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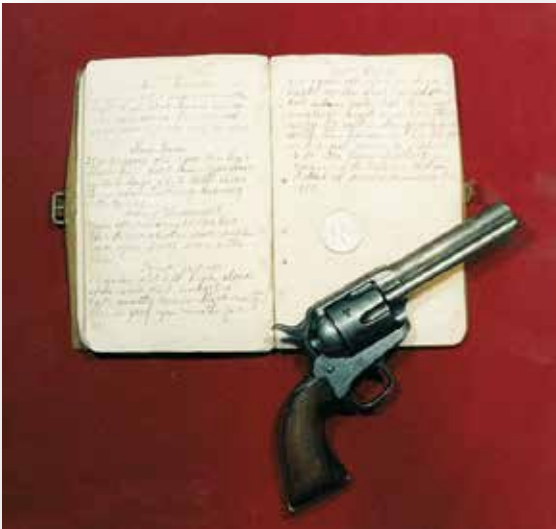
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Forgotten Rangers

by Robert M. Utley

Early historians of Texas and the Texas Rangers have found almost nothing positive to write about the Radical Republican administration of Governor Edmund J. Davis, 1870-73. The Rangers of the Davis regime, therefore, are ignored altogether, confused with the hated state police, or dismissed with a few condescending phrases. They deserve better.

With the readmission of Texas to the Union on March 3, 1870, Reconstruction ended in Texas, only to be followed by a governor who stirred as much rancor, conflict, and violence as had Reconstruction. For all its immersion in the momentous issues that split Texans, however, the Davis administration did not neglect frontier defense. For the first time since the end of the war, Texas Rangers would take the field.

Prewar Texans had repeatedly faulted the federal government for not protecting their frontier settlers from Indians. By 1870, Texans complained of a double grievance: Not only did the federal defense line fail to safeguard settlers from murder and plunder, but the federal government itself provided the Kiowas and Comanches with a base of operations. Chiefs of both tribes had made their marks on the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, by which they pledged to settle their people on a reservation in the Indian Territory, accept a bounteous array of gifts from the Great Father, and learn to support themselves by farming. Under President Ulysses S. Grant's Peace Policy, pacifist Quaker agents set forth to transform their charges into imitation whites.

Only Red River separated the Kiowa-Comanche reservation from Texas, and far from diminishing, the pace of aggressions quickened. After the treaties were signed, the Peace Policy allowed troops in Texas to attack raiders in Texas but barred them from crossing Red River onto the reservation. The big garrison at Fort Sill watched over the reservation itself but could act only on application of the agent—one whose religious scruples enjoined nonviolence. Truly, as Texans charged, Fort Sill became a "city of refuge," where warriors received government supplies and protection while resting between raids.[1] As Red River shielded the Kiowas and Comanches, even more infuriatingly the Rio Grande shielded Lipans and Kickapoos. All across South Texas, to the

very outskirts of San Antonio, these Indians ran off horses and cattle by the hundreds and left dead or wounded any Texan who got in their way. Driving the stock across the Rio Grande, the raiders readily disposed of them to Mexican intermediaries. Influential Mexicans profited from this commerce and authorities made only token effort to break it up. For U.S. troops, of course, the Rio Grande presented an even more formidable barrier than Red River.

A product of the frontier himself, Governor Davis felt a keen obligation to the anguished frontier families. At his behest, on June 13, 1870, the legislature enacted a measure authorizing him to muster, for twelve months' service, twenty companies of "Texas Rangers"—only the second appearance of this term in law. Each company would number sixty-two officers and men. As usual, Rangers would provide their own horses, six-shooters, accouterments, and camp equipage. For the first time, however, the shoulder arm—breechloading cavalry carbines—would be purchased by the state, issued to the Rangers, and the cost deducted from the first pay. And pay was promised: from one hundred dollars a month for captains to fifty for privates. The state would furnish provisions, ammunition, and forage. Although organized under the rules and regulations of the U.S. Army, the Rangers would always operate under state control, reporting to an adjutant general authorized by the new militia act.[2]

The enabling legislation remained silent on how to pay for what came to be known as the Frontier Forces. However, on August 5, 1870, the legislature resorted to the novel expedient of floating \$750,000 in state bonds, with interest at seven percent, payable in gold twice a year. These "Frontier Defense Bonds" would be redeemable in twenty years and paid off in forty.[3] With pay and logistical support promised, ranger companies came together swiftly. Governor Davis appointed the captains, mostly solid Unionists with solid ranger credentials. By the end of 1870, fourteen companies had been organized and posted at key locations on the frontier. The full twenty sanctioned by the legislature never took shape, but for the first time since 1865 Texas Rangers patrolled the frontier.[4]

