



Official State Historical Center of the Texas  
Rangers law enforcement agency.

**The Following Article was Originally Published in the  
*Texas Ranger Dispatch Magazine***

The *Texas Ranger Dispatch* was published by the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum from 2000 to 2011. It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

Managing Editors

**Robert Nieman** 2000-2009; (b.1947-d.2009)

**Byron A. Johnson** 2009-2011

Publisher & Website Administrator

**Byron A. Johnson** 2000-2011

Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame

Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

**Pam S. Baird**



Funded in part by grants from  
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

Copyright 2017, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, Waco, TX. All rights reserved. Non-profit personal and educational use only; commercial reprinting, redistribution, reposting or charge-for-access is prohibited. For further information contact: Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, PO Box 2570, Waco TX 76702-2570.

Three Shining Stars:

# The *Aten Brothers*

Texas Rangers of Company D, Frontier Battalion



**Austin and Catherine Aten and their family.**

**by Chuck Parsons**

Through the decades of Ranger history, there have been several sets of brothers who served: the Siekers, the Joneses, the Durbins—and the Atens: Ira D., Calvin Grant, and Edwin Dunlap. These three young men were born in Illinois, but they became Texans at an early age and chose the dangers of enforcing the law in frontier Texas over tilling the soil in Central Texas.

Ira, Calvin, and Ed were the sons of Catherine E. (Dunlap) and Austin Cunningham Aten. Austin was both a minister of the gospel and a farmer.

Calvin (Cal) claimed Knox County, Illinois, as his birthplace, whereas Ira believed his to be Peoria County, Illinois. This may not be a contradiction; the two counties are adjacent, and the family may have moved several times. Youngest sister Clara B. stated that the

family moved to Texas from Knox County “to escape the cold weather.” The Atens eventually ended up in Round Rock, Williamson County, Texas. They arrived there on October 29, 1876, because it was the end of the line for the International & Great Northern Railroad.<sup>1</sup> The Aten boys worked on their father’s farm until leaving to lead their own lives.<sup>2</sup>

We know a great deal about Ira Aten’s life and career as a Ranger due to his numerous autobiographical writings. Harold Preece also visited with him and published his life story. Cal and Ed were also Rangers, but unfortunately, their memoirs were never recorded.<sup>3</sup>

### Calvin Grant Aten

Calvin Grant Aten was born in Abingdon, Knox County, Illinois on December 7, 1868. One is tempted to speculate that his middle name was inspired by General U.S. Grant. After moving to Texas, Cal remained on the family farm until April 1, 1888, when he joined Captain Frank Jones’s Company D of the Frontier Battalion.

When Cal walked into Jones’s camp near Realitos, Duval County, he had no weapons. His brother Ira, already a member of the company, saw his predicament and came to the rescue. He handed Cal a pistol and revolver and told him to put it on.



**Austin and Catherine Aten**

Certainly the most dangerous incident of Cal’s career happened on Christmas Day 1889. John R. Hughes, Cal, and two others were near Bull Head Mountain in Edwards County. There the Rangers challenged Alvin and Will Odle, two wanted rustlers who chose to fight it out rather than surrender. Both Odle brothers were killed in the exchange.<sup>4</sup>

1 Jean Shroyer, *Williamson County, Texas*, 57.

2 Travis County Census, 67. The family lived in precinct #2;

Betty Allen, “Frank Lincoln Aten” in *Williamson County, Texas*, 57-58. The Aten ancestors came from Holland in 1615 seeking religious freedom. The 1880 census shows the name as Austin Q., whereas the Betty Allen article identifies him as Thomas Q.

3 Ira Aten, *Six and One Half Years in the Ranger Service*. This was also serialized in *Frontier Times* in four parts Vol. 22, numbers 4-5-6-7 (January-April 1945). *Frontier Times* published numerous other articles by and about Aten. A bound typescript of *Six and One Half Years* is preserved in the Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin; Harold Preece. *Lone Star Man: Ira Aten, Last of the Old Texas Rangers*. (New York: Hastings House, 1960).

