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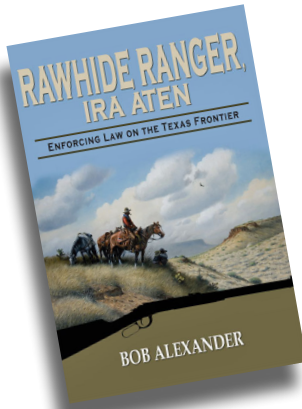
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Chapter 6

**“If you pull it, Jack,
I’ll kill you”**

Bob (James R.) Alexander

In accordance with orders from Austin headquarters, Company D’s main camp was shifted from San Ambrosia Creek back to Uvalde County. It would seem Lam Sieker, too, could see the rationale in repositioning Company D Rangers due to hardened feelings. He notified AG King in writing: “All I could do at my present camp [San Ambrosia] would be in a negative way.” Sieker’s “negative way” was but gobbledygook: Rangers would brutally settle the score, he feared.

Certainly the captain’s assessment may have been on target. Remembering that little law enforcement axiom, “you might beat the rap, but you can’t beat the ride,” the unforgiving Texas Rangers of Company D acted. On August 1, 1885, in Laredo for court, Sergeant Ben Lindsey and “3 men” arrested Pendencia and Tomas Herrera, “charged in Dimmit Co. with resisting officers.” The tables, in these Texas Rangers’ minds, had been turned back upright. The entry in Company D’s Monthly Return for August is curt: “Delivered them to Shff , Webb Co.,” who would himself soon be ousted from political office. Whether or not Private Ira Aten was one of those “3 men” is indistinct. He was, however, later in the month particularly identified as conveying prisoner Tobe Edwards, charged with theft of a horse to the sheriff of Uvalde County, Henry W. Baylor.

Captain Sieker was also conveying someone—himself. As early as March, upon learning that the Frontier Battalion’s Quartermaster, Captain John O. Johnson, was about to accept the lucrative job as postmaster for the city of Austin, Lam Sieker had been vying to backfill. His career aspira-



tions were honorable and aboveboard—not hush-hush. The Frontier Battalion realignments took place during October. Under a date of the 12th, General Order No. 85 made it official: Captain Lam Sieker was promoted to battalion quartermaster. Leaving Lieutenant Frank Jones in command of Company D and caring for his prized horse, Captain Sieker reported for duty at Austin. Although its impact on Ira Aten's life has been overlooked or underplayed, Captain Sieker's promotion will factor drastically and dramatically in resetting the young Ranger's law enforcing compass.

For October 1885, Private Aten was a whirlwind of activity. He and another Ranger made a trip into Edwards County, arresting T. M. Wilmore, wanted in Nolan County (Sweetwater) for assault with intent to murder, covering 160 miles in five days. The prisoner did not take well to confinement in the Uvalde County Jail, so he escaped. Private Aten was put back on his trail. After a grueling trip, Ira finally ran Wilmore to ground on the Burriss Ranch in Edwards County and jugged him again. The following week, Ira was hunting in Tom Green County (San Angelo) for stolen cattle, which were reportedly being driven for a clandestine export into Mexico. On the Texas side of the Rio Grande, Privates Ira Aten and W. W. Collier recaptured the stolen beeves in Dimmit County. Realizing they were being pursued by two Rangers, the thieves had abandoned the cattle, racing for asylum at the river. Privates Aten and Collier came in second place, but recovering the cattle was a pretty nifty prize. The owner thought so, anyway.

Though coming to a close, the tail end of 1885 was anything but quiet for Private Ira Aten. During December on separate scouts, he covered more than 500 horseback miles and was away from Camp Leona, which had been reactivated, more than two-thirds of the month. Perhaps his most significant success during these scouts, aside from serving as a deterrent to some would-be cow thieves, was his once again recovering a herd of stolen cattle in Dimmit County. Private Aten aggressively attacking his workday assignment was not going unnoticed either in the field or at battalion headquarters.