The War Department lost little more than a month in reacting to the advent of Texas Rangers. On July 19, Secretary of War William W. Belknap declared that the state of Texas would not be allowed to make war on the Indians and that the U.S. military authorities would preserve the peace. The U.S. military authorities, of course, had signally failed to preserve the peace—either in the interior or on the frontier—and the Texas commander, Brevet Major General Joseph J. Reynolds, welcomed the prospect of twelve hundred Rangers on the frontier. He and Davis promptly colluded to sidestep the secretary's edict. In direct violation of the law, Davis placed the Rangers at the disposal of the

War Department—i.e. a receptive Reynolds. During the formative months of the Frontier Forces, therefore, ranger officers operated under the command of the nearest senior federal officer. That worked neither uniformly nor well. General Reynolds, moreover, had flouted the intent of his superiors, and he made matters worse by recommending, as an alternative to the Rangers, the muster of five hundred frontiersmen into the U.S. service. Hopelessly tangling the issue was a dispute over whether the Rangers could draw subsistence at U.S. military posts. By the end of 1870, so confused and frustrating had the bureaucratic squabbling become, Davis had the state assume complete control and support of the Frontier Forces.[5]

On one vital issue, however, the governor had won. No matter what the secretary of war decreed, the state of Texas would make war on the Indians.

Davis's Texas Rangers performed exceptionally well. Their record is especially impressive in view of the short time allotted them. They began to deploy in the autumn of 1870, and the last company was mustered out in June 1871. Such was the state's credit rating that the bonds that were to pay for them proved unmarketable. The state treasury could not sustain Davis's expensive programs, and frontier defense was among the first casualties. Despite their achievements, the Davis Rangers dropped from memory, buried by the fulminations of early Texas historians against the iniquities of the Davis regime.[6]

Despite the low reputation of the Davis administration, two individual Ranger captains proved particularly capable and energetic and should be noted: John W. Sansom and H. J. Richarz.

A rancher and farmer from the Hill Country north of San Antonio, John W. Sansom had campaigned as both ranger private and ranger captain before the Civil War. Unionist convictions drove him from Texas in 1862, and he served through the rest of the war with Colonel Edmund J. Davis's First Texas Cavalry (Union). As a Davis Ranger in 1870-71, he fully lived up to his political and professional credentials.[7]

Captain H. J. Richarz was a veteran of Prussian military service who fled his homeland following the revolution of 1848 and established himself as a sheep and cattle grower west of San Antonio. Nearing fifty in 1870, he had suffered repeated losses to Indians and had fought them as a minuteman during the Civil War. His record as a ranger captain underscored the observation of an acquaintance: "He has a kind and friendly disposition, and has many friends. His judgment of men and things is astute, and he has a blunt way of talking and expressing himself, but his judgment is seldom at fault." [8]

Sansom sheltered his men in the crumbling buildings of old Camp Verde, in strategic Bandera Pass, while Richarz moved into the dilapidated remains of prewar Fort Inge (present Uvalde), long used as hog and cattle pens. Thanks largely to the drive of these captains, the southwestern frontier from the mouth of the Pecos to Laredo came under closer scrutiny than ever before. The favored river crossings of the Kickapoos and Lipans fell in this sector. With their fellow captains John R. Kelso and Peter Kleid to the north and west, Sansom and Richarz maintained a rigorous system of scouts and patrols that disrupted the usual Indian routines. The federal troops at Forts McIntosh, Duncan, and Clark had never kept so constantly in the field. Even though the Rangers could seldom get within rifle range of an Indian, the captains could report that constant and thorough scouting had curtailed Indian raids and given stockmen of the Nueces and Frio ranges a new sense of security.

Still, the work was frustrating because of the sanctuary across the Rio Grande. To compound the indignity, the Indians disposed of their plunder within a river width's view of U.S. troops. The Kickapoos even had the effrontery to send Mexican messengers to Richarz vowing to drive him away and sweep the country to San Antonio. "If it were not for this cursed international law," Richarz proclaimed, "I know very well what to do to clean out these bloody savages on the other side of the Rio Grande." [9]

Rigorous scouting for Indian trails uncovered a class of depredation the Rangers had not been formed to combat but that would increasingly preoccupy them for decades to come: cattle theft.

