



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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.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

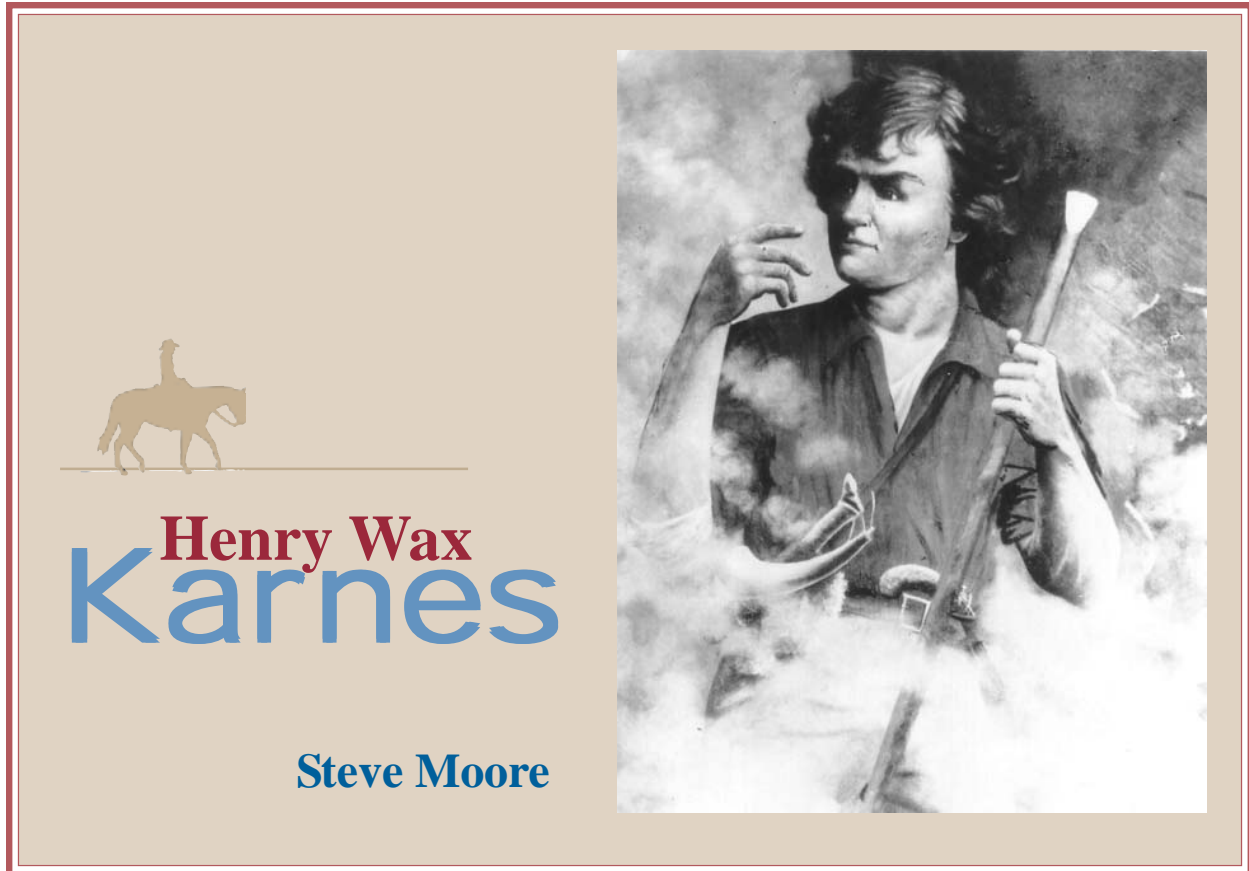
Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

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.



Above is the only known image of Henry Karnes, a great Ranger and hero of the Texas Revolution. *Picture courtesy of Steve Moore and Texas State Archives.*

Short on formal education, Henry Wax Karnes was a model frontiersman who was respected by both his Texas Ranger companions and his Comanche foes alike. He was a short, heavyset man with bright red hair, and his friends said he never swore and was modest and generous. On the battlefield, Karnes would consistently be recognized for his bravery.