One of the most spellbinding chapters in the saga of Ira Aten's law enforcing days unravels during the front half of 1886. It seems that two of John Braeutigam's supposed killers, Jack Beam and Wesley Collier, had been rounded up the year before after their break from the Bexar County Jail, and due to close proximity, had been locked away in Mason County's jail—for a little while. There was a second jailbreak, and the bad boys were on the run again. During September 1885, Private Aten and two men had scouted in Kerr and Bandera Counties but "failed to learn anything of their whereabouts." For several months, it seemed as if fugitives Collier and Beam had fallen off the face of the earth. Out of sight does not necessarily equate with out of mind, not for the Texas Rangers, and in this specific case, the governor too. After Father Time ushered in a new year, news about possible sightings of the wayward fellows picked up. The hunt intensified. Private Aten made one scout trying to locate them, but as far as suspects Collier and Beam were involved, Ira met with no success. However, he could report that while looking for them, he had bumped into Adrian Wilson, wanted for theft, and arrested him on January 23, 1886.

Not content to stand idle, Private Aten, teaming up with Sheriff Ira Wheat from Edwards County, started looking for Collier and Beam once more on January 24. After a four-day search "on the Devil's River in Kimble County [Junction]," that scout was terminated and Sheriff Wheat returned to his home base. Ira Aten remained in the field, this time hunting for John Odle, who was charged with murder in Burnet County. Ira alone followed Odle's trail deep into the Devil's River country of Crockett County. After the trail played out, he returned to Camp Leona via Brackettville, Kinney County. On this one scout, he was out twenty-two days, covering some 600 miles.



With a quick turnaround on February 17, 1885, Ranger Aten sashayed over to the Hill Ranch and arrested William Redman for purportedly stealing a horse. Again, Private Ira Aten's persistence did not go unseen.

Particularly friendly to the German enclave in Texas's Hill Country, according to Aten, Governor John Ireland had a mulish plan. The thought that Wes Collier and Jack Beam were time and again outfoxing the Blind Mistress of Justice was wearing thin. There's little doubt the governor had turned to Captain Sieker, validating his scheme and double-checking his personnel selection. Ira Aten had caught his eye. On March 6, Private Ira Aten was summoned to Austin on the shadowy pretext of delivering Captain Sieker's horse. Singling out Ranger Aten for an important special assignment is clear indication Ira was maturing as a lawman, earning respect from his bosses. Ira had been continually exhibiting the fact he was tenacious. As a man of but twenty-two years, he had satisfactorily reacted under real pressure, galloping hard to join with suspected enemies with Winchester in hand and exchanging scorching gunfire. The good governor had a message for his budding Texas Ranger superstar: arrest Braeutigam's murderers using all means at his disposal, overtly or covertly. Time was of no import, and Ira was to stay after them with the perseverance of a bloodhound or tiger if they wanted a fight.

On detached service, Ira Aten began making an investigation into the whereabouts of fugitive Jack Beam. Ira laid on the pressure, scouting openly and aggressively throughout Williamson, Blanco, Burnet, and Travis Counties. Figuring smartly that the outlaw would be fashioning plans to skip to parts unknown but would probably seek a farewell visit with his sister, Ira made his move, too. Beam's brother-in-law's place on Perdenales Creek (Travis County) was placed under surveillance. Pressing into service the two Thruman brothers as citizen possemen, the stakeout kicked off. On the second day, from their lair on a brushy hill with the aid of binoculars, the manhunters espied a lone rider coming in. He was riding a "good" horse and had tied behind the saddle a colorful blanket and an oilcloth slicker, indicators to Ira that the man was traveling, "coming to bid his sister good-bye." When the rider arrived at the homeplace, he didn't put the horse in the nearby barn but left it saddled and fed it grain from a box nailed to a tree. Ira's interpretation was straightforward and reasonable: the rider was ensuring a fast getaway if need be. Darkness soon enveloped the little ranch, and Ira Aten and his helpers moved closer. The Thruman boys actually found a secluded spot inside the barn. Texas Ranger Aten opted to remain outside, explaining, "I took a position between the horse and the tree, squatting down almost under his neck." Around nine o'clock that night, the cabin's door opened. Ira could hear the melodic tune of jingling spur rowels as the mysterious form eased toward the saddled horse. When almost eye-to-eye, Ranger Aten jumped up and popped into action, sticking his six-shooter right into Beam's belly. He ordered, "Hands up, Jack." Throwing down saddlebags he had been carrying, Jack went for his Colt's revolver. Ira finishes the story:

I was so close to him that I threw my left hand over on his right wrist and pushed down upon it as hard as I could to keep him from pulling his six-shooter, at the same time saying 'If you pull it, Jack, I'll kill you. I'll kill you if you pull it.'

