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20th Century Shining Star:

Capt. Johnny Klevenhagen

“That man had a fire burning in him like no man I’ve ever known.” So said Captain Jim Ray. This sentiment was echoed by Ed Gooding, the last surviving Ranger who had the honor of serving under Captain Johnny Klevenhagen, a member of the Ranger Hall of Fame.

Captain Klevenhagen made Ed Gooding a Ranger in 1957. Ed served under him until the next year. Ed says that several things

always stick in his mind about the captain. For one thing, he lived on coffee and cigarettes. Another memory is Klevenhagen’s call letters. It didn’t matter what time of day or night it was, it was normal to hear, “This is number two.” But the most important thing was that the captain never said, “You go.” Ed says that the words were always, “Let’s go.”

Besides his intelligence and capability for hard work, Klevenhagen was noted for one other thing—his explosive temper. In his book, *Ed Gooding: Soldier, Texas Ranger*, Ed describes an incident that is almost unbelievable.

The noted defense attorney Percy Foreman was cross-examining Klevenhagen and made the mistake of questioning his integrity. Bad, bad mistake on Foreman’s part. Klevenhagen exploded out of the witness chair with blood in his eyes. Foreman knew he had gone too far. He turned and ran as fast as his legs would carry him. Klevenhagen was hard on his heels.

The next time Foreman was seen, he was bandaged from head to toe, was on crutches, and had what he said was a broken leg. He claimed he was the victim of Ranger justice. Doctors who examined Foreman said that they had found no broken bones.

Ed said that, unfortunately, all those hours and tension plus the coffee and cigarettes finally caught up with Klevenhagen. “We buried him on Thanksgiving Day 1958 in San Antonio.”

John Joseph Klevenhagen was born on a farm near New Braunfels, Texas, on June 2, 1912. When he was a youngster, rustlers struck several ranches in Comal County, including the Klevenhagen ranch. The Rangers came in and drove the rustlers out. Klevenhagen would later say that the moment he first saw the Texas Rangers, he knew that one day he too would be one of them.

But being a Ranger would have to wait. Times were hard, and Klevenhagen dropped out of school after the eighth grade to help on the family ranch. The family continued to be strapped for cash, however, so when he was sixteen, he went to work in nearby San Antonio for the San Antonio Electric Company.

Klevenhagen worked as a lineman for a year, but still burned to be a lawman. Being only seventeen presented a problem, but not an insurmountable one. He was six feet, two inches tall, and all the outdoor work on the ranch and the mustache he had grown made him look older. But he still had to prove his age.

In order to vote at that time in Texas history, you had to pay a poll tax and be twenty-one years old. Neither of these requirements created much of a problem for an enterprising young man with a fire burning inside him. The poll tax was one dollar, and if you didn't have the dollar, a generous politician would gladly pay it for you. Of course, it was then understood that you would vote the "right way" at polling booth.

Klevenhagen knew the routine. Soon he was armed with a voting poll tax receipt showing he was twenty-one years of age. He became the newest motorcycle patrolman of the San Antonio Police Department.

In 1934, Constable Will Wood hired Klevenhagen away from the police department as a deputy constable in San Antonio's Precinct 1. Klevenhagen worked in this job until 1936, when Wood was elected sheriff of Bexar County (San Antonio). One of the first things the newly elected sheriff did was hire his former deputy constable as an investigator for the sheriff's office.

It wasn't all work for Klevenhagen. In 1933, he had met a beautiful young blond at the Bexar County Courthouse refreshment stand. Her name was Viola Wolff. A romance sparked, and they married on May 7, 1935. This union lasted through Klevenhagen's lifetime. The couple had one son, Johnny Jr. The younger Klevenhagen would himself become a great Texas lawman when he served as the sheriff of Harris County (Houston).

In 1940, Will Wood was defeated for reelection, but Klevenhagen didn't miss a beat. Bexar County District Attorney Lawrence Shook knew how good the deputy was, and he quickly hired him as his criminal investigator. As expected, Klevenhagen hit the ground running and proved to be one of the finest investigators to ever hold the job. But he wasn't destined to be in that position for long. His lifetime dream was about to come true.

