



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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.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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In Their Own Words:

The Case of the Deadly Milkshake

Introduction

On October 18, 1997, retired Texas Ranger Captain Jim Ray and I sat down in his home in Bullard, Texas, to review his career. Captain Jim, as he is fondly called, had one of the most distinguished careers in history of the Texas Rangers. He is the only Texas Ranger to ever achieve the rank of Chief of Criminal Law Enforcement in the Texas Department of Public Safety.



Jim Ray was born on December 15, 1914, in Bullard, Texas, just a few miles from where he now lives. His full name is Jim Ray, not James. Nor does he have a middle name or initial, even though he signs his name Jim M. Ray. He told me that he simply got tired of people always asking for a middle name or initial so he gave himself the same initial that had been his father's: "M". In his father's case, the "M" stood for Monroe.

Graduating from Bullard High School in 1933, Jim attended Stephen F. Austin in Nacogdoches before transferring to East Texas State in Commerce. He graduated from East Texas State in 1940 and taught briefly at Lindale (Texas) High School.

He did not teach long. On November 1, 1941, Jim entered the Texas Highway Patrol School at Camp Mabry in Austin. Except for two hitches in the Army during World War II and Korea, Captain Jim served in the Department of Public Safety until his retirement in 1978.

His wife, Kathleen, passed away in 1984.

Captain Jim had many cases in his distinguished career. One we talked about, though deadly, did have a humorous side to it. It started in 1958 and involved a man and his wife: Charles and Evie Denny. I call it "The Case of the

Deadly Milkshake."

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JIM RAY: A doctor at the veteran's hospital in McKinney (Texas) had called the sheriff in Tyler (Smith County), telling him she had a patient that had been poisoned by strychnine, and she thought somebody ought to come up talk to this old boy.

I went up there and talked to the doctor and she told me that her patient, Cecil Denny, had been brought up there from a hospital in Kilgore and that she had diagnosed his condition as being poisoned with strychnine. All of his hair had come out and the soles of his feet were so sore he couldn't walk on 'em.

ROBERT NIEMAN: This was an indication of strychnine?

JIM RAY: Yes. He was in pretty bad condition. Anyway, after she got him off the poison he got better and finally was released-discharged. But during my investigation I found that his wife, Eva Denny, had been poisoning him with this strychnine. Matter of fact, I served a search warrant on her place between Tyler and Kilgore. She lived on a farm out there, and I found a sack of strychnine that had been opened hanging in one of the old sheds out there. You could tell it had been used because it was fresh. Of course she denied all this.

However, I found out that old Cecil Denny loved strawberry milkshakes and Evie had taken those strawberry milkshakes, fed 'em to him there at the house and also there in the hospital. You know strychnine has a pinkish color, and of course the milkshake being strawberry, you couldn't detect it being in there.

ROBERT NIEMAN: She was just giving him a little bit more and more until it would have finally killed him?

JIM RAY: Yeah, just enough to make him sick, but keep him alive. Old Cecil would go off hunting and fishing and stay gone two or three days and drinking beer and she would get mad at him about that. And every time he went on one of these fishing trips, he'd come back home and she'd feed him some more strychnine. So that went on for a while until he got in the hospital.

ROBERT NIEMAN: And what was his age?

JIM RAY: He was about 40 years old.

ROBERT NIEMAN: And her?

JIM RAY: She was about 65. She had old thin, red, curly hair and was ugly as sin. A man had to be drunk, you know, to stay with her.

ROBERT NIEMAN: Did she ever kill him?

JIM RAY: No, didn't kill him. He came back down to East Texas after he got out of the hospital. Of course I had my case pretty well investigated and I talked to the District Attorney, who at that time was Bill Colston. I asked Bill, "I know we probably need him to sign a complaint, but can I file on her if he won't sign?" He said, "Well, we wouldn't have much of a case if you did, but let's get him in here and see what he says".



ROBERT NIEMAN: Why wouldn't you have a strong case?

JIM RAY: You need the complaint from somebody that had first-hand prior knowledge to it. If the person who was harmed refuses to complain, that pretty well takes the wind of your sails with the District Attorney.

Anyway, I got old Cecil up there in the District Attorney's office and Bill and I started talking to him. Bill asked him to sign a complaint against his wife for poisoning him. Old Cecil kind of hung his head and he said that well, he didn't think he would. He didn't want to. And that was the end of that.

ROBERT NIEMAN: And did they end up living happily ever after?

JIM RAY: Yeah, he went back to her and in about six months he was off again on a fishing trip, got drunk, and run his old pickup into a tree and killed himself.

ROBERT NIEMAN: I wonder if she was still making him strawberry milkshakes?

JIM RAY: Probably was, and he was probably still liking 'em.

She finally passed away a while after that.

ROBERT NIEMAN: She never did any time?

JIM RAY: Never did.

[Top](#)

[Dispatch](#)

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