



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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

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Funded in part by grants from  
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

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## 19th Century Shining Star:

### Ranger Mathew "Old Paint" Caldwell by Steve Moore

*He* has been hailed by one historian as the "Paul Revere of the Texas Revolution." His contemporaries affectionately dubbed him "Old Paint." When it came to leading a frontier fight, however, only one description aptly fit Texas Ranger Mathew Caldwell — courageous.

In the years immediately following the Texas Revolution, a handful of men rose to the surface as the elite frontier leaders of Texas. Among them were Edward Burleson, Benjamin McCullough, John Henry Moore, Jack Hays, and "Old Paint" Caldwell.

Mathew Caldwell was born on March 8, 1798, in Kentucky. He moved with his family to Missouri in 1818. There he reportedly became a skilled Indian fighter and was involved with trading with the local Indians.

Texas land records show that Caldwell settled in the DeWitt colony in 1831 as a married man with a family, although his first wife's name is unknown. She apparently did not live long in Texas, although the couple did have at least three children. He would eventually make his home in Gonzales on Water Street, across from the Guadalupe River and south of the Almeron Dickinson and George Kimble hat factory.

Caldwell was known as "Old Paint" because of his premature gray hair. When his beard grew out, his whiskers were spotted with white patches. Another Ranger who served under him would write that Caldwell also had white patches of chest hair "like a paint horse."

Caldwell fought for his fellow settlers when the need arose. In April 1835, a group of French and Mexican traders were attacked and killed by Comanche Indians in Gonzales County. Caldwell joined a twenty-seven-man Gonzales volunteer party which tracked the Indians to the Blanco River near present San Marcos. In the ensuing battle, Caldwell and his fellow Texans killed most of the fifty-odd Comanches and recovered the stolen goods of the traders.

Caldwell was present for the opening shots of the Texas Revolution. Lieutenant Francisco Castaneda and a hundred soldiers arrived at Gonzales on September 29, 1835, with orders to remove the settlers' cannon. Eighteen

defiant citizens held the Mexican troops at bay on the Guadalupe while other Texian volunteers mobilized. Caldwell served as one of three scouts who monitored the Mexican camp during this time. He convinced the Texas negotiator to stall the Mexican commander while other Texians were recruited. Caldwell rode from Gonzales to Bastrop to call men to arms before the battle of Gonzales on October 2, 1835. For doing so, one historian later dubbed him the "Paul Revere of the Texas Revolution."

Caldwell commanded a company of men in Colonel Stephen F. Austin's army during early November 1835. He was soon thereafter appointed as a supplier for the Texas Army, operating from the Bexar area. He was also involved in recruiting and providing for the Texas Rangers, which had been raised by the convention during the revolution.

As of January 7, 1836, Caldwell was in Gonzales, "recovering from my wounds & afflictions." Although uncertain, it is possible he had been wounded in the early December siege of San Antonio.

Caldwell informed the convention that the citizens did not care for the new Ranger system in which company commanders were appointed. "In regard to the appointing [of] officers to command the rangers in this division, the people will not organize under that regulation," wrote Caldwell. "But, if your Honorable body will see fit to permit us to elect our own officers to command the company, up to a Captain, in that event I think a company may be made."

This issue was common with early Texas Ranger companies. Due to the dangerous nature of the service, the men much preferred to decide who would lead them into the frontiers. In response to the need for more Ranger companies, the acting government of Texas appointed commissioners to head up the task. Mathew Caldwell and two other men were appointed on February 4 to raise a Ranger company for the municipality of Gonzales.

Caldwell served as one of the two delegates from the Gonzales Municipality at the Convention of 1836 at Washington-on-the-Brazos. On March 2, 1836, he was one of the signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence. That same day, he and two others were appointed as special couriers for the Texas Army by the convention. As such, Caldwell spread the news of the Texas Declaration of Independence. His job was to also ascertain the condition of the Texan forces and the movements of the enemy Mexican army on the frontier.

Caldwell was married again, this time to Hannah Morrison in Washington County on May 17, 1837. As a respected Ranger and community leader, he helped keep the peace in town as well as on the prairies. During 1838, when hecklers tried to prevent Reverend Zachariah Morell and other ministers from preaching, Caldwell boldly stood his ground. He claimed to be on the side of "civilization and religious liberty." No one dared use any violence on the preachers.