Klevenhagen was in his office one August day in 1941 when he got a call from Colonel Homer Garrison, chief of the Texas Department of Public Safety. The colonel told Klevenhagen that he was now his newest Ranger, and his duty station would be Houston. The yell Klevenhagen let out could be heard all over the courthouse.

Standing in his office in Austin a few days later, Colonel Homer Garrison swore in the future Hall of Famer as one of only forty-five Texas Rangers. It was August 14, 1941.

The captain of Company A was a tough old war-horse named Hardy Purvis. He told Klevenhagen that he would handle just about every crime imaginable, and he would be expected to work sixty to seventy hours per week. Of course with Johnny Klevenhagen, this was a short time. He would also get to do all of this for \$175 per month. To Klevenhagen's way of thinking, all of this was a

small price to pay in order to have the honor of wearing the greatest badge in all of law enforcement.

For the next seventeen years, Johnny Klevenhagen left a record of crime busting that would be the envy of any law officer in the world.

Though he didn't fire any fatal shots, Klevenhagen was involved in one of the most famous gunfights in Texas history. No more deadly killer ever traveled the roads of Texas than Gene Paul Norris—and that includes John Wesley Hardin. It is probable that during his thirty-five years, Norris murdered as many as fifty people. As Ed Gooding said, there are old water wells all over Texas that Norris stuffed bodies in. He was arrested at least twenty-five times and sent to prison six times. He committed just about every crime in the books.

Norris didn't care: he would kill anybody if the price were right. In between assassinations, he would squeeze in armed robberies and many other felonies too numerous to mention.

Norris also had a long memory. Twenty years earlier, his brother Pete had been listed as public enemy number one on the Texas-Oklahoma Most Wanted List. Pete was convicted and sentenced to ninety-nine years in prison for murdering a bookie. His conviction was based mostly on the testimony of another bookie named Johnnie Brannan. Norris and his brother had both sworn that Brannan would die.

Houston police received a call from a known associate of Brannan. He said that he had been trying for hours to telephone Brannan, all to no avail. A patrol car was dispatched to Brannan's home. The officers knocked on the door, but received no reply. They tried the front door and found it unlocked. When they entered the house, they were greeted with a gruesome sight. Both Brannan and his wife were dead, and the heads of both victims had been beaten to bloody pulp. In fact, Brannan had been hit so hard that one of his eyeballs had been literally knocked from his head.

The crime-scene investigation revealed that, after the killers had massacred their victims, they had gone into the bathroom and washed the blood off themselves. Then they had calmly gone into the kitchen and drunk coffee.

Klevenhagen knew of only one man who killed like this—Gene Paul Norris, the man who had earned the nickname, "The Smiling Killer." But knowing and proving are two entirely different things.

A few days after the murders, a Temple, Texas, police officer contacted Klevenhagen and told him that William Carl Humphrey, a known associate of Norris, had been arrested for drunkenness. This by itself was nothing unusual, but what had caught the young officer's attention was the huge gold ring shaped like a horseshoe that Humphrey was wearing. Brannan had been known to wear just such a ring for luck.

Ed Gooding said that Klevenhagen gave the entire company orders to turn the whole area upside down, especially Houston and Galveston where the

suspects were known to hang out. This was Ed's area. The orders were simple: "Find Gene Paul Norris. And don't take any chances with this mad-dog killer." Ed said that no one had to draw any of the Rangers a picture.

Shortly thereafter, Klevenhagen got a call from Company B's commander, Captain Jay Banks. Fort Worth Police Chief Cato Hightower had received a reliable tip that Norris and Humphrey were in the Fort Worth area and were planning to rob the Fort Worth National Bank on Carswell Air Force Base on April 30. Captain Banks asked his Company A counterpart if he could come to Dallas. Almost before Banks could hang up the phone, Klevenhagen was on his way to Dallas.