Returning from the war, stockmen found the ranges swarming with thousands of unbranded longhorns as well as hundreds of would-be stockmen and freebooters of less respectable intent. By 1870, cattlemen with branded herds of longhorns and squads of cowboys to handle them curved west and north from San Antonio to the headwaters of the Llano River. South of the Nueces, a land of defined though unfenced ranches, vaqueros managed branded herds in much the same fashion as they had for more than a century. Texas beef emerged as a profitable commodity, especially after trail drives north to the railroads connected the longhorns with lucrative northern markets.

On the postwar generation of stockmen, burgeoning gangs of cattle thieves preyed mercilessly, even extending their depredations to cattlemen south of the Rio Grande. Emulating the Kickapoos and Lipans, Mexican gangs scooped up Texas herds and spirited them to sanctuary beyond the Rio Grande.

The Frontier Forces had been established to fight Indians, not to deal with criminals. But county law officers seemed powerless, if not actually in league with the offenders; and Davis's state police were preoccupied with combating crime (and political opposition) in the interior counties. Adjutant General James Davidson instructed the ranger captains to arrest cow thieves and turn them over to the local authorities.

Captain Sansom had already discovered ample evidence of cow theft, brand "blotching," and slaughter of cows for their hides in the hilly grasslands at the head of the Guadalupe River and in unorganized Kimble County west of Fredericksburg. His Rangers succeeded in apprehending some of the culprits, but he found the courts unable or unwilling to deal with them.[10] In addition to the outstanding individual accomplishments of Sampson and Richarz, two companies stood out as distinctive if not wholly unprecedented.

Composed of Hispanics, Captain Cesario G. Falcón's unit took station on the lower Rio Grande while Captain Gregorio García's formed around distant El Paso. Falcón campaigned tirelessly. García passed his entire term doing little more than trying to get his men armed and equipped.

From the beginning of their service, the two companies stationed on the lower Rio Grande dealt almost solely with cow theft. Indian raiders seldom found their way that far down the river, but Mexican bandits constantly stole from ranchers on the Texas side. Captain Cesario Falcón in Starr County and Captain Bland Chamberlain in Zapata County campaigned tirelessly and sometimes successfully.

On the northwestern frontier, the Kiowas and Comanches also found the new Rangers worthy foes. Honors for the hardest fight fell to Sergeant Edward H. Cobb of Captain David P. Baker's company, posted to cover the favorite crossings of Red River in Montague County. Baker sent Cobb and eighteen men to camp on the eastern edge of the Cross Timbers, twenty-five miles south of the river. Cobb was a seasoned combat veteran of the Confederate Army but had never fought Indians. Nor had any of his men, most of whom were young and inexperienced—Billy Sorrell was only sixteen.

Early on February 7, 1871, a settler dashed into camp with word that Indians were raiding down Clear Creek, on the open prairies to the southeast, toward Denton. With ten men and the citizen, Cobb hit the trail at once. All day they rode hard, at one point discovering another trail joining the first and indicating a combined force of at least forty warriors. Horses tired and slowed, and one man had to turn back. By late afternoon the Rangers came up with the quarry, half mounted and half afoot, clearly identifiable as

separate parties of Comanches and Kiowas. The Indians noted the small number of pursuers and, shouting and brandishing shields and weapons, turned to give battle. Both the Comanche chief and the Kiowa chief, vividly painted and ornamented, rode boldly to the front and taunted their foes with dazzling displays of horsemanship.[11]

Cobb faced a dilemma. The horses were too fatigued to charge or retreat. He had his men move slowly in an arc away from the Indians to the shelter of a ditch forming the head of Hickory Creek. Once in the ditch and somewhat rested, Cobb suddenly said, "Boys, what do you say to a charge?" No man objected, and the squad assembled and pushed out on the prairie at a slow gallop, heading for the Indians. When within range, the warriors leveled their rifles. Cobb shouted, "Dismount, they are going to fire." Everyone leaped to the ground as the volley cut the air overhead. Scattering in the tall prairie grass, they returned a heavy fire from their Winchester repeating carbines. Time and again the Indians charged; then turned back under heavy fire. Observing that the Rangers had six-shooters as well as repeating carbines, the warriors shrank from risking lives. Both sides fired many shots without doing much damage. As Ranger Andrew Sowell observed, "an Indian is hard to hit; protecting himself with a shield in front spoils the aim even of the best marksmen."