4 H. Allen Anderson, “Calvin Grant Aten” in the *New Handbook of Texas*.



Cal served faithfully until he received an honorable discharge on September 1, 1890.<sup>5</sup> One of the most famous Texas Ranger group photographs shows Captain Frank Jones and thirteen of his men with their weaponry prominently displayed. Seated to the right of Captain Jones is Cal, who is holding a Winchester, wearing a Bowie knife, and carrying at least one pistol.

Following his discharge, Cal returned to Round Rock, where he married Mattie Jo Kennedy on May 2, 1894. The couple later made their home in the Texas Panhandle, where Cal worked on the XIT Ranch from 1898 to 1904. He then established his own ranch near Adrian, Oldham County.

Cal then requested to be commissioned as a Special Ranger to serve without pay, which was granted. He gave his personal description as age 49, 5' 9" tall, "brown gray" hair, gray eyes, and florid complexion. His warrant of authority shows he began his Special Ranger service as a private, enlisting on June 1, 1918. Less than a year later, the state recalled all Special Ranger commissions. After some delay, Aten returned his on February 22, 1919.

Calvin Grant Aten died on April 1, 1939, at Lelia Lake. He is buried in Citizens Cemetery in Clarendon, Donley County.<sup>6</sup>

#### Edwin Dunlap Aten

Edwin Dunlap Aten was born September 5, 1870, in Abingdon, Illinois. Family tradition, which has been accepted as fact, relates that Ed resented the drudgery of farm life and became somewhat of a rowdy. In 1890, he was sent to live with older brother Ira, then foreman of the Escabarda division of the XIT Ranch. Once there, Ed still lived the wild life and became involved in several unpleasant incidents in local saloons. Brother Ira asked his former Ranger Captain Frank Jones to take Ed into his company as soon as an opening appeared, which was done. Ed, perhaps with reluctance, became a private in Company D on September 16, 1892, mustered in at Marathon, Brewster County. Fortunately for the family and the Rangers, Ed became an enthusiastic member of the force.<sup>7</sup>

Ed's service records show that he served under Captains Frank Jones and John R. Hughes. He began as a private, promoted to corporal on March 1, 1894, and promoted to sergeant on July 25, 1895. He served until he received his honorable discharge on July 6, 1898.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly the most memorable event of Ed Aten's Ranger career involved the death of Captain Frank Jones on Pirate Island, near San Elizario on the Rio Grande. On June 30, 1893, Jones and a squad including Carl Kirchner, J.W. "Wood" Saunders, T.F. Tucker, Ed

