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Remembrances of My Dad: Hollis Milton Sillavan



by Randy Sillavan

My dad, Hollis Milton Sillavan, was born August 26, 1915, at Honey Grove, Fannin County, Texas, but he didn't stay there long. During the 1920s, my grandparents moved around a lot in search of work. They finally settled in Austin County, between Bellville and Hempstead. Dad graduated from Navasota High School and briefly attended the University of Texas in Austin. In 1936, Dad and Mom (the former Sadie Paine) got married and set up housekeeping in nearby Genoa. Dad started off operating a grocery store, but he soon moved on to Houston. There he went to work as a route salesman/truck driver for Dentler's, a potato chip and salad dressing company.

When the United States entered World War II, there was a definite scare of sabotage, and Dad joined the Houston Police Auxiliary. In October 1942, he took the next step when he joined the Houston Police Department as a patrolman. He was soon promoted to detective and worked in the Burglary and Theft Division. I guess the long hours were taking a toll on Mother and Dad because in 1951, they decided they had enough of Houston and moved to Burton. Sheriff Tieman Dippel, a long-time acquaintance, offered Dad a job there as his chief deputy.

I was very fortunate to be the oldest sibling and to have a dad who tried to include me in a lot of things. While he was chief deputy at Brenham, I was still in high school. I spent most Saturdays at the Sheriff's Office dispatching, keeping the office, etc. when the others were out. The Sheriff's Office was very small back then, and the city police did not have a dispatcher at all. In fact, the patrol officers stayed on the street and got their calls either from the Sheriff's Office or by telephone.

In March 1956, I was in Dad's car that he used for work. He was in Houston visiting relatives. I got a call from the Brenham dispatcher saying that Captain

Clint Peoples was trying to get in touch with Dad. I called Dad in Houston and relayed the message. The message was that he had received an appointment in the Rangers. Through the years, Dad, like most Texas lawmen, wanted to be a Texas Ranger and he had made his desire known to Captain Clint Peoples, the commander of Company F in Waco. In those days, if a captain wanted you to be a Ranger, you were a Ranger-no tests, no interviews-that was it.

On April 4, 1956, I drove Dad to Austin, where he was sworn into the Texas Rangers by Colonel Homer Garrison, Jr. Captain Hardy Purvis, commander of Company A in Houston, had decided to retire within the year, and Johnny Klevenhagen was in line to be promoted from sergeant to captain as his replacement. Sergeant Klevenhagen had known Dad since his days in the Houston Police Department and wanted him in Company A. Captain Klevenhagen worked out an arrangement with Captain Peoples to allow Dad to be temporarily stationed at Hearne in Robertson County. He would work an eight-county area for Company F until an opening developed in Company A. Several months later, Captain Purvis retired and Johnny Klevenhagen was promoted to captain. Dad transferred to Brenham in Company A's area of responsibility.

Knowing the Hearne station was only temporary, Mom and my brothers and sister did not move to Brenham, but stayed in Burton. Dad would come home on weekends whenever he could. For Rangers at that time, those weekends were few and far between. One weekend, Mom went to Hearne to stay with Dad for a few weeks and fix up his rent house a bit. My youngest brother Russell and sister Linda were visiting relatives, so that left my brother Bob and I to take care of the chores around the farm. I was going to nearby Blinn College in Brenham at the time.

On Friday morning, July 6, 1956, I got a call from Dad. Constable Milton Lewis had been shot in Somerville. He said he was going back to the house and pick Mom up at a beauty shop. I was to meet them in Somerville and take Mom back to Burton.

Bob and I took off for Somerville, which is about a fifteen-minute drive from Burton. Just as we pulled into the parking lot in front of the drug store where we were to meet Mom and Dad, I saw Dad driving down the street. When Mom got out of the car, she was shaking like a leaf. She said that never again would she ride with Dad when he was in such a hurry. They had covered about three times the distance I had in the same amount of time. Not only that, but there was an electrical problem with Dad's car, and the siren and lights only worked some of the time. This caused her untold anxiety as they flew through intersections.