Thankfully for Ira, once they deciphered what was happening, the Thruman boys rushed from the barn and helped physically subdue Jack Beam. After placing him in handcuffs, they passed the night where they had wrestled him to the ground—35 miles from Fredericksburg. At the county seat the next day, March 24, 1886, Texas Ranger Aten extracted a promise that folks would not "mob" Jack Beam, and then he turned the luckless prisoner over to local authorities.



Two fellows had learned something that day. Texas Ranger Aten confirmed from Beam that another of the suspects in Braeutigam's demise was indeed Jim Fannin, a man never to be heard from again. Wesley Collier, who was supposed to meet Beam that night for a trip out of Texas, knew it was time to make long tracks before he too landed in the calaboose. Ranger Aten reported success of Jack Beam's capture to Governor Ireland, knowing Wes Collier would show up sooner or later, here or there. For a manhunter, patience is indeed a golden virtue. Now pleased as punch that he might not lose the German vote and that justice was at long last being served, an elated governor noted Ira's actual tenacity. Lam Sieker had been spot-on right: Aten was a "good Ranger." A damn good Ranger!

Good Ranger that he was, yet knowing his work was but half done, Ira Aten still managed time to scoop up suspected horse thief C. C. Morrison on March 25, 1886, turning him over to Travis County Sheriff Malcolm M. Homsby. Private Aten may or may not have put the San Ambrosia shooting affair and the capture of Jack Beam behind him, but loose ends were hanging, and Governor Ireland was not a forgetful chief executive. Private Ira Aten maintained the hunt for Wes Collier.

In Travis County, during afternoon hours of April 29, 1886, the young Texas Ranger thought he had inadvertently struck pay dirt. Working informants and sporadic scraps of criminal intelligence, Ira Aten found himself sitting on the front porch at George Wells' rancho on Long Hollow, about ten miles southeast of Liberty Hill. Ira had unsaddled his horse and put it in Wells' barn. The two were pleasantly killing time before supper, talking about items of general importance and the possible whereabouts of Wes Collier in particular. Suddenly, George Wells looked up, peered into the distance, and exclaimed, "I believe that's your man!" Ira Aten reacted instantly and "threw my field glasses on him and saw that he had on a vest with a large red bandanna around his neck and his right hand in it, as if in a sling. He was riding a big sorrel horse."

Telling George to sit real tight, Ira quickly slid into the house, trying to maintain clear sight yet hoping to remain unobserved. As the rider drew closer, Ira realized his good fortune: It was Wes. Private Aten checked the loads in his Colts, as his Winchester was not handy, still in the saddle scabbard in the barn with his other gear. Fugitive Collier drew yet closer, suspiciously eyeing his surroundings with coyote caution. There was not a clue George had company. When he reined up in front of the porch, Wes Collier inquired of Mr. Wells the location of the Glasscock Ranch. George raised his hand to gesture directions, and Ranger Ira Aten thought that was about the only distraction he would get. From an open doorway, the Texas Ranger hollered, "Hands up, Wesley Collier!" at the same time "throwing my six-shooter on him." As modern-era lawmen might say, at that point it turned "western."

Wes Collier's bandanna, the supposed sling, was but a blind. With the quickness of a diamondback's strike, the outlaw's hand was unsheathed and his six-shooter fanged poison in Ira's direction. A bullet struck the doorstep between Ira's boots. Ira can tell it best:

He was a little excited, I guess, or he would have shot me right in the belly as he was a better shot than I. We almost shot together. I hit his hand hitting the middle finger and his six-shooter, which went a "whirling" in the air, and he spurred his horse and started running downhill toward the creek below the house. I jumped out the door and thought to myself, "I'll just break your back." I took my six-shooter in both hands and shot. Just before I shot he had to go under a live oak which forced him to dodge down under a limb, and I hit the limb center. I would have broken his back otherwise.



Racing on foot toward the big live oak, Mr. Wells and Private Aten right fast found Collier's sweat-stained headgear underneath the tree. Respectfully but somewhat mockingly and in good fun, George chided Ira, "Oh, you've killed him. Here's his hat with his brains in it." The pair looked around for awhile, hoping to find more clues, but darkness soon put the kibosh on further police work that night.

