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20th Century Shining Star:

Capt. Jay Banks

by Robert Nieman

Born near Munday, Texas, on April 22, 1912, Jay Banks was the fourth child of tenant farmers John and Julia Banks. By the time he was three years old, his parents had left Knox County and were living a short distance from Perrin in Jack County. Jay was still in school when the pull of family drew the family back to Knox County. Jay graduated from Girard (Kent County) High School in 1930.

In his autobiography, Cast A Long Shadow, Jay said that he had fond memories of his childhood days along the Brazos River. He added that, according to standards of the time, the Banks family lived well.

Jay’s first job away from home began when he and his older brother Young jumped a freight train and rode it to Bay City, Texas. Young had heard that they could get work building a bridge in the Gulf Coast city. He was correct, and the brothers soon found themselves shoveling sand and gravel ten hours a day for the princely sum of twenty-five cents an hour.

After leaving Bay City, the brothers returned to Perrin. Jay didn’t stay long. Joined by his Uncle Homer, he was soon on another freight train, this time headed west. Jay and his uncle rode the rails to California and back to Texas.

He was back home in Perrin when he got his first taste of law enforcement. Guy Morgan was the sheriff of Jack County and used Jay from time to time as a special deputy. By 1936, oil had been discovered in Jack County. As in all boom areas, the lawless element swarmed into the county. Jay decided to run for constable against a well-liked incumbent. To his great surprise, he won the election. On January 1, 1937, Jay Banks started down the path that would lead him to the Texas Rangers.

It was while Jay was a constable that he met Beluah Anderson. The two fell in love, married, and had two daughters, Linda and Julia Ann. It was a marriage that would only to broken by death.
In 1938, the opportunity came to join the Texas Highway Patrol. On April 18, Jay became a student patrolman with a salary of $125 per month. After graduation on June 1, he was assigned as a Highway Patrolman in the South Texas city of Alice. In the ensuing years, he was stationed in Fort Worth and Denton.

On September 1, 1947, Jay Banks fulfilled a longtime dream when he became a Texas Ranger. His first duty station was in Graham. He continued there until January 1, 1949, when he transferred to Dallas. There he spent the rest of his career as a field Ranger, then sergeant, and finally as the captain of Company B. He left the Rangers on March 10, 1960. By then, his pay had increased to the dizzying height of $516.66 per month.

In the eleven years that he wore the badge of a Texas Ranger, Jay worked just about every kind of crime imaginable. Several stand out.

**Mickey Cohen Case**

In 1950, California mobster Mickey Cohen tried to move his gambling operation into Texas. He ran into some major obstacles—Jay Banks and the Texas Rangers! Cohen arrived in Wichita Falls to a less than hospitable reception. The director of the Department of Public Safety, Colonel Homer Garrison, ordered the Rangers to arrest the gangster on sight and escort him right back out of Texas.

Cohen managed to get from the airport to the Kemp Hotel before the Rangers caught up with him. He was sleeping peacefully when he was abruptly awakened by Jay and his fellow Rangers standing over his bed. Not only did the Rangers escort Cohen to the airport, but Jay also personally walked him onto the plane.

On the plane, Jay, in no uncertain words, warned the Mafia chief to get out of Texas—and stay out. Cohen complained bitterly to the press about the lack of Texas hospitality he had been shown, but he followed Jay’s advice and never came back to the Lone Star State.

**Mansfield, Texas, Integration Case**

Integration created many explosive situations throughout the United States in 1956. Mansfield, Texas, was no exception. Feeling ran high throughout the community. In an effort to defuse the ticking time bomb, Governor Allen Shivers ordered the Rangers onto the town’s school campus. Sergeant Banks and his fellow Rangers kept things quite and peaceful. The Rangers let it be known to all involved that they were not on anyone’s side: their only job was to keep the peace. And keep the peace they did, all without having to use any excessive force. With their evenhanded display of impartiality, Jay and the Rangers gained not only the respect of the locals, but also the public gratitude of state and federal authorities.

**Gene Paul Norris**

Throughout his career, Jay was involved in many deadly encounters. None was more lethal than the one with Gene Paul
Norris and his partner, “Silent” Bill Humphrey.

Gene Paul Norris was probably the most evil killer that ever disgraced Texas. He was even worse than the infamous John Wesley Hardin, who reigned terror eighty years earlier.

Looks can be deceiving, and Norris certainly filled that bill. He dressed neatly, was soft-spoken, and had a good vocabulary. But his flip side was darker than black. When Jay put an end to Norris’ murderous career, it was believed that Norris had killed forty to fifty people. He took a particular joy in not just killing, but killing in as brutal a way as possible. It did not matter to him who he murdered; he would slaughter a woman as quickly as he would a man. As more than one Ranger said, half the abandoned wells in rural Texas had a body put in it by Gene Paul Norris.

The Norris brothers, Pete and Gene Paul, were from Cement, Oklahoma. Pete made quite a name for himself first in Oklahoma and then later in Houston. He became the FBI’s Public Enemy Number One in Texas and Oklahoma before being captured and sentenced to several hundred years’ of stacked sentences in the Texas prison system.

