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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

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Funded in part by grants from
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

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The Bloomburg, Texas Bank Burglary

by Glenn Elliott &
Robert Nieman

Co-author's note:

From 1949 until 1961, Glenn Elliott served as a Texas Highway Patrolman. From 1961 until his retirement in 1987, he had the distinguished honor to serve as one of Texas' most elite—a Texas Ranger. As a Ranger he was described by Jim

Ray, Chief of the Criminal Law Enforcement Section of the Texas Department of Public Safety, as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, field [Texas] Ranger that has ever lived."

Glenn's good friend, Paul Harvey, dedicated a "page" on his national radio broadcast to Glenn on August 26, 1987, the day of Glenn's retirement. In part Paul Harvey said, "I don't know what you know about the Texas Rangers, but they are an elite corps of lawmen—respected at all levels of law enforcement and revered in their home state. And if you had to pick one to represent the best of the best, that one would be Ranger Glenn Elliott." Perhaps Glenn's last sergeant, David Byrnes, summed it up best: "Glenn was Mr. Ranger."

When Glenn allowed me the honor of assisting him with the writing of his autobiography, Glenn Elliott: A Ranger's Ranger, two things that he was enormously proud of quickly became evident: his work ethic and his fellow lawmen.

Glenn's work ethic was unflagging—hundred-hour weeks were common. In his thirty-eight year career with the Texas Department of Public Safety, Glenn had six captains; each told him that he did not have to work as hard as he did. Perhaps they did not know Glenn as well as they thought they did because Glenn, being the man he is, did have to work that hard.

Glenn took enormous pride in working with other law enforcement people and agencies. This sentiment was reciprocated by his peers, as evidenced in the few (of many) testaments cited above.

When Glenn and I were discussing what to submit for this magazine, I frankly wanted to do another story. I feel that his

greatest single work was solving the Inez Phillips murder by Stanley Faulder; it took Glenn two long, hard years to solve this case. But Glenn was adamant that he wanted the Bloomburg Bank burglary case presented.

Not only was the Bloomburg robbery his first major case after becoming a Ranger, but it also showed clearly how cooperation between different law enforcement agencies can solve a crime that otherwise might go forever unanswered. Sadly we hear in the news today of far too much distrust and jealousy between agencies—agencies whose first priority should be to the citizens they serve. Regretfully, all too often it seems the goal is personal glory, either for the individual or the agency.

Because of Glenn's exemplary work on this case, he received letters of commendation from his captain, Bob Crowder and his colonel, Homer Garrison. Colonel Garrison was a featured speaker at the 1962 National Police Association in Washington, D. C. Glenn's work and report impressed him enough that in his speech he used the Bloomburg Bank burglary as an example of how police departments should work together.

§

Often when I was in Dallas, I visited a roundtable meeting of police officers from the Metroplex[1] area. Over lunch, officers would discuss various crimes and criminals that concerned their areas. The officers were from nearly every branch of law enforcement: Rangers, Highway Patrol, sheriff's departments, numerous local police departments, and federal agencies— including the FBI. The first thing that struck me was the way they shared their information, just the way law officers should. Because of these meetings and the comparing of notes as to what assumed criminals and their known and/or suspected activities were in each officer's area, there is no telling how many criminals ended up in prison.

I realized the advantage of such a meeting in my area and decided to try and create a similar organization in East Texas. I shared my idea with Gregg County Sheriff Noble Crawford and he agreed that we needed to copy the Dallas effort. On April 6, 1970, I wrote a letter— which Noble and I both signed—and sent it to police departments all over the area. I contacted fellow state, local, and federal officers in western Louisiana, southwestern Arkansas, and, of course, East Texas. Thus was born the Ark-La-Tex Peace Officers Meeting. The way I visualized the organization (and the way it turned out) was that it would be an unofficial organization with no president, secretary, or any other officers. We started, and remained, simply a group of peace officers getting together once a month to discuss common problems.