The next morning, George Wells regretfully told Private Ira Aten that he had pressing business elsewhere (and there is no reason to doubt it) that would prevent his participating in that day's hunt for Wes Collier. Aten was advised he might secure help, if he felt he needed it, at the Hughes' Ranch over near Liberty Hill. By then, Private Aten had rightly learned that for a gunfight, an assistant or two was not at all ill advised and, besides, having a favorable witness might just prove an invaluable asset in front of a judge and/or jury. Aten struck out for Liberty Hill.

There he met thirty-one-year-old John Reynolds Hughes. The two hit it off admirably, and both could trace roots to a birthplace in Illinois. John Hughes unhesitatingly agreed to join in the search. Saddling up, he joined Ranger Aten, and the duo mapped a course for the nearest doctor, some thirty-five miles away on the Colorado River. Ira was stuck to the notion that he had shot Collier at least once, maybe twice. The frightened physician at first denied any treatment of outlaw Wes Collier. Finally, after an interval of aggressive but not physical intimidation, he owned up to providing medical services. Aten and Hughes poked around in the country for a day or two but soon realized Collier had flown the coop, and they returned to the Hughes brothers' ranch. On May 3, 1886, Ira Aten sat down at a desk, table, or board laid across his lap, and in longhand posted the adjutant general with the latest development so he could pass it along to the governor:

On April the 29th I met up with my man Wesley Collier who is wanted in Gillespie County for murder. As soon as he recognized me he drew his six shooter, & I mine. Shooting then commenced on both sides, but I got in the second shot first & hit him in the right hand then he dropped his pistol & run. He was on a fine horse & I was a foot at that time. I tried my best to kill him but it seems I failed to do so. I think I hit twice, once in the hand & a slight wound about the head. I got his hat, six shooter & pocket knife. I have looked the country over & cannot find him. Think he has hid in the mountains some place. Will look for him a few more days. Then report to you officially, say about the 7th [or] 8th. Will give full particulars then. Excuse haste. [Signed Ira Aten]

Private Ira Aten was not fooling about sitting down with bigwigs in Austin for an official confab. The meeting took place, confirmed by his own voice and in an addendum to Company D's Monthly Return. At the state capital, with arrangements made by Adjutant General King and in the presence of Captain Sieker, no doubt, Private Ira Aten gained another personal audience with the good Governor John Ireland. Deservedly, Ira was congratulated in person for successfully and safely rounding up Jack Beam and giving him up to local folks. He could now have a fair trial—of sorts. The governor's striking message about the Wes Collier manhunt was somewhat surprising to Ira Aten in that a politico would not better cover his fanny, but the words were easily understood and blunt. The governor said, "Catch him or kill him." Ira would do just that before the month was out.

Why Wes Collier had not quickly left the Lone Star State for parts unknown, changed his name, and nondescriptly blended in with hundreds, maybe thousands, of other yahoos dodging the law in America's Wild West defies coherent explanation. Murder charges would hold forever. Were not gunshot wounds and being hounded like a wolf enough? There was indeed a common



denominator linking the outlaw to the Texas Ranger. Both guys were pigheaded. Wes would not skip, and Ira would not quit: precursors, then, for a showdown.

On or about May 22, news broke Ira's way. Roughly six miles east from Liberty Hill was the Nicholas Dayton household. Although Wes Collier was married, according to Ira, he was sparking the Dayton's young daughter. On the quiet, Ira Aten contacted his civilian helper John Hughes. After securing supplies to sustain them a few days, the pair initiated a stakeout of the Dayton premises. It was a twenty-four-and-seven setup. Ira and John traded off, one sleeping and the other watching. Late in the evening between sundown and dark on the third day, May 25, 1886, Ira could just barely make out the color of an approaching man's horse. It was a sorrel—it was Wes. The hormone-charged outlaw was going to make his gamble, throw the dice, and see the Dayton girl. He had not been with her for some time.

Putting his horse in the barn, Wes Collier went into the house. Aten and Hughes, their horses tied in a distant thicket, began easing forward under the cover of darkness, and dogs began barking. Aten whispered to Hughes, "John, we have got to get to that horse. He suspected something and will leave right now." Actually throwing caution to the wind, Aten and Hughes hotfooted to the barn, knowing if they allowed their quarry to regain his saddle, they would be utterly helpless because their horses were secreted too far away. As long as Collier's boots were on the ground, it could break even. Somehow, the canine yipping didn't put Wes on the alert—he had something else on his mind. The Ranger and his older apprentice passed the night, waiting to make their move at dawn.

