



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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.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



The Mervyn Mystery...Solved!  
by Chuck Parsons

*Alone and standing among the sleeping rangers I  
have gazed on the face of him I guarded, John  
Wesley Hardin, the gentlest sleeper of them  
all. . . . his sleep was calmer than the moonlight  
stream flowing past me to the sea. If any demons  
ever haunted his bedchamber, they kept aloof of  
his bivouac. Were the irons on his limbs the  
potent charms that awed them, or, was it the cold  
blue gleam of the sentinel's Winchester?*

- Mervyn, 25 September 1877, writing from Comanche.

We are so accustomed to thinking of a Texas Ranger as a man with a six-gun or a Winchester. The image is so much more dramatic if he is astride a lathered horse, galloping after a handful of Comanche or Kiowa braves, or perchance chasing a fugitive running from a county sheriff. But that is not always the true picture. Perhaps the striking contrast of the image of the Frontier Battalion Rangers of the 1870s and the life of the men after retiring from the service is no greater than when considering the life and career of Mervyn B. Davis (1844-1912).[1] The following briefly recounts Davis' contribution to the establishing of law and order, his solving of a minor mystery, and his life outside the Rangers.

A number of years ago, while doing some preliminary research on the life and career of N. O. Reynolds, Lieutenant Commander of Company E during the 1870s, I found several letters printed in the widely circulated Galveston Daily News.[2] The series of four letters was composed between September and early December 1877 and written from the four Texas towns of Austin, Comanche, Menard, and Llano. The only identification of the man who wrote the letters was the signature "Mervyn." Rarely in that era was a correspondent identified by his real name; more often a pen name was used, such as "Alamo" or "Pidge" or "Texan." I published those four letters in 1988 with

some annotations in the Brand Book of the English Westerners Society.[3] The letters describe the commander of the Frontier Battalion, Major John B. Jones; discuss and describe the trial of John Wesley Hardin for the killing of Charles Webb; provide a brief account of an Indian raid into Kimble and Menard counties; and provide a humorous description of a nightmare of Ranger Mervyn.

At the time of initial publication, all that was known for sure was that the Ranger who had composed these letters was a member of Reynolds' Company E. The muster roll for that period contains the following names, and all that could be said with certainty at the time was that the mysterious "Mervyn" was one of them: 1st Sergeant C. L. Nevill, 2nd Sergeant H. W. McGhee; 1st Corporal J. W. Warren; 2nd Corporal G. F. Walker; privates A. Anglin, J. H. Bates, J. M. Braden, William Clements, C. R. Connor, M. B. Davis, W. T. Derrick, J. H. Gibbs, J. B. Gillett, T. P. Gillespie, J. H. Grizzell, W. P. Hughes, D. L. Ligon, H. Maltimore, M. S. Moreland, L. W. Rogers, H. J. Thomas and R. C. Ware.[4] The only conclusion made at that time was a plaintive "One of these Rangers composed the 'Mervyn' letters!"

Sometimes good fortune comes from unexpected places. While browsing through the Index to Indian Wars Pension Files 1892-1926,[5] my eye fell on the name of M. B. Davis. The proverbial light bulb was lit. Researching further, it was obvious that the M. B. Davis whose widow was applying for a pension based on his service in the Frontier Battalion was the same M. B. Davis whose name appears on Reynolds' muster roll. A key bit of information found in the application was that M. B. Davis died on June 18, 1912, in McLennan County, Texas. Further, the Davis couple was married on December 8, 1883, in Tarrant County, Texas. Prior to his Ranger service, Davis had served in Company G, Tenth Virginia Cavalry and Company E, Fifty-ninth Virginia, Army of Northern Virginia.



One of the few surviving images of M. B. Davis

By discovering these dates, a brief summary of M. B. Davis' life was then obtainable from obituaries in the Waco newspapers, other publications, and perhaps census records. The Waco Daily Times Herald carried three items relevant to Davis' passing in the issues of June 18, 19, and 20, 1912. Each item provided a little more information. A brief editorial page notice—four paragraphs—appears in the issue of June 18, noting how many hearts were saddened that day "because of the death of one of its best beloved citizens, Captain M. B. Davis." The editorial points out that when Waco was a village, Captain Davis "took up the fight in an humble way for a Greater Waco." He was the "Grand Old Man" in newspaper circles, and his acts of tenderness and love "were not confined to human beings but extended to beasts and birds."