I was amazed at the turnout we had at our first meeting at the Downtown Motor Inn [2] in Longview on April 23. Looking back, I should not have been. I don't care that the news media and movies love to portray the police as being nothing but a bunch of on-the-take, crooked drunks, and just plain no-goods. Maybe there are a few officers like that, but believe me, their numbers are small. If you look, what you will find are thousands-upon-thousands of overworked and underpaid officers out there doing the best they know how every day.

Like any organization, it took a lot of work to keep the Ark-La-Tex Peace Officers Meeting going. Once a month I made sure that I contacted all the

different departments in the area and reminded them of our meeting. By doing this I was able to keep a good attendance until the day I retired. You can easily see the pride I took in our meeting. It was a well-placed pride, and I can truthfully say that many cases that might have gone unsolved were brought to a successful conclusion through the sharing of information with other officers over lunch.

A police officer's first and only reason for existence is to serve and protect the public. And that is done by working together. There is no accomplishment that I achieved during my thirty-eight-year career that I am prouder of than having a reputation of working with my fellow officers—all officers: local, state, and federal.

Even though the case described below happened more than seven years before the birth of the Ark-La-Tex Police Officers Meeting, few cases exemplify police agencies working together better than my first major felony case as a Ranger—the Bloomburg, Texas bank burglary [3] in early 1962. I worked hand-in-hand with Texas and Louisiana sheriff departments, city police departments, a juvenile delinquent officer, a probation officer, and the FBI. This was truly an example of police working together to protect and serve.

Ever since the first bank opened, I suppose someone has tried to rob it. The Bloomburg State Bank offered an enticing target. Many factors made it ideal for thieves and burglars: besides being a small bank with little or no security and in a town that had no local law enforcement, it was also located near the borders of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. These features made it ideal for thieves to make their getaways and try to create confusion over jurisdiction.

At approximately eleven o'clock on a freezing cold Friday night, March 16, 1962, unknown persons broke into the Bloomburg State Bank. Using an acetylene torch they cut the combination out of the bank's vault door, forced out the vault locks by hand, and entered the vault. Inside the vault was a Mosler safe.



We found the knob from the safe on the floor, where the thieves had tried to gain entry. Since the safe was equipped with a time lock, however, the thieves were unsuccessful at opening it. The dial cannot open a time lock until the appointed time has arrived. But these bank burglars were determined and experienced, and they had an answer to a time lock—take the whole safe.

The Mosler safe measured 34 inches by 22 inches and was freestanding. In order to get it outside, the burglars placed several large books on the floor and pushed the safe onto them. Attaching a cable from a winch truck they had stolen in Atlanta, Texas, they pulled the safe out of the west rear door

of the bank and onto the sidewalk. Once outside, they loaded the safe on the bed of the winch truck and calmly drove out of town. Like I said, they were experienced and well prepared.

The books used to move the safe out of the bank.

The burglars got off with \$28,323.50 in cash—both coin and paper—plus an additional \$5,000 in money orders and U. S. Government series "E" bonds.

No matter what era people live in, they always fondly remember "the good old days." Invariably things were better "then," people cared more "then," and they definitely got more involved "then". And the smaller the community, the better things were "back then." Small communities cared much more for their neighbors, and in small communities where everyone knew everybody, they did not hesitate to get involved "back then." Oh, really? In 1962 Bloomburg was, and still is, a small rural community in the northeastern Texas county of Cass. Its population on a busy week was only a few hundred people. During the burglary the thieves made no attempt at secrecy. Several citizens heard the burglars banging away in the bank. One man lived in the bank building directly over the vault and admitted, as did several citizens, that he heard the burglars between the hours of 11:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. Some even acknowledged not only hearing, but also looking out their windows and seeing the winch truck in action. Not one person reported anything to the authorities. So much for how much more people were involved "back then" in the "good old days."



The following morning at 7:30 I received a call from Cass County Sheriff Bill Dowd, asking if I would assist in the investigation. Bloomburg is about seventy-five miles from Longview, so I did not arrive at the crime scene until 8:45. I have investigated countless crime scenes, but I have never seen one filthier. There was tobacco juice all over the floor. But that didn't stop us. Over the weekend, Sheriff Dowd and I investigated not only the bank, but also the immediate area around Bloomburg, asking questions and looking for evidence.