At first light, a young boy came to the barn, fed the horses, and returned to the house. Ira Aten and John Hughes had remained nearby, undetected. Shortly thereafter, the Dayton's daughter came outside and headed for the barn, presumably to gather a few eggs for breakfast. Ira Aten was flabbergasted, thinking "she was the prettiest girl I ever saw." After a few minutes, she returned to the house, entering through the back door. She had not noted the lawmen's presence either. Ira explains what followed:

I said, John, you go to the front door and I'll go to the back door. You will likely find the front door locked, but the back door will be unlocked and I can get in. As I went into the kitchen, the girl was preparing breakfast and did not see me. I passed tiptoe towards a door leading out of the kitchen. I saw her skirts turn from the corner of my eye, but I did not dare look as I was already opening the next door with my six-shooter in my hand. Mr. and Mrs. Dayton were in that room. Sound asleep. I did not stop, but went right on through to the next room, as I knew Collier would be in the next room. As I opened the door, he was sitting on the edge of the bed with one boot on holding the other up in front of him. With his foot starting into it, in the act of pulling it on. He was facing the door that I opened [and] as soon as I touched the knob he was alert, and as I could barely peer through I saw him quickly turn his head slightly and listen and look. I started to say: "Hold Up, Wesley Collier." I never had time to finish. He fell back across the bed towards his pillows as soon as he saw me and jerked his six-shooter with both hands, and as he was bringing it up from the pillows over to line it up on me, I shot him through the heart. He dropped his gun, fell over on his back upon the bed, and mumbled something. He was quick as a flash and in another instant would have killed me.

Hearing the gunfire, John R. Hughes, six-shooter in hand, kicked in the front door, rushing to backup Ira. Not finding him in the front room, Hughes burst into the second bedroom, frightening Private Aten badly. For a split second, Ira thought he would be mistakenly gunned down by Mr.



John, a lamentable case of friendly fire. Hughes, quickly grasping reality, cautiously lowered the hammer on his Colts. Leaving John Hughes with the dead body of Collier, Ira Aten retrieved his horse and rode west to Liberty Hill, where he telegraphed Williamson County Sheriff John Taylor Olive and Adjutant General King at Austin.

Within but a short spate of time—three hours—Sheriff Olive and Deputy (Constable) J. F. Hoyle were on the scene, accompanied by Sam Connell, justice of the peace, who was dutifully charged with overseeing an inquest. The editor of the *Liberty Hill Ledger* was along also, as was a gathering crowd of gawkers. Doctor Thorpe conducted a medical examination, suggesting that an autopsy would only satisfy curiosity, not materially add to scientific results of the death investigation. Wes Collier was dead, a lead bullet somewhere near the heart. Case closed.

The public's general feeling that Wesley Collier was indeed a desperado was cemented upon examining his armament:

Under his vest, on each side, was concealed a pistol and another was found in an inside pocket. The pistols on his sides were arranged in a very ingenious manner, being connected together by a strap which passed over his shoulders, terminating at each end in a scabbard, and in each of these scabbards was a six-shooter, one of them being a Smith & Wesson, .45 caliber; the other a Colt's of the same caliber. The smaller pistol which was found in his pocket was an Invincible, .38 caliber. The whole of them were loaded all around and in prime condition.

Who were not in prime condition were the Daytons. According to their version, they had simply been hoodwinked. Ira relates their story:

The report of the pistol was the first intimation the horrified family had that they were harboring a murderer and a refugee from justice. Their surprise and consternation, when they became apprised of the facts can better be imagined than described. Collier had been stopping there for a week, claiming that his name was Martin.

At the scene of the shooting, a blanket of legal formalities began smothering Private Ira Aten's reassured demeanor. Wes Collier had gone down rather than him—that was the good news. But, would he himself have to withstand any criminal charges? Turning to Sheriff Olive, Private Aten questioned, "Will you have to arrest me?" Almost indignantly, the sheriff replied no, he would not. He was happy that Wes Collier had been taken off, and so would be the folks of Williamson County. Mistakenly thinking Fifth Amendment protections of the United State's Constitution regarding double jeopardy extended to a grand jury's work, Ira Aten believed that if he were but no-billed, the matter could never ever be revisited. "I wanted them to indict me and get the matter over so an indictment could not be trumped against me later on. They let me tell my story but would not indict me."