When I got Mom safely situated back at the farm in Burton, I headed for the Sheriff's Office in Brenham. I had been spending a lot of time dispatching there whenever all the officers were out. I figured that everyone in the office would be in Somerville to assist in the manhunt. I was certainly correct in that assumption. After I got a few hurried instructions, I had the Sheriff's Office basically by myself for the next four days.

Shortly after arriving at the office on Monday morning, a call came in saying that a suspect had been found, and a few officers had him pinned down. There was only one officer with me when the call came in, and he yelled out to me to get all the agencies in the area to return to Somerville to help with the capture. I contacted the sheriff's departments in the surrounding area, as well as the Ranger office in Houston.

I remember a news reporter for the *Brenham Banner Press* came into the office, pulled up a wastebasket near the radio, and listened to the events as they unfolded. I never saw a man get so excited.

Soon I got a message that the manhunt was over. I was to contact the Ranger office in Houston and advise them that the suspect had been shot and killed by Ranger Johnny Klevenhagen.

It wasn't until Dad and Sheriff Dippel returned to the office that I found out exactly what had happened. Investigation had determined that Constable Lewis' shooter, Alton Halson, had been undergoing treatment for mental illness, and his family was scared to death of him. That he was mentally bothered was obvious. During the pursuit, he had stripped off his clothes and had run all over the area, armed with at least two guns. Naked or not, he had successfully eluded officers all weekend. There was a large hill in the creek bottom area called Green's Mountain, and it was here that the suspect had holed up. From his vantage point atop the mountain, Halson could see officers approaching from a distance and thus evade their best efforts to capture him. By Monday morning, most of the officers had returned to their home bases to take care of their own business, leaving just enough officers to prevent the suspect from leaving the area.

That Monday morning Dad, Sergeant Klevenhagen, and Sheriff Dippel had been having breakfast and discussing a way to end this mess. Their final plan was devilishly simple. All three officers would ride up Green's Mountain on horseback from three different directions at once, forcing the suspect to flee down the fourth side of the mountain into the waiting arms of other officers.

Their plan had worked like a charm-almost. They had flushed Halson just as they planned, but instead of going down the fourth side of the mountain as he was supposed to, Halston had begun shooting and had run into a heavily wooded thicket. Klevenhagen had ridden down the hill to get the bloodhounds while Dad and Dippel had kept Halson pinned down. When Klevenhagen had returned with the dogs and their handler from the TDC (Texas Department of Corrections), the suspect had begun shooting at the animals. The handler hadn't wanted any part of this and had run for cover.

Not Johnny Klevenhagen. Still astride his horse, he had charged the suspect. Halson had opened fire on Klevenhagen. He had missed. Klevenhagen had leveled his double-barreled shotgun at Halson. * He didn't miss. He had cut Halson almost in half. The manhunt was over.

Constable Milton Lewis, the original victim, survived his wounds.

Captain Klevenhagen was using a sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun that belonged to the Washington County Sheriff's Office. I remember seeing it many times through the years. It had a pistol grip and was a mean-looking weapon.

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Shortly thereafter, Dad transferred to Company A, just in time to take part in the shutdown of the gambling dens in Galveston. The attorney general of Texas, Will Wilson, had ordered the open gambling in Galveston to cease, and Captain Klevenhagen and the Rangers of Company A took the order to heart. They swept Galveston and busted slot machines, poker tables, roulette

wheels, and other gambling equipment with a vengeance.

For years, at least one Ranger from Company A would stay at the Buccaneer Hotel in Galveston for a two-week period, joined for a week at a time by a Ranger from one of the other companies. Then it was back to his regular duties for four weeks before coming back to Galveston for another two-week stretch. It took three-and-a-half years, but when the Rangers finally checked out of the Buccaneer Hotel, gambling had ceased in Galveston for at least a while.