---

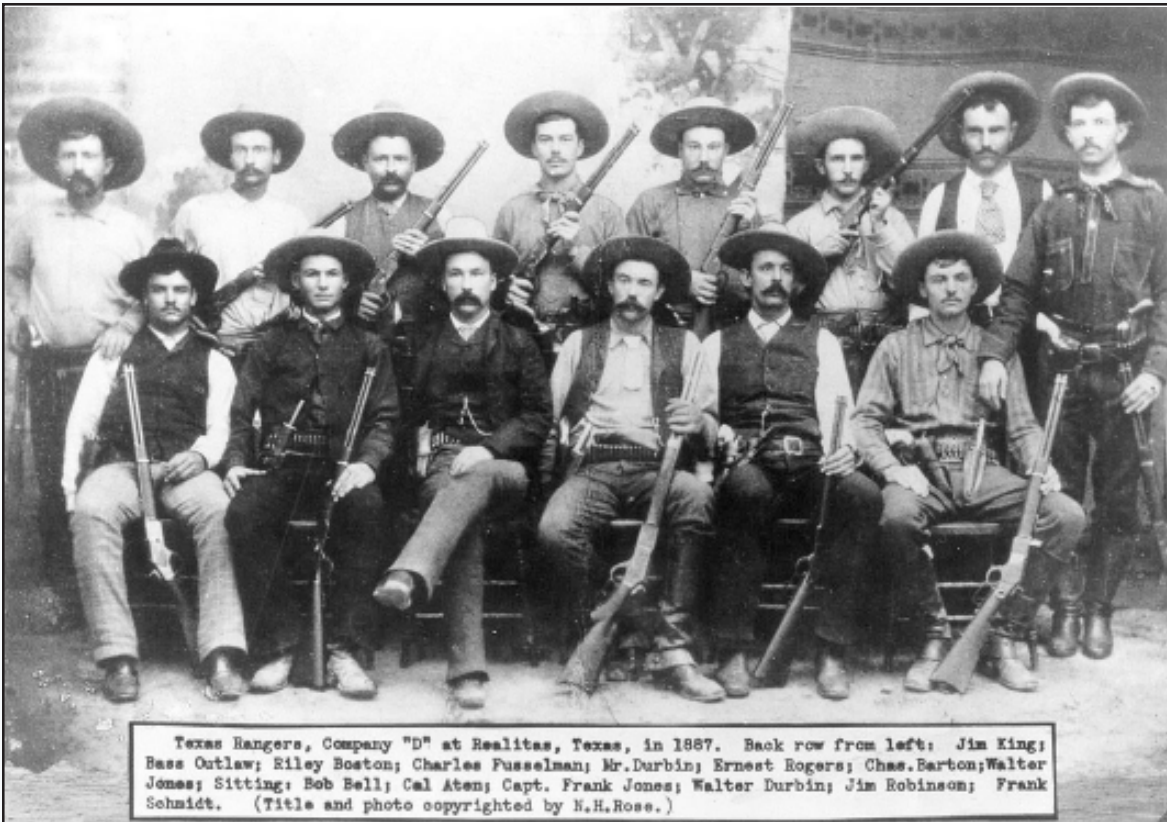
5 Service records of Calvin G. Aten are found in the Adjutant General Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin.

6 Robert W. Stephens, *Texas Ranger Sketches*, 15-16.

7 Stephens, *Texas Ranger Sketches*, 18.

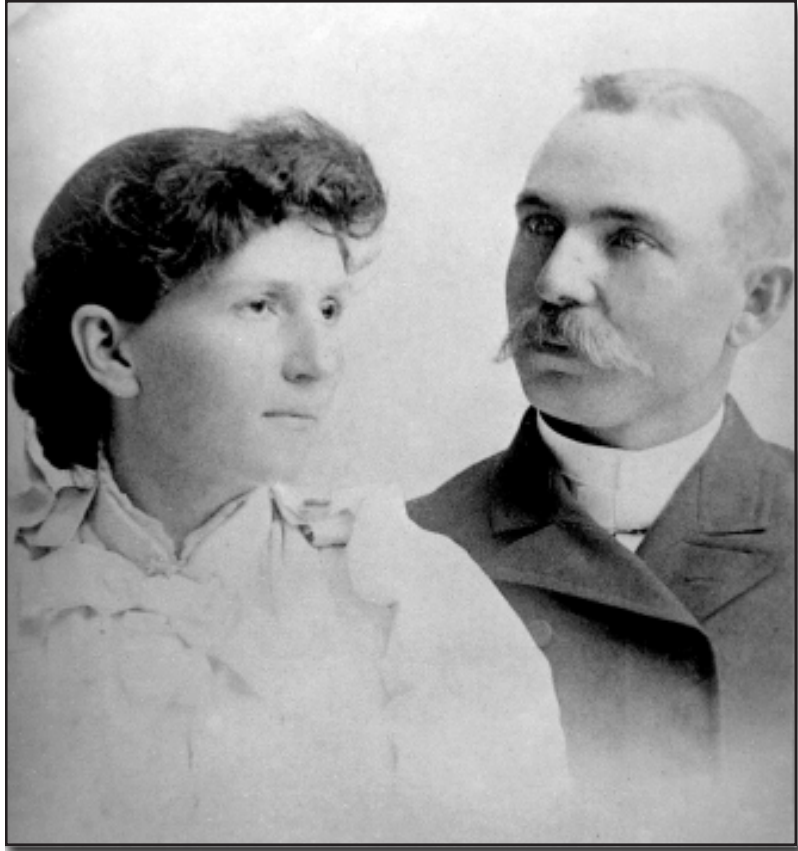
8 Service records of Edwin D. Aten are found in the Adjutant General Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin.

