

THE TEXAS GUN COLLECTOR



Cold Steel and Warm Gold: Arms & Badges of Three Texas Ranger Captains

By Kurt House

Solid gold Texas Ranger badges are a rarity, with less than twenty Captain badges known, and as such are highly valued by collectors. Documented arms used by Rangers are not quite as rare, but highly prized also. This author has been fortunate enough to accumulate three such badges and seven pistols in some fifty years of collecting, and this article is the story behind these tools of three Texas Ranger Captains.

Texas Ranger Captain Harry Odeal lived up to his name; he was somewhat odd. When I first heard of him in 2002 it was when I was approached about purchasing his Colt New Service revolver, gold badge and personal papers that are shown on the cover of this magazine. He is virtually unknown to even veteran Ranger historians as well; not much more has been discovered through my intensive research.

However, as many of you may agree, historical anonymity does not equate to the worthless value of biography. Someone once said that history is nothing more than biographies, if you will, of people who have accomplished major things.

In November of 2002, a friend of mine called and offered me the .45 caliber Colt New Service pistol, nickel, with carved pearl steer head grips, gold badge and other items which had belonged to Texas Ranger Captain H. R. Odneal. Naturally, any gun that belonged to a Texas Ranger was of interest to me, even though I have never been a great fan of the New Service Model. However, I am a fan of Texas history, and this gun with accompanying artifacts of a Texas Ranger Captain did interest me. As it so happened, my friend and I were travelling to the TGCA show in Houston together the next week, so on the trip down we began our negotiations. The 12 Karat gold badge was of greatest interest to me, having a .75 carat diamond in the center of a star which was surrounded by a shield with an eagle on top. The obverse was marked "Linz Jewelers, Dallas, Texas" and having lived in Dallas for 25 years, I was very familiar with the custom jeweler who had a store on Northwest Highway at Hillcrest Avenue not far from Southern Methodist University where I had gone to graduate school. The front of the badge was marked in blue enamel lettering, "Captain H. T. Odneal, Texas Rangers", and the badge was in beautiful condition. Being a student of Texas Ranger history, I was surprised that I had never heard of this Captain, but my friend stated that he had obtained the pistol, badge and material from

Captain Odneal's grand-daughter, so I was re-assured that I could track down some history on this Ranger. Just before we arrived at the TGCA show, we agreed on a price, neither of us knowing quite what the assemblage was worth, but nevertheless agreed and I purchased the lot.

Weeks passed until I was finally able to establish contact with Captain Odneal's grand-daughter who then transferred the other materials shown on the cover of this magazine to me, including the multiple railroad passes that are shown, along with his pocket arrest notebooks and other items. Conspicuously missing, however, was any photo of Captain Odneal, and months passed before I was finally able to gaze at the man who had owned the pistol and badge. She was kind enough to furnish a reprint of a photo showing Captain Odneal about 1940 in the traditional black suit with tie and Stetson hat. Several more months passed before I finally received the historical letter from the Colt Archives which revealed to my great satisfaction that the 5 1/2" barrel New Service had been shipped "Pearl with carved steer head motif grips" on May 31, 1917 to Shelton Payne Arms Company, El Paso, Texas, in a single gun shipment. Now the story was getting more interesting to this collector who values Texas-shipped guns!

Thus inspired, I began to research who this mysterious Ranger was. I discovered that Captain Odneal served from 1925 to at least 1933 having been apparently appointed by Texas Governor Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, who had succeeded her husband Jim Ferguson in that office in 1924. He was Captain of Company B, which was headquartered in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, and this explained the Dallas jeweler-made badge, although it is unknown whether he purchased it directly or whether it was presented to him.

According to the Texas State Archives, H. T. Odneal was 38 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall, 165 lbs., born in Sherman, Texas, dark complexion, hazel eyes, brown hair, a previous peace officer and was married, living in Ft. Stockton when he enlisted in Company A as a Sergeant on June 4, 1925. He was discharged on May 14, 1927, but re-enlisted as a Captain on January 19, 1933, in Company B which was stationed in Ft. Worth at that time, but moved later to Dallas. He died on April 30, 1934 apparently from a self-inflicted gun shot wound with this gun. Texas politics was rife with scandal and corruption at this time, and the economic woes of the Great Depression placed untold stress on families everywhere. To put this into perspective

for the reader, only approximately 3 weeks later former Texas Ranger Captain Frank Hamer and his crew ambushed Bonnie & Clyde at Gibsland, Louisiana, on May 23, 1934, ending their two year crime spree.

