



Official State Historical Center of the Texas  
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Managing Editors

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

**Byron A. Johnson** 2009-2011

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## It's a Family Tradition



Sheriff Frank Brownfield,  
Captain Sweaney's grandfather.

Ranger Captain Richard Sweaney  
in his office beside his great-  
grandfather's pistol.

by Robert Nieman

Captain Richard Sweaney's office is in the headquarters of Company B in Garland (Dallas). Hanging prominently in a shadow box on the wall is his great-grandfather's Colt .32-20 pistol.

Law enforcement comes naturally to Captain Sweaney. His grandfather, Frank Brownfield, was the sheriff of Scurry County (Snyder), Texas, from 1927-1933. During those years, he carried his Colt in a leather holster—not on a belt, but in his back pocket. During his time as sheriff, he and the pistol saw more than one close call.

Once, a local farmer reported that someone had hidden 300 gallons of 200-proof, moonshine alcohol on his farm along Brushy Creek. With one of his deputies, Sheriff Brownfield set up surveillance near the location of the moonshine. They waited all night but got no results. As they were getting up from their bedrolls, two armed men arrived at the stash. Not sure whether the men were the moonshiners they wanted, the sheriff and his deputy did not move. They did hear one of the men say, "It is still there," before they left the scene.

After another deputy arrived, the three lawmen settled back into the surveillance. They had barely gotten situated before the two moonshiners returned with a wagon and a team of mules. After watching the bootleggers load some of the whiskey, the sheriff ordered them to throw up their hands. Instead, the moonshiners opened fire on the sheriff and his deputies. In the gunfight, none of the lawmen was injured, but one of the moonshiners was hurt, and Sheriff Brownfield killed the other with the pistol that now hangs on Captain Sweaney's wall.

Sheriff Brownfield had many other close calls before he finally hung up his gun for the last time. After his passing in 1965, the pistol remained in the family, but it was not passed down to any particular family member.

In March 1985, Richard Sweaney was promoted to Texas Ranger. That spring day was made even more special when his family presented him the Colt .32-20 that his great-grandfather had carried so proudly. They had met earlier and decided that he should have the family heirloom.

Sheriff Frank Brownfield handed down more than just his pistol to his grandson. He also provided valuable advice that Sweaney has used throughout his career: "Have plenty of nerve and always be a gentleman."<sup>1</sup> Good advice for any career.

From 1985 to 1992, when Ranger Sweaney promoted to lieutenant and transferred to Dallas, he served as a field Ranger in the Rio Grande Valley. During those years, he occasionally and very proudly carried his great-grandfather's Colt .32-20 pistol.



**At the still: Deputy Horace Leath (left) and Sheriff Frank Brownfield.**

<sup>1</sup> *The Snyder Dailey News*. March 29, 1953, 12.





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## Captain Richard Sweaney



*The Rangers* are fortunate to have one of their finest “shining stars” as the new captain of Company B: Richard Sweaney.

Captain Sweaney, who was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1948, is one of three children. When he was four, his family moved to the deep South Texas town of Uvalde. After eight years there, they relocated to the border town of Eagle Pass on the banks of the Rio Grande.

Richard graduated from Eagle Pass High School in 1966 and attended Texas A&M University, where he was a proud member of the Corp of Cadets. He graduated in 1970 with a degree in business management in one hand and a commission as a U.S. Army Infantry second lieutenant in the other. After completing airborne training, he became a Ranger for the first time -- an Army Ranger.

By February 1975, Richard was out of the Army and began his career in the Texas Department of Public Safety as a member of the A-75 Class. The class graduated four months later, and Private Sweaney was assigned to Devine as a Texas Highway Patrolman.

Shortly after he arrived in Devine, Richard met a schoolteacher named Donna Ehlinger. In 1976, Richard and Donna were married. They continued to live in Devine until 1985.

