan had not been looking forward to watching *Wheel of Fortune* yet again, although he did like the way Vanna White exposed her vowels.

The cooling November air slapped Ryan’s face as his anticipation grew. Meanwhile, Jack County Sheriff Dub Mathis was having his yearly law enforcement cookout on his ranch south of Jacksboro. Ryan figured he could stop by there to get help, go resolve the extortion, come back to eat, and then be back home before the calf fries cooled. His wife would no doubt be sound asleep by the time he returned, and she would never know about the extra social hours.

Ryan drove at Texas Ranger speed—very, very fast—to see Sheriff Mathis. Dub was deep into his cooking project when Ryan wheeled up beneath a cloud of Jack County



dust. He got out and explained the extortion plot, meanwhile tossing a blistering calf fry from hand to hand.

Sheriff Mathis arranged for \$3000 to be withdrawn as flash money, and he supplied a couple of deputies who would assist. Dub sent the trio away, promising to save some food for the crime fighters and mumbling some words about being careful. He had grown particularly fond of Ryan, and even though Dub's words were muted, there was honest and deep concern in them.

Ryan shouted back, "Don't worry! It's no big deal." Ryan himself was not worried. He never was—at least not that anyone could tell.

“ Don't worry! It's no big deal. ”

Nicole was waiting for Ryan. After he fitted her with a small body microphone, he picked up the cash and handed it to her. He then climbed into the back seat of her car, got positioned on the floorboard, and covered himself with a blanket. From that location, he offered instructions to a visibly shaken Nicole.

The two deputies already had their directions and took position in a nearby secluded position. In their marked patrol cars, they awaited Ryan's radio call.

It was dark when Ranger Ryan and Nicole arrived at the extortionist's designated meeting place. Nicole parked her Suburban on a high shoulder near where the Olney and Wichita Falls highways merge. Ryan checked on the hidden deputies with a quick call by handheld radio. All was in place.

Now, Ryan and Nicole could only wait. Nicole passed the frightful minutes in meaningless conversation with the Texas Ranger, who was still in his position on the rear floorboard. Through Ryan's presence and comfortable conversation, Nicole began to relax. She also found it remotely tempting that she had a furtively placed Texas Ranger within her Suburban. He wasn't a bad-looking man, and there was something fascinating about the badge on his chest and the gun at his hip. Nicole felt that, at this moment, Ryan would keep her safe. These emotions were a manifestation of the Stockholm syndrome, an overwhelming need felt by kidnap victims to emotionally connect with their captors.

"He's here," Nicole abruptly announced when she saw headlamps pull to a stop several yards behind her vehicle. Ryan dug deeper into the floorboard and uttered some last-minute instructions to her about not venturing far from her car.

A darkened figure dressed in a hat and an overcoat approached and circled the vehicle. He looked inside in a weak attempt to make sure Nicole was alone. She got out and met the suspect at the hood of the car.

Ryan listened to the low-keyed body bug. He heard enough of the discussion to understand an agreement had been reached and money was being delivered. Into his handheld radio, he whispered to the deputies, "Come on." There was a brief instant of silence, and then engines raced and tires squealed—confirmation the radio broadcast was appropriately understood. The deputies were on their way.



The extortionist quickly gathered the cash from the Suburban hood. Stuffing crisp, hundred-dollar bills in his coat pockets, he turned to run away from the rapidly approaching patrol cars. As he looked back at the Jack County deputies, he smiled. In a few moments, he would be in the brush and they would never catch him. The fools were playing into his hands because he had figured that Nicole would rat out the deal, and he had planned his escape. He knew this country, and he had a vehicle hidden close by that was stolen and could not be traced back to him.

Ryan had never been a man of inaction. As soon as he had issued the radio call, he had scrambled from underneath the blankets in the back floorboard and pushed himself through the passenger side door like a fullback behind a pulling guard. The extortionist's smile was extinguished as Ryan caught him and drove his fist into the big man's chest. The shakedown artist bounced off the passenger side of the Suburban and fell to his knees. Ryan stood over him and shouted, "I'm a Texas Ranger! You're under arrest!"

"No, you're not," the extortionist pathetically replied.

Ryan shoved his badge in the man's face. "Oh, yes, I am!"