Along with Captain Odneal's personal effects were two pocket notebooks (shown on front cover) and a dozen railroad passes from virtually every railroad in Texas, mostly marked "for travel within Texas only" and a single ID card dated 8-24-27 in McCamey, Texas, signed by the Chief of Police listing Odneal as a "Special Officer". McCamey, which was barely a town in 1925 is about 45 miles northeast of Ft. Stockton, Texas, where Odneal had enlisted two years earlier.

His pocket notebooks reveal the physical descriptions of criminals that he was looking for, including the following interesting characters:

"Ikie Weathered and Chicken Wilson;

Were tried in Hill County for robbery of

The Osceola Bank in 1924"

Weathered is tall, 6 ft., wt. around 200 lbs.

Fair complected, big & mean, lives in Ft. Worth,

Chicken Wilson, weight 160-165,

medium complected, light hair, cackles, lives in Dallas"

Captain Odneal also lists other Rangers in his company who were Sgt. Burt Whisenant, Privates L. C. Sport, F. A. Cravens, and Leon Hannah with their phone numbers. This sort of Texas Ranger minutiae is valuable to the historian who searches for mention of little known Rangers. Another notebook lists receipts, mileages and expenses to be turned in as well as a typed note from Headquarters Company Captain Aldrich in Austin who wrote: "As soon as you are permanent (sic) located, please forward your mailing address to this office with phone number."

Unfortunately, not much more information is available for Odneal, but he is representative of the many Texas Rangers about whom virtually nothing is known other than their enlistment dates. *ODNEAL*

These little known Rangers contrasted greatly to others who had longer careers and were more visible in the public limelight, such as the Four Great Captains: Rogers, McDonald, Hughes, and Brooks. For example, a great deal of information (e.g. Webb 1935; Utley: 2002; Cox 2008), several biographies, and countless articles have been written on Captain John R. Hughes, the famous Captain of Company "D" frontier Battalion which was traditionally stationed on the Mexican border. Several guns, a gunbelt, clothing, hats, photographs, other items and at least one spectacular badge have survived from Captain Hughes for instance, but I will discuss his badge later as it is the earliest of the three considered in this article.

In 2012 this author was lucky enough to also obtain the elaborate solid gold badge of Captain Frank "Bigfoot" Johnson which is marked on the front

Captain Frank Johnson

Texas Ranger Force

which consists of a star within a wreath within a circle within another wreath, a one-of-a-kind design. More fascinating, however is the inscription on the reverse, which reveals the details of its presentation:

Presented by T. Crixell

Brownsville, Texas 1909

I had known of this badge for many years in the collection of veteran TGCA member Charles Schreiner III, who obtained it from TGCA member Gaines DeGraffenreid (House 2012). Mr. Schreiner illustrated the badge on page 222 of his monumental book on Texas Rangers with Bob Berryman, *A Pictorial History of the Texas Rangers*, published in 1969. I treasure my copy of this book which is autographed by Charley to me with the following humorous inscription:

"To my good friend, Kurt House, Esq.,

My biggest rival in collecting Texas Ranger

Memorabilia – and unfortunately the best, I know –

You are always welcome at the YO.

(signed) Chas. Schreiner III

Y.O. Ranch, Mt. Home, Tex., 9-9-00"

Captain Frank Johnson began his law career as sheriff of Mitchell County, with Colorado City as the county seat (Tise 1989). He was born in 1869 in Tennessee and moved to Texas in 1870 residing at Weatherford *up to* the time of his death in 1923. Elected sheriff of Mitchell County in 1904 and re-elected in 1906, he served until 1907 when he resigned to become Captain of Texas Ranger Company A then stationed at Colorado City where he remained until 1910 when Company A was transferred to the Rio Grande Valley. Captain Johnson enjoyed a storied career (Cf. Utley 2002:283-285), and several photos are known of him as commander of Company A, Colorado City (Schreiner, et al 1969:76) and which are labeled 1905 and 1906. He is also shown as Company A commander at Harlingen, Texas, in a photo dated 1904. However, since we know he was Sheriff of Mitchell County until 1907, this handwritten date is probably erroneous. This author also owns a factory engraved Colt Single Action serial number 258278 with the back strap inscribed "Parker Weston, Co. A, TSR" (Texas State Ranger), who is shown in the same photograph with Johnson and in another photograph where Weston is proudly showing off his obviously new pistol (Figure 1).