There is one side note on the gambling crackdown. Not surprisingly, some of the big gamblers were not ready to give up such a moneymaking operation. They bought a motel in the Sealy area and spent thousands of dollars refurbishing it. They moved gambling equipment into place to begin operation away from the heat in the Galveston area. The Rangers found out about the move early on, but waited until everything was in place and a lot of money spent, and then SURPRISE! Just like a repeat of several places in Galveston, the Sealy operation was down and out before it was ever actually up. Texas Rangers are just as deadly with an axe as they are with a six-shooter.

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In the early 1960s, I was working at the Houston Police Department. One morning, an old sergeant in the jail called me and told me to come up to the men's cell block. He led me down a row of units and said he wanted me to meet someone. There was a prisoner in one of the cells that looked to be in his early forties. The sergeant had been talking to the prisoner and had mentioned that there was an officer on the Houston Police Department named Sillavan. That's when the prisoner asked to see me.

When I walked up to him, the prisoner kind of laughed and said, "I believe that one of your relatives come pretty close to killing me a few nights ago." He continued, "I don't believe I have been any closer to death."

He told me he and another character had been hijacking (robbing) warehouses in Houston, but had lately been working their way to other locations. They had hit a house in Sealy around Christmas and were on their way to La Grange a few days later to hit another one, the infamous Chicken Ranch, which was the subject of the Burt Reynolds and Dolly Parton movie, *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*.

The two burglars had been heading up Highway 71 between Columbus and La Grange when they had passed a car sitting off the highway. The car had pulled onto the road, fell in behind them, hit the siren, and flashed his lights. He said they had pulled over and he had gotten his pistol out. He had started to open his door when he noticed the officer getting out of the other car was a guy he remembered from his earlier days in Houston-Hollis Sillavan. He also remembered that Dad worked with another Houston police officer named Woody Stephenson.

He said he had quickly dropped his gun on the floorboard, put his hands out the window, and told his buddy to do the same. He told me he had just known that they were about to be blown away if they made the slightest incorrect move. He had known Dad was a cop you did not mess with. He also told me that when he had found out Dad was now a Texas Ranger, he had actually peed in his pants. This guy had been a thief, burglar, and hijacker all his life. He had been arrested several years ago by Dad and Woody Stephenson when they worked burglary and theft at the Houston Police Department. Apparently,

Dad and Woody had made quite an impression on that old thief.

I later talked to my dad about the encounter, and he kind of laughed. Dad said he had worked on the Sealy hijacking and had been in touch with Brenham Police Department and Harris County officers. They had believed these two guys were hitting a bunch of places. He had gotten a call at home from one of the Houston officers, who had told him they had information that the La Grange whorehouse was going to be hit. Dad said he had driven out on Highway 71 and pulled off to check out the traffic for a while. He said he had been sitting there for only a short time when a car passed, fitting the description of the car he had been given. The same prisoner I had talked to had said, "Mr. Sillavan, don't shoot me!" and had dropped to the ground. Dad said he had called for a wrecker to pick up the crooks' car and took them to the jail in Columbus.

End of story.

Many a time I have been sitting in my dad's living room when he would get a call from some informant in Houston that he had developed as far back as the 1940s. I cannot get over how he maintained contact with the underworld for over twenty years after leaving the Houston Police Department. I was always running into some old character while I was working at the Houston Police Department who would ask me if I was kin to Hollis Sillavan. When I would say yes, they usually would say, "That guy arrested me once and that was enough!" I never heard one of them really say anything bad about Dad, but they always said they didn't want to run into him a second time.

I guess that's what the whorehouse hijacker meant when he said, "I don't believe I have ever been closer to death." That was his second encounter with Dad. This robber had a gun and was planning to use it until he recognized the officer who had stopped him.

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In 1966, a young lady was savagely sexually assaulted by six men in El Campo, Texas. Dad was stationed in Columbus at the time and was called to the scene by Sheriff Mike Flournoy. This case is a perfect illustration of the power of inter-agency cooperation in law enforcement. Three Texas Rangers, Department of Public Safety lab personnel, the Sheriff's Department, Police Department, and the Highway Patrol all worked together, and after some ninety hours, arrested and charged all six suspects.