After reading these articles, I knew that the mysterious "Mervyn" had a full life span, possessed a loving heart, and was a Captain—besides having been a private in Reynolds' Company E! The news items of June 19 and 20 tell of the funeral services, identify the six active pallbearers, and list by name the thirty-nine honorary pallbearers and the hundreds who called to pay their last tributes of respect. These hundreds included "every walk of life, rich, poor, Jew and gentile." So many floral tributes were delivered it was impossible to see the grave. Some were piled on his daughter's adjacent grave.

I found further information through census records. The 1850 Henrico County, Virginia, census lists the family of Davis' father, J. Lucius Davis. The head of household was quite wealthy, claiming real estate valued at eight thousand dollars. His wife Elizabeth and six children are named, one of whom is identified as Bathurst, five years old.[6] This lad was Mervyn Bathurst Davis.

The 1860 census does not mention M. B. Davis. Possibly Davis had relocated in Pennsylvania, as in 1870 in the Susquehanna County census M. B. Davis does appear—twenty-nine years old, a blacksmith.[7] This perhaps might have been the right man, but there is more certainty with the 1880 census, as M. B. Davis appears in Bexar County, post office San Antonio. In this census, Davis was a thirty-six-year-old journalist, has a wife named Susan, and has four children: daughter Constance Welley (ten years old, born in Pennsylvania); son William F. Hartson (thirteen); Burdie E. Hartson, a five-year-old daughter, and an eleven-month-old son named Quinton B. Davis.[8] This seemed to provide the evidence necessary to conclude that the M. B. Davis of the Pennsylvania census was the same man.

The 1900 McLennan County census was most informative. It shows that M. B. Davis was born in October 1845 in Virginia and then lived at 2012 Austin

Street, Waco. Apparently Susan Davis had died, as Davis' wife is listed as Celeste Bassett Davis, born in May 1848 in Michigan. There were two children living with them: Constance, twenty-nine, born in Virginia; and M. B., Jr., born June 1879 (the Quinton B. of the 1880 census). Mrs. Davis is shown to have borne three children, and all were then living.[9]

But what of M. B. Davis' Ranger service? The service records show that Davis was mustered in at Camp Bear Creek, Kimble County, by Major Jones on September 1, 1877. He was then thirty-three and thus the oldest man in the company! He was issued a \$28 Winchester. Although earning \$90 in that first quarter of service, he was issued only \$68.15 because \$28 was deducted for the Winchester, \$1.10 for side lines and hobbles for his horse, and \$39.05 for a debt owed to Lieutenant Reynolds. There is no indication as to what the \$39.05 debt represented.

Davis may have been away from the service in December, but the second pay record reveals that he had money due for service from January 1 to February 28. Captain D.W. Roberts signed the record. The third pay document shows that Davis served from March 1-31 and was honorably discharged from the service on March 31, 1878.[10]

Prior to his joining the Ranger service, Davis worked for the Daily Reporter of Waco. During his few months in the Rangers, "Mervyn" wrote his four fascinating letters to the Galveston Daily News. Since his primary career had been journalism, perhaps he joined the Frontier Battalion because it provided the opportunity for adventure, a popular subject matter for his writings. The first letter was written at Austin on September 20 and is, as his self-provided headline read, "A Complimentary Sketch of the Frontier Battalion's Gallant Leader." This paean informs the News readers of Major John B. Jones' early life: how he "hastened" to Virginia to serve in the Confederate Army when war broke out, and how he served under such popular generals as Speight, Harrison, and Polignac. The letter relates the formation of the Frontier Battalion and Governor Richard Coke's offering to Jones of the position of commander "which the major with his wonted energy to set to work and recruited and organized up to the standard contemplated in the act [creating the battalion]." After taking command, Jones "met and defeated the Indians in fifteen battles."

The praise continues as Jones is depicted several times fighting "hand to hand with the savages" and always proving himself a soldier and a hero. "Impervious to the extremes of cold or heat, able to endure the tortures of hunger and thirst, a Bedouin in the saddle," Jones led his "wild Rangers" through "the gloom of midnight, along the forest trails, and the wolf and the owl fly from

the path . . . ." But the "red fingered murderer he drags into light to toil in chains or dangle at a rope's end, as justice decrees."