The extortionist jumped up and started running the opposite direction. After a short chase, Ryan tackled the man from behind and pushed him to the rough pavement of US Highway 380. When Ryan slapped the man alongside the face with his Texas Ranger ID and badge, a circle and star welted up from the big man's left cheek. He fought and attempted to rise, but Ryan kept him pinned.

Two shotgun-bearing deputies breathlessly arrived and thrust twelve-gauge barrels into the suspect's face. He quit fighting and started screaming something about wanting an attorney. As one of the deputies knelt and started to handcuff the extortionist, it was discovered that he held a butcher knife. The gentle nudge of a blue, steel barrel convinced him to drop the weapon.

Ryan backed away and noticed heavy blood spatters on the roadway asphalt. He conducted a quick visual inventory of the deputies and the suspect, but they seemed fine, so he cataloged his own body parts. Everything was in place, but there was blood from his knee to his foot and he felt an uneasy warmth in his right boot. Ryan first thought he might have sprained his ankle in the chase, but now there was something vaguely familiar about the numbness he was feeling in his ankle—he had apparently been stabbed.

The suspect struggled free of the deputies and was began the fight again. Ryan was understandably agitated due to his unexpected wound. He dove into the pile of tussling men and swung a wild left hook. The entire heap of humanity tumbled over a guardrail and into brush below. After some additional exertion, the suspect was ultimately handcuffed, and the officers pulled the suspect back up to the roadway.

When the Jack County deputies finally got a look at the extortionist, they quickly recognized him. He was a local probationer who also happened to be the husband of Gabriel's mistress.

Ryan sat down on the pavement and slipped off his blood-filled boot. The arterial injury was allowing a thick flow to spurt about four inches above the wound with each beat



of Ryan's heart. One of the deputies recognized the seriousness of the Ranger's injury. Keying his microphone, he uttered the most dreaded broadcast known to all of law enforcement, "Officer down! Officer down!"

An ambulance arrived, and Jacksboro doctors tried to slow Ryan's blood flow. He was given an IV and transported to a trauma center in John Peter Smith Hospital, Fort Worth.

A burley emergency room nurse was standing with her arms crossed when the ambulance doors flew open. Ryan did not note a hint of compassion in her face when she looked down upon his gurney. She visually examined her patient, and her eyes locked on the ankle bandages.

"Are you the Texas Ranger who was stabbed?" she dubiously asked.

Ryan confirmed that he was a Texas Ranger and did believe he had been stabbed.

A cynical sneer slipped across the nurse's broad, freckled face. "Did a midget stab you?"

After a few nerve grafts and the reconstruction of his left hand (the wild left hook had broken several bones), Ryan recovered and continued for a few more years as the Texas Ranger northwest of Fort Worth. In 1992, he was elected sheriff of Wise County. The previous sheriff had been convicted of corruption charges, and Ryan restored confidence in that office. In 2004, he retired from Wise County and spent his last two years in law enforcement as Denton County's captain of criminal investigations. Today, he continues his investigative skills in the corporate world.

Throughout over thirty-five years in law enforcement, Phil Ryan labored without fanfare. He became the product of his father's lessons and often had one of his countless sayings frequently passing through his mind: "The steam that blows a whistle never turns a wheel."

Ryan is no steam whistle. He is the steam that turns the wheel.

Lieutenant Lane Akin was born at Greenville, Texas, on September 24, 1952. After graduating from Princeton High School, he attended Texas A & M-Commerce, where he earned a BSCJ and graduated 1981.

He started his career in law enforcement as an officer of the DFW Airport Police Department in 1974. In 1976, he became a Highway Patrolman with the Texas Department of Public Safety and was named an investigator in DPS Narcotics Service in 1983. Akin proudly became a Texas Ranger in 1988 and was promoted to lieutenant of Company D in San Antonio in 2001. Soon thereafter, he transferred back to Company B as lieutenant. He retired in 2003 and became a member of AT&T's corporate security.

Akin was highly respected by his peers. During his years with the Texas Department of Public Safety, he was twice named Law Enforcement Officer of the Year (1996 and 2000) for Wise, Jack, and Montague Counties by the Three County Criminal Justice Association.

It is easy to see why the Texas Ranger Dispatch is proud to have retired Texas Ranger Lieutenant Lane Akin join our family of historians/writers. Having been a Texas Ranger, he brings a unique prospective to our magazine.