Co. A photo not shown

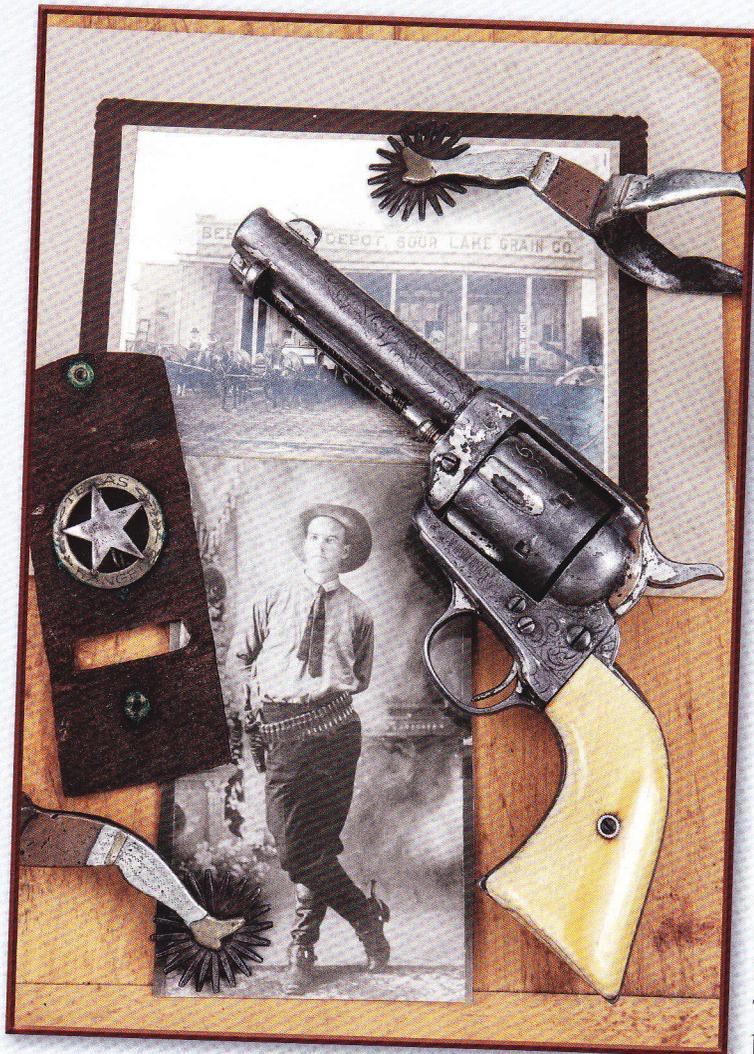


Figure 1 - Composite photo of Weston gun, badge, spurs. Photo credit © Paul Goodwin.

Captain Johnson died at his home in Weatherford, Texas after an illustrious career in law enforcement, and his obituary appeared in the Weatherford Daily Herald on December 12, 1923. Although this author is not aware of any firearm attributed to Captain Johnson, it is rumored that he used a nickel plated Colt Single Action Army. Maybe it will appear some day.

However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Captain Johnson's badge is the information on the obverse, which to this writer's amazement had never been researched previously. Who was the mysterious "T. Crixell", and what happened in 1909 in Brownsville, Texas, to cause the presentation to Captain Johnson? As any experienced collector knows, if an artifact can be placed in a certain time and place, the value is enhanced; thus, I started with the Brownsville telephone book in July, 2012. To my utter surprise, I located Frank Crixell, the 100 year old nephew of Teofilo Crixell, who, it turns out, owned a saloon on main street in Brownsville during the time of Captain Johnson's tenure there. Our conversation was delightful! I consider the opportunity to interview a centenarian a remarkable one that cannot be taken lightly. Showing his great humor, when I asked Mr. Crixell for an appointment, he stated,

"Well, you better hurry up, because I am a-hunnerd years old and my memory is not so good any more!"