Surmising that the Indians intended to wear down the Rangers, exhaust their ammunition, then charge in to finish them with lance and tomahawk, Cobb told the men to mount and fall back to a low knoll some five hundred yards to the rear where they could better defend themselves. This move proved nearly fatal. As the others rode off, the exhausted horses of Sowell and Gus Hasroot balked. Suddenly surrounded by Indians, Sowell and Hasroot shouted for help, and their comrades wheeled back to their rescue. A big Indian galloped at Hasroot with lance leveled. "The boys all thought Gus was gone up," the company's lieutenant later reported, but at the last moment Gus fired his carbine at such close quarters that the smoke engulfed the Indian and his horse, which reared and threw the dead rider to the ground, breaking the lance.

The rest of the Rangers pitched in and fought viciously at close quarters—thirty paces, remembered Sowell. A pistol ball hit Billy Sorrell in the left side, disabling him. The Comanche leader rallied his men and charged. Cobb and several others shattered the charge, putting a ball through the chief's left eye and killing his horse at the same time. Now, with the sun sinking, the Kiowa chief led his followers to the attack as the Rangers dismounted and spread a protective line in front of the prostrate Sorrell, bleeding profusely from the hip. "The chief came almost at full speed, firing his revolver," related Sowell.

"He seemed determined to ride us down." At twenty paces a ball smashed his chest. He dropped his shield and pistol and fell forward. The horse carried him through the ranger line before his weight turned the saddle and dragged the animal to a halt.

As the Kiowas fell back, some of the exultant Rangers followed as fast as their fatigued horses could carry them. Others, at Cobb's direction, ran to secure the chief's horse, for Cobb's own horse had been shot down. While they maneuvered to corral the horse, Sowell and a comrade decided to get the chief's scalp and "rigging." Another Indian charge aborted that move, and the Kiowas succeeded in bearing off the body of their chief.

In the fading light, the Indians abandoned the field. Cobb, mounted on the Indian horse and covered with the chief's blood, led his men from the field. Their ammunition was all but exhausted and Sorrell was in a bad way. They withdrew to the nearby home of a settler. Sorrell almost died that night, but ultimately he pulled through. Several others had taken minor wounds and lost horses, but suffered no greater casualties.

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By morning, farmers and ranchers had gathered to give pursuit, but it was too late. Examining the battlefield, they found the bodies of six Indians, including the Comanche leader, and returned with six scalps and trophies enough for all. Cobb's lieutenant reported, "All the citizens say with one accord, and proudly too, they never saw Rangers like these, to contend with such great odds."

The citizens did not exaggerate. For so few, youthful, and inexperienced men to stand up to four times their number of seasoned Indian warriors was extraordinary. The adjutant general published general orders holding up Cobb as an example for all Texas Rangers.[12]

The feat took on added importance several months later when Captain Baker had occasion to send three Rangers to Fort Sill with dispatches for the Kiowa-Comanche agent. The agent said that in February a wounded Indian had told of a fight in Texas with Rangers. The slain Comanche chief was Young Horseback (possibly the son of the Nokoni Comanche head chief Horseback),

and the other dead leader was the nephew of old Satank, the principal chief of the Kiowas.[13]

With the termination of the Frontier Forces in June 1871, Texas Rangers no longer strove to head off Kiowas and Comanches. That mission remained with the federal troops, who did no better. As a substitute for the Rangers, in November 1871 the legislature authorized twenty-four companies of minutemen to serve for twelve months. The new adjutant general (Davidson had absconded with \$37,000 in state funds) convinced himself that the minutemen were more effective while less expensive.[14]

Less expensive they were, but whether more effective is arguable. Forgotten to history, the Frontier Forces of 1870-71 played a brief but creditable role. They deserve to be remembered.



Robert M. Utley served for 25 years in various capacities with the National Park Service and other federal agencies. Since his retirement from the federal government in 1980, he has devoted himself full time to historical research and writing. His specialty is the history of the American West. Nine of his books have been selections of the History Book Club, seven of the Book of the Month Club.

In 1988 Utley was awarded the Western History Association Prize for distinguished published writings and in 1994 the same organization's Caughey Prize for *The Lance and the Shield* as the best western book of 1993. Twice, in 1988 and 1989, he received the Wrangler Award of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center (for *High Noon in Lincoln* and *Cavalier in Buckskin*). In 1994 he received the Spur Award of the Western Writers of America (for *The Lance and the Shield*) and also the Owen Wister Award for distinguished lifetime achievement. In 1997 the Society for Military History honored him with the Samuel Elliot Morison Prize.

