

The Texas Rangers

Bettmann/Contributor



The iconic Texas Rangers vividly illustrate the power of a state's legends both inside and beyond its own borders. The Texas Rangers have become a defining symbol of law enforcement, originally galloping through serials such as *The Lone Ranger*. They were featured in early radio and television programs and in the movies, where they were played by Western stars such as Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Tex Ritter. Long after the early Western stars rode off into the sunset, the Texas Rangers have continued to capture the imagination of viewers across the country on shows such as *Walker, Texas Ranger* and in movies such as *Man of the House*, starring Chuck Norris and Tommy Lee Jones.

The Rangers can trace their origins back to Stephen F. Austin, who first referred to the citizens asked to protect his settlements as “rangers” because they had to range over the countryside. The Rangers became an official extension of the temporary government of Texas in 1835 when they were called upon to protect the frontier during the Texas Revolution.

While they have been generally revered, the Rangers’ image has suffered from time to

time. When Sam Houston wanted to move the state’s capital out of Austin, the two Rangers who went to Austin to retrieve the archives met resistance from the local citizens and returned with their horses’ manes and tails shaved. In 1918, Governor William P. Hobby allegedly used the Rangers to suppress voter turnout for James Ferguson in South Texas during that year’s Democratic primary. During the 1932 election, the Texas Rangers made the mistake of backing Governor Ross Sterling. When Miriam “Ma” Ferguson won office, she retaliated by firing the entire force of forty-eight Rangers and replacing them with 2,300 “special” Rangers, many of whom were criminals. The legislature responded by authorizing the hiring of just thirty-two Rangers, leaving Texas virtually unprotected as Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow (the infamous Bonnie and Clyde) roamed the state robbing banks. The Rangers’ image was further tainted when they were accused of being instruments of discrimination and intimidation used against Tejanos. Captain Leander McNelly, whose tactics included piling the bodies of dead Mexican rustlers in the Brownsville town square, made

the Rangers particularly unpopular among Tejanos in the 1870s.

The Rangers’ image today combines independence with law and order—qualities on which all Texans can agree. While the details of the story vary, a common tale depicting the Rangers’ uncanny abilities involves citizens of a town who called for a company of Rangers to stop a prizefight. When the local people arrived at the train station to greet the twenty Rangers they had anticipated would be needed to quell the expected riot, they were disappointed to see just one Ranger get off the train: legendary Ranger captain Bill McDonald. When the citizens’ disappointment over the arrival of only a single Ranger became evident, McDonald responded by saying, “Hell! Ain’t I enough? There’s only one prize-fight!” Since that time, “One riot, one Ranger” has been a common slogan associated with the Rangers.

Today, the Texas Rangers are a highly professional and modern law enforcement organization that has been part of the Department of Public Safety since 1935. Perhaps less colorful than many of their predecessors—and their television and cinema image—today’s Rangers are trained to meet the demands of a high-tech state. The Rangers include 144 commissioned officers, twenty-four noncommissioned administrative support personnel, a forensic artist, and a fiscal analyst. Rangers assist local law enforcement with criminal investigations, help with the suppression of major disturbances, and conduct special investigations. While twenty-first-century Texas Rangers may look little like their predecessors, they still abide by the creed set down by Captain McDonald: “No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that’s in the right and keeps on a-comin.”ⁱ

i. Texas Department of Public Safety, “Silver Stars and Six Guns,” www.txdps.state.tx.us/TexasRangers/silverstars.htm (accessed September 1, 2014).

ii. Ibid.