## Captain Frank Jones and Texas Rangers Group Photo 1888



**The famous Texas Ranger group photo. Standing from left: James W. King, B.L. Outlaw, Riley Barton, Charles H. Fusselman, James W. "Tink" Durbin, Ernest Rogers, Charles Barton, and Walter Jones. Seated from left: Robert Bell, Calvin G. Aten, Captain Frank Jones, J. Walter Durbin, James R. Robinson, and Frank L. Schmid Jr. Taken at Realitos, southern Duval County, in 1888.**

Bryant, and Ed Aten were searching for smugglers, who were members of the Olguin Gang. These outlaws were described as “part of a gang of thieves, murderers, and smugglers that have for years infested an island that has been a sort of neutral ground.”<sup>9</sup> The Rangers were ambushed and, in the pursuing onslaught, Jones was killed. Was his death avenged? According to Ira Aten, “Twenty-one members of that gang of outlaws paid the death penalty, one way or another, in the years that followed.”<sup>10</sup> Captain Jones’s body was eventually recovered from the battle scene, and today a Texas state historical marker commemorates the event.



**Ira and Imogen Aten wedding photo.**

On July 6, 1898, Ed Aten resigned from the service due to illness. His work in such West Texas communities as Marathon, Pecos, and Alpine has gone largely unrecognized by historians. Following his service with the Rangers, he operated a saloon in El Paso for a while and then worked in Shafter as a faro dealer and bartender. In 1906, he became a special officer in El Paso, working for the Southern Pacific Railroad. On February 20, 1915, he married Gertrude Bacus Aiello, a widow from Las Cruces, New Mexico. Ed continued working with the railroad until he resigned his position in 1947. He died on January 31, 1953, and his remains were laid to rest in Rest Lawn Cemetery, El Paso.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *San Antonio Daily Express*, Saturday, July 1, 1893, citing a report from El Paso, June 30.

<sup>10</sup> Aten, *Six and One-Half Years*. This may be an exaggeration, but Aten certainly knew of what he spoke. Here is contemporary evidence that vengeance for Jones’s death came quickly. An item in mid-July from El Paso reported that a “Mexican named Jazo” was found hanging to a tree on an island occupied by the gang “that murdered the ranger.” The man had been hanging a day or two when found and “there is no clue as to who hanged him.” - *San Antonio Daily Express*, 17 July 1893.

<sup>11</sup> Stephens, *Texas Ranger Sketches*, 19-20.



## Ira D. Aten

Of the three brothers, Ira D. Aten is the best known. Only highlights of his career can be covered here.

On July 21, 1878, a significant event happened that caused Ira to direct his energies towards law enforcement. The town of Round Rock was still excited over the foiled attempt of the Sam Bass Gang to rob the local bank. One gang member and a deputy sheriff had been left dead on the street, but Bass and gang member Frank Jackson fled out of town. Bass was mortally wounded, however, and Jackson left him and escaped the law. The next day, Bass was found in a dying condition and brought into town, where the Reverend Aten and his three sons happened to be at the time. At that point, young Ira, sixteen years old, decided he would become a Texas Ranger. Rangers had broken up the gang, and Rangers from N.O. Reynolds' Company E had trailed the wounded Bass outside of town and brought him in to either stand trial or die.

His service records show he enlisted in Company D under command of Captain L.P. Sieker on June 1, 1883, and served continually until August 20, 1889. By May 1, 1887, he had risen to the rank of 1st sergeant under Captain Frank Jones. As a private, he earned \$30 per month; as a sergeant, his pay was increased to \$50 per month. After he had years to reflect upon his exciting and dangerous career, he left this thought, which is perhaps true for many other young men who joined the Rangers:

At that time [of joining the service] I was a mere boy of twenty, but, like most boys, I wanted adventure and the romance that goes with it. I was always expecting the impossible—like we see so often in the moving pictures these days—such as attempting to rescue some pretty girl from the Indians in a daring attack, or from the bandits who infested the Texas border along the Rio Grande. But, that kind of romance never happened to me.<sup>12</sup>