One who did like the story was Adjutant General King. In a complimentary letter to A. L. Patton, Esq., Fredericksburg, King praised the Ranger's taking off of Wes Collier:

Wesley Collier was killed by Aten, at a great expense both to the State & himself and at great risk, for which he certainly deserves a part of the reward offered. Aten is a good & courageous officer, & the killing of Collier has saved infinite trouble to the citizens & authorities of your county.

Institutionally the Texas Rangers may have been dodging a few barbs hurled by Senator Hall. Certain Rangers, it is true, were also running into career-changing snags in South Texas. The harsh



criticism and abrasive commentary wasn't affecting Private Aten, not in the Texas Hill Country. He was a hero. One has but to look at the aforementioned *Liberty Hill Ledger* eulogizing the Ranger for embargoing the bad doings of Wes Collier:

Aten has been tracking him with the sagacity and tenacity of a bloodhound for a long, long time....we feel that the people are under obligations to him for ridding the country of a desperate character and thereby aiding in the triumph of truth and justice and the downfall of heinous crimes and atrocious murders.

Private Ira Aten's immediate supervisor, Frank Jones, who had attained captaincy of Company D following Lam Sieker's promotion to Frontier Battalion quartermaster, within days added his two cents worth to the adulation being hastily piled on the private, saying, "Aten is deserving of both credit and reward for his work after those murderers."

Post the crime scene clean up, Private Aten reported to Austin, updating A. G. King and Captain Sieker. If he met with Governor Ireland again, it has escaped historical notice. Someone that did not manage a getaway was John Glasscock. Although the exactness of what actually happened is murky, while Private Aten was in Travis County he arrested the fellow for resisting arrest and locked him in the county jail. Presumably, this is one of the same Glasscock family that Wesley Collier was trying to contact when he had made inquiry about directions at George Wells' rancho before spinning his horse in a one-eighty after tasting the hellfire of Ira's Colt's six-shooter.

With instructions from headquarters to keep pressing the hunt for Jim Fannin, the fourth man sought in the Braeutigam murder investigation, Private Aten returned to duty. His work had been stellar regarding the capture of Jack Beam and the gunfight with Wes Collier, bolstering his reputation as a manhunter. However, neither Ira Aten nor anyone else was ever able to locate the elusive murder suspect Jim Fannin. That he fled Texas is not unlikely. That Fannin was but an alias is also feasible. The case against Ede (sometimes written "Ed") Janes would eventually be dismissed. As for Jack Beam, that was a different story, but it would play out shortly.

Resting on his laurels was not in Private Ira Aten's operational game plan. During July 1886, he was on peacekeeping duty at Del Rio, Val Verde County. After receiving a report from Guadalupe County (Seguin) Sheriff Hugh McGuffin that Appleton Thomas had misappropriated seven oxen, Ira located the wanted man along the Texas-Mexican border. The arrest was quick and uneventful. Ira Aten placed accused thief Thomas in Sheriff W. H. Jones' county lockup at Del Rio. Seemingly with the vigor of a tornado, Private Aten spun them into the jailhouse. He was dispatched downriver to Eagle Pass to maintain order. There Aten quickly rounded up Susanna Rodriguez for stealing a horse in La Salle County and Pablo Rameriz for a horse theft taking place in Maverick County. Aten then scooted over to Zavala County and arrested Wash Poteet and Ab Love, charging them with illegally smuggling stolen horses and mules into the United States. These prisoners he turned over to Customs House authorities at Eagle Pass. Aside from the successes, Aten came up short hunting fugitive Bob Finn, who was charged with theft in Gillespie County. Also, even though he racked up 120 miles and spent three days in the effort, he could not locate Bill Ware, wanted for a murder in Reeves County (Pecos).

The month rolled over on Ira Aten still in the field hunting for a fellow named Allen, who was wanted in Edwards County for resisting an officer. As soon as he returned from this 200-mile scout empty-handed, Private Ira Aten had new orders waiting for him: without delay, report to Austin and see AG King, who had special assignments for the ever industrious Mr. Aten. One of those delicate jobs was to covertly contact City Marshal N. O. Reynolds in Lampasas County, who was in desperate want of a new face to "ferret out" some very specific "perpetrators."