We also broadcast the description of the burglary throughout the country. As professional as this job had been, there was little doubt in our minds that this was not the thieves' first job. By comparing notes with other departments, we could put together a pattern. And once we had a pattern, we could narrow the field as to who we were looking for.

I surveyed the bank employees as to whether any questionable-acting person had been in or around the bank in last few days. The bank manager, E. D.

Simmons, reported that an unknown man, about thirty-five years old and acting very suspiciously, had indeed been in the bank about a week before asking to change a ten-dollar bill. Also, on the previous Wednesday, March 14, an unknown female had inquired about opening a savings account. People living in urban areas may find it strange that bank employees remembered two unknown people being in the bank, but Bloomburg is a typical small, southern town: strangers entering their bank would be noticed.

We discovered that the truck that had been used to hoist the safe, a 1947 three-quarter-ton pickup with a winch, had been stolen the night of the burglary from Atlanta, Texas. We located a site about one mile from the bank where the burglars had unsuccessfully attempted to move the safe from the winch truck to another vehicle. Also, a 1956 Chevrolet pulpwood truck had been stolen in Bloomburg on the night of the burglary, but it had been abandoned where the transfer had been attempted. It had apparently been stolen to obtain its gasoline. A hole had been punched in the bottom of the gas tank.

On Monday, March 19, Sheriff Dowd and I drove from Bloomburg to Hosston, Louisiana, forty miles away. We had contacted all the police departments in the surrounding area and made them aware of the burglary and the methods used. Consequently, when Bossier Parish Deputy Frank Goodman recovered a stolen winch truck about a mile and a half from the Red River bridge between the Louisiana communities of Hosston and Plain Dealing, we were contacted immediately.

We were looking for a 1947 one-half ton Chevrolet. This, however, was a 1946 Dodge, two-and-one-half-ton winch truck, stolen the night before from a Carl Baker in nearby Bradley, Arkansas. Even though this was not the wrecker used in Bloomburg on Friday night, we were sure our thieves had used it. Paint samples taken from the back of the wrecker matched the color of the missing safe.

On Tuesday, March 20, I again traveled to Shreveport to visit Homer Bryant, Chief of the Criminal Division of the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Department. I brought Chief Bryant up-to-date on the case. Listening attentively until I finished, he gave me several names of people who he thought were capable of having pulled the burglary and then known to be in the Shreveport area. One was familiar—Ivey Lee Umphries. Ivey Lee had already been convicted twice in Texas for burglary and was currently free on bond for safe burglary and armed robbery in Louisiana. Reportedly he was living with this girlfriend, also a suspect in the bank burglary. But when shown pictures of Umphries and his girlfriend, the bank's employees were unable to make a positive identification.

On Thursday, March 22, I returned to Shreveport. After gathering information from the Shreveport Police Department concerning Umphries, I went on to Shreveport's sister city, Bossier City, to visit with its police department. They had information that Umphries worked for a sheet metal company in Minden, Louisiana. This company had furnished the money for his bond for the above-mentioned burglary case.

Leaving Bossier City, I met Bossier Parish Deputies Frank Goodman and Roy Bain and Sheriff Bill Dowd at the Highway 2 bridge where it crosses the Red River. Deputies Goodman and Bain had found a spot under the bridge where something had been buried. We believed our missing safe had been temporarily deposited here.





The winch truck used to steal the safe

Checking the area around the bridge, we found tire tracks that matched those of the stolen Bradley winch truck that had been recovered only about a mile and a half away. The deputies had also discovered the footprints of several men and one woman (we could tell by the depth of the heels

imprints that she had worn eight-inch, spiked heels); several pieces of rope; a clipboard with the name of a Minden, Louisiana company written on the top; several pieces of chain; and numerous paint scrapings from several nearby small, low-hanging tree branches.