Utley began his career in history at Custer Battlefield National Monument, Montana, and served for six summers during his college years, 1947-52. From 1954 to 1957 he was a historian with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense, both as an army officer and as a civilian. He then returned to the National Park Service to serve, successively, as Regional Historian of the

Southwest Region in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1957-64; as Chief Historian in Preservation, 1972-73; and as Assistant Director of the National Park Service for Park Historic Preservation, 1973-76. From 1977 to 1980 he was Deputy Executive Director of the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

One of the founders of the Western History Association, Utley served on its governing council 1962-74 and as its president 1967-68. He was a member of the editorial board of *The American West Magazine* 1964-80. The *Western Historical Quarterly* was launched during his presidency, and he served on its editorial board 1968-73. He was a founder of the Potomac Corral of the Westerners in 1955 and its sheriff in 1973. He was Chairman of the Board of Directors of Eastern National Park and Monument Association 1985-87 and 1989-92. He has appeared frequently on television productions relating to the history of the West.

NOTES

[1] The literature of the Fort Sill reservation is voluminous. I have dealt with and documented the subject in *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-91* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 207-14; and *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 140-48.

[2] H. P. M. Gammel, comp., *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, 10 vols. (Austin: Gammel Book Co., 1898), 6:179-82. For the militia act of June 14, 1870, and the state police act of July 1, 1870, see *ibid.*, 185-90, 193-94.

[3] *Ibid.*, 6:45-46.

[4] General Order No. 3, Hq. State of Texas, Adjutant General's Office, Austin, August 3, 1870, RG 401 (Ranger Records), Box 1156, Folder 15, Texas State Archives (hereafter TSA). Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Texas from June 24, 1870, to December 31, 1870 (Austin: Tracy, Siemering & Co., 1870), 6-7, 61-63.

[5] A chronological abstract of the correspondence, War Department, Adjutant General's Office, April 9, 1872, appears in *Claims of the State of Texas*, Senate Executive Document No. 19, 45th Congress, 2nd Session, 1878 (Serial 1780), 10-12. Reynolds to Assistant Adjutant General, Division of the South, Austin, September 30, 1870, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1870*, 41-42. Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Texas from June 24, 1870, to



December 31, 1870 (Austin: Tracy, Siemering & Co., 1870), 6-7.

[6] For the bonds, see Message of Governor E. J. Davis to the legislature, January 10, 1871, RG 301(GC), Box 89, Folder Davis350, TSA; and Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Texas for the Year 1872 (Austin: James P. Newcomb, 1873), 6-8.

[7] John E. Lich, "Sansom, John William," *The New Handbook of Texas*, 6 vols. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 5:879-80.

[8] A. J. Sowell, *Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas* (Austin: Ben C. Jones, 1900; Austin: State House Press, 1986), 202-05, 542-53.

[9] Richarz to Adjutant General James Davidson, Fort Inge, December 4 and 12, 1870, RG 401 (Ranger Records), Box 389, Folder 13, TSA. Periodic reports from Richarz and Sansom are in *ibid.*, Folders 9-16. For Governor Davis's view of the Mexican refuge, see his message to the legislature of January 10, 1871, RG 301 (GC), Box 89, Folder Davis350, TSA.

[10] Sansom to Davidson, Camp Verde, February 17, 1871, RG 401 (Ranger Records), Box 390, Folder 3, TSA. See also same to same, October 17, 1870, Box 389, Folder 10; and same to same, February 28, 1871, Box 390, Folder 4, TSA.

[11] The fight is described in graphic and convincing detail by Ranger A. J. Sowell, *Rangers and Pioneers of Texas* (San Antonio: Shepard Bros., 1884; New York: Argosy-Antiquarian, 1964), 298-345. The official report is also detailed: Lieutenant A. C. Hill to Davidson, Thompsonville Station, Wise County, February 9, 1871, RG 401 (Ranger Records), Box 1156, Folder 18, TSA.

[12] General Order No. 4, Adjutant General's Office, Fe

[13] Sowell, *Rangers and Pioneers*, 345.

[14] Act of November 25, 1871, Gammel, *Laws of Texas*, 7:36-38. Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Texas for the Year 1872, 8-9.