By the time you read this, I hope to have met Mr. Crixell with whom I have an appointment on August 28, 2013, who incidentally, is now 101 years old having had a birthday on January 11th! Ah....what fascinating adventures historical research can bring, and this is one of the reasons I collect historical arms. Every gun has a story; you just have to find it. Furthermore, Mr. Crixell told me about his other uncle, Jose "Joe" Crixell (pronounced Kri-shell) who was brutally shot six times with a Colt .45 automatic by Texas Ranger Paul McAllister on August 9, 1912, in downtown Brownsville (Officer Down webpage) across the street from the Crixell Saloon (Harris, et al. 2009). My informant was 6 months old when the event occurred; how rare is that? He further related family lore that his uncle had the badge made in Corpus Christi for Captain Johnson. At this point, a thousand questions arise; why would a Ranger kill the brother of a man who presented a gold badge to a Ranger Captain just three years before? Obviously, much more research is needed, and this author is currently engaged in attempts to find the answers during my trip to Brownsville in August. Remarkably, from the Internet I learned that the City of Brownsville Museum has re-created a portion of the Crixell Saloon and has over thirty original photographs of the same time period, copies of which I hope to obtain.

The last gold Texas Ranger Captain badge that is shown herein is unique indeed. Perhaps the most valuable because of its age and provenance, it is the only 19th Century gold Captain badge known. Incredible! Shown in the composite photo is this rare and unique "Pirate Island" badge of famous Company D Captain, John R. Hughes, the "Border Boss", as he is known (Figure 2). The badge is approximately 2 1/2" in diameter, is a 5 pointed star within a circle within a wreath and marked:

TEXAS CAPTAIN RANGER

with the word "CAPTAIN" engraved diagonally across the central star. Like the Odneal badge, it is made of two pieces of gold pinned together. On the obverse is the hallmark in two lines, "Hickox & Hixon El Paso" who are well known jewelers. This badge has impeccable provenance, having descended from Captain Hughes through well-known collector Bobby McNellis to TGCA member Joe Goodson to another TGCA member to the present owner. It is accompanied by a thick notebook of provenance data, research, history and other information on Captain John R. Hughes (House 2002). Coincidentally, Hughes also ended his life with a nickel plated Colt Single Action Army in 1946 at his home in Austin, Texas.