In December 1838, several children of the Lockhart and Putman families were kidnapped by Comanche Indians while gathering pecans on the Guadalupe River south of Gonzales. Mathew Caldwell, Ben and Henry McCullough, and other residents rode in pursuit of these Indians but were soon faced with a bitter winter "norther" that left ice and snow on the ground. The men eventually were forced to turn back to the winter weather, but most of the children would later be liberated from the Comanches.

The Third Congress of the Republic of Texas passed an act on January 15,

1839, which called for the raising of a fifty-six-man ranging company for Gonzales County. The citizens voted Captain Mathew Caldwell into command, although law required the captain to be appointed by the president. Not disagreeing with the citizens' choice, President Mirabeau B. Lamar officially placed Caldwell in command of the Ranger unit.

Captain Caldwell mustered in his Gonzales County Rangers on March 16, 1839. One of his men, Henry McCullough, was already becoming known as a daring Indian fighter in his own right. Curiously, Mathew Caldwell was named one week later (on March 23, 1839) to become a captain of the First Regiment of Infantry. A letter written by James W. Robinson to President Lamar confirms that Caldwell had been named captain of the Gonzales Rangers by February 24 and had also been appointed as captain in the First Regiment. By the laws of its creation, the First Regiment only needed fifteen captains, and Colonel Lysander Wells informed Caldwell that his army already had met its capacity. Robinson wrote to Lamar, praising Caldwell: "I hope he can yet be provided for, as I do think him the best Capt. of Spies in Texas, even superior in many respects to the old veteran Deaf Smith."

"Old Paint" Caldwell would join the army in due time, but he proceeded to fulfill his obligation to command the Rangers first. His Gonzales Rangers covered the area between San Antonio and Gonzales during the next three months. They established their main camp about fourteen miles above Gonzales on the Guadalupe River near present Luling in what is now Caldwell County. A large force of Austin-area Rangers and volunteers under Colonel Edward Burleson fought a battle with Vicente Cordova's Mexican and Indian rebels on Mill Creek on March 29, 1839.

Captain Caldwell's Rangers were on scouting missions and thus missed the main battle. Five of his men, however, were attacked by Cordova's fleeing forces the following day on the Guadalupe River. "Guns were fired and two of the Gonzales Rangers wounded," wrote Captain Caldwell. Two of his men hurried back to Seguin on foot to spread word of their skirmish, in which the Rangers had been relieved of their horses. "Paint" Caldwell and his Gonzales Rangers thus began a dogged pursuit of Cordova's rebels, who were fleeing toward Mexico. Caldwell crossed the Guadalupe where New Braunfels now stands and pursued them north of San Antonio. Joined by Colonel Henry Karnes and other volunteers, Caldwell's men gave chase until signs showed that the rebels had too great of a lead on them. Although unsuccessful in catching them, his men had helped drive the danger from the country.

Caldwell's 1839 Ranger company helped protect surveyors working between Gonzales and Austin. His company disbanded on June 16 at the completion of its term. He then apparently became involved with recruiting for the First Regiment of Infantry. An August 29, 1839, list of officers includes Captain Mathew Caldwell as one of the fifteen infantry captains. By December 1839, Captain Caldwell was in command of a small, mounted spy party connected to Colonel Burleson's First Regiment. His company joined an expedition of the army, which departed Austin on December 16. It included four other First Regiment companies and friendly parties of mounted Lipan Apache and Tonkawa Indian scouts. Burleson led his troops out in an offensive against hostile Indians.

On Christmas Day, they encountered a band of Cherokees about 100 miles northwest of Austin. At least six Indians were killed, including at least two Cherokee chiefs. The only Texas loss was former Texas Ranger Captain John L. Lynch from Captain Caldwell's company. Caldwell's scouts pursued the Indians for several more days without further battle, and the expedition

returned to Austin in January 1840.

During March 1840, Captain Caldwell was in San Antonio staying as a guest at the home of Samuel Maverick. He was present for the negotiations, which were to be held with Comanche chiefs at the Council House on March 19. He walked over to the meeting unarmed, but he soon found himself in trouble when the talks turned violent. The Comanche chiefs refused to acknowledge that they were holding more than one white prisoner. One of the Indian leaders attacked a Texian sentinel, and the fight quickly became general. Caldwell wrestled a rifle away from one Indian, shot him to death with it, and then used the butt end of the gun to club another Comanche to death.

