

The Canales Investigation: A Turning Point for the Texas Rangers

Victoria Smith

Faculty Introduction

Dr. Charles Heath

In this essay, Victoria Smith critically examines a broad swath of Texas historiography, in particular, our state's "official history" that often dismisses violence no matter what the context. Smith also reads of the memories of innocent individuals, ethnic Mexicans in Texas, that suffered such widespread violence. Smith conducted original research that examines the 1919 Canales Investigation of the Texas Rangers, found at the time to be perpetrators of such injustice. These three currents together form the following work, which arose from Smith's senior history seminar. Smith tells this story with a voice and approach that, I believe, engages and educates a general public.

Abstract

When someone hears "Texas Rangers," they may have a wide range of images in mind. One could be the Lone Ranger and his great white stallion, Silver, or perhaps Chuck Norris as he battled crime across the State of Texas. Even in recent times, Netflix has introduced a new generation to the legendary story of Frank Hamer and the death of Bonnie and Clyde. However, there is an era of the Rangers' past that does not typically come to mind. Between 1910 and 1920, it was revealed that the Rangers were responsible for numerous violent incidences, including the massacre at Porvenir where fifteen people were executed. Those actions led State Representative José T. Canales to launch an investigation into the Texas Rangers. This research paper demonstrates how that investigation ushered in the formation of the Texas Rangers that the world knows today.

During the years following the Mexican Revolution, racial problems quickly escalated along the United States and Mexico border. Thousands of ethnic Mexicans died at the hands of local law enforcement, civilian vigilantes, and the Texas Rangers due to violent action and reaction along the Mexican border. Looking to make a change and refusing to allow violence to be an answer, José T. Canales (1877-1976) requested an investigation into the Texas Rangers. While he did not receive the outcome that he desired from the investigation, the Texas Rangers did experience a positive change as a result of this inquiry. Through this investigation, a once tarnished star began to shine to what is known today.

The Formation of the Texas Rangers

On November 24, 1835, the Texas Provisional Government officially organized the Texas Rangers, which consisted of three companies of Rangers, fifty-six men in total.

There are many eras in the history of Texas, and with those different periods came different types of Texas Rangers. In 1823, Stephen F. Austin organized a group of frontiersmen to lead an effort against the Native

Americans raiding the settlements of the Texas frontier. Austin hired this group of men on his own account, using his own funds.¹ On November 24, 1835, the Texas Provisional Government officially organized the Texas Rangers, which consisted of three companies of Rangers, fifty-six men in total. Each company was commanded by a captain, lieutenants, and a major. Sam Houston, then President of the Republic of Texas, authorized the formation of six hundred “mounted gunmen” to further protect the frontier.² Until 1874, the Texas Rangers were citizen soldiers who temporarily served to fight American Indians or Mexicans. However, the state’s frontier settlements remained susceptible to violence by Native Americans and Mexican bandits. In a response to that violence, the Texas Legislature created the Frontier Battalion on April 10, 1874.³

¹ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 20.

² Webb, *The Texas Rangers*, 30.

³ Robert M. Utley, *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* (New York: Berkley Book, 2003), 146.

Rangers during this era mainly earned employment based on their physical stamina, their knowledge and skill with guns and horses, and their ability to follow a trail for weeks upon end.⁴

The Bandit Years

As the population of Texas began to rapidly grow, so did the violence along the 1,254 miles of border between Texas and Mexico. Local residents, especially Anglo ranchers, urged the state to increase the size of the Texas Rangers, as they remained their preferred form of protection. In September 1913, the state of Texas employed only thirteen Texas Rangers to guard the state. Governor James E. Ferguson (1915-1917) increased the number of Rangers, but unfortunately did not provide them with the leadership that the border crises demanded. Instead, both he and future Governor William P. Hobby (1917-1921) were accused of using the Rangers for political purposes. According to historian Walter Prescott Webb, this time of violence provided the Texas Rangers with an opportunity for distinguished service to the state, but because of their political superiors, this was not the result. Some of the Rangers were professional in their actions but some were “totally unfitted for the service.”⁵ In her book, *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, author Monica Muñoz Martinez reiterates that Texas Rangers blurred the lines between enforcing laws, practicing vigilantism, and enacting racial terror.⁶

On July 20, 1915, Governor Ferguson commissioned Henry Lee Ransom to serve as captain of the newly created Company D division of the Texas Rangers. The governor reportedly instructed Ransom to take any means necessary to stop Mexican violence in the Valley, “if he had to kill every damn man connected with it.”⁷ The long and violent years of the Mexican Revolution resulted in thousands of graves along the Texas-Mexico border without anyone having to answer for those actions.