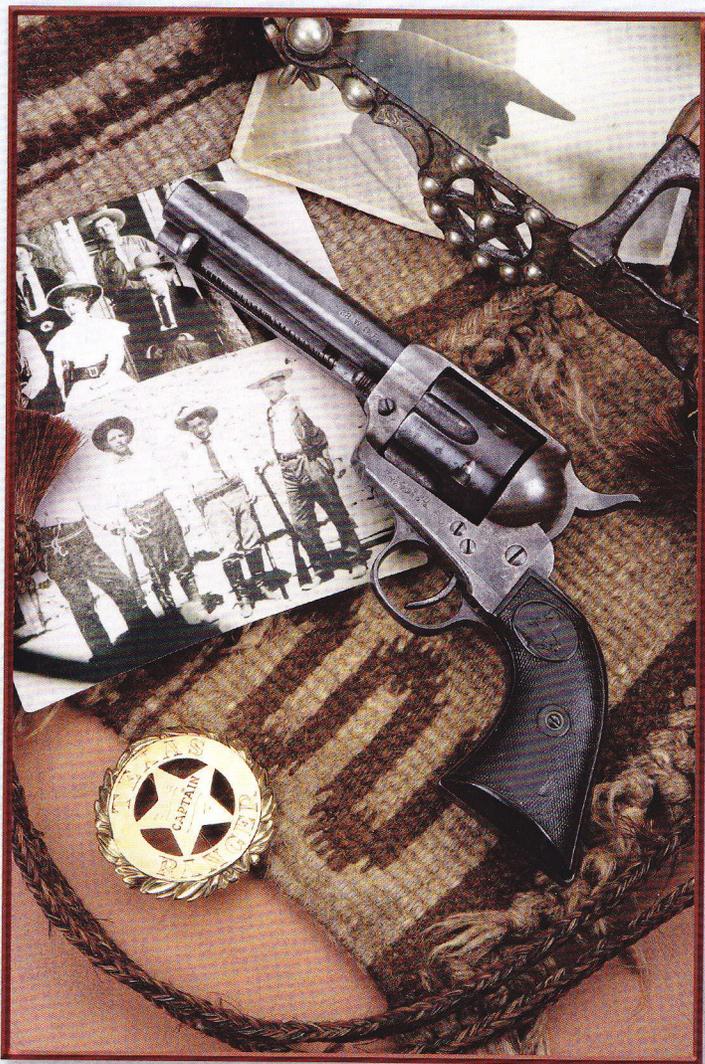


Figure 2 - Composite photo of Hughes gun, badge, and other historical items. Photo credit © Paul Goodwin.

But the most amazing aspects of this badge concern how it came to be presented to Captain Hughes (Figure 3). Captain Hughes assumed command of Company D upon the untimely death of previous Captain Frank Jones, who was killed at Pirate Island, or “Tres Jacales” as the site is sometimes called. Due to the meandering course of the Rio Grande, this site is sometimes in the United States and sometimes in Mexico, but on June 29, 1893, when Captain Jones was killed, it was in Mexico. Remarkably, a badge almost identical to the Hughes badge, which was illustrated on the cover of TGCA magazine in the Spring 2003 issue and attributed to Captain Jones is made of copper, has initials “F” and “B” (Frontier Batallion) overlaid on the front, and otherwise constructed identically. Additionally, it is known that all other members of the Pirate Island fight were presented with identical badges but made of silver, thus there were a total of seven Pirate Island badges made. The five Rangers who were with Captain Jones at his death: Corporal Carl Kirchner, Privates Wood Saunders, Eddie Aten, T. F. Tucker, and Deputy R. E. “Ed” Bryant, had identical silver badges made by the El Paso firm of Hickox & Hixon, but only three of the silver ones are known, those

of Kirchner and Tucker remain undiscovered. Because the John R. Hughes badge is the only known example of a 19th Century gold Texas Ranger Captain’s badge, and because of the history it represents, it is considered by experts to be the finest Texas Ranger badge extant.



Figure 3 - left to right - Captain Frank Johnson, Captain John R. Hughes and Captain Harry Odneal with their respective badges shown. Photo credit © Paul Goodwin.

Regarding the arms used by Captain Hughes, several with impeccable provenance are known. One is his Model 1873 Winchester carbine in .38-40 caliber in the Texas Ranger museum at the Buckhorn Saloon in San Antonio, and another is his inscribed Colt Single Action, serial number 223829 in the same caliber also in the same display case. Made in 1902, this gun was the one used by Hughes in the guarding of Charlie Dodge during his trial in Houston, and is inscribed on the back strap “John R. Hughes, Captain, Austin, Texas”. Unfortunately the 4 ¾” nickel Single Action serial number 246586 formerly in Hughes’ El Paso Saddlery marked holster rig was stolen several years ago when these guns were on display at the Texas Ranger Memorial Museum at the Witte complex.

This article has examined the personal artifacts of a relatively unknown 20th Century Ranger Captain Odneal, and compared his gold badge to that of Captain Frank Johnson of the 1909 era, and finally to that of the 1893 badge of Captain Hughes (see Figure 3). Three Ranger Captains, with three golden badges, but perhaps the most valuable part is the history they represent. It has been my pleasure to present them for the first time to you in publication, and remember, if you have any old gold Texas Ranger Captain badges lying around, call me.

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Kurt House has been a Life member of the TGCA since 1970, as a result of then-President Leo Bradshaw's recruitment. Kurt has been a life member of the NRA since 1966 and avidly collected Texas Ranger and Old West items since he was 14. To date he has published over a hundred articles and six books (working on a seventh, the Colt Model 1877) on his interest areas of natural history, anthropology, western history and the lore of southern Texas, but insists he is still a student.

