



Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum

Excerpt of Project Report by Tom Andrews

Colt Single Action Army owned by Cal Aten

The following article has been adapted from a special project report on key artifacts in the Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. This project report was written in 2018 based on extensive research compiled by project intern Tom Andrews.

M1873 Colt Single Action Army owned by Cal Aten

Provenance

The provenance of this pistol is impeccable. The incident in which Aten and other rangers intercepted and killed the Odle brothers is documented in multiple letters and an official report, and the pistol can be connected to Aten through the handwritten note concealed in the grips as well as his memoir where he identifies the pistol and remarks on its fine finish and engraving.

Cal Aten Biographical Information

A Ranger Family

Calvin Grant “Cal” Aten was born on December 7, 1868 in Abingdon, Illinois. The third of four sons, Cal followed in the footsteps of his older brother, Ira, and became a lawman at the age of 19 when he enlisted with the Texas Frontier Battalion on April 1, 1888. He was assigned to D Company, his brother’s unit.

The Odle Brothers

The first time the Aten and Odle families crossed paths was in 1887 when Ira Aten accompanied Captain Frank Jones on a mission to track down Will and Alvin Odle, wanted horse thieves. The pair tracked them to a ranch house and debated whether to raid the property. Aten cautioned his Captain against such action as they had a telegram informing them that the Odles were armed and dangerous. They decided to go in at dawn, and waited 100 yards away from the house at a spring. At break of day, a young boy came to the spring to fetch water and the rangers held him. They then entered the house, Aten through the back door, Jones through the front. Aten held the just awoken men with his revolver while he let in his Captain through the front door and they arrested the group, which included one Henry Cavius along with the Odle brothers. On April 18th, Aten handed over the three prisoners to the Burnett County Sheriff, John Wolf, who met them at Uvalde.¹

Christmas Eve, 1889

The next and last time the Odles crossed paths with an Aten was on Christmas Eve, 1889. Ranger Privates Cal Aten, John Reynolds Hughes, and Bazzel Lamar Outlaw, along with local sheriff’s deputies lay in wait for Will and Alvin Odle. By this time, the Odles had amassed an impressive number of offenses including burglary, horse theft, and homicide. They were once again at large, wanted for the murder of their brother-in-law John L. Stroope. Sheriff Wheat had made a deal with another fugitive to give up their locations in exchange for leniency. The Odle brothers planned to attend a Christmas party near Vance, also known as Bull Head Mountain. At approximately 8:00 PM, the lawmen heard the sound of approaching horses. What happened next is the subject of debate. There are two versions of the story.

Captain Frank Jones’ letter to Captain Sieker remarked, “I guess you have seen in the papers where some of my men celebrated Xmas day by killing the two Odles in Edwards County. It is a great strain off that county and the good people are rejoicing. John Hughes, Outlaw, and young Aten and some citizens did the work.” In a second letter, Jones added, “I

¹ Bob Alexander, *Rawhide Ranger, Ira Aten: Enforcing Law on the Texas Frontier*, 1st ed, Frances B. Vick & (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 130–31.

have no particulars of the killing of the Odle's except that they drew their pistols when commanded to surrender and the firing began. Hughes, who is in charge of the Edwards County detachment, simply stated that they made a hard fight and they were compelled to kill them."

In his official report, Hughes gave the same story: "Vance, Edwards Co., Dec. 25th 1889. Ten O'clock P.M. With the assistance of Deputy Sheriff Will Terry and a few good citizens, we succeeded in trapping Will and Calvin [*sic*] Odle who are wanted for murder and theft. They resisted arrest and made a hard fight and we had to kill them in self-defense, also killed one horse and shot another through the neck. It took place about 8 o'clock tonight. We will hold an inquest in the morning. Outlaw & C.G. Aten were with me."

Cal differed somewhat from the official story in a letter to his brother, Ira. "There is another happening that comes out of the [Battle of Bull Head Mountain]. I am responsible for [unknown] but you will understand that it pertains to the time when the Odle boys were assassinated. That is all it was just plain legal assassination. However there would have been someone else assassinated if we hadn't got in the first shots." In a later memoir, Cal reflected: "I have held a dying outlaw [Alvin Odle] in my arms. One of the worst ever-known in the Southwest. Took his pistol out of his dying hand. The same pistol I keep under my mattress now. It was a wonderfully beautiful gun then without a blemish on it, beautiful engraving. I was sorry for that boy. Just a few years older than I, and I have often wondered what he would have done had our positions been reversed. Just rode off and left me like a dog, I think, but this would be another story and I intended to tell you of my first scout."

While the legal standing of the shooting may be questionable, there can be no doubt that the Colt Single Action S/N #116626 is the same gun taken by Cal Aten from the dying hand of Alvin Odle.²

Retirement and Private Life

Cal led a short career with the rangers, resigning on August 31, 1890. He served for several years as a constable in Round Rock, where he met his wife, Mattie Jo Kennedy. The couple were married on May 2, 1894 and later moved to the Panhandle where his brother was then the section foreman for the Escarbaras Division of the XIT Ranch and head of their police force. Cal worked for XIT until 1904 when he established his own farm and ranch in Donley County. He died on April 1, 1939 at the age of 71.

History of the Colt Single Action Army

The Colt Single Action Army Revolver was contracted and issued in large quantities by the U.S. Army during the Indian Wars. In addition, it was carried by numerous legendary individuals from the Old West, including lawmen and outlaws alike. It has earned a gamut of nicknames, including "Peacemaker," "Frontier Six-Shooter," "Equalizer," "Hog-leg," and "Thumb-buster."

The original production ran from 1873 through 1940. Standard barrel lengths were 4-3/4," 5-1/2," and 7-1/2." Grip types can be found in oil-stained or varnished walnut or eagle and shield pattern hard rubber. Unadorned hard rubber grips were introduced at approximately serial number 165000. Grips were also available in ivory and pearl. Finishes were typically blued with the frame and hammer casehardened. Nickel plating was also common.

² Alexander, 220–22.

Barrel markings can be found in two variations: "+COLT'S PT. F.A. MFG. Co. HARTFORD, CT. U.S.A.+" for serial numbers up to 24000, and "COLT'S PT. F.A. MTG. Co. HARTFORD, CT. U.S.A." for serial numbers ranging from 24000 to the end of production. Patent date markings can be found on the left side of the frames in several variations. The two line marking of the 1871 and 1872 patent dates (S/N 1-34000), the three line marking of the 1871, 1872, and 1875 dates (34000 – 135000), and the two line marking of 1871, 1872, and 1875 (135000 through end of production). A rampant colt trademark can be found stamped next to the dates.

Serial numbers were stamped on the cylinders up to about serial number 120000. Around 140000, the transverse, spring-loaded catch for the cylinder pin was introduced.³

Information Specific to this Firearm

This Colt Single Action Army Revolver has a note concealed in the grip written by Cal Aten. The note reads: "Taken from hand of Alvin Odle as he lay dying at the East Fork of Bullhead Mt. Edwards Co., TX. Xmas night 1889" The serial number is 116626. It features a 4 ¾" barrel and hard rubber grips. The finish is nickel-plated with engraving throughout. The Colt archives confirm the pistol's configuration, noting that it was shipped with a "soft" finish, indicating that the plating and engraving were added afterwards. It was shipped to Hartley and Graham of New York City in November of 1885.

³ Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Values*, 100–101.