In the smoke and gunfire that erupted in the packed Council House, "Old Paint" was shot through the right leg by rifle fire, possibly from an errant friendly shot. The fighting spilled out into the streets of San Antonio. The Texian soldiers pursued and killed all of the Indian chiefs, sparing only some of their women and children. Although painfully wounded, Caldwell had moved outside of the courthouse and continued to fight. His "borrowed" rifle now shattered, he used the only weapon he could seize—rocks! That night, Caldwell was helped back to the Maverick home. In her memoirs, Mary A. Maverick recalls: "Dr. Weideman came and cut off his boot and found the bullet had gone entirely through the leg, and lodged in the boot, where it was discovered." The wound, though not dangerous, was very painful. The doughty Captain recovered rapidly and, in a few days, walked about with the aid of a stick.

Mathew Caldwell's next Indian encounter came in August 1840. Hundreds of Comanches made an offensive against the coastal towns of Victoria and Linnville, killing settlers, taking prisoners, looting and destroying homes, and stealing hundreds of horses, cattle, and mules. Various volunteer forces of Texan settlers took up pursuit of the Comanches as they retreated toward north. Among these forces was a mounted company under Captain Caldwell. Other volunteer units gathered at Plum Creek near the Gonzales and Austin road. Scout Henry McCullough brought word during the early morning hours of August 12 that the massive force of Comanches was approaching. Captain Caldwell made a stirring speech to the combined Texian forces, insisting that they must attack before the Indians could reach the protection of the nearby hills. "If we can't whip 'em, we can try," Caldwell insisted, according to Ranger Jim Nichols. Although favored by many to take command of the forces present, Caldwell instead relinquished leadership to the senior officer present, Major General Felix Huston, although the latter had no direct experience with Indian fighting.

In the heated Battle of Plum Creek, the Comanches lost more than eighty killed. The Texans suffered only one man killed and seven wounded. A number of Comanche women and children were taken prisoner, and a large number of stolen goods, mules, and horses were recovered.

Once the battle had begun to swing in favor of the Texans, it was Caldwell and Ben McCullough urged the green General Huston to order an offensive charge. Felix Huston would write in his report that Captain Caldwell led the Texan left wing in a charge "executed in gallant style." Caldwell participated in the Santa Fe Expedition in 1841 as captain of Company D. The expedition was a fiasco, and many of the Texans were captured or forced to surrender. Captain Caldwell and his men were taken prisoner on September 29. The men were forced to walk for months across Mexico during the winter. One of Caldwell's men died from exhaustion. Others were shot for refusing to walk any further and had their ears cut off for souvenirs. Caldwell and some of his

men were taken as far as Mexico City by April 1842. Most of the surviving prisoners were released during the spring and summer of 1842.

Following his release, Caldwell reportedly swore that he would never again surrender to any Mexican force. Shortly after his release, Caldwell was in command of 200 men to give relief to San Antonio. General Adrian Woll, with a force of about 1,400 soldiers, had invaded and captured the town. From Salado Creek on September 17, 1842, Colonel Caldwell sent a written plea for more assistance. Nonetheless, he vowed, "The enemy are around me on every side, but I fear them not." Although outnumbered, he promised, "I can whip them on any ground...Huzza! huzza for Texas!" He signed as "Mathew Caldwell, Colonel Commanding." On September 18, Caldwell sent Captain Jack Hays with a company of men who enticed Woll's cavalry to chase them to the Salado. One of Caldwell's men was Nathan Boone Burkett. He reported in 1895 that, in preparing for this battle, "He [Caldwell] rolled up his sleeves and stopped in front of the men with a red handkerchief tied around his head."

Caldwell announced that he was eager for revenge against the men who had imprisoned him. He encouraged each of his men to pick a different target and to wait for a certain shot. Caldwell theorized that if everyone could "make a sure shot, we will whip hell out of them before they know it."

James Ramsay, another of Caldwell's men, agreed that the commander made a determined speech before the battle of Salado. He recorded that Caldwell urged his men to "Fight for your homes and families and give them hell." Ramsay noted that Caldwell was "above the common height of men, a little slim, dark hair, now mixed with white patches, more particularly in the beard, by which he got the sobriquet of "Old Paint." Although outnumbered, the 200 Texans did put up a stiff fight for the Mexican troops that Jack Hays lured toward Salado Creek. Woll's defeated forces turned back for Mexico, but not before about 60 of the men were killed and many more wounded.

Some Texas leaders criticized Caldwell severely for not pursuing and capturing all of the Mexican soldiers. Troubled by the condemnation against him and still suffering from the many illnesses he had endured in Mexican captivity, Mathew Caldwell died at his home in Gonzales on December 28, 1842. He was buried with military honors. Caldwell County was established in his honor in 1848. The state of Texas also erected an historical monument at his grave in the Gonzales cemetery in 1930.

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