I do not have a lot of details regarding the case, but I did see a letter sent to my dad by the victim, thanking him for his help in apprehending the suspects and more importantly, helping her cope with such a traumatic experience. I know that Dad called in Detective Lanny Dixon from the Houston Police Department Homicide Division to work and comfort the victim. Lanny was one of the first female detectives in the Houston Police Department and specialized in sexual assault cases for years. She later married Woody Stephenson. Upon their retirement, they moved to Lake Buchanan where Lanny served many years as the justice of the peace.

When hurricane Carla hit the Texas Gulf Coast, the Rangers were sent to the coastal area to assist in aiding the victims, preventing looting, and generally offering assistance. I believe Dad first went to the Port O'Connor area while

the winds were still near hurricane force. He remained down there for several days and received several letters from citizens expressing their appreciation.

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I believe it was during the 1960 election that Dad received a telephone call from Colonel Homer Garrison. Colonel Garrison directed him to go to Rio Grande City before the polls closed, and impound all the voting boxes in the county, and lock them in a bank vault, and make sure they were secure until they could be properly counted. Several other Rangers were sent to different counties in the valley with similar orders. The state of Texas was trying to take every precaution to see that George Paar, the Duke of Duval, did not steal yet another election.

I remember Dad later saying he drove about three hundred miles in four hours. A couple of times, a Highway Patrolman turned around on him to stop him. Dad would identify himself via the radio and the response from the trooper was usually: something like, "I would never catch you anyway."

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Another incident I recall occurred when my family was visiting my parents. Dad got a call from the sheriff in Hallettsville. He stated that he had three suspected burglars in custody and was sure they were good for numerous cases in the area. Several attempts had been made to interrogate them, but to no avail. The sheriff asked Dad to take a crack at them. I rode down with Dad, and after the sheriff filled him in on some of the details, he went into a room to talk to the suspects one at a time. I remained in the Sheriff's Office, visiting. In less than thirty minutes, Dad came out and told the sheriff that the three were ready to make written statements, and we went back to Columbus. I have no idea what went on in the interrogation room, but apparently a Texas Ranger got his message across.

§

In 1959, Dad transferred to Columbus, and that was his home station until his retirement in April of 1976. He established a great working relationship with all the law enforcement agencies throughout his district and maintained his old contacts with the Houston Police Department and other offices throughout the state. He was a firm advocate of officers from all jurisdictions and levels working together to stop criminal activity. He was an active member of numerous organizations such as the Southeast Texas Association for Identification & Investigation, Texas Division of the International Association for Identification, Sheriffs Association, and many others.

I suppose that years of too many cases and far too many hours were typical of most Rangers. It all caught up with Dad in 1970 when he had open-heart surgery. But it only slowed him down for a short time before he was up and at it again. I really did not notice his slowing down, even though Eddie Oliver, his captain in Houston, tried to get him to pace himself. I believe Dad really wanted to get his twenty years in and retire. He still never gave less than one hundred percent and was able to pull his weight and get the job done. I had several conversations with Johnny Krumnow, who was the Company A sergeant during this time. He told me that he and Captain Oliver worried about Dad overdoing it and tried to send someone to help out whenever possible, but usually to no avail.

Dad did get his twenty years in and retired from the Texas Rangers in April of 1976. But typical of Dad, he didn't stay retired. Waller County District Attorney Oliver Kitzman appointed him a special investigator in his office. In January of 1977, though, Dad's heart just gave out.

Mom continues to live in Columbus and my sister Linda lives in Eagle Lake. My brother Russell was a Houston Police officer, an officer in Eagle Lake, and chief of police in Brookshire before deciding he had enough of law enforcement. He currently lives in Sealy, Texas. Brother Bob spent several years with the Harris County Sheriff's Department and then was a deputy for Jim Flourney (portrayed by Burt Reynolds in the *Greatest Little Whorehouse in Texas*) at La Grange during the Chicken Ranch mess. Flourney had been a Texas Ranger before becoming sheriff of Fayette County, and he and Dad had known one another for several years. Bob left law enforcement when Jim went out of office. Sadly, Bob died of cancer last year (2000). He had lived in LaGrange for several years.