⁴ Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans in Americans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 11.

⁵ Webb, *Texas Rangers*, 486.

⁶ Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 11.

⁷ “Proceedings of the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House in the Investigation of the Texas State Ranger Force,” Adjutant General Records, Texas State Archives, Austin. Pg. 1502-1503.

The history of violence towards Mexicans living in South Texas could fill many pages. Between 1910 and 1920, historians find that state agents and vigilantes murdered thousands of ethnic Mexicans.⁸ Martinez shares several stories of such violence. For example, on November 1910, Antonio Rodriguez was arrested for killing Effie Greer Henderson in Rocksprings, Texas. Instead of giving him a trial for murder, a mob took the alleged murderer from the county jail and burned him alive in front of thousands of local residents. The following year, fourteen-year-old Antonio Gómez was arrested for murder in Thorndale. He was also removed from his jail cell only to be hung from a telephone pole. Political positions and social status were irrelevant for ethnic Mexicans during this time of turmoil. An example is the double murder of Jesus Bazán and his son-in-law, Antonio Longoria, who were shot for being suspected cattle rustlers. Antonio, who was the county commissioner at the time of the killing, and his son-in-law were left in the field to rot. Another violent act of the Texas Rangers can be traced back to the Big Bend region of the state. Mexican residents living in this area fell under more suspicion than normal as it was a commonplace for murderers and desperadoes. On January 28, 1918, that suspicion led to an unjustified and horrendous act when Company B of the Texas Rangers executed fifteen people in the community of Porvenir. The Texas courts did not prosecute the Texas Rangers who were involved in this massacre. As was the case with the 1910 lynching and the 1915 double murder, the descendants of those murdered were left wondering why justice would not acknowledge the death of their loved ones.⁹ The discovery of Mexicans' dead bodies had reached the point where it created little or no interest to media outlets. Only raids, or a murdered American, sparked interest.¹⁰

Reform Efforts

These acts of violence, along with the high number of deaths, led State Representative José T. Canales to demand a change, as he refused to accept violence as a solution. Canales was no stranger to the Texas

⁸ Monica Muñoz Martinez, "Recuperating Histories of Violence in the Americas: Vernacular History-Making on the US-Mexico Border." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 2014) 661-89, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.shsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=Mzh&AN=2014383412&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁹ Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*, 159.

¹⁰ "Trouble Zone Along the Rio Grande Almost is Deserted", *San Antonio Express* 50, no. 254, ed. 1. Saturday, September 11, 1915.

Rangers; they were around him and his family for most of his life. In his youth, his family would often welcome the state officers to the family ranch, *La Cabra*. “They stayed there,” said Canales, “came there at all hours, got our horses, received meals there, and they got our services.”¹¹ He once shared that retired captains Hughes and Rogers were “some of the noblest

Canales considered the Texas Rangers to be essential to law enforcement in South Texas.

men I know.”¹² Canales considered the Texas Rangers to be essential to law enforcement in South Texas.¹³ Even with the high regard he had for them, however, Canales recognized that the Rangers were not playing on the same ethical and moral ground that they once occupied. Canales placed himself and his family in jeopardy by confronting the Texas Rangers. As Canales’ voice was being heard in opposition to the violence, Ranger Frank Hamer threatened him with physical violence. “You are hot-footing it here, between here and Austin and complaining to the Governor and the Adjutant General about the Rangers and I am going to tell you if you don’t stop that you are going to get hurt.”¹⁴ Later, Hamer was forced to apologize but was not removed from the Ranger force.¹⁵ Canales did not let this threat stop his desire to reform the force. He wrote Congressman John Nance Garner, requesting a federal intervention in removing the Texas Rangers responsible for the killings. That letter was then forwarded to the White House, which would in turn forward it to the War Department. The response prepared by the army’s adjutant general stated that the Rangers had “served a very useful purpose in suppressing lawlessness in the State and along the border, and while it is true that their methods are not always in conformity with strict judicial procedure, they are never-the-less effective” and should not be removed from the Valley area.¹⁶

On January 15, 1919, José Canales introduced House Bill 5; it would become known as the Canales bill. It was an ambitious bill that aimed to establish guidelines for hiring new recruits, ensuring that new hires be at least twenty-five years old, have two years’ experience in the field of law

¹¹ Cox, *Time of the Rangers*, 87.