Ira Aten enlisted in Company D in Uvalde County. “Our work,” he recalled, “was mostly in the counties bordering the Rio Grande, I might say from the Pecos River to Rio Grande City, some 800 miles.”<sup>13</sup> He stated that the “most disastrous fight I ever had” was near San Ambrosio Creek in Webb County, some eighty miles above Laredo on the Rio Grande. Corporal Benjamin D. Lindsey was in charge of the scout, consisting of Ben Riley, Frank Sieker, C.W. Griffin, and Aten. The squad saw mounted Mexicans, whom the Rangers suspected were horse thieves, leading horses towards the river. The groups saw each other at the same time, and the suspects headed for a “high, rough, and rugged hill on the banks of the river.” It was Riley who rode up to the Mexicans first and demanded their surrender on suspicion of being thieves. Their reply was to shoot Riley off his horse. As he fell, he fired back. Griffin’s horse fell on him and broke his collar bone, effectively putting him out of the fight. Sieker and Aten were also shooting, and Sieker shot one of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Aten, *Six and One Half Years*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Aten, *Six and One Half Years*, 1.



thieves in the shoulder, but he was shot as well. Aten heard him yell “Oh, my God!” and later wrote:

It seemed to me like a death cry, and I could not help but look around although the bullets were whizzing past. Sieker was reeling backwards off his horse, pistol still in his hand. He had been shot through the heart.

The Mexicans escaped over the hill and found refuge in some adobe houses along the river. Lindsey rode up and yelled, “Where are they?” Aten pointed to the houses, and Lindsey responded, “By God! Come on, let’s go and get them.”

If the Rangers’ enthusiasm to continue the fight had not been calmed, the gun battle would have continued, with the Rangers probably losing their lives since they were now vastly outnumbered. Instead, a “big Mexican” came up, said he was a deputy sheriff of Webb County, and stated that he would arrest the Mexicans for the Rangers. After some parleying, it was agreed that the two wounded Mexicans would be taken to Laredo for treatment, followed by the Rangers acting as guards. Ben Riley had been shot through the thigh, and arrangements were made to deliver him to the Votaw Ranch some 15 miles away. The injured Griffin and the body of Sieker were delivered to Eagle Pass, 80 miles up the river.

At Laredo, the Mexican prisoners were turned over to Webb County Sheriff Dario Gonzales—but then the Rangers were arrested by Gonzales for “assault with intent to murder” and jailed! Aten managed to talk Sheriff Gonzales into letting him out to find someone who would post their bond. He found a Mr. Grant, who graciously did so. Telegrams to the governor and adjutant general resulted in the Rangers being released. The Mexicans who had fought the Rangers were also released, and they crossed the river. Aten learned later that one of them died from his gunshot wounds.<sup>14</sup>

After this tragedy, Aten and others were sent to Brady in McCulloch County to work up cases against cattle rustlers. At the end of one roundup, they had between 5 and 600 head of mavericks, which are cattle with suspicious brands. Those animals whose ownership could not be proven were turned over to the county, and the money was deposited in the county treasury. The Rangers arrested “several of the better-known cattle rustlers,” but they were “generally turned loose.”

Aten and the group were then sent to Menard County to hunt fugitives. However, many of the “boys” hated the cold weather and begged the adjutant general to send them back to Uvalde, where it was warmer. As Aten mused, a nicer climate was not the only thing appealing to them—the boys also had sweethearts living in Uvalde County.

