

Silver Stars and Sixguns: the Texas Rangers

[image: picture of five men sitting with guns]

[image: picture of a group of men outside]

War With Mexico

In 1846, within a year of Texas' admission as the 28th state of the Union, the United States and Mexico were at war. Walker joined one of the several Ranger companies that were mustered into federal service to function as scouts. The Rangers fought with such ferocity in the war they came to be called "Los Diablos Tejanos" – the Texas Devils. The luck Walker had after Mier did not hold. He was killed in the fighting. For the next decade after the Mexican War, the Rangers existed primarily as volunteer companies, raised when the need arose and disbanded when their work was done.

"Rip" Ford

One of the best known Rangers of this period was John S. "Rip" Ford, whose nickname stood for "Rest in Peace." Ford – medical doctor, newspaper editor, and politician – lived up to his nickname in 1859, when Juan Nepomuceno Cortina took over the border city of Brownsville. The bandit had in mind retaking, in the name of Mexico, all of Texas below the Nueces River. The Texas government saw it differently, and dispatched Ford and a company of Rangers to mitigate the matter. Cortina was defeated in a running fight that cost the lives of 151 of his men and 80 to 90 Texas citizens, including some Rangers. In his memoirs, Ford later described the kind of men who served under him as Rangers: "A large portion ... were unmarried. A few of them drank intoxicating liquors. Still, it was a company of sober and brave men. They knew their duty and they did it. While in a town they made no braggadocio demonstration. They did not gallop through the streets, shoot, and yell. They had a specie of moral discipline which developed moral courage. They did right because it was right." Still, the bloody fighting stirred passion in South Texas that were a long time in cooling.

Civil War

During the Civil War, with thousands of Texans off fighting with the Confederate Army, frontier protection was afforded by a "Regiment of Rangers." Even it eventually became part of the Confederate Army. The backbone of home front security was still the volunteer "ranging" company, whose members operated on the "legal authority" of the pistols they carried on their hips or the rifle swinging in their saddle boot. After the war, the Legislature passed a bill creating three companies of Texas Rangers, but a bill to provide funding failed. Financial support for state law enforcement in the early 1870s was sporadic. For all practical purposes, there were no Texas Rangers for nearly a decade after the war. During this time, law enforcement was handled by a highly political and roundly hated organization known as the State Police. Texas, like other Southern states, was in the throes of reconstruction and any authority, civil or military, was distrusted. The force eventually was disbanded. Unfortunately, the problems that had made some kind of statewide police force necessary in the first place had not disappeared along with the State Police. But Texas was changing. The military, led by

war-seasoned veterans of the Union Army, was methodically ridding Texas of its Indian problem.

The Frontier Battalion

By the second half of the decade, the biggest threat to Texas was lawless Texans. In 1874, the Legislature created two Ranger forces to cope with the situation – the Frontier Battalion, led by Major John B. Jones and an organization called the Special Force under Capt. Leander McNelly. In five years time, the Rangers were involved in some of the most celebrated cases in the history of the Old West. Much of the fact that would later be mixed with Ranger legend occurred during this turbulent period. Texas' deadliest outlaw, John Wesley Hardin, a preacher's son reputed to have killed 31 men, was captured in Florida by Ranger John B. Armstrong. After Armstrong, his long-barreled Colt .45 in hand, boarded the train Hardin and four companions were on, the outlaw shouted: "Texas, by God!" and drew his own pistol. When it was over, one of Hardin's friends was dead, Hardin had been knocked out cold, and his three surviving friends were staring at Armstrong's pistol. A neat round hole pierced Armstrong's hat, but he was uninjured. Hardin served a lengthy prison sentence, only to die in a shootout in El Paso in 1896 shortly after his release.

Sam Bass

Another well-known Texas outlaw who had run-in with Texas Rangers did not make it to prison. Train robber Sam Bass, who had been in Texas since 1870, was confronted by four Rangers in Round Rock in the summer of 1878. In the shoot-out that followed, one of Bass' gang was killed outright. Bass was gravely wounded, but managed to escape. He was found, taken back into town, and later died. One account has the 27-year-old outlaw saying, "Life is but a bubble, trouble wherever you go" shortly before he died. Bass may or may not have described life as a bubble, but the Texas Rangers certainly found plenty of trouble wherever they went. Rangers contended with local disturbances that amounted to miniature wars, bloody feuds, lynch mobs, cattle thieves, barbed wire fence cutters, killers and other badmen. The Rangers usually prevailed. As the turn of the century approached, the reptua- [rest of article is missing]

[image picture at bottom of page, which is the same as the first image in the article; Caption says: "A large proportion...were unmarried. A few of them drank intoxicating liquors. Still, it was a company of sober and brave men. They knew their duty and they did it."]