Private Mervyn B. Davis was not content to praise only his commander in this first letter; he also compliments his companions as well. He describes the 150 men composing the battalion as "almost without exception brave, able-bodied, deadly shots, and perfect horsemen." Further, he states that Major Jones was "very select in recruiting men and has gathered into the battalion quite a number of scholars whose attainments would grace any position in life." With these last words was Mervyn actually describing himself.

The second Mervyn letter was written at Comanche on September 25 during the trial of noted man-killer John Wesley Hardin. It appeared in the News of October 3 and also the Galveston Daily News of October 8. The headline "John Wesley Hardin at Comanche" certainly caught the readers' eyes at that time as Hardin's capture in Florida on August 23, just a month before, had been front-page news across the state. Here Mervyn provides a brief description of Hardin and how the Rangers guarded him. A few lines appear about the trial, followed by closing lines that have frequently been quoted:

*But I have guarded this wild man, the report of whose bloody crimes has caused so much shuddering, whose name was a 'bug bear' to the timid tourist in Texas. Yes, I have guarded him at midnight, when the moonlight was reflected on the cow house. Alone and standing among the sleeping rangers I have gazed on the face of him I guarded, John Wesley Hardin, the gentlest sleeper of them all. Sometimes a troubled look disturbed his countenance for an instant; once he murmured "Johnny", his little son's name, but in the main his sleep was calmer than the moonlight stream flowing past me to the sea. If any demons ever haunted his bedchamber, they kept aloof of his bivouac. Were the irons on his limbs the potent charms that awed them, or, was it the cold blue gleam of the sentinel's Winchester? Perhaps some spiritualist can answer.*

Here is revealed not only Mervyn's sense of responsibility, but also his eye to nature and his ability to create beautiful imagery. The final four sentences were reprinted in the Austin Daily Democratic Statesman of October 18 and are introduced with this brief statement: "A poetical correspondent says of John Wesley Hardin 'alone and standing among the sleeping rangers. . . .'" One wonders if Hardin, whose capture resulted in Rangers John B. Armstrong and Jack Duncan receiving the \$4000 reward, was ever guarded by a single Ranger!

A third letter is unsigned, but it is believed that Mervyn composed it as well because it was written during the same time period and in the place where Company E was stationed. The letter mentions Corporal J. B. Gillett, who was with Reynolds at this time. This is the briefest letter, but Mervyn explains the reason for its brevity: "with the utmost difficulty" was he able to write "these hurried lines . . ." as the Rangers were then following the trail of a party of Lipan Indians who had raided into Kimble County the preceding week and had stolen a number of fine horses. Even though the three-paragraph letter is principally informative, the nature allusions are strong:

*The rivers are teeming with fish, and the forests skirting them abound with the finest game—deer, turkeys, etc. It is a wild and rugged country, but for sheep and all other kinds of stock it is as good as the world can offer anywhere. This is also a fine pastoral country, well watered and rich in grass.*

Were such phrases as "teeming with fish," forests "skirting" the rivers, and "a fine pastoral country" part of the average Ranger's vocabulary? Or part of the average reader's of The Galveston Daily News?

The fourth and final letter is from Llanotown (now simply Llano). It is dated

November but printed in the December 7 issue of the News. It is headlined "A Texas Rangers [sic] Dreams" with the sub-headline, "Experiences of a Night in Camp on the Banks of the Colorado."

As the letter depicts, Rangers crossed over to the Llano side of the Colorado River as the sun was setting on the evening of November 26. There were a dozen in the party: seven Rangers, Llano County Sheriff J. J. Bozarth, Colonel Wright, a livery man of Llano, and three prisoners: George Gladden, sentenced to a term of ninety-nine years in the Huntsville penitentiary; John Ringo, later to gain world-wide fame in Tombstone, Arizona, territory; and one Mitchell. The prisoners were all "heavily ironed." Immediately Mervyn noted the beauty of nature: "The great glow gave a deeper tint of scarlet to the wild sumac, dyed with the tint of autumn and waving like red suction flags over all the flowers of bankrupt summer." Mervyn could not resist describing nature. "The purple skies faded, but our camp fires glowed brightly on the boughs of the trees, and we fell to work with a zest upon the fried bacon, bread, and coffee that bespoke the hungry men." At midnight "your correspondent" was awakened to take his turn at guard, then the "waning moon was dancing on the rippling sheen of the Colorado as I took my post to watch the sleepers and the glowing coals beneath the big log."