¹² “Proceedings”, 856.

¹³ Robert M. Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen: The Second Century of the Texas Rangers*, (New York, NY: Berkley Books), 69.

¹⁴ “Proceedings”, 240.

¹⁵ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 73.

¹⁶ Cox, *Time of the Rangers*, 62.

Canales made it clear from the beginning of the investigation that his goal was not to impair the Texas Rangers, but to improve them.

enforcement and have proof of their moral temperament.¹⁷ It also required a Ranger to post a bond to assure they worked in a professional manner, and allowed for the filing of civil lawsuits against the Rangers. Canales made it clear from the beginning of the investigation that his goal was not to impair the Texas Rangers, but to improve them. Speaking strongly on behalf of this bill, Canales insisted that he was not trying to dissolve the force, but that he “merely want[ed] the personnel purified: I want efficiency, not destruction.”¹⁸ He maintained that the bill was only a measure to insure the rights of citizens against lawless practices. Representative Barry Miller of Dallas led the argument against the legislative bill, which he stated would ruin the effectiveness of the Texas Rangers. While addressing the House, he presented several documents from well-known men from all over Texas, stating that a change to the force would destroy them. He provided many instances where the Rangers served in a manner of nobility that resulted in order of the chaotic conditions.¹⁹ Praising the Texas Rangers, Governor Hobby wrote this message, which appeared in the state’s major newspapers on January 18, 1919:

In my opinion this force has never rendered more efficient service to the state and to the federal government since its organization than during the war with Germany, when German propaganda was being spread over the county. The regular rangers, the loyalty secret service department and the special rangers have worked in unison with the city and county officials to keep down disloyalty, apprehend deserters, alleviate unsettled conditions along the border and contribute their efforts toward the successful prosecution of the war.²⁰

The investigation opened at the State Capitol on January 30, 1919, with Representative William Bledsoe presiding over a joint committee consisting of three senators and three representatives. Enlisted to represent the Texas Rangers were Robert E. Lee Knight and Dayton Moses,

¹⁷ William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*, (Oxford University Press, 2017), 24.

¹⁸ “Proceedings” 1569.

¹⁹ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 77.

²⁰ Cox, *Time of the Rangers*, 88.

attorney for the Southwest Cattle Raisers Association. Representative Canales filed nineteen charges against the Rangers, including their higher-ranking personnel in the adjutant general's office. All the charges filed referenced bad conduct since Governor Hobby took office in 1917, although many of the witnesses mentioned killings that occurred in 1915 and 1916. Canales charged inspector-general William Hanson, referred to as "the worst captain in all of Texas Ranger history,"²¹ and Adjutant General James Harley with tampering with crimes of the Rangers, and with using the state police as a political tool.²² Canales reported on one such cover-up in Hidalgo County: several Texas Rangers took Arturo Garcia and Pedro Tamez out of their jail cell only to use them as target practice. Once the public discovered this incident, Captain Hanson of the Rangers placed the blame on the local law enforcement. No arrests were made for either the Rangers or the local enforcement.²³ The hearings lasted for several weeks, producing many dramatic confrontations and nearly sixteen hundred pages of transcript.

After the legislative hearings ended on February 13, 1919, the committee released its final statements absolving the Rangers of any wrongdoing. The statements declared that the Rangers should continue, although they conceded the "gross violation of both civil and criminal laws" by some of the Rangers.²⁴ The committee did recognize the need for reform and agreed to a smaller force, higher pay, and a more centralized organization that would bring forth men of character and integrity.²⁵ However, the bonding measure was rejected. *The Statesman* was not the only media outlet to announce such headlines as, "Mr. Canales significantly failed in his efforts to reorganize the Ranger force and place the Rangers under bond."²⁶

While the legislative hearings and the revised House Bill 5 did not produce the outcome that Canales had wanted for the Ranger Force, the attention and spotlight led to "greater care in selecting recruits and greater awareness of public opinion."²⁷ The reorganization of the Texas

²¹ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 334.

²² Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 171.

²³ "Proceedings," 146-147.

²⁴ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 82.

²⁵ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 83.

²⁶ J. A. Fernandez, "Legislature Will Reorganize the Texas Rangers; Adjournment Date is Still Doubtful," *The Statesman*, March 8, 1919.

²⁷ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 84.

