



Official State Historical Center of the Texas
Rangers law enforcement agency.

**The Following Article was Originally Published in the
*Texas Ranger Dispatch Magazine***

The *Texas Ranger Dispatch* was published by the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum from 2000 to 2011. It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

Managing Editors

Robert Nieman 2000-2009; (b.1947-d.2009)

Byron A. Johnson 2009-2011

Publisher & Website Administrator

Byron A. Johnson 2000-2011

Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame

Technical Editor, Layout, and Design

Pam S. Baird



Funded in part by grants from
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

Copyright 2017, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, Waco, TX. All rights reserved. Non-profit personal and educational use only; commercial reprinting, redistribution, reposting or charge-for-access is prohibited. For further information contact: Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, PO Box 2570, Waco TX 76702-2570.


[Rangers Today](#)
[Visitor Info](#)
[History](#)
[Research Center](#)
[Hall of Fame](#)
[Student Help](#)
[Family History](#)
[News](#)

★ [Click Here for
A Complete Index
to All Back Issues](#)

★ [Dispatch Home](#)

★ [Visit our nonprofit
Museum Store!](#)

★ [Contact the Editor](#)



20th Century Shining Star:

Frank Hamer

by Robert Nieman

Though best known as the man who brought the infamous Bonnie and Clyde to ground, Frank Hamer accomplished much more than this one crime. He is the man that many believe to be the greatest Texas Ranger of the first half of the twentieth century.

Francis Augustus Hamer was born on March 17, 1884, in Fairview, Texas. While still a very young child, his family moved to the Welch Ranch in San Saba County, where his father was a blacksmith. When an opportunity presented itself in Llano County in 1894, Mr. Hamer and his wife Francis packed up their family and moved to Oxford. There he continued blacksmithing and his son Frank eventually joined him in the trade for a time.

Blacksmithing didn't hold Frank's interest for long. In a career filled with violence, his first deadly shooting scrape—he was reportedly in over fifty gunfights during his career—occurred on June 12, 1900.

Hamer and his brother Harrison, who was four years his junior, had entered into a 50-50 sharecropping agreement with Dan McSwain. McSwain, like everyone in the county, was aware of Frank's ability with a weapon. One day he asked the youngster if he wanted to make an extra \$150. According to

brother Harrison, Frank thought McSwain was joking and replied, "Who do I have to kill?"

Frank quickly realized that his landlord was deadly serious. McSwain was having trouble with a rancher and wanted Frank to "solve" the problem. The youngster quickly and in no uncertain words informed his boss that he was only "kidding" and had no intention of killing anyone. McSwain replied, "If you let one word of this out, I'll kill you!"

Two days later, Frank and Harrison were plowing their field when McSwain walked up. He told the younger brother to go into the nearby barn to get some equipment and asked Frank to go into the house and get some groceries.

Harrison didn't go into the barn immediately because he was doing some repair work on the plow. Soon, he heard a noise behind him. Turning, he saw Frank picking up some cans that he had dropped, and he saw McSwain coming towards his brother with a shotgun.

Harrison yelled to Frank, "Look out!"

Frank jumped to the side, and McSwain's blast barely missed him. He rose to his feet to run for cover, and McSwain let loose the second barrel of his shotgun. This time, the blast found its target. Buckshot ripped into Frank's back and the left side of his head, knocking him to the ground. (At his death, dozens of bullet and knife scars were counted on Frank's body.)

Fortunately—at least from Frank's point of view—the blast was not lethal. Still on the ground, he drew a small pistol he was carrying and returned fire. His first shot hit his would-be assassin, knocking him to the ground. The shot was not fatal, though.

Harrison rushed to his brother's side, helped Frank to his feet, and they both ran to the nearby draw. Meanwhile, McSwain had also gotten up, and he went into his house.

The hiding boys saw McSwain come out of the house carrying an old buffalo gun. He mounted his horse and began searching for the brothers, but they remained safely hidden, and McSwain eventually gave up and rode out of sight.

It took Frank a long time to heal. He carried some of the buckshot in his back until the day he died. In time, however, he was ready to settle things with McSwain. He mounted up and rode to McSwain's house.

McSwain couldn't believe his eyes. He thought he had murdered the boy and said as much to Frank. The boy replied, "Not by a damned sight. I've come to settle accounts." With that, both man and boy went for their guns. McSwain fell to ground, dead.

The following year, 1901, Frank and Harrison moved to Sheffield, Texas. They had been hired as wranglers on the Pecos Ranch of Barry Ketchum. Barry was the brother of the notorious outlaw Tom "Black Jack" Ketchum. The Hamer brothers were still working on the ranch on April 26, 1901, when Black Jack was the guest of honor at a "necktie party" in New Mexico.

By 1905, Frank was cowboying on the Carr Ranch between Sheffield and Fort Stockton. He volunteered his services to the local sheriff, Dud Barker, to

apprehend a horse thief. His successful effort so impressed Sheriff Barker that he recommended Frank to the Texas Adjutant General, saying that Frank would make an excellent Texas Ranger.

