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The 1887 Conner Fight on the Sabine

By Paul N. Spellman

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First light, March 31, 1887. The Ranger company stood six abreast in the bottom of the dry gulch, their Winchesters and pistols at the ready. Not twenty paces in front of them, three shadowy figures crouched frozen in the thick underbrush while a fourth flanked the scene in a sniper's position. Not a breath of wind stirred along Lick Branch; not a twig or leaf moved.

One of the crouching figures stood up, his shotgun pointed at the Ranger line. The movement attracted the attention of every man standing around the creek bed.

Then all hell broke loose.

The explosive confrontation on that spring morning was the culmination of more than three years of conflict along the Sabine River bottoms. The Conner clan, led by Uncle Willis Conner and his five sons--Frederick ("Fed"), Charley, Alfred ("Alfie"), John, and Bill--had once been peaceful hog farmers along Bull Creek east of Hemphill, but a scuffle in 1883 involving these rambunctious young men resulted in the shooting death of two neighbors. A warrant was made for Fed and Charley Conner's arrests, and both were convicted of the double murder and incarcerated. In December 1886, Uncle Willis engineered a breakout of Fed, and the authorities went on the hunt.

But hunting down all the Conners in the thick East Texas Sabine bottomland was like catching a certain rabbit in the briar patch. The two brothers and their rescuers simply vanished from sight.

When the locals couldn't catch the Conners, the adjutant general of Texas sent in Ranger Captain William Scott and Company "F" to do the job. Alfie Conner was tracked into Calcasieu Parish in Louisiana and captured by Captain Scott, but in late March 1887, the others were still fugitives from justice.

"I had rather be a pack mule out west than be a millionaire in this brush," declared Scott when assessing his Ranger camp near Hemphill. "We have been going out every day, and each man brings back ticks--enough to keep them scratching and Kussing all night." After years out on the West Texas prairie, each of the men of Company F heartily agreed.



Scott's force in Hemphill included Sergeant John Brooks and Private John H. Rogers—later, two of the famous "Four Captains" of the turn of the century--and Privates Jim Carmichael, Jim Moore, Billy Treadwell, Bob Crowder, Ed Caldwell, Len Harvey, and Bob Fenton.

Capt. John Brooks

Scott enlisted the help of locals upon his arrival on the Sabine, including Judge James Polly, Judge William W. Weatherred, Henry Harris, John Toole, Milton Anthony, and Redden Alford. These men seemed to know the lay of the land as well as the dangerous Conners.

On the morning of March 25, Scott divided his forces. He sent Crowder, Harvey, Fenton, and Caldwell with the locals on one patrol while he commanded the remaining Rangers.

Both patrols rode south out of Hemphill together. They crossed Housen Bayou and continuing southward to the county line along the Big Sandy, scouring the thicket for any sign of the Conner camp. The weather was already warming, and the painstaking search stretched into a fifth day of aggravation and failure. Turning back toward Hemphill, a vague trail turned up near Walnut Creek that seemed less than a day old. Anthony and Alford believed it would lead down into Lick Branch and the Conner hideout.

Scott divided the two patrols during the night of the 30th, directing his own patrol into the dry creek bed while sending the rest on a flanking maneuver to cut off any retreat. As the locals and four Rangers skirted to the north, the six remaining troopers moved silently and slowly along the steep banks. An abandoned camp house loomed as a shadowy box to their left. A hundred paces later, they crept around a plot of several graves.

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. A steep descent into the gully brought the six Rangers dangerously near the spot where the Conners now lay in wait. The slightest nighttime noises of the Ranger company had, in fact, alerted the fugitives, who now moved into position for a fight. It was barely past five o'clock. The first light of dawn crept warily along the edge of the thicket, unable to penetrate the darkness of the bottomland.

Bill Conner, sensing more than seeing the Rangers directly in front of him, shuffled from his bent posture and stood up. He brought a shotgun to his shoulder in the same motion.

Sergeant Brooks knew in an instant that the movement, only fifteen paces in front of him, would not be anyone from the rest of the company. He shouted a warning that pierced the crushing silence.

The rifles of Captain Scott, the sergeant, and John Rogers spoke as one voice as bursts of flame lined a moment of silhouettes. Bill Conner crumpled backward onto the ground, one bullet in his brain and two more in his chest.