In the lengthy letter, Mervyn describes how, as he stood his post, the "two hours passed swiftly by." After having aroused the next man, Mervyn wrapped himself in his blankets and, with his head on the saddle, saw in the glowing coals the faces of loved ones. The faces in the embers "once beaming brightly with hope and love, now turned to dust and ashes." When he whispered to one of the faces, a "radiant angel arose above the blaze and sailed upward, smiling as she passed beyond the moon."

Then the nightmare began, for when Davis awoke he discovered Corporal J. W. Warren, "a good and faithful Ranger, a brave soldier . . . Oh, horror! he was dead." And the sheriff, the liveryman, the other Rangers—all but the three prisoners—were dead. The prisoners were gone; their shackles lay beside the dark pit.

What followed was indeed a nightmare. Ranger Mervyn buckled on his cartridge belts, knife, and revolver. He seized his Winchester, approached the pit, and gazed into the gloomy depths. Beholding "apparently miles into the bowels of the earth . . . a voice . . . broke the stillness." The voice came from a "tall form dressed in a hunting shirt of the olden time."

What Mervyn heard was a "tone of voice resembling the winter wind moaning through the forest." The phantom guide flew downward and Mervyn noted the changes (and revealed at the same time his knowledge of geology): "Stratum after stratum we passed, argillaceous quartz in thick veins; coal, iron, silver and petrified monsters with tons of ivory in a single tooth . . ." until they reached the center of gravity, where the devil welcomed Molock, Mervyn's "guide."

The "frowning devil" demanded that Mervyn fall down and worship him. Instead, the Ranger pumped a cartridge into his Winchester and aimed "full at his horned head." Before he could fire, Mervyn was "pitched into a burning cauldron" where the heat exploded the cartridges in his gun belt. Awakening then, Mervyn realized a "chunk of fire had rolled against my back and burned off the tail of my overcoat." The burning into his backside had caused one cartridge to explode—"Hence the dream."

No hint is given in the service records or scouting reports as to why Private M. B. Davis chose to leave the service. Prior to relocating to San Antonio, he spent some time in Austin. In January of 1878, while still in the Rangers, an "original address" penned by Davis was to be read by a Mrs. Versay. Other events of this cultural evening included instrumental music, a vocal duet, and a vocal solo. No hint is given as to the subject of the "original address." [11] On March 20 it was reported that Davis was in command of a detachment of



Rangers stationed at the General Land Office in Austin. But the detachment had left Austin on the nineteenth, leaving Davis in charge, alone, "to guard papers."<sup>[12]</sup>

Davis was in the news again a year later. In March 1879 he was accused by J. C. Clark, the "fat barber," of writing an article published in the Austin Gazette, which was not to his liking. The Gazette editor, John D. Elliott, and Clark scuffled. Davis made a complaint in Justice Court on February 12 against Clark. Clark was acquitted, as Davis did not choose to appear in court against him.<sup>[13]</sup> On March 7, 1879, Davis gave a "humorous lecture" on the subject of "superstition." Other events provided entertainment for the price of fifteen cents for gentlemen, ten cents for ladies, and five cents for children. <sup>[14]</sup> The following month Davis was noted as editing a short-lived Austin Saengerfest newspaper.<sup>[15]</sup> Then on May 21, 1879, a window fell while Davis was sleeping; the bottom of the sash struck him on the temple and "hurt him severely."<sup>[16]</sup>

By 1880, as previously noted, Davis was in Bexar County working as a journalist. From 1883 to 1885, he worked in Fort Worth for the Dallas Weekly Herald. Occasionally Davis visited Austin to see old friends and his visits were recorded in the Statesman. In December 1881, Davis offered a five-dollar reward for the recovery of a white mare lost on the grounds of the Texas Military Institute.<sup>[17]</sup>