It was not hard to piece together what had happened. The burglars were running out of darkness and they had to stash their cache until it would be safe to travel with it. After all, it would have been rather obvious that something was amiss if they had been seen driving down the highway with a safe sitting on the back of a wrecker. They had stolen the Bradley wrecker to lift the safe into another vehicle. Finishing with the wrecker, they had driven it a short distance away and abandoned it.

Early morning travelers had seen the wrecker sitting close to the bridge but had thought nothing about it. This region is known as the Big Thicket because of the heavy growth of pine trees. One of the biggest industries is logging; therefore it was common to see logging equipment—and a winch truck is a common logging tool—early in the morning. Loggers are a lot like farmers: it is seldom that the rising sun does not find them in the fields.

We left the river location and went to Minden, Louisiana There we contacted Webster Parish Deputy Buster Atkins and asked for his help in locating the owners of the company, whose name we found on the clipboard. Atkins informed us that two brothers owned the company, but they had moved to Monroe, Louisiana.

Checking further, we learned from Haynesville, Louisiana, Probation Officer Kendrix [4] that the brothers had been on probation but their time had expired. We also found that they were reportedly in deep financial trouble.

In the ensuing weeks we continued to gather information. We learned from the FBI that bank burglaries in Nash, Oklahoma; Lena, Mississippi; and Bernard, Kansas, matched the M. O. of the Bloomburg Bank burglary.

On May 15, the Bloomburg safe was recovered near Cotton Valley, Louisiana, about seventy-five miles from Bloomburg, in the Dorcheat Bayou at a place



called Uncle Ralph's Fishing Camp. The safe had been opened. Unfortunately we were unable to recover any evidence that would help us with the case.

By this time, however, we felt we had sufficient cause to request warrants for Ivey Lee Umphries and the owners of the Minden, Louisiana sheet metal company. We went to Queen City, Texas—you never know when you leave Atlanta and enter Queen City—

and secured arrest warrants for all three from Cass County Justice of the Peace John Hanes.

We sent a message to the owners of the sheet metal company that we had a warrant for them and it would be best if they came in voluntarily. The two brothers contacted us and agreed to meet Sheriff Dowd and me in Longview, and at the appointed time they showed up. We wasted no time and quickly started questioning them. Three hours later both still denied any guilt or knowledge of the burglary. They went so far as to agree to take a polygraph test in Dallas.

On Thursday, March 29, the brothers, Sheriff Dowd, and I traveled to Dallas. Results of the polygraph showed that neither had been present when the safe was stolen, but both did show a strong reaction when Bloomburg was mentioned. Both claimed under further interrogation that they had thought of Bloomington, Illinois, when Bloomburg was mentioned. Maybe so—that is where they were arrested after escaping from the Mississippi state penitentiary where they were being held on a three-year sentence for burglary. After completing the polygraphs, both were returned to Longview, where they had left their car, and were allowed to return to Louisiana.

On Monday, April 2, I received a call from Bossier Parish Juvenile Officer Otis Allen. On Saturday, March 31, Sergeant Daniels of the Shreveport Police Department had brought in for questioning a sixteen-year-old boy who was the son of one of the owners of the sheet metal company in Minden. He had been going to different stores with a black, wooden box filled with almost two hundred dollars in coins, trying to exchange the coins for paper bills. Becoming suspicious, one of the clerks notified the police. All weekend he had been questioned. At first the boy claimed that he had found the money under a bridge. When taken to the bridge, however, police found there had been no evidence of any activity for a long time. As he would do several times, the boy changed his story.

The following day found me again in Louisiana. Happy Ewing, also from the Bossier Parish Juvenile Department, questioned the young man for three hours. All that the boy ever admitted was that he had gotten the money from someone close to him, and that if he talked, he would be in trouble. So he would not talk.

