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Indian Fighting in Jack County, Texas in the 1870s

By Eddie Matney



The early spring of 1875 began. Citizens of the northwestern frontier counties of Texas happily started to emerge from twenty years of almost constant Indian raids, killings, and thievery. Several factors had led to this sense of hope and safety.

In the year 1868, the United States government had adopted a peace plan whereby the Indian reservations would be administered by civilians. As long as the Indians stayed on the reservations, they would be protected and fed.

This act caused a real hardship on the anguished citizens of Texas and the army stationed in Texas. The Indian raiders would come off the reservations into Texas for depredations and then retreat back to the badlands of West Texas or to the sanctuary of the reservations. According to the treaty, Texasbased cavalry units chasing Indian raiding parties had to stop along the Red River and could not legally advance onto the reservation unless requested by higher authority.

Throughout the early months of 1874, the U.S. government had been seeing an ever-increasing unrest among the Indians on the reservations, especially among the Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne. It was becoming apparent that civilian control was slipping. Some of the reservation Indians were leaving and going out to the Staked Plains of West Texas and others were making raids into the northwestern part of the state. It seemed that a general outbreak of Indian warfare was at hand.

Stationed at Fort Richardson in Jack County, the Army had been doing its best to protect the homesteaders and ranchers, but the number of cavalry companies was never enough to give proper protection of such a large area. Through patrols, the soldiers found and had several fights with warriors, yet the Indian raids continued.

The raids coming out of the western parts of the state, especially from the reservations in the Oklahoma Territory, were so numerous the citizens

were begging the state government for extra protection. In answer to the pleas, the state legislature authorized Governor Coke in 1874 to organize six companies of Rangers for deployment across the west and northwestern frontier counties of the state. They were to be designated as Companies A through F and were to have full legal power to arrest “wrong doers” and especially to find and either kill or drive out Indian raiding parties. This contingent of men <http://www.texasranger.org/dispatch/17/pages/Matney.htm> (1 of 7) [4/30/2009 11:24:19 PM] TEXAS RANGER DISPATCH Magazine was to be known as the Frontier Battalion. Overall command of the Frontier Battalion was placed under John B. Jones, a Civil War veteran, and he was given the rank of major. Major Jones reported to State Adjutant General William Steele.



John B. Jones

G. W. Stevens of Wise County was commissioned captain and authorized to recruit men from the Wise County area for the new Company B, stationed west of Wise County. Enlistment was to be for one year or less. Stevens was the captain of a Wise County minuteman company and had always answered the call of neighbors to lead in chases and fights with Indians. In the last two or three years, he had been wounded in the hand and the hip in a fight with Indians just above Buffalo Springs, located in Clay County.

Stevens recruited to the full compliment of seventy-five men. Several of the enlistees had lived in Wise County for years and had experience fighting with Indians. Company B moved out to the western part of Young County for duty. By early June, the unit was on station and riding on patrol over Young, Archer, and Jack Counties.

The men soon got their first baptism of fire. On July 9, 1874, Corporal Newman and eight men were attacked by about 50 Indians while patrolling in western Archer County. The engagement lasted about four hours, with no lives lost on either side.

After organizing the battalion, Major Jones had begun his first series of inspection tours up the line of his units in order to position the companies where he thought they would do the most good. He also set about whipping the battalion into the proper fighting force that he desired. At each company, he would take five or six men to provide an escort for protection as he traveled the dangerous frontier counties.

While visiting with Company B on July 12, 1874, Major Jones, his escorts, and a portion of Company B had a major fight with approximately 125 Kiowa

and Comanche Indians in Lost Valley, about sixteen miles west of Fort Richardson. The fight lasted for several hours and there were casualties on both sides.

Recognizing that the Grant Peace Policy was a failure, the Army was finally authorized in late July to hunt down and drive into the reservations any Indians, wherever found. The Army then set in motion a devastating fivepronged attack throughout the west and northwestern part of Texas and the southwestern area of the Indian Territory. This became known as the Red River War.

After several months of fighting and unrelenting tracking by the Army, almost all the pursued Indians began to see that their old way of life was gone. They started to come back to the reservations and surrender.

In November, Adjutant General Steele informed Major Jones that the Frontier Battalion could not be sustained at its present level because the state treasury was low on cash flow. Steele, wishing to keep the battalion in force, cut the manpower of five companies in half, leaving each company with thirty Rangers commanded by one 1st lieutenant.

Captain Stevens of Company B left the Ranger service with an honorable discharge and returned to his home in Decatur. In turn, 2nd Lieutenant Ira Long was promoted and placed in command of the company.

By the spring of 1875, the Red River War was over and the northwestern part of Texas was, for once, almost free of Indian raids and depredations on its citizens.