During this period occasional news items appeared about Davis but none pertained to his work as a journalist. About noon on April 6, 1883, a "furor[e] [sic] of excitement was created" by "an encounter" between Davis and J. H. Selden. Selden was having a statement published in the Fort Worth Democrat accusing Mrs. Selden of adultery with several men in Michigan and Texas. Davis' wife was from Michigan and Davis felt the need to defend the honor of her home state. Davis sought out Selden and demanded a retraction and spit in his face. Later Davis beat Selden on the face and head with a "heavy cavalry boot," breaking his nose and inflicting serious wounds. Davis was arrested by Sheriff Walter T. Maddox for aggravated assault but gave a bond of five hundred dollars. No further details have been learned in this matter.<sup>[18]</sup>

In 1885, the Dallas Weekly Herald carried a circular that identifies Davis as acting superintendent of Wells, Fargo & Company's Express in Houston. Davis then moved to Dallas where he worked for the Dallas Morning News. In 1886 he was transferred to Waco as a correspondent. It was here that he gained his greatest recognition as a journalist and also as a public speaker. He supposedly delivered hundreds of addresses in Waco and the environs,

and it was said of him: "No Wacoan could say more, in fewer words, and that everything uttered by him was timely and to the point." [19]

Although an altercation occasionally provided high-action news reporting, and it is his brief career as a Ranger that concerns us here, M. B. Davis' greatest contribution lies not from guarding John Wesley Hardin while he slept in chains, but from his work as a preservationist. In 1881, with Champe Carter McCulloch and H. E. Ambott of Waco, he formed the first Game Protective Association in Texas. As the association's secretary, he campaigned to alert the public to the need to protect wildlife. A chapter of the Audubon Society was formed in 1899 in Galveston, but most of its members were killed in the great Galveston Storm of 1900. An attempt to reestablish the society was made in 1903. In 1904 until 1912 Davis was secretary of the Texas Audubon Society. In 1907 he was instrumental in having the 1903 Model Game Law reenacted. This resulted in requiring licenses for resident and nonresident hunters, with the revenue from licenses and fines to be used for game protection and propagation.

In 1910 he was elected an honorary life member of the Museum and Scientific Society of Houston. Davis was instrumental in forming the Texas Humane Society in Waco. In 1912 he served on the Constitution and By-laws Committee of the Texas Game and Fish Protective Association. [20] One of Davis' memorable addresses, "The Birds of Texas," appears in the Texas Department of Agriculture Bulletin entitled "The Use and Value of Wild Birds To Texas armers and Stockmen and Fruit and Truck Growers." It was originally delivered before the Texas Farmers' Congress in 1907. [21]

Davis is buried in the Oakwood Cemetery in Waco beside his daughter, Constance L. Davis, who had preceded him in death on March 27, 1906, at the age of thirty-five. And while guarding the sleeping John Wesley Hardin in Ranger camps, did Mervyn Bathurst Davis strain his ears to hear the hoot of an owl, or other night sounds of birds which were so plentiful then, but a few decades later were almost extinct?

#### Notes

[1] Stanley D. Casto, "Mervyn Bathurst Davis" in *The New Handbook of Texas* (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1966), Vol. 2, 532-33. The only reference to his Ranger service is that he served two short periods as a Texas Ranger in the Frontier Battalion.

[2] The letters appeared in *The Galveston Daily News* of 26 September, 3 October, 10 November, and 7 December, 1877.

[3] Chuck Parsons, "'Mervyn - A Poetical Correspondent'", *The Brand Book*,



(London: The English Westerners Society), Winter, 1988/89.

[4] Muster roll of Lt. N. O. Reynolds, 1 September 1877. Original is in the Adjutant General Files, Texas State Archives, Austin.

[5] Virgil D. White, transcriber, Index to Indian Wars Pension Files 1892-1926 (Waynesboro, Tennessee: The National Historical Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. 1, 378.

[6] Henrico County, Virginia Census, 2 August 1850, 539.

[7] Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania Census, 2 August 1870, 277.

[8] Bexar County, Texas Census, 7 June 1880, 77.

[9] McLennan County, Texas Census, 12 June 1900, E.D. 75, Sheet 14.

[10] Ranger Service Records in M. B. Davis file, Texas State Archives, Austin.

[11] The Daily Democratic Statesman (Austin), 11 January 1878.

[12] Ibid., 20 March 1878.

[13] Ibid., 13 and 14 February 1879.

[14] Ibid., 7 March 1879.

[15] Ibid., 3 April 1879.

[16] Ibid., 22 May 1879.

[17] Ibid., 1 December 1881.

[18] The Dallas Weekly Herald, 12 April 1883.