In 1884, Ira Aten was sent to Val Verde County to assist and protect the tax collector. Along with one other man, they used arguments and hard looks to convince the squatters and others that it was best to pay their taxes. After a month working with the unidentified

---

14 Aten, *Six and One Half Years*, 4-8. The gunfight that cost Frank Sieker his life occurred on May 31, 1885. Sieker was buried in Eagle Pass.





tax collector, Aten recalled that they had gathered between \$4,000 and \$5,000 dollars, mostly in \$20 gold pieces.<sup>15</sup>

Over the next months, Aten was sent into Lampasas, Brown, and Navarro Counties to work up cases against fence cutters. Here, Ira created his “dynamite bomb,” which he believed would prevent men from cutting fences:

I fixed the bombs so that when the fence was cut between the posts it would jerk a small wire laid under the grass to the cap and explode the bombs. I evidently did not care much what might happen to the fence cutter after he had cut the wire. After trying out several lightly charged bombs which worked to my satisfaction, and feeling rather proud of my job, I boarded the train for Austin to report to the Adjutant General.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, Aten was called into the office of Governor L.S. Ross to explain his actions. The governor had quite a reaction:

That bald head of his got redder and redder and when I had finished my story it was on fire. I thought he was going to have me court-martialled and then shot. However, I had grown to be a man by that time, and was not very much afraid of even the Governor.

Aten was ordered to go and retrieve all the bombs, which he did—by exploding them! That settled the fence-cutting problems in Navarro County.<sup>17</sup>

### **Jaybird – Woodpecker Wars**

In 1888, Fort Bend County, Texas, was the site of a vicious feud between two factions, the Jaybirds and Woodpeckers. The bad blood had its origins in the seemingly continual conflicts between the white and the black communities. C.L. Sonnichsen stated that the Woodpeckers controlled the black vote, and with the numeric superiority, they (Woodpeckers) “ran the country.” The Jaybirds hoped to someday change the balance in their favor.

Fort Bend County politics may not have been much different from other Texas areas until August 2, 1888, when murder entered the picture with the fatal shooting of J.H. Shamblin, a Jaybird. A few weeks later, on August 30, Jim Bearfield rushed into town with wounds in his neck and hand and accused H.H. Frost, a Jaybird, as one of his attackers. On September 3, someone let loose with both barrels of a shotgun at Frost as he walked home after dark. Bloodhounds trailed the scent to a plantation, where several men were arrested and lodged in the county jail. To prevent a possible lynching (or possible jail delivery) 30 men were posted around the prison.

These troubles between the Jaybirds and Woodpeckers developed into the Terry-Gibson Feud. The threats, insults, and name-calling between Woodpecker Kyle Terry and

---

<sup>15</sup> Aten, *Six and One Half Years*, 9-17.

<sup>16</sup> Aten’s description of the dynamite bomb is from “Fence Cutting in Navarro County” in *Frontier Times*, February 1945, 130-32.

<sup>17</sup> “Fence Cutting in Navarro County,” *Frontier Times*, February 1945, 53, 132. Governor Ross served from January 18, 1887, to January 20, 1891.



followers of Jaybird Dr. Gibson and his sons became a shooting affray. Terry was wounded but was not so bad off he couldn't challenge his adversary to a duel. On January 21, 1889, Terry found Gibson on the street in Wharton and shotgunned him to death.

Of course, these events were noticed in Austin. Finally, Governor Ross took action and sent Sergeant Ira Aten and a squad of Rangers to Fort Bend County in August 1889. The presence of Aten and his men quieted things down somewhat. As a result, the initial squad of seven was reduced to three when events elsewhere required Ranger presence. If the other four had been retained, perhaps the bloody street battle that followed would have been prevented.

On August 16, the Woodpeckers and the Jayhawks met in front of the courthouse in Richmond, ready to fight. Rangers Ira Aten, Frank L. Schmid Jr., and Alexander McNabb were unable to prevent the gun battle. The tragic result of the confrontation was Ranger Schmid being wounded in the stomach by a spent bullet and suffering a severe injury in the leg.<sup>18</sup> Several citizens were wounded and four were dead, including Sheriff Thomas J. Garvey.