It's funny what you remember about events. The thing I remember most about the questioning was the large plug of tobacco the boy chewed. Just as we began his interrogation the young man put a huge wad of tobacco in his mouth. I have always had little regard for chewing tobacco: if there is a nastier habit, I don't know what it is. Before he put the wad in his mouth I reminded

him that we had no spittoon and he would not be allowed to spit on the floor. Since I never have liked seeing someone spit into a cup, just where did he plan on spitting? In his best "I'm a real he-man" tone of voice, he said, "I don't need anything to spit into, I swallow."

So we let him chew—and swallow. Three hours later he was greener than fresh spring grass. Looking at me with the sickest eyes you have ever seen, he mumbled in a feeble little voice, "I'm sick. I gotta go to the bathroom." Considering the amount of tobacco juice in his stomach, I was amazed he had survived as long as he did. I have to give it to the boy: he was tough—he never did own up to where he got the money.

I left Louisiana and returned to Marshall, Texas, to question Ivie Lee Umphries. Since the burglary, he had dropped out of sight and we had been unable to locate him. But it turned out we did not have to; he dropped himself right into our laps. He had been in Henderson, Texas, shacked up with some ole gal who was not his girlfriend. But enough fun is enough. He figured he better get his girlfriend's car back to her before she caught him with another woman. Leaving Henderson in a drunken stupor, he got nearly to Marshall before running off the road. Investigating the accident, the Harrison County sheriff's department arrested him for DWI, carrying a pistol, and operating a motor vehicle without a license.

Under questioning, he not surprisingly denied any knowledge of the Bloomburg burglary. He also refused to take a polygraph test. I was confident we had the right man, and I knew that he was not going anywhere; too many people wanted the pleasure of his company. Cass County, Texas, wanted him, as did Caddo Parish, Louisiana. Ivie Lee must have felt he was playing against a stacked deck; even his bondsman had filed to be relieved of his obligation on Ivie Lee's bond.

We were confident we had our man, but we just could not find the undeniable piece of evidence that would put him away. We could not charge him, and he eventually found another bondsman and hit the street again. But ole Ivie Lee just could not stay straight.

On December 7, 1962, Sheriff Dowd, Texas Ranger Red Arnold from Mount Pleasant, FBI agent Sam Cotton, and I drove to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to pick up Ivie Lee. At the time of the burglary we had broadcast the serial numbers of the money orders throughout the region. In Hot Springs, Ivie Lee had passed one of the stolen hundred dollar Republic Express money orders renting a room at Dan's Courts. Before he could get very comfortable, the Hot Springs Police had him in custody. When arrested, he also had on his person seven additional one-hundred-dollar and two fifty-dollar Republic Express money orders—all from Bloomburg.

This case is a classic example of departments working together for the citizens: Texas Rangers, county and parish sheriff's offices, the FBI, local police departments, probation department, and even the juvenile department all pulled together to get the case solved.

Postscript: I have always enjoyed visiting with senior citizens in nursing homes. A few years ago I was visiting a local nursing home in Longview when I saw a familiar name on one of the doors—Ivie Lee Umphries. I stopped in to say hello. I'm afraid Ivie Lee was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He no longer knew anything or anybody. He died shortly thereafter.



Glenn Elliott was born in Texas on August 1, 1926, on a small farm in Fannin County. Glenn began his life as a law officer during World War II. He entered the Army in 1944, where he served in the Philippine Islands as an MP. After the war, Glenn began a distinguished thirty-eight-year career with the Texas Department of Public Safety. Glenn served as a Highway Patrolman stationed in Longview until October 8, 1961, when he became a Texas Ranger stationed in the Longview-Marshall area.

During his illustrious career, Glenn has shaken the hand of every president from Harry Truman through George Bush. Governors, senators, representatives, nationally known celebrities, fellow law officers, and citizens are proud to call Glenn their friend.

On August 31, 1987, Glenn retired. On a ranch east of Marshall, Texas, his retirement party attended by over four hundred. He now spends his time tending his farm at the home place in Windom, promoting his autobiography, *A Ranger's Ranger*, giving speeches, and meeting with friends.

Glenn is married to the former Catherine Cooper. They have two children, Diane and Dennis.

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