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Publishing the Texas Rangers

An American Literary Tradition through Three Centuries

Byron A. Johnson, Director

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This issue of the Dispatch excerpts several outstanding new books in the latest cycle of publication on the Texas Rangers. The current leader in publishing Texas Ranger history is the University of North Texas Press, under Director Ronald Chrisman:

The University of North Texas Press is dedicated to producing the highest quality academic and general interest books for the Metroplex, state, national, and international communities as part of an outreach activity. UNT Press publishes in the humanities and social sciences, with special emphasis on Texas history and culture.

Since its founding in 1987, publications on the Texas Rangers have been a staple of UNT Press'

- *In the Line of Duty: Reflections of a Texas Ranger Private* - Lewis Rigler
- UNT Press has published biographies of the four "Great Captains" at the turn of the twentieth century:
 - *Captain John H. Rogers, Texas Ranger* - Paul N. Spellman
 - *Captain J. A. Brooks, Texas Ranger* - Paul N. Spellman
 - *Yours to Command: The Life and Legend of Captain Bill McDonald* - Harold J. Weiss Jr.
 - *Captain John R. Hughes: Lone Star Ranger* - Chuck Parsons
 - *Winchester Warriors: Texas Rangers of Company D, 1874-1901* - Bob Alexander
 - *Rawhide Ranger, Ira Aten: Enforcing the Law on the Texas Frontier* - Bob Alexander
 - *Eleven Days in Hell: The 1974 Carrasco Prison Siege* - William T. Harper
 - *The Savage Frontier series of four volumes on the early Rangers from 1835 to 1845* - Stephen L. Moore
 - *Six-Shooters and Shifting Sands: The Wild West Life of Texas Ranger Captain Frank Jones* – Bob Alexander
 - *Bad Company and Burnt Powder: Justice and Injustice in the Old Southwest* – Bob Alexander

- *Riding Lucifer's Line: Ranger Deaths along the Texas-Mexico Border* – Bob Alexander
- *Whiskey River Ranger: The Old West Life of Baz Outlaw* – Bob Alexander

Truly, Texas Ranger books have a life and history of their own. Walter Prescott Webb's landmark, ***The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*** was published for the Texas Centennial in 1936. As part of his research, Webb shared sentimental reminiscences of the old days as well as libations with veterans Frank Hamer and Bob Goss. He came away agreeing with their opinion that the twilight of the Texas Rangers might have arrived with the creation of new Texas Department of Public Safety.

Seventy-five years later, the Texas Rangers remain a pillar of Texas law enforcement, the oldest law enforcement agency in the nation with statewide jurisdiction. Webb's book, still containing his long outdated apprehensions, has never gone out of print since 1936. Webb intended a revision, but he died in 1963 before writing it.

Colonel Homer Garrison Jr., long-time director of Texas DPS, once stated, "As long as there is a Texas there will be Texas Rangers." It also appears that as long as books are written about the American West, there will be books about the Texas Rangers.

Scarcely two decades after their creation in 1823, the Texas Rangers had become national celebrities, "superstars" of the Mexican War. They owed this fame to the first embedded journalists in history, who traveled to Mexico with the US Army. These newspaper correspondents described the Texas Rangers as "highly irregular irregulars," unorthodox heroic figures worthy of columns of newsprint.

Unlike the starched US and Mexican troops, Texians wore colorful frontier dress reminiscent of Davy Crockett. On one hand, they exhibited raucous backwoods behavior, but they also carried devastating high-tech Colt repeating weapons decades ahead of what the Army carried. Refusing to line up in orderly ranks to be shot, as did the US and Mexican troops, the Rangers employed no-holds-barred horseback guerilla tactics that drove West Point officers to distraction. This combination saved the US Army from defeat on more than once occasion and influenced a generation of young officers like Robert E. Lee, who borrowed their tactics in the Civil War. Texian Ranger leaders like Jack Hays and Sam Walker became household names in Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Richmond.

Following the lead of the news media, the publishing establishment began a new Texas 14 Ranger literary tradition. Novels, histories, biographies, autobiographies, songs, and stage plays appeared. They were later joined by

screenplays for silent movies and “talkies” and scripts for radio programs and television series. So far, the phenomenon has lasted more than 160 years. The first Texas Ranger book noted by the Library of Congress is a florid romance novel by Joseph H. Ingraham, *The Texan Ranger; or, the Maid of Matamoros a Tale of the Mexican War*, published in 1847. It was soon followed by nonfiction histories like *The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch’s Texan Rangers* by Samuel Reid Jr. in 1848 and *The Mexican war and its Heroes* (1849), containing references to John C. Hays and Samuel Walker.