Raised in Arkansas, Henry Karnes was the son of a hunter and trapper who learned more about these trades than anything presented in a classroom. Born in 1812, he first visited Texas at age twenty and returned to settle there in 1835. Soon after reaching the Lone Star State, Henry joined the Texas War of Independence, enlisting in the volunteer company of Captain John York. He fought valiantly at the Battle of Concepción and in the siege of Bexar. During the fighting within the streets of San Antonio, Karnes led a charge against a key house with a crowbar to pry his way in—all while under heavy fire.

Karnes was among those men who went to Gonzales in March 1836 to prepare for the march into San Antonio to aid the Alamo. He rode with Deaf Smith and Robert Handy from Gonzales to ascertain the Alamo's condition, and he was the first to return to town with news that it had fallen.



On March 20, he and a five-man scouting force defeated a party of about twenty Mexican soldiers on Rocky Creek. Karnes lost his horse while helping to capture one of the Mexican soldiers, but he took one of his enemy's horses as a replacement.

Two days later, Karnes took a group of scouts close enough to a Mexican Army campground to draw fire from them. Throughout the campaign, he and Deaf Smith would be in the thick of monitoring their enemy's actions. Smith would remain a scout and recruiter while Henry Karnes was given formal command of one of the Texas Army's two cavalry companies.

At the battle of San Jacinto, Captain Karnes was second in command of the cavalry forces. His unit was the first to swim its horses across Buffalo Bayou and continue scouting ahead for General Santa Anna's forces.

On April 20, Karnes and the cavalry joined Colonel Sidney Sherman in a skirmish against Santa Anna's men. When young Walter Lane was knocked from his horse during the fight, Karnes and Mirabeau Lamar were the ones who saved his life.

On April 21, Karnes conducted his company of thirty-five men into the main battle of San Jacinto. After the rout of the Mexican Army, Karnes led many of the scouts in pursuit of escapees and helped in their capture.

Karnes was promoted to colonel for his role in the San Jacinto campaign. He was then sent to Matamoros to effect a prisoner exchange but was taken prisoner himself on June 10, 1836. Learning of plans for another invasion, Karnes smuggled out a warning letter to Texas scouts, the secret express becoming known as the "whip-handle dispatch." The invasion did not happen, and Karnes was eventually released from prison. He was issued a promissory note on September 26, 1836, for \$1,439.16 in expenses. This included four months' salary, \$100 for a lost saddle, \$30 for a gun and shot bag lost, and payment for having served as the guide to Matamoros.

Colonel Karnes continued to lead and direct cavalrymen on the Texas frontiers during the years following the Texas Revolution. He served as captain of cavalry from March 20-September 22, 1836, when he resigned. He was formally assigned as colonel of the First Regiment of Cavalry on January 2, 1837, and served as such through March 14, 1838.

The first cavalry company under Colonel Karnes included Captain Deaf Smith, whose men operated from around the San Antonio area. During 1837, Karnes added companies under Lysander Wells, James W. Tinsley, and Juan Seguín to cover the central and southern regions of Texas.

During his time of commanding Texas frontier forces, Karnes became a key negotiator with the various Indian tribes. He met with Tonkawa Indian leaders in San Antonio during November 1837 and signed a treaty with them on November 22. The Tonkawas promised to "bury the Tomahawk and live upon terms of peace and amity" with the Texas government and its people. The Tonkawas would thereafter help serve as scouts and Rangers with the Texas frontiersmen.

In early 1838, Karnes, Albert Sidney Johnston, and Lysander Wells were appointed as commissioners to deal with the Comanche. Some 150 of the Indians came into San Antonio during May for peace talks. Afterwards, Henry Karnes left with them and sold a supply of goods to the Comanche people.

There was no long-standing peace with the Comanches, however. Karnes and twenty-one of his cavalrymen were attacked by some two hundred Comanches near the Arroyo Seco on August 10, 1838. Suffering at least twenty killed and more wounded after three charges, the Indians finally collected their dead and moved on. No Texans were killed, although Henry Karnes had



been shot through with an arrow while standing atop a bank of the river to direct his men. Karnes's wound was not fatal, although he would be plagued with illnesses off and on for the rest of his life as a result of this shot.

Karnes applied for a headright in 1838 and received 1,920 acres for his Texas service. While he recovered from his injuries in the fall, the state of Indian affairs in Texas continued to deteriorate. On December 28, 1838, Karnes was authorized to raise eight companies of Texas Rangers for frontier defense. Assisted by Lieutenant Colonel Jerome D. Woodlief, Colonel Karnes was charged with recruiting Rangers to operate "against the Comanches and other hostile Indians."