Now a new sheriff had to be selected. To prevent the political conflict of the two battling factions settling on whom to elect as Garvey's replacement, both sides agreed that Ranger Ira Aten would be a good candidate. He was appointed Fort Bend County Sheriff on August 21, 1889. Aten recalled that the two factions could not agree so "after many conferences, Governor Ross offered me as a sacrifice, and I was appointed sheriff and tax collector of the county."<sup>19</sup>

It was not a job Aten had wanted. In fact, with Schmid and McNabb both out of the picture, Aten was alone. He describes his emotions:

. . . [this had a] depressing effect upon me. I felt so lonely I went to my room at the hotel and there wept in silence. [I] was left alone in a strange land and among strange people. The governor was expecting so much of me and I prayed that I might have the strength and courage to go on and do my duty.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, Aten did his duty and served faithfully until he resigned on November 4, 1890. By December 1 of that year, he settled in Castro County, some 50 miles south of Amarillo. He intended to live out his days as a peaceful rancher.

On February 3, 1892, Aten was in Austin. There he married his "old sweetheart," Imogene Boyce, promising her that he would never seek public office. However, he was once again requested to take the position of sheriff, this time of Castro County. His accepting the responsibility on May 9, 1893, "almost broke her heart but she was true

---

18 Stephens, *Texas Ranger Sketches*, 125-131. Doctors were unable to do much for Schmid's leg and it ultimately caused his death on June 17, 1893, in Austin. He is buried in the Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri, where his family resided.

19 Stephens, *Texas Ranger Sketches*, 73.

The summary of the Terry-Gibson feud is from *I'll Die Before I'll Run* by C.L. Sonnichsen, 186-226.

20 Aten, *Six and One Half Years*, 73.



and stayed with me.” Not only did she stay with him—she became the county jailer! Aten served as sheriff until January 1895, when he resigned.<sup>21</sup> The Atens then moved to El Centro, California, where he remained until death called him home on August 5, 1953. He is buried in Evergreen Cemetery at El Centro.<sup>22</sup>

21 Aten, *Six and One Half Years*, 86.

22 James A. Browning, *Violence Was No Stranger*, 7.

## Bibliography

Allen, Betty. “Frank Lincoln Aten,” in *Williamson County Texas: Its History and Its People*, First edition. Austin: Nortex Press, 1985.

Anderson, H. Allen. Entries on the individual Aten brothers in the *New Handbook of Texas*, vol. 1. Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996, pp. 276-277.

Aten, Clavin G. Service records, Adjutant General Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin.

Aten, Edwin D. Service records, Adjutant General Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin.

Aten, Ira. *Six and One Half Years in the Ranger Service Fifty Years Ago: the Memoirs of Ira Aten, Sergeant, Company D, Texas Rangers*. Typescript copy in the Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin. Also serialized in J. Marvin Hunter’s *Frontier Times*, vol. 22, nos. 4, 5, 6, & 7 (January-April 1945). Bandera Texas: 1945.

Browning, James A. *Violence Was No Stranger: a Guide to the Grave Sites of Famous Westerners*. Stillwater, OK: Barbed Wire Press, 1993, 7.

“Fence Cutting in Navarro County” in *Frontier Times*, February 1945, 130-32.

Preece, Harold. *Lone Star Man: Ira Aten, Last of the Old Texas Rangers*. New York: Hastings House, 1960.

*San Antonio Daily Express*, Saturday, July 1, 1893, citing a report from El Paso, June 30.

*San Antonio Daily Express*, July 17, 1893.

Shroyer, Jean, and Hazel Hood, comps and eds. *Williamson County, Texas: Its History and Its People*, for the Williamson County Genealogical Society, Inc. First edition. Austin: Nortex Press, 1985.

Sonnichsen, C. L. *I’ll Die Before I’ll Run: the Story of the Great Feuds of Texas* by New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951, 186-226.

Stephens, Robert W. *Texas Ranger Sketches*. Privately printed, 1972.

Travis County Census: Enumerated 18 June 1880 by G.W. Malone.

### For further reading:

Stephens, Robert W. *Walter Durbin. Texas Ranger and Sheriff*. Clarendon, TX: Clarendon Press, 1970.

Utley, Robert M. *Lone Star Justice: the First Century of the Texas Rangers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Wilkins, Frederick. *The Law Comes To Texas: the Texas Rangers, 1870-1901*. Austin: State House Press, 1999.