Lurid Texas Indian captivity tales made their appearance during this era with Nelson Lee’s *Three years Among the Camanches*, [sic] *the Narrative of Nelson Lee, the Texas Ranger* (1859). Nelson was allegedly held captive by the Comanche and, straining credibility, eventually escaped by bartering a pocket watch.

The predecessors of Tin Pan Alley, not to be outdone, began publishing ballads and sheet music for songs like “Song of the Texas Rangers,” “Texas Ranger!” and “Texian Volunteers!” in collections like the 1874 compendium *Allan’s Lone Star Ballads*.

The next era of Texas Ranger publishing stretched between the Civil War and the early 20th century. Ranger biographies premiered in the 1860s and 70s with the publication of *The Scout and Ranger: being the personal adventures of Corporal [James] Pike . . . as a Texan Ranger in 1865*. It was popular, and it was reprinted in 1883.

Because of a gift for self-promotion and manipulation of fact, Pike never made it into the pantheon of Texas Rangers. He unintentionally ended his own life by using a loaded rifle as a club during an Indian attack, discharging it into his chest. Two other bona fide Texas legends gained additional fame in this era of biography with the publication of *The Adventures of Big-Foot Wallace: the Texas Ranger and Hunter* by John Crittenden Duval in 1871 and *Life and adventures of John C. Hays, the Texas Ranger* by John C. Hays with John Caperton in 1878.

This was also the era of dime novels, youth literature, and “penny dreadfuls.” Writers of romantic bent churned out titles like *The Ranger Boy’s Career or Cougar Bill of Texas* by Frederick Whittaker in 1872, *Revolver Billy, the Boy Ranger of Texas: a history of the romantic life of a prairie boy-Billy Miranda* by Col. Prentiss Ingraham in 1883, and *Texas Charlie, the Boy Ranger: a Narrative of Thrilling Incidents in the Life of Captain Charles Bigelow* the same year.

With a wealth of material appearing, melodramatic playwrights began to script dramas for traveling theater companies such as “The Vanishing Race or A Texas

Ranger: a Frontier Melodrama in Four Acts” in 1899. In 1915, Harry Demark’s play “A Texas Ranger, a Play of the Great Southwest in Three Acts” premiered to unknown reviews. There were certainly other Texas Ranger productions making the rounds.

The end of the century saw an increase in the number of Ranger biographies and a welcome change from bombastic adventure stories to narrative history. Napoleon Jennings, a Ranger in Leander McNelly’s Frontier Battalion, wrote his often-republished ***A Texas Ranger*** in 1899. In 1909, Albert Bigelow Paine wrote ***Captain Bill McDonald, Texas Ranger***. It started McDonald, “the man who would charge Hell with a bucket of water,” on his road to widespread fame. John Sullivan, a less colorful but more observant writer, recorded his valuable reminiscences in ***Twelve Years in the Saddle for Law and Order on the Frontiers of Texas***, also in 1909.

By the 1920s and 30s, the few surviving Texas Rangers of the Old West were elderly. Fortunately for posterity, several turned to reminiscing and writing their autobiographies. In 1925, James B. Gillett penned ***Six years with the Texas Rangers, 1875-1881***, a classic and one of the best sources of information on Sam Bass, feuds, range wars, and skirmishes with Indians. Ira Aten wrote ***Six and one-half Years in the Ranger Service; 50 Years Ago*** in the 1930s, and Buck Barry, with the help of James Greer, wrote ***A Texas Ranger and Frontiersman; the Days of Buck Barry in Texas, 1845-1906*** in 1932.

These books were outnumbered by countless novels. By the 1930s, new books by authors like Zane Grey sold like hotcakes and spawned movie after movie starring the likes of Gene Autry and Tom Mix. Pulp magazines appeared, including ***Texas Ranger***, and were the descendants of dime novels. In the last fifty years, thousands of Texas Ranger titles have appeared and hundreds remain in print. It is certainly one of the outstanding genres of American literature.

Thanks to the efforts of publishers such as the University of North Texas Press, the Texas Ranger literature is moving into its third century.