In 1985, Richard achieved his lifelong dream when he was accepted into the Texas Rangers. He was stationed in Harlingen, just about as far into South Texas as you can go. It was hard to uproot his family from Devine, but Richard says that the Rio Grande Valley was a wonderful place to live. “It is rich in Ranger history and was a great place to work and get all kinds of experience.”

In 1992, Richard promoted to lieutenant and was stationed with Company B in Dallas. During the seven years that he was a field Ranger, he worked many cases, but three stand out:

### The Nordyke Murders

Rangers seldom enter a case without an invitation from state or local officials, and this case was no exception. The bodies of an elderly retired couple were pulled out of the Rio Grande River. Though they had clearly met with foul play, there were few clues. The Harlingen Police Department and the district attorney's office asked Ranger Sweaney if would assist with the investigation.

After a week of intense work, Richard was able to resolve the case. Fingerprints and stolen credit cards led to a teenage boy and girl in Cleveland, Ohio. After contacting officials there, the couple was arrested. Richard assembled a small task force and flew to Cleveland, where confessions were obtained.

It took two lengthy trials, but in the end, the boy and girl were both sentenced to life imprisonment.

### Drug Task Force

In 1987, there was a "war on drugs" campaign in the Valley. Richard joined forces with members of the A.T.F., D.E.A., and the district attorney's office to work on large drug organizations and transactions. From 1987 to 1992, the small task force, nicknamed the "Tortuga" (Spanish for turtle), arrested over 100 felons and confiscated over 22,000 pounds of marijuana and cocaine.

The Tortuga's work was invaluable to the citizens of Texas and America. Murder and many other crimes go hand in hand with the illegal narcotics that get into our country. The task force helped put a major dent in the drug traffic. Not surprisingly, Richard found his work with the task force very satisfying.

### Flores Murder

A teenager was upset with his mother's attempts to get him to stay in school and quit running with drug users. He didn't like her interfering with his life, and it upset him to the point that he hired another teen to kill her.

Several attempts were made to kill the mother, all unsuccessful. Finally, the teenager came up with what he considered a foolproof plan.

First, he equipped his hit man with a shotgun and a mask and dropped him off on a desolate road. Then he went to his mother and persuaded her to take a drive with him so they could talk over their problems. Arriving at the place where the teen's partner had been left, they got out of the car.

As the two talked, the hit man slipped up to the unsuspecting mother and shot her dead. The son and the shooter got into the car and drove off, leaving the dead woman lying in the middle of the road.

Richard and Southwestern Cattleraiser Special Ranger Hap Roberts began assisting the sheriff's office, and the case was made. The teen killers led the officers to the murder weapon and other incriminating evidence.

One of the teens first went to the Texas Youth Council, but later joined his partner to serve a twenty-year sentence in the state penitentiary.

In 1992, Sergeant Sweaney promoted to lieutenant of Company B in Dallas and became captain on 01 September 2002. He has spent over ten years of his career as Company B's lieutenant.

Upon his promotion to captain, Richard stated, "It's a dream come true to make Ranger Captain. I give the credit to God, my family, the Rangers, the secretaries of Company B, and my friends around the state who have always supported me. I will continue to support the D.P.S. and the Rangers with hard work and dedication. I also will continue my work raising scholarship monies for the children of Rangers, spending time giving talks, and visiting with the citizens of Texas."

For the past ten years, the Sweaney family has lived in Forney. Donna has worked her way up from a fourth-grade teacher to become assistant superintendent of the Forney Independent School District. Richard and Donna have three children: Richard IV, a coach-teacher at Victoria (Texas) Memorial High School; Adam, a senior at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches; and Sarah, a sophomore in Huntsville at Sam Houston State University, where she plays center field for the university's softball team.

The state of Texas and the Rangers are very fortunate to have a man of Captain Richard Sweaney's ability.



Company B's New Commanders: Captain Richard Sweaney (left) and Lieutenant Lane Akin (right)

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