A strange and harrowing sound now melded with the gunfire. The Conners' four hunting dogs let out a unison growl and sprang toward the Ranger line. Jim Carmichael and Billy Treadwell saw the outline of the charging dogs and took aim.

But another shot rang out at the same instant. Uncle Willis Conner fired into the melee from his sniper's position, and the bullet struck Ranger Jim Moore in the heart. Moore collapsed, his rifle flung into the underbrush. Carmichael bent down to him. Moore managed a crooked smile for a brief moment and then died.

The firing now became general across Lick Branch. In the next several minutes, over a hundred rounds would be fired within the crowded space of the gulch.



Capt. John Rogers

John Rogers had shot several times when he felt what seemed like a huge fist pound against his left ribcage. The bullet had miraculously struck the Ranger daybook in his vest pocket, surely saving his

life. But a second bullet struck the Ranger private an instant later, shattering bones in his left wrist and severing ligaments and muscles as it traveled up to and through his elbow. It finally bounced off his left hip, where a gash spewed blood. Rogers sat down hard on the ground, backed up against a tree, and continued to fire his rifle against the assailants. He shot with one hand as he squeezed the rifle barrel between his knees.

Captain Scott went down next, a bullet screaming through one lung and out his back. He fell backward and was out of the fight, taking all his strength to catch his breath and stay alive.

Sergeant Brooks continued to stride forward in the darkness, his rifle blazing. Alongside him, Carmichael and Treadwell carried the fight to the Conners as well. In a moment, the four hunting dogs lay dead. The fugitives' packhorse was struck repeatedly by the erratic gunfire that filled the predawn air.

But even as Brooks stepped over Bill Conner's body and took aim at a figure peeking from behind a tree ten paces away, the sniper once more found his mark. The bullet banged against Brooks' rifle, slid along the barrel, and careened across the sergeant's grip, mangling three fingers on his left hand and coming to rest in his right palm! Unable to hold his gun, Brooks retreated to sit beside his friend Rogers, who in turn managed to apply a tourniquet to Brooks' bleeding left hand.

The last volley and the damage it did left only Carmichael and Treadwell in the desperate fight. Treadwell's true aim found Fed Conner as the escapee stepped out from behind a tree, but then the Ranger's gun jammed, leaving only Jim Carmichael to carry the battle.

With one son dead and another wounded, Uncle Willis had had enough. Figuring that reinforcements for the lawmen would surely be in the vicinity, he hollered a signal. John and the wounded Fed disappeared into the thick underbrush, ground they knew so well.

As suddenly as the fight had commenced, it was over. Silence once again reigned over Lick Branch as the light of dawn now began to win the day once more in the bottomland. Soon the Rangers, including the other patrol that finally arrived but well too late, could survey the damage and care for their wounded.

Scott's wound seemed perilous, but he would survive. Throughout the morning, he continued to give orders while in excruciating pain and coughing blood. "Had

the [other] squad come," Scott reported later, "we would have captured the entire Conner gang.

Ranger Bob Crowder and Judge Weatherred raced to Hemphill and San Augustine. There they retrieved Doctors J. W. Smith and Frank Tucker, who arrived on the bloody scene soon and administered help for the rest of the day and into the night.

Jim Moore's body was taken into Hemphill, where he was buried. His Kerrville kin arrived and claimed his possessions.

Bill Conner was buried up on the rise where the other graves had been seen during the manhunt. The other graves were also Conner clan, including two children.

John Brooks and John Rogers were finally moved the next day to Hemphill, along a bumpy wagon ride that nearly killed them both. The two men healed up and continued illustrious careers in law enforcement. Captain Scott also resumed his duties. A year later, however, he retired from the Rangers, as did Carmichael and Treadwell.

The Conners were tracked throughout the summer. Fed was killed in a shootout on October 25 and was buried next to his brother Bill. Uncle Willis was tracked down and shot on November 15. John Conner vanished from sight.

The Conner fight along the Sabine in 1887 was one of the bloodiest encounters for the Texas Rangers. It left in its wake both accolades for bravery and steep criticism from some for the unsuccessful confrontation. It also left a legacy of fact and fiction, high drama and legend, and a place of significance in Ranger lore.

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