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New Charges Tarnish Texas Rangers' Image and Reopen Old Wounds

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Back east, for social cachet there is nothing like an ancestor on the Mayflower. In Texas, it is a Texas Ranger in the family tree.

Here at the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, a shrine to the frontier lawmen who set Lone Star hearts aflutter, some of the most avid visitors come in search of connections to the men who won the West and, it was said, would charge hell with a bucket of water and quell riots single-handedly ("one riot, one Ranger").

But Southern Methodist University in Dallas says new historical accounts are casting the long-revered outlaw and Indian fighters in a decidedly darker light.

The scholarship -- being gingerly acknowledged at the Hall of Fame -- involves investigations into massacres committed in an obscure border war against Mexican bandits and insurrectionists in 1915, a quagmire of its time. "Not a bright period in the history of the Rangers," concedes the museum's director, Byron Johnson, in a film seen by many of its 80,000 visitors a year.

A recent book by an assistant history professor at Southern Methodist and other accounts exploiting archives on both sides of the border, including a damning but little-known Texas legislative investigation of 1919, link the Rangers to the "evaporations" of up to 5,000 Mexican insurgents and Tejanos -- Texans of Mexican origin -- whose lands in the Rio Grande Valley were coveted by Anglo settlers.

"People are still coming across skeletons," said the professor, Benjamin Heber Johnson, 32, whose book, "Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans Into Americans," published late last year by Yale University Press, offers one of the fullest accounts to date of the violence. In the end, he said, the repression led the Mexican-Americans to secure their rights with organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens.

The university's communications director, Meredith Dickenson, in material promoting the book as a "bullet in the back" to conventional, laudatory

accounts of the Texas Rangers, wrote: "Here's an episode unlikely to ever be on 'Walker, Texas Ranger.'"

In addition, a new documentary, "Border Bandits," based on the memoirs of a Texas rancher, offers a firsthand account of the killings of two unarmed Tejanos by a carload of Texas Rangers driven by a legendary Ranger, William Warren Sterling, who later led the force as adjutant general and mythologized his exploits (but not his shootings) in a popular 1959 memoir, "Trails and Trials of a Texas Ranger."

"I thought the killings were an isolated incident," said the director of the documentary, Kirby F. Warnock, a Dallas writer whose grandfather, Ronald A. Warnock, had tape-recorded his recollections of coming upon the victims and burying the bodies. After recounting the tale in a 1992 memoir, "Texas Cowboy," Kirby Warnock said, "I got lots of calls saying, 'The Rangers killed my granddad.'"

Another book just published, "The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution: The Bloodiest Decade 1910-1920," by Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler, history professors emeritus at New Mexico State University, also recounts the cruelty of both sides.

The disclosures have bruised some feelings at the museum, which has a half-million items of Ranger memorabilia. "You can't put current values on past times," said Mr. Johnson, the director, who is an anthropologist.

In recent weeks, showings of "Border Bandits" and forums on Benjamin Johnson's book have reopened wounds nearly a century old in the heavily Hispanic borderland, where the graves of the two Tejanos can still be found. "I think the real bandits were the Texas Rangers," said Jon Bazan, a grandson of one of the victims, who spoke at a screening in Harlingen in early October. "They were just like James Bond -- a license to kill."

Yet critics like Mr. Kirby say they have no wish to malign today's Rangers, an elite force of 116 law enforcement professionals, including 2 women, 14 Hispanics and an American Indian, led by an African-American chief, Earl Pearson, within the Texas Department of Public Safety.

A spokeswoman for the department in Austin, Tela Mange, said that the events occurred before the Rangers became part of the agency, and that she was not familiar with the books.

The museum cites Ranger "aggressions" against Mexicans but treats with reverence icons like Frank Hamer, who tracked down Bonnie and Clyde years after accumulating a fearsome reputation -- not acknowledged in the exhibits -- for terrorizing Mexicans.

A focus of the recent scholarship is an enigmatic plot that served as the backdrop to the violence. In January 1915, with Mexico in a revolutionary uproar and world war raging in Europe, a Mexican rebel named Basilio Ramos was stopped in McAllen, Tex., with a manifesto calling for an armed uprising to reclaim Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California for Mexico, and other lands for Indians and blacks. Prisoners and Anglo males 16 and over were to be executed.

Confusion continues to surround the origins and seriousness of the scheme, called the Plan de San Diego for the small Texas town where it was supposedly hatched, but its exposure at a time of bandit raids from Mexico panicked the settlers. In one attack, Mexican raiders captured an American soldier, cut off his head and stuck it on a pole.

Texas Rangers, first recruited in the 1820's by the early settler Stephen F. Austin to control the Indians, responded with a wave of shootings and lynchings -- what one local newspaper called a "war of extermination." The Johnson book quotes witness accounts of mass hangings of prisoners and innocent Mexicans and Tejanos, some of the bodies desecrated "with empty beer bottles stuck in their mouths."

After an attack on the giant King Ranch, three of the dead raiders were lassoed and dragged by Rangers on horseback, who proudly posed for a photograph later made into postcards. Elsewhere, bodies, dead and alive, were thrown on flaming pyres or left to rot, with relatives too terrorized to bury the remains. A Brownsville lawyer, J.C. George, said, "There have been lots who have evaporated." Estimates of the dead range from the hundreds to 5,000, historians say.

In Mr. Warnock's documentary, his grandfather, who died in 1976, recounts the aftermath of a Mexican bandit attack on the McAllen Ranch in 1915. The raiders were driven off, taking refuge at the ranch of a 67-year-old Tejano, Jesus Bazan, and his son-in-law, Antonio Longoria. Rangers in a Model T Ford hunted down the bandits. "Every man they found they killed, drove off and left them there," Roland Warnock said.

Next, he said, the Rangers came after Bazan and Longoria, who had been too fearful to turn the bandits away. The two, he said, "pulled over to the side of the road to let them pass, and when they did, the Rangers just shot them off their horses." Warnock said he found the bodies from the stench two days later and buried them where they remain today, near the town of Edinburg. He identified two of the Rangers as William Warren Sterling and H.L. Ransom, both of whom are lionized in the Ranger museum.

(Kirby Warnock said he was not influenced by the fact that Sterling was also acquitted, on grounds of self-defense, of having gunned down his great-grandfather, Frank Warnock, in revenge for Warnock's killing of a man who had cut off his water supply.)

A showing of the film in Harlingen drew more than the idly curious.

"It touched me, what I saw here," said Richard Martinez, 56, a retired teacher and postmaster, who said he had heard the story of the killings from his mother, Longoria's daughter, now 97, who was 7 years old when her father was killed.

"It does anger me," Mr. Martinez said. But, he added: "These are things we overcame. We're stronger for it."

Photos: Texas Rangers posed for photographs with the bodies of three of the raiders killed in an attack on the giant King Ranch in the summer of 1915. (Photo by Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas-Austin); Benjamin Heber Johnson's book about the Texas Rangers casts them in a less than flattering light. The view of William Warren Sterling and other Rangers is different at the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. (Photo by Mark Graham for The New York Times); (Photo by Brad Doherty for The New York Times)