The Ranger battalion raised by Karnes and Woodlief included the companies of Captains Mark Lewis, James Ownby, Greenberry Harrison, John Garrett, and John C. Neill. During late March and early April, Colonel Karnes and some of his Rangers pursued Vicente Cordova's rebels as they retreated past San Antonio. Karnes remained stationed in the San Antonio area through the summer months, sending Lt. Col. Woodlief and two of his Ranger companies to participate in the Cherokee War of East Texas. During June 1839, Karnes led a hundred-man expedition with the companies of Captains Louis B. Franks and Juan Seguín. The men returned to San Antonio on June 23 and were invited by Colonel Karnes to enjoy refreshments at Black and King's coffee house. Their Indian encounters had been minor, although squad leader Jack Hays and others did manage to kill a few Indians.

Leading such a small force of men out on expedition frustrated Henry Karnes to no end. He had been approved by the Texas government to raise eight Texas Rangers companies, and yet he often operated with volunteers. He resigned his commission as colonel on July 28, 1839, and set about raising his own men to lead new Indian offensives from the San Antonio area.

By September 10, Karnes had formed a new company from San Antonio composed of forty-six men under Captain José María Gonzales. He then pulled in a new mounted gunman company from Galveston County, which was headed by Captain William F. Wilson. Karnes met Wilson's company and led the unit back to San Antonio to continue preparations for his Indian expedition. Along that journey, he had to halt the men for two days while he lay sick with a fever, still haunted by the effects of his Arroyo Seco arrow wound.

Karnes and his 105-man expedition departed San Antonio on October 20 for the San Saba hill country. The terrain was rugged, and food was difficult to procure. Karnes, Jack Hays, and half of the expedition's men made a surprise attack on a Comanche camp, killing at least ten and taking one seriously wounded prisoner. Soon after this battle, Karnes fell sick again, and the expedition was forced to halt for days before returning to San Antonio on November 21.

Henry Karnes's health never fully returned, but he continued to work on the Indian situation. Comanche leaders came into San Antonio in January 1840 to meet with him on a potential peace treaty. Karnes proposed to the Texas secretary of state that a group of Indian commissioners be appointed to carry out peace negotiations with the Comanches when they returned. He also felt that sufficient forces should be readied "to justify our seizing and retaining those who may come in as hostages, for the delivery of such American captives as may at this time be among them."

Karnes was in New Orleans on business when the Comanches came back to San Antonio. Negotiations fell apart, and most of the Indians were killed in what became known as the Council House Fight. When Karnes finally returned, the Comanches were provoked to the point of being a serious threat to settlers. President Lamar authorized Karnes to raise a volunteer force to prevent Mexican military forces from operating in the west. Lamar hoped that Karnes could provide order out to the Rio Grande border while also "chastizing the Indians in that section."



Karnes traveled to Houston to meet with Lamar on the issue. He thereafter placed a notice in the Houston paper on June 24 that he hoped to raise as many as six companies to move toward Laredo and protect the western Texas border. By late July, Karnes was in San Antonio, preparing for “a rapid march to Laredo” with his new forces. Days later, however, he fell sick once again with yellow or typhoid fever. While he lay gravely ill, he allowed the Frontier Regiment troops to cut the corn on his property to feed the men.

When he finally felt well enough to travel, Colonel Karnes decided it was important to make one last trip to Houston. He planned to visit with President Lamar about his upcoming military expedition to Laredo. Against Dr. Edmund Weideman’s advice, Karnes set out in a light wagon. He suffered a relapse on the first day of the trip, however, and was taken back to San Antonio.

Henry Wax Karnes never recovered, and he died on August 16, 1840. A veteran of the 1835 battle for San Antonio, a hero of the battle of San Jacinto, and a constant cavalry and Ranger commander in the years following Texas independence, Karnes’s fighting spirit was an inspiration to future leaders on the Texas frontiers. Karnes County is named in his honor.



Sources

Henry W. Karnes Audited Military Claims, Texas State Library.

“Henry Wax Karnes.” *The New Handbook of Texas*.

Online: <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/>

Moore, Stephen L. *Savage Frontier. Rangers, Riflemen, and Indian Wars in Texas*.
Volume II: 1838-1839. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2006.