Rangers laid forth the guidelines of the state police: the ranger force is for the purpose of protecting the frontier against lawlessness and crime throughout the state and to aid in the enforcement of the state laws. The captains and the quartermaster shall be appointed, and removed, by the Governor, not the individual captains. The act further stated that “it shall be the duty of any citizen who knows of any misconduct or violation of the law on the part of any member of the ranger force to at once notify the Adjutant General in write of such misconduct.”²⁸

A few short years after the hearing, the Rangers began to put policies into practice that Canales had wanted to see through his exposure of their past.²⁹ Texas Governor Pat Neff valued the Texas Rangers and once expressed that during his administration, “their work and worth to a Governor in behalf of law enforcement, when he is honestly trying to enforce the law, can scarcely be overestimated. Long live the Texas Rangers!”³⁰ Governor Neff would call on the Rangers over local law enforcement when he felt it necessary. An example of this occurred in December 1921 in the small town of Mexia, located in Limestone County. An undercover Texas Ranger was sent to investigate complaints of crime, some including crooked lawmen. Because of the actions discovered, Governor Neff formed an assault on the crime activity by calling in several Texas Rangers, along with Houston attorney Brigadier General Jacob F. Wolters. At one point, Governor Neff placed the entire county under martial law; however, by the end of February 1922, Mexia would be declared cleaned-up. General Wolters credited that success to the Texas Rangers: “courageous and impersonal in the performance of duty, they exemplified on every occasion the highest ideals and best traditions of the Ranger Force.”³¹

On November 16, 1922, about three hundred armed men marched through the community of Breckenridge, Texas, demanding that local Mexicans leave by the end of the day. Some of the Mexicans appealed to the mayor for protection, but he could not guarantee their safety. Just five days before this disruption occurred, Texans lynched a man in the south Texas town of Weslaco, located in Hidalgo County. Elias Zarata

²⁸ Darren L. Ivey, *Texas Rangers: A Registry and History*, (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 297.

²⁹ Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 151.

³⁰ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 86.

³¹ Cox, *Time of the Rangers*, 112.

was arrested after fist fighting another man, and a mob of about fifteen men took him from his jail cell and shot him. Because of the continuing acts of racial violence, Governor Pat Neff dispatched the Texas Rangers for both situations. While they did not arrest those responsible for the unrest in Breckenridge or those responsible for the lynching of Elias Zarata, their presence was enough to restore order to the communities, without any violence from either side. Both incidents demonstrated a new outlook on the part of the Rangers. They demonstrated that they could administer the law in a professional manner while protecting Mexicans, instead of oppressing them.

In February 1924, another example that would prove their newfound professionalism occurred when Booker T. McMillan, a black man, killed a white man in Lufkin. After he was placed in jail, a mob of citizens demanded a lynching. Once again, Governor Neff stepped in and ordered the Texas Rangers to Lufkin in the hopes of avoiding another disaster. The Rangers performed no acts of violence and they prevented attempts of violence by others. They kept order in the town until McMillan was convicted and later escorted to the Huntsville penitentiary.

The Rangers performed no acts of violence and they prevented attempts of violence by others.

There have been several chapters in the history of the Texas Rangers. The force known since the 19th century came to be for several reasons. One of those reasons is the fact that the governors between the years of 1911 and 1935 did not follow the same plan for the “selection, upkeep and deployment” of the Texas Rangers.³² Adding hundreds of Special Rangers did not sharpen the image of the force. However, the time for questioning had come to an end in 1935 when James Allred became governor, with a promise of better law enforcement for the state of Texas. On January 23, 1935, he started by discharging all but three of the regular and Special Rangers. He then commissioned thirty-six new appointees, eleven of whom had earlier Ranger experience. Under his leadership, the Department of Public Safety was formed, which included the Rangers and the Highway Patrol. While this revised force of the Texas Rangers fell under a new leadership, their roles resembled a professional era in two ways: they maintained law and order, and they investigated criminal activity when local law enforcement required additional aid. The 1935

³² Harold J. Weiss, “The Texas Rangers Revisited: Old Themes and New Viewpoints,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (1994): 620-640.

requirements to be a Texas Ranger changed as well. New qualifications for candidates included that they must be between thirty and forty-five years old, at least five feet eight inches in height, and in good physical and mental condition.³³

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Texas Rangers provided the motivation and the model for the formation of the Arizona Rangers, the Nevada Rangers, and the New Mexico Mounted Police. Likewise, they laid the foundation for an arrangement of state

Rangers are now older, increasingly experienced, better prepared, and more educated than their predecessors.