On April 21, 1906, twenty-two-year-old Frank Hamer became the Texas' newest Ranger. He was assigned to legendary Captain John Rogers of Company C. Captain Rogers ordered Hamer to report to Sergeant Jim Moore in Sheffield. (Frank's older brother Estelle and younger brothers Harrison and Flavus also became Rangers. Younger brother Clint, called Sant by the family, died before he got the opportunity.)

As was common during those years, there was trouble along the Rio Grande. Hamer soon found himself in the Del Rio area. Until 1908, he rode the border doing whatever was necessary to uphold the laws of the state of Texas.

By the fall of 1908, another challenge lay before Frank. Navasota, Texas, was being ripped by racial strife. Killing occurred almost daily, and worse, the town couldn't keep a marshal. The latest one had lasted a week. Clearly, a man with iron in his backbone was needed.

Frank's reputation was already well established, and the Navasota city council offered him the position as city marshal. He accepted. By 1911—and more than one deadly encounter—he had worked himself out of a job. He left Navasota for Houston.

For the next four years, Frank worked in Harris County helping maintain law and order in that rough and woolly part of Texas.



By 1915, the call of the Rangers tugged at Frank, and he rejoined the organization. He was stationed along the Rio Grande border, again at Del Rio. The situation along the Mexican border had not improved during his absence; if anything, it was worse than ever. But in typical style, Frank began a relentless pursuit of the thugs and outlaws who roamed the area.

As busy as he was, Frank still had time to fall under the spell of Gladys Johnson. They were married on May 12, 1917. She had two daughters from a previous marriage, and together they had two sons, Frank Jr. and Billy.

As was common during that era, Frank once again left the Rangers. He became a prohibition agent, trying to stop bootleggers from bringing illegal liquor into the United States. Eliot Ness he wasn't, however, and in 1921 he was back with the Rangers, this time stationed in Austin. This was his last move. He and Gladys would spend the remainder of their lives in Texas' capitol city.

On January 1, 1922, Frank was named Senior Ranger Captain. Now he commanded all Rangers, and he found himself as busy as he had ever been.

Texas in the 1920s spelled O-I-L, and that meant more work than the Rangers had ever imagined. Boomtowns roared to life all over Texas: Breckenridge,

Van, Ranger, Borger, and Kilgore, to name a few. Even the Rangers couldn't handle the mass of crime they confronted. More than once, the current governor was forced to declare marshal law and send in the National Guard. (A film in Kilgore's Oil Museum relates that its sleepy community exploded from a population of 800 to 8,000—in twenty-four hours!)

In 1932, Miriam "Ma" Ferguson was elected governor. Ma and her husband James ("Pa"), who had earlier been impeached and thrown out of the governor's office, hated the Rangers almost as much as the Rangers hated them. The handwriting was on the wall, and every Ranger who did not resign was fired. Frank retired. Never again would he be an active Texas Ranger.

In 1934, the notorious killers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Parker murdered their way through Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. Despite their best efforts, law officers could not bring the pair to justice.

Something had to be done. Who better to solve the problem than the greatest manhunter of them all? Lee Simmons asked Frank to accept a position as special investigator for the prison system, which Simmons headed. Frank's only job was to track the killers down. On February 1, 1934, he went on the hunt.

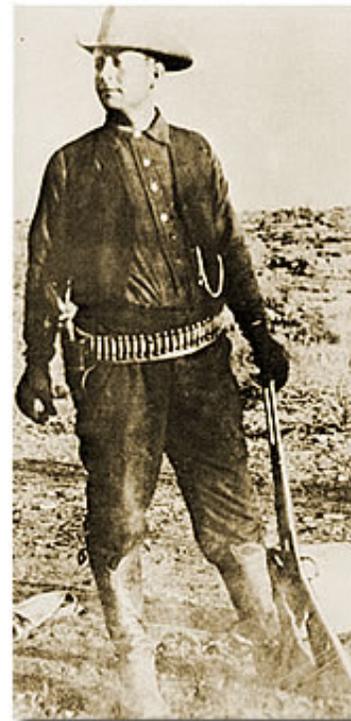
So many books and articles have been written on this subject, we will not attempt to fully recount this story. Suffice it to say that on May 23, 1934, near Gibsland, Louisiana, Frank and five other officers—one of whom was fellow former Texas Ranger Manny Gault—put an end to the deadly duo's murderous career.

Not surprisingly, the killing of Bonnie and Clyde made nationwide headlines. The praise poured in from everywhere. Texas Congressman Robert Kleberg sponsored a bill that sailed through, and Frank was presented a congressional special citation.

For his remaining years, Frank worked for several oil companies as a special investigator. He died peacefully in his sleep on July 10, 1955, and was buried in the State Cemetery in Austin.

Frank's name jumped into the public view again in 1967. The movie *Bonnie and Clyde* came out and was a smash hit. Unfortunately, it portrayed Frank Hamer as a bumbling fool. Gladys and Frank Jr. (Billy had been killed during World War II at Iwo Jima) sued the movie's producers. The case droned on for years, but in 1971, they were awarded an out-of-court settlement.

Rangers like Frank Hamer made the Texas Rangers the legendary lawmen that they are today.



Texas Ranger

DISPATCH