As for me, I went to work at the Houston Police Department in August of 1957. I worked in the Identification Division as a fingerprint specialist, and later became the first official firearms examiner (ballistics) in the department. I spent 10 years as the assistant superintendent of the division, retiring in 1982. I tried working in the insurance and investment business for a few years, but couldn't get law enforcement out of my blood. In 1989, I went to work for the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office as a crime scene investigator. I finally retired for good in March 1999 as a lieutenant. I was honored as the 100 Club Officer of the Year in 1969 and again in 1999.

I am proud to say that I have three fine sons who have all worked in law enforcement. Ron, my middle son, has worked for the Houston Police Department and the Brazoria County Sheriff's Department. He is currently in his twelfth year as an officer with the Webster Police Department. My oldest, Rick, spent some fifteen years working at Texas Department of Corrections and the Brazoria County Sheriff's Office. My youngest, Mike, worked for the Brazoria County Sheriff's Office and the Angleton Police Department for several years before getting into the automobile business.

My dad's brother John retired from the Houston Police Department. Currently, several nephews and cousins are law enforcement officers.

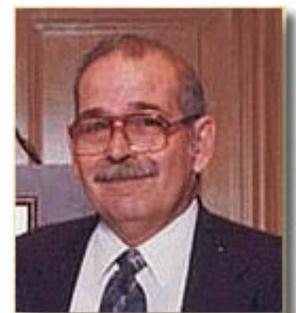
I guess my dad started something when he went to work as an auxiliary officer in Houston in 1941.

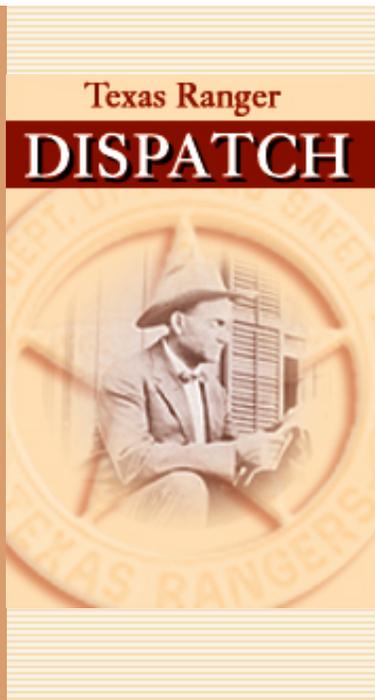
But first, last, and always, my dad was a Texas Ranger.

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Being a Sillavan, police work was a natural for Randy. He started in August 1957 with the Houston Police Department, ending up in the Identification Division. He was a fingerprint specialist and became the first Houston Police Department official firearms examiner (ballistics). Before retiring in 1982, he spent ten years as assistant superintendent of the Identification Department.

Randy tried working in the insurance and investment business for a few years, but the call of law





enforcement was too strong. In 1989, he went to work for the Montgomery (Conroe) County Sheriff's Office as a crime scene investigator. Before his retirement in March 1999, Randy had risen to the rank of lieutenant and had been honored as the 100 Club Officer of the Year in 1969 and again in 1999.

Texas Ranger Hollis Sillavan would be proud of his children and grandchildren. His son Randy is the proud father of three fine boys who have all worked in law enforcement. Ron worked for the Houston Police Department, Brazoria County Sheriff's Office, and is currently working as an officer with the Webster [Texas] Police Department. Another son, Rick, spent fifteen years working for the Texas Department of Corrections and the Brazoria County Sheriff's Office. Randy's youngest son, Mike, also worked for the Brazoria County Sheriff's Office before joining the Angleton [Texas] Police Department. Randy also has several nephews and cousins currently in law enforcement.

[Top](#)

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