police that rapidly spread over the whole county.³⁴ Rangers are now older, increasingly experienced, better prepared, and more educated than their predecessors. This is particularly important in a period of procedural justice, in which rules administer the acceptability of proof in the American courts. Their order continues as it did in the past: the end of social violence, the enforcement of state criminal resolutions, the examination of legal wrongdoings, and the capture of fugitives. They appreciate close collaboration with county and municipal law enforcement when local peace officers encounter a dangerous criminal or circumstance. Under the direction of Colonel Homer Garrison, Jr., who became the DPS director in September 1938, the Rangers resumed their exalted rank, which was absent since the “Bandit War” years. Remarkable captains such as Hardy B. Purvis and Johnny Klevenhagen ensured that excellence and professionalism were again accomplished and maintained. One case of the new Texas Ranger was Captain Robert A. Crowder who, on April 14, 1955, without any assistance, ended a hostage situation at the maximum-security unit of Rusk State Hospital without firing his gun.³⁵

The Texas Rangers Today

To be a Texas Ranger today, the qualifications are somewhat different. According to the Texas Department of Public Safety website, each applicant must have an outstanding record of at least eight years’ experience with a bona fide law enforcement agency, participating mainly in the investigation of major crimes. In addition to that, the

³³ Ivey, *Texas Rangers*, 190.

³⁴ Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*, 302.

³⁵ Ivey, *Texas Rangers*, 193.

candidate should be currently employed with the Texas Department of Public Safety, with a status of a commissioned officer. Their background check must reflect good moral character, and there cannot be any restrictions that would compromise their ability to perform his duties. In 2018, the average Texas Ranger was about forty-four years of age.³⁶

The Texas Rangers have served Texas for nearly two centuries. The small group of “rangers” formed by Stephen F. Austin have little in common with the Texas Rangers of modern times. While he originally formed this group to protect the frontier from Native Americans, he surely would not imagine the violence that eventually occurred during the 1910-1920 decade when many Mexicans lost their lives. While the 1919 legislative hearings did not produce the results that José T. Canales had hoped for, they did close out the darkest years in the history of the Texas Rangers. Because of the efforts made by Canales, the Rangers did seek to reform the force. Without the hearings, the Texas Rangers would still sport a tarnished star instead of the shining one that Texans, and the world, know today. ■

³⁶ Texas Department of Public Safety. Accessed April 13, 2019. <http://www.dps.texas.gov/employment/index.htm>

Bibliography

“Proceedings of the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House in the Investigation of the Texas State Ranger Force,” Adjutant General Records, Texas State Archives, Austin.

Carrigan, William D., and Clive Webb. *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Cox, Mike. *Time of the Rangers: Texas Rangers: From 1900 to the Present*. New York, NY: Forge, 2010.

DPS Web. “TxDPS Texas Department of Public Safety.” Accessed April 13, 2019. <http://www.dps.texas.gov/>.

Fernandez, J. A. (1919, Mar 08). Legislature Will Reorganize the State Rangers; Adjournment Date is Still Doubtful. *The Statesman* (19161921)

Ivey, Darren L. *The Texas Rangers: A Registry and History*. McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2010.

Johnson, Benjamin Heber. *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

Martinez, Monica Muñoz. *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

----- 2014. “Recuperating Histories of Violence in the Americas: Vernacular History-Making on the US-Mexico Border.” No. 3: 661. doi: 10.1353/aq.2014.0040.

“Trouble Zone Along the Rio Grande Almost Is Deserted” *San Antonio Express*. Vol. 50, No. 254, Ed. 1 Saturday, September 11, 1915.

Utley, Robert M. *Lone Star Lawmen: The Second Century of the Texas Rangers*. New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2008.

Utley, Robert M. *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers*. New York: Berkley Books, 2003.

Webb, Walter Prescott. *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.

Weiss, Harold J. “The Texas Rangers Revisited: Old Themes and New Viewpoints.” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (1994): 620-40.

Student Biography

Victoria Smith graduated cum laude from Sam Houston State University in Spring 2020 with a BA in history and a minor in psychology. During her senior seminar class, the class had the opportunity to read and study *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, written by Monica Muñoz Martinez. While reading about the violence that occurred along the Texas/Mexico border, Victoria decided to conduct further research on the Canales investigation into the Texas Rangers. Under the advisement of Dr. Charles Heath, this became her semester long research project. She hopes to participate in various historical organizations in her hometown community of Bryan, Texas. She is passionate about research, especially Texas history. She is currently researching the history of the sheriffs of Texas.