

# An Old Ranger's Coming Home

Text and photographs by Bob and Vera Thornton

That we decided to visit Oregon at all was perhaps a bit peculiar as the migratory paths of most Texans heading west normally route through the obligatory watering holes and vacation destinations of Palm Springs, Pebble Beach, and San Francisco. However, as a hobby, Vera and I had been working on a wildlife photography project for several years that had in itself taken on a life of its own, and so we went west, specifically to Oregon, to photograph two small birds, the Townsends warbler and the Hermit warbler, on the eastern slopes of the Cascades near the small ranching community of Sisters, Oregon. Our research had indicated that since the Hermit's breeding range runs north from California to Oregon and the Townsends' range runs north from Oregon to Alaska, this particular location was logistically our best shot at locating both birds.

Hence our arrival at a 12-unit campground, Camp Sherman, a few miles north of Sisters in mid-May 1993.

We had never been to Oregon, knew few who had, but we were nevertheless impressed with the beauty of the green valleys and mountains still snow-capped at that time of the year. The campground complex was deserted in May, as the tourist season wouldn't kick-start until June, and we consequently had the whole area to ourselves except for the lone occupant of a set-apart small cottage across a stream from the cabin we occupied. That cottage belonged to Roblay McMullin, then 86, former owner of the campground who had sold out several years before, but who still lived there under the terms of the original sales contract. It is Roblay McMullin who is the heroine of this story and the linkage to the famous frontiersman and Texas Ranger — Captain Jack Hays. Jack Hays was also a colonel in command of the 1st Regiment, Texas Mounted Volunteers during the War with Mexico.

Vera and I had been in the area for a



couple of days, concentrating on our project with but modest success, when late one afternoon, Roblay, whom we had not yet met nor even seen, called to us across the stream to come join her for a drink. When she learned that we were from Texas, she paused momentarily, and then sallied forth with the following: "Before we settle in, there are three things you need to know: Number One - I've never been to Texas; Number Two - I've never met a Texan; and Number Three - Quite frankly, I don't think I've missed a damn thing." We liked her immediately. Liked her a lot. She was salty and engaging as she wove tales of the area, the geography, and the colorful history of the Sisters/Bend communities. It was, however, at least 45 minutes into the conversation, perhaps even an hour, before she began to lean into her new agenda. She suggested that "since you two are from Texas, perhaps you would like to meet another Texan — Colonel Jack." When I asked her who this Colonel Jack was, she invited us to look over our shoulders at a

Captain Jack Hays was a legendary Texas Ranger who distinguished himself in the Mexican-American War under General Zachary Taylor. A.I. Bancroft & Co. Publishers, San Francisco.

large oval oil painting hanging over the door, a painting of a bearded young man in buckskin kneeling on top of an escarpment, gripping a percussion rifle. The actual rifle itself hung beneath the painting. She said "that's Colonel Jack Hays, Texas Ranger, and one of the heroes of the Mexican-American War." She went on to say that the painting depicted an actual event in 1841 when Hays fended off a band of attacking Comanches from Enchanted Rock near Fredericksburg, Texas. The rifle beneath the painting was the one he presumably used that day.

Jack Hays was a remarkable man by any measurement. He came to Texas as a 19-year-old orphan from Tennessee, arriving in 1837 shortly after the Texan victory at San Jacinto. He soon joined a newly formed "ranging" group commissioned by President Sam Houston to protect the settlements around San Antonio from the Comanches and other assorted renegades who were ravaging the area at the time. Hays was a fearless fighter and a leader worshipped by the men he led. Although he was slight of build and modest in demeanor, he made captain in the Texas Rangers at the early age of 23 and colonel a few years thereafter during the Mexican-American War. His bravery and competence were legendary, and his real life heroics were sensational enough to render John Wayne's exploits a bit frail and incomplete by comparison. Hays' small band of Rangers particularly distinguished itself during the Mexican-American War when, under General Zachary Taylor, Hays operated a commando force deep inside Mexico behind enemy lines, leading to the American capture of Monterrey. His outstanding successes made him a

national hero, he was lionized by the press, and celebrations were thrown in his honor wherever he traveled.