While the Army had been chasing the Indians, Company B had continued their patrols against the occasional horse-stealing party slipping across the Red River. Early May of 1875 found the little company of Rangers camped in the foothills just east of Lost Valley at a spring then known as Raines Spring. Location of the camp was three miles east of the present community of Jermyn, just north of present State Road 199.

On May 5, 1875, Major Jones rode into the camp of Company B with his escort. He was perhaps surprised to find that the men there had a measles outbreak. The next day, after conferring with Lieutenant Long about the condition of the

company and the Indian situation, Jones wrote a report to Adjutant General Steele:

Sir

I have the honor to report my arrival at this the camp of Co B yesterday. I find the measles in camp. Seven or eight men just recovering but not able for duty, six more down, and new cases breaking out every day. Consequently the Company is, and has been for several weeks, entirely unfit for service, and will not be able to do any scouting before the expiration of their time of service.

I regret this much more, because the Indians have visited this immediate section three or four times already since the first of January, and will probably come frequently during the Spring and Summer. They have stolen horses twice this spring from Mr Loving whose ranch is five miles from this place.

I have eleven men with me, some of whom have not had the measles, and have established a quarantine between my camp and Leuit Long's.

Loving (James C. Loving) was a rancher who, in 1868, had moved his headquarters and ranching operations from Palo Pinto County up to the northwestern end of Lost Valley, located on the western edge of Jack County. Lost Valley was an area of flat land approximately three miles wide and about eight miles long, north to south. It was somewhat surrounded by rocky hills and low mountains and made for an excellent place for raising cattle and horses. The northern end of the valley was watered by two creeks, Cameron and Stewart.

For several years, the Loving ranch had been almost constantly harassed by Indian raiding parties who either killed or stole the cattle and horses—especially Loving's horses. Two of Loving's cowboys, Mr. Wright and Mr Heath, had been killed by Indians in the last two years.

Perhaps on the very day that Major Jones arrived at Lieutenant Long's campsite, a party of six Kiowa men and one squaw slipped away from their reservation in the Indian Territory for a short raid across the river into Texas. Arriving in the Lost Valley area on the night of May 7, they headed to Loving's ranch. There they stole some horses out of the corral and rode southwest down Cameron Creek.

The next morning, after Loving and his men had left for the day's work on the ranch, two of the men who had stayed at the ranch house soon

discovered that part of the fence was down and a few of the saddle horses kept in the corral were missing. Knowing that there was a Ranger company stationed southeast at Raines Spring, the boys saddled their horses and quickly rode to give the alert to the Rangers.

Once informed, Major Jones gathered some of his men and rode towards the ranch to investigate the theft. When he arrived, he found the messengers to be correct.

Following the trail south along Cameron Creek, the Ranger force lost the tracks left by the raiders and began a search along the western area of Lost Valley. Finally, several miles south of the ranch house, the Indians trail was found just north of Cox Mountain at the south end of the valley.

Following the trail and riding at a fast rate, the Rangers overtook the raiding party close to Rock Creek, northeast of the present community of Bryson. One of the Indians was shot and killed immediately. A running gunfight then took place in which four more of the raiders were killed. Two Indians were able to make their escape. With the chase and fight over, the Rangers returned to their camp at Raines Spring.

The next day, May 9, Major Jones sent a Western Union telegram from Jacksboro to Adjutant General Steele in Austin:

With small detachment of my command I struck Indian trail in Lost Valley yesterday. Overtook them & killed five only one known to have escaped. One of my men slightly wounded. Lt. Long's horse killed another wounded Indians blankets marked U. S.I.D.

As a follow-up, Major Jones wrote a report to Steele, giving a description of the fight:

*Headquarters Frontier Battalion
Camp near Lost Valley Jack Co. Texas
May 9th 1875*

*Gen Wm Steele Adjt genl
Austin.*

Sir,

I have the honor to report that information reached me yesterday morning about ten o'clock that some horses had been stolen from Mr. Lovings ranch, some five miles distance, the night before. I immediately started to the ranch accompanied by Dr. Nicholson, the Surgeon, Lt Long and ten men of Company B, five men of Company A and four men of Company D.

From the ranch we searched through the western part of the valley; found some Indian sign, but no trail until we reached the south end of the valley, five or six miles from the ranch, when we struck a trail just where I entered the same valley last summer when in pursuit of Lone Wolf and his party.

We followed the trail at a brisk gallop in a southeasterly direction three or four miles, when we overtook a party of seven Indians. Luit Long killed on the first fire.

Then they took to flight and a running fight ensued for five or six miles in the woods and over rough and rocky hills and hollows, during which they changed their course and performed almost a complete circle, so that the fight ended within a mile of where we first struck their trail. We killed five; the other two evaded us in the woods and made their escape into the mountains.