Gene Paul idolized his older brother and followed him in crime from Oklahoma to Texas. Although still a teenager, Gene Paul soon devised a successful plan to break Pete out of prison. Then the brothers started robbing grocery stores, but were soon captured in Conroe, Texas. Gene Paul quickly broke out, but was just as quickly recaptured and sentenced for aiding his brother’s prison escape. He had already served two years in an Oklahoma reform school and had another sentence awaiting him, but Oklahoma decided to let him serve his reform-school time in Texas.

In the following years, Norris murdered and robbed his way through Texas and Oklahoma. Every time the law thought they had the killer, the witnesses ended up being either terrorized or dead. Either way, no one testified against Norris. But by 1957, his time was running out.

An informant told law officers that Norris and his partner Bill Humphrey, who was just as deadly a killer, planned to rob the Carswell Air Force Base bank. The base was located just outside Fort Worth, and that put the killer on a collision course with Jay Banks.

In the following days, the informant kept the Rangers up to date with all of Norris’ plans except for the day of the robbery. That, Norris kept to himself.

Norris and Humphrey had recently committed an unusually brutal murder of an elderly couple in Houston. The couple had committed the unpardonable sin of testifying against his brother Pete. In Gene Paul’s mind, no one could do that and live.

The Ranger captain in Houston, Johnny Klevenhagen http://www.texasranger.org/dispatch/10/Pages/Klevenhagen.htm had been able to secure a warrant for the arrest of the murdering duo. Unfortunately, Norris was an expert at eluding the law, and this time was no exception.
Klevenhagen wanted more than anything to bring down the psychopathic killer. Jay Banks knew his fellow captain’s feelings, so he called him and told him about the upcoming planned bank robbery. More importantly, he asked Klevenhagen if he wanted to come to Fort Worth. The commander of Company A almost burned up the highway between Houston and Fort Worth.

Knowing what but not when, Jay and fellow lawmen started looking for the outlaws. Their time paid off, and Norris and Humphrey were seen traveling at a high rate of speed on Meandering Road near Carswell Air Force Base.

Heading toward the area, the Rangers soon spotted the pair, and the race was on. Humphrey was driving the outlaw car. Jay in pursuit, Ranger Jim Ray [http://www.texasranger.org/dispatch/2/Ray.htm](http://www.texasranger.org/dispatch/2/Ray.htm) and [http://www.texasranger.org/memorials/Ray_Jim.htm](http://www.texasranger.org/memorials/Ray_Jim.htm) was in a second car right behind his captain.

Hitting speeds of 115 mph, the chase continued. Finally, Humphrey made a fatal mistake: he turned onto a country road that was covered with caliche (crushed rock). It had rained shortly before, and the road surface was very slick. When Humphrey turned onto the road, he fishtailed several times before straightening out. Jays did two complete spins himself, but ended up heading in the right direction.

The race continued along the road that ran beside the swollen Walnut Creek. All the while, Norris and Klevenhagen were hanging out their respective car windows, firing away at one another. Just outside the tiny community of Springtown, the chase came to an end. Humphrey tried to make a left turn when his ’57 Chevy slid off the road and slammed into a tree.

Jay tried to stop behind the killers’ car, but instead slid right up beside it. He said later that this really worried him. He was concerned that Norris would be able to level his deadly shotgun—Norris’ weapon of choice—at the Rangers. He need not have worried; Norris and Humphrey hit the ground running.

Jay rolled out of his Dodge and gave chase. In a desperate effort to escape, Humphrey and Norris jumped into the flooded Walnut Creek and made for the far shore. Humphrey headed north and made it to a small island in the creek. He died on that island in a hail of Jay’s gunfire.

Meanwhile, Norris was trying to go straight across the creek. He made it to the water’s edge. As Jay said, the most heartless of killers, Gene Paul Norris, “died screaming like a baby.”

**Braniff Airlines**

With all the high-profile cases that he worked, it is little wonder that Jay Banks was well known to the public. In 1956, Braniff Airlines had just been awarded a Dallas-to-New York City route. The company successfully planned a high-publicity, inaugural flight. Among the celebrities on board were June Pritchard, Miss Texas of 1955, and “the famous Texas Ranger” Jay Banks.
As for Jay Banks, he did the Rangers and the state of Texas proud. Dressed in boots, cowboy hat, and two six-shooters, he looked the way a Ranger should look. He was the hit of the town. Jay appeared on three major television shows: *Name That Tune*, *What’s My Line*, and *The Today Show*. On *Name That Tune*, he proved that, as great a lawman as he was, he was quite the opposite when it naming music. He identified *The Eyes of Texas* as *I’ve Been Working on the Railroad*. He fared better on *What’s My Line*. He was dressed in a business suit and stumped the panel. On *The Today Show* he learned the hard way what most actors have always known: don’t appear with a baby or a pet. The chimpanzee, J. Fred Muggs, stole the show.

Ending a great career, Jay Banks left the Rangers in 1960. After his Ranger years, he served as the chief of police in the Texas cities of Big Springs, Palestine, and Gladewater. He died August 2, 1987.

In the main lobby at Dallas’ Love Field is a statue of Texas Ranger entitled *Legend In Bronze*. Captain Jay Banks, Captain of Company "B", Texas Rangers, was the model used by sculptor Clint Grant.

Statue of Jay Banks *Legend in Bronze* (right of center) at the Love Field Airport in Dallas, Texas ©2004 James C. Kruggel - Used by Permission http://www.myaviation.net/