



**Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum**

**Excerpt of Project Report by Tom Andrews**

**The Edwin Wesson Rifle attributed to Jack Hays**

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.

## Edwin Wesson Rifle attributed to Jack Hays

### Provenance

With regards to the assertion that this is the rifle which Jack Hays posed with in the W.S. Jewett portrait and used in the Enchanted Rock fight, there are some conflicting details. First of all, this rifle and the rifle depicted in the painting are not an exact match. The overall appearance is the same, but some small details differ. The silver butt plate is a match, but the shape of the patch box is different. The rifle in the painting also lacks the target sights which are present on the Museum's rifle. Additionally, the rifle in the portrait has a half-stock which our rifle lacks. However, based upon similar rifles recently sold at auction, it seems likely that our rifle did have this feature but that it was separated and lost later. Overall, it seems safe to conclude that this is the rifle in the portrait, but that the artist took liberties in depicting it.

The family legend that the rifle was used by Hays at Enchanted Rock however is decidedly untrue. In addition to the fact that the Enchanted Rock fight likely never occurred (see below), Edwin Wesson did not produce rifles in Hartford until 1847, seven years after the Enchanted Rock fight is supposed to have taken place. Hays must have acquired the rifle at some point between 1847 and 1850, when he sat for the portrait.

In further support of this theory, the title of the painting according to the Lucas Conservation Laboratory Examination Report is "Col. Jack C. Hayes" and not "Jack Hays at Enchanted Rock" as the painting is commonly known. Additionally, there is a reference to an inscription on the reverse of the painting which says "Col. J.K.C. Hayes. The Texan Ranger, Painted from life." If it were the artist's intention for this painting to depict the legendary fight at Enchanted Rock, as the family legend states, it is curious that Jewett did not refer to it in the inscription.

### Jack Hays Biographical Information

#### Early Life and Arrival in Texas

John C. Hays, commonly known as Jack Hays, was born at Little Cedar Lick, Wilson County, Tennessee, on January 28, 1817. Jack's father, Harmon Hays, served with Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 and named his son for General John Coffee, one of Jackson's trusted officers. At an early age, Hays left home and surveyed lands in Mississippi later attending Davidson Academy in Nashville.<sup>1 2</sup>

Hays came to Texas sometime in 1837 or the early months of 1838, at about twenty-one years of age and took up residence in San Antonio. He joined the Texas Rangers and fought against Native American and Mexican raiders under Erasmus (Deaf) Smith and Henry W. Karnes. In February, 1840, a group of San Antonio citizens recommended him to President Lamar as one competent to survey the boundary of Travis County in which Austin, the capital, had just been located.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, Second Edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Harold J. Weiss Jr., "Hays, John Coffee," Texas State History Association, n.d., <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhabq>.

<sup>3</sup> Webb, *The Texas Rangers*, 67.

The first record of his service in Texas was his presence at the Plum Creek fight, shortly after which he received his appointment as captain of a spy regiment from President Lamar, which he held until after the Mexican War. The Texas Congress enacted legislation authorizing three companies of fifteen men each to range the country South of San Antonio and Victoria. Hays' group was active in the Nueces Strip fighting Mexican raiding groups.<sup>4 5</sup>

#### Militia Service

Hay's first expedition as a captain was to Laredo, where his actions were consistent with the boldness that would characterize later accounts of his deeds. He and his men entered the town and intimidated the Mexican soldiers, seized their horses, and withdrew to a camp near the town. On the following day, he returned the horses and told the soldiers he had not intended to keep them, but to let the Mexicans know that the Texans would retaliate for any raiding committed.<sup>6</sup>

On his next expedition in 1841, he set out with twelve men under his command and an additional thirteen serving under Captain Antonio Perez in search of a Mexican raiding party which had been harassing traders on the route from San Antonio to Laredo. Sometime in the night, a rider passed them carrying news of their expedition. As a result, they were met ten miles from Laredo by Captain Garcia with a party of about thirty-five.<sup>7</sup>

The Mexican force rode upon the Texans with an aim to intimidate, sounding bugles and calling for Hays' surrender or else they would be wiped out by superior forces. In the fight that followed the initial Mexican charge, the Texans would dismount, charge the Mexicans, then remount their horses and follow. Eventually, the Mexicans dismounted and made a stand. The Texans charged, drove them out of their position, and captured their mounts. Realizing defeat was at hand, the Mexicans surrendered. Captain Garcia escaped and carried news of his defeat to Laredo. When Hays' party reached the town, the alcalde met them and pleaded for them to spare the town. Hays replied that he only wanted Agaton, leader of the raiding group, and protection for the traders from San Antonio. They then set off for San Antonio with their prisoners.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to his daring exploits, Hays became the de facto chief of frontier protection in the San Antonio area. During the Mexican offensive led by Brigadier-General Rafael Vasquez in March of 1842, Hays' company was the only force on the frontier between the city and the Rio Grande.<sup>9</sup>

In 1843, Hays' company received the new Colt Paterson Revolvers. Between 1839 and 1841, the Republic had purchased one hundred and eighty No. 5 Holster pistols for the navy. The five-shot pistols quintupled the firepower available to an individual ranger. This allowed them to employ the mounted charge when skirmishing with Comanche raiders, a vast improvement over their previous need to dismount and reload their single-shot rifles. They used their new weapons quite effectively at the battle of Walker's Creek in 1844.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Webb, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Darren L. Ivey, *The Texas Rangers: A Registry and History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2010), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Webb, *The Texas Rangers*, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Webb, 70.

<sup>8</sup> Webb, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Ivey, *The Texas Rangers: A Registry and History*, 25–26.

<sup>10</sup> Ivey, 17–28.