After the war and the annexation of newly-won territory, a county was even named for him in tribute. Although subsequent generations of Texas school children were raised to revere the early heroes of the Republic: Austin, Houston, Travis, Crockett, and Bowie, with barely a nod toward this great Ranger, it is nevertheless Jack Hays, who in the judgment of many, could legitimately stake claim to being the bravest and most extraordinary of them all.

The obvious question, the one I then asked, was "why are these possessions of Jack Hays here in Oregon and how do you happen to have them?" Roblay explained that shortly after the Mexican-American War, Hays moved to California where he became sheriff of San Francisco, a successful businessman and land owner, and the actual founder of Oakland, California. In response to the second part, she simply said "and you see, I was married to the grandson of Colonel Jack Hays."

Vera and I were quite naturally stunned that these important Ranger treasures, so clearly Texan in scope and historical significance, were quietly hanging in a little campground home in Oregon. My next



Future generations of Texans will owe a debt of gratitude to Roblay McMullin, shown above with painting of Captain Jack Hays and the rifle thought to be the one that Hays used in fending off Comanches near Fredericksburg.

question, lobbed at Roblay a little more directly than was perhaps polite, was "what do you plan to do with these?" She replied that she had not yet made any definite

***"We reflect back on that unusual confluence of circumstances...that drew us to Oregon...to a little cottage owned by a little lady who had never been to Texas, but who had hanging above her door a remarkably important piece of Texas Ranger legend."***

plans, but that her original inclination, since she had no heirs, was to bequeath them to Gene Autry's Western Heritage Museum in Los Angeles, which already owned an imposing collection of Jack Hays memorabilia.

I told her that simply didn't feel right, since these were Texas historical items that belonged in Texas. Even Enchanted Rock, I explained, was a famous Texas landmark originally preserved by The Nature Conservancy of Texas and now operated as a state park. Roblay twinkled a bit, smiled, then acknowledged that there was some truth to what I was saying. She asked if there was place in Texas that would provide an appropriate home for Hays' possessions. We then discussed at some length the Texas Ranger Museum in Waco and agreed to discuss it further when I returned to Texas.

The rest, as they say, is history. We contacted Fort Fisher—the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, and I worked with Roblay during the next several weeks to hammer out the details of a potential gift. Roblay also sent to me the definitive written work on Jack Hays (a book written by James Greer, now 94, who still lives in Waco) that actually references this particular oil painting of Hays in 1851 by a San Francisco artist named W.S. Jewett. We were able to work out terms whereby the Ranger Museum would buy the painting and rifle from Roblay for \$50, and she would in turn be allowed to retain possession of them for as long as she lives. The deal was wrapped up and closed in October 1993, and the Texas Ranger Museum is now the official owner of the painting, the rifle, as well as a portrait of Mrs. Jack Hays, and the chair in which she sat for that portrait.

Vera and I have not been back to Oregon, although we think of Roblay often,

exchange cards, and talk to her on the phone every now and then. And occasionally we reflect back on that unusual confluence of circumstances, in some respects almost mystical in sweep, that drew us to Oregon, where we had never been, to a little cottage owned by a little lady who had never been to Texas, but who had hanging above her door a remarkably important piece of Texas Ranger legend.

As for Roblay, she is now 88, feisty, and in reasonably good health. She will not, however, agree to come to Texas, either to see the Ranger Museum or to undertake a general visit. She always begs off, citing the immobility of her "advanced years," although I regrettably detect a hint of that original, indelicate implication that she really does not feel she would be missing all that much.

Despite, however, her never having been to our state, Roblay nevertheless has a keen, instinctive feel for that special kind of pride Texans have in their land and its history, and has remarked on more than one occasion that "Texans have a good record of honoring their heroes." And future generations of Texans who visit Captain Jack Hays at the Texas Ranger Museum in Waco will owe Roblay McMullin a special debt of gratitude for her generosity, to be sure — but more precisely for her innate sense of order and rightness which, at the end of the day, as she set about to tidy up her own affairs, compelled her to simply do what she could to put things in their proper place.

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