Private L. C. Garvey of Co. B received a very slight wound. Lt Long's horse was killed and two horses wounded. No other casualties on our side.

The Indians were armed with breach loading shot guns, and six shooters and fought desperately, three of them continuing to fight after they were shot down. One of those killed was a squaw, but handled her six-shooter quite as dexterously as did the bucks. Another was a half-breed or quarter, spoke broken English, was quite fare and had auburn hair.

They were well mounted, but had no horses but what they were riding. Four of those were killed in the fight. Some of them proved to be horses that were stolen from Mr. Loving about

three weeks ago, the others were taken night before last. It is very evident that they had mounted themselves at the first ranch they came to, with the design of penetrating farther into the settlements, as their course lay in the exact direction of Keeche valley in the northeast corner of Palo Pinto, and northwest corner of Parker County, and if we had not overtaken them, would doubtless have reached the settlements yesterday evening.

The fight took place in Jack County, about fifteen miles a little south of west from Jacksboro, on the head of rock creek. They were well clothed, and doubtless directly from the Reservation, as their blankets were marked U.S.I.D. One of them had the scalp of a white woman fastened to his shield.

In this report, Major Jones went on to give special commendation to Lieutenant Long for his leadership, coolness, and courage in the fight. Lieutenant Long (later captain) penned a very interesting story of his part in the fight:

We found some sign at the ranch but no definite trail until we got about six miles south in the valley. Watching closely in order not to lose it and by any chance let them escape again, I sighted far ahead and saw a man standing under a tree. The very fact that he was alone roused my suspicions and speaking to the Major about it we turned our field-glasses on him and he ran into the timber. I hurried to investigate and when I reached the tree, was so intent on examining the footprints that I neither looked up, nor around, until I heard my men shout, "Indians!" and saw them turn in the direction that they had discovered them. Jumping my horse, which was a fine one, I was off at a dead run. Getting closer I saw there was but seven in the bunch. Outdistancing my men I gave them a hot chase for about three miles, pouring hot lead into them as I ran. The men overtaking me used their ammunition freely, as did the Major, with telling effect. I saw that one of the scoundrels had it in for me and I dodged more than one of his bullets. But seeing him draw his horse closer and draw a bead on me I let him have it between the eyes and when he doubled up and fell I resolved that I would come back that way and strip him of paraphernalia for he wore the trappings of a chief.

Bullets were whizzing constantly around us, but we were doing some pretty fair shooting ourselves and seeing my shot

had taken the horse from the chief I felt like we could at least report progress.

I could not tell whether he was wounded or not, but he was shielding himself in the brush and trying to pick off my men one at a time, making every shot tell. It seemed to me the very next one took my horse in the center of the forehead and when I felt him tremble I knew that it had done its hellish work.

When I hit the ground I was on my feet. Here came the old painted devil straight toward me, yelling and shooting like mad. I had emptied my pistol and having to reload gave him the advantage. But with a round in place I fed him melted bullets until both his and my guns were empty. Then it dawned on me in a flash that it was a game of tit for tat between us. I recall how thankful I was that I was big and brawny and strong and then we closed. I had never then, nor have I since, seen such strength and agility as that Indian possessed. When I threw him off in a grapple he bounced like a rubber ball. And he used his gunstock as skillfully as I did mine."

My men had gone on with the remainder of the bunch, and we were both tired out. I knew I could expect no help from them, and that it was the best man for it. He was panting for breath, so was I, and I knew that neither of us could hold out much longer when, plunk! A shot took him in the knee. One of my company, fearing that I was in trouble, had ridden back, and taking in the situation, risking a bullet, although he said afterward he 'didn't know whether it would take me or the chief, for it was nip and tuck as to who would be on top next.' That gave me a chance to reload my pistol and at such close range I felt like the ball I put into him did the work. But I didn't take time to see, for sure. Jumping a horse, I was off with my rescuer to try my hand on the rest of them. We got three of them after that and on the way back we went to see if the old chief was dead, and there he lay stretched full length

The state would have Indian troubles in the far western section of Texas for several more years. However, the raiding party of May 8, 1875, proved to be the last in the northwestern frontier counties.

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Copies of the following items may be obtained from Texas State Library and Archives Commission PO Box 12927, Austin, Texas 78711-2927:

Jones to Steele, report, May 9, 1875. Follow-up report giving more detailed description of the chase and fight with the Indian party.

Jones to Steele, telegram, Western Union, May 9, 1875. First report of fight with an Indian party.

Major Jones to Adj. Gen. Steele, report, May 6, 1875. Report gives condition of Company B personnel on Jones' arrival at their campsite.