It was one of these battles between Hays' men and Native American forces which was later immortalized in the now legendary cylinder scene on the Colt Walker revolvers and later the Colt Dragoon Revolvers.<sup>11</sup>

### Enchanted Rock

It was some time just after his appointment as surveyor in 1840 that the legendary fight at Enchanted Rock is supposed to have taken place. Hays heard tell of the rock and believed it would be an excellent vantage point from which to view the surrounding area. Hays' men did not join him in his climb and as soon as he reached the pinnacle he was observed by a group of Comanches while on top of the Rock. There he hid himself in a depression and held off a number of warriors which varies according to the account, one hundred in conservative retellings and several hundreds in the more fanciful narratives. However many there were, Hays supposedly held them off for between one and four hours until he finally ran out of ammunition. Luckily for our hero, his men heard the sound of his guns and came to the rescue.<sup>12</sup>

One constant in the stories is the shape of Enchanted Rock, which proved crucial to Hays' ability to hold off so many enemies. Wilbarger describes the Rock as the "apex of a high round hill very difficult to climb. In the center of this rock there is a circular hollow sufficiently large to allow a small party of men to lie in it, and its perpendicular sides formed an effective breastwork." In a later account, Sowell delved into further detail. "It was of large, conical shape, with a depression at the apex something like the crater of an extinct volcano. A dozen or more men can lie in this place and make a strong defense against largely superior numbers, as the ascent is steep and rugged." All of the tales agree on the fact that the Rock's topography allowed Hays to easily fire on one target and then turn about and scare others.

The earliest known appearance of this story was in Samuel Reid's account published after the Mexican War. It later appeared in accounts by Wilbarger and Sowell. The only other mention of the fight is found in the manuscript of John Caperton, a tribute to Hayes written after he and Caperton went to California following the Mexican War.<sup>13</sup>

Modern scholarship has called into doubt the events of the Enchanted Rock fight and even the very presumption that it took place. Writing in 1996, Frederick Wilkins found a number of issues with the popular accounts of Hays' stand. Hays' movements in 1841 and 1842 are well documented, and neither the official records nor any newspapers covered the Enchanted Rock fight. In stark contrast to the rocky hill which provided Hays with concealment, Enchanted Rock is a solid granite mass, the second largest such formation in the United States. There are no significant features on top of the hill, and certainly not the natural fortifications described by Sowell, Wilbarger, and others. The hill is not difficult to climb and Hays would have been completely exposed to enemies on all sides. In Wilkins' opinion, it is preposterous that a lone man could hold the top of the Rock. Even a dozen soldiers would be quickly overwhelmed by superior numbers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R.L. Wilson, *The Book of Colt Firearms*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Blue Book Publications Inc., 1993), 79.

<sup>12</sup> James Kimmins Greer, *Colonel Jack Hays: Texas Frontier Leader and California Builder* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1952), 52–53.

<sup>13</sup> Wilkins, Frederick, *The Legend Begins: The Texas Rangers, 1823-1845*, First Edition (Austin, Texas: State House Press, 1996), 201–4.

<sup>14</sup> Wilkins, Frederick, 201–4.

It is also of interest that the Enchanted Rock fight is not mentioned in the manuscript of Colonel John S. Ford, who served as Hays' Adjutant during the Mexican War. Further, Ford details Hays' time as a surveyor, even making reference to the fact that his surveying party were frequently attacked by Native Americans and had to defend themselves on several occasions. It is curious that a man who served under Hays would write on his time as a surveyor without mentioning the most famous story concerning it. This lends greater credence to Wilkins' assertion that the conflict never occurred.<sup>15</sup>

#### The Mexican War

Hays further distinguished himself in the Mexican War. Serving under General Zachary Taylor, Hays' Texas Mounted Riflemen scouted and took part in the attack on Monterrey in 1846. The following year, he formed another regiment which served the function of keeping communication and supply lines open between Veracruz and Mexico City for General Winfield Scott's troops. These activities brought them into conflict with Mexican guerrilla forces near Veracruz, Teotihuacan and Sequalteplan.<sup>16</sup>

#### Life After Texas

Following the Mexican War, Hays pioneered trails through the Southwest to California, and became known as a prominent citizen of the state. In 1850, he was elected sheriff of San Francisco County. Also that year, he sat for the W.S. Jewett portrait now in the Texas Ranger Museum's collection. Several years later in 1853, he was appointed United States surveyor general for California. In addition, he was one of the co-founders of the city of Oakland. John Coffee Hays died on April 21, 1883 at the age of 66 in California. Hays County, Texas was later named in his honor.<sup>17</sup>

#### History of Edwin Wesson Rifles

Edwin Wesson established himself as a gunsmith and rifle maker in 1835, opening his shop in Grafton, Massachusetts. He soon became famous as both an excellent shot and as a maker of very accurate target rifles. In 1842, he moved his shop to Northborough, Massachusetts and took on his brother Daniel, of later Smith & Wesson fame, as an apprentice. In 1847, Wesson moved his shop to Hartford, Connecticut. He died in 1849 of a sudden heart attack, but his heirs and creditors continued to produce rifles under his name for a period of time.<sup>18 19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Colonel John S. Ford, "Colonel John C. Hays in Texas By Colonel John S. Ford of San Antonio, Texas: Late Adjutant of Colonel Hays." (1996), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Weiss Jr., "Hays, John Coffee."

<sup>17</sup> Weiss Jr.

<sup>18</sup> Roy G. Jinks, *History of Smith & Wesson* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1977), 5–7.

<sup>19</sup> P. Friend, "Wesson's Rifles," *Spirit of the Times; A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literatur and the Stage*, September 26, 1849.