On April 29, Banks was driving Klevenhagen and Hightower near a house where they thought Norris was holding up. They suddenly spotted Norris and Humphrey in a car, and the chase was on. For the next several minutes, a running gunfight covered an area over much of the western area of Fort Worth. Norris was behind the wheel of the fugitives' vehicle and Humphrey kept up a steady fire at the pursuing Rangers. By this time, Texas Ranger Jim Ray had joined Klevenhagen and his men in a second car. The Rangers were returning a steady fire themselves. As much as Norris tried, he couldn't shake the cars being driven by Banks and Ray.

All three vehicles roared through the Springtown community. For some unknown reason, Norris suddenly turned off the blacktop onto a small muddy road that ran along the banks of Walnut Creek. The road was split, with a median separating the traffic directions. Klevenhagen, Humphrey, and Banks took one of the roads, and Ray took the other. There was no way that Norris and Humphrey were going to double back.

Charging into a curve too fast, Norris suddenly slid off the road and into two trees. Though shaken, Norris and Humphrey stumbled out of their car and started running up a nearby hill. Banks came slid to a halt right behind the outlaws' car. Moments later, Jim Ray also pulled into the battle scene.

This writer had heard from more than one person that Jim Ray killed Carl Humphrey. Over the years, I have been honored to develop a close relationship with this very private retired Ranger captain and chief of the DPS Criminal Law Enforcement Division. One day I just asked him, "Captain Jim, did you kill Carl Humphrey?" His answer was very Jim Ray—simple and straight to the point:

I've heard this for years, but I never fired a shot that day. When I arrived at the scene, I saw Humphrey lying dead on the hillside. As I jumped out of the car, Klevenhagen yelled at me, "He's getting away! Give me a gun!" [His weapons were empty from the running gunfight.] I had my shotgun in my hands, and I just tossed it to him. Just as my shotgun reached Klevenhagen, we heard Norris give out a scream like a banshee, and then came a full burst from Jay's [Banks] M-3 [an M-1 turned up to full automatic, much like the M-14].

Norris, in front of Humphrey, had made it over the hill and was in the middle of Walnut Creek when Banks caught up with him. Norris surely knew what was about to happen, but he also knew that all he had waiting for him if he surrendered was the electric chair. He started shooting and, in turn, he took a full twenty-eight rounds. Banks started at Norris' ankles and worked his way to the top of his head. As Jim Ray told me, "He shot him to pieces."

Thus ended the career of the worst killer in Texas since John Wesley Hardin.

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For those who remember, Galveston's Balinese Room was THE finest nightclub on the Gulf Coast. In the 1940s and 50s, many big names in the business appeared there at one time or another: Frank Sinatra, Groucho Marx, Bing Crosby, and Phil Harris, to name but a few.



Balinese Club ©2003, Robert Nieman

The club wasn't just for singing and eating--it was also an illegal casino. The Balinese Room wasn't the only casino operating on Galveston Island, though. There were dozens.

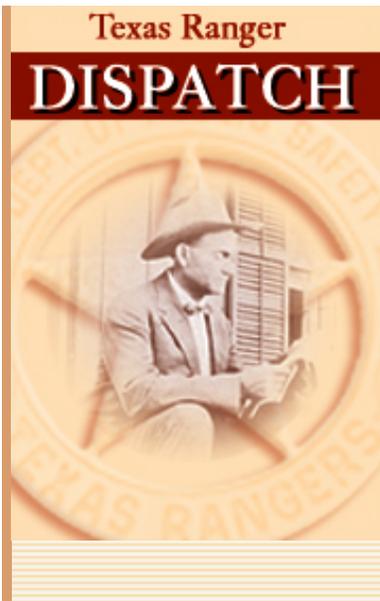
All this activity brought the Rangers in.

Klevenhagen's Company A, which covered the area, was ordered to shut Galveston down. The Balinese Room was the crown jewel of the casinos, and the Rangers set their sights on bringing it down first.

The Balinese Room was built on a pier hanging deep into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The casino was located on the far end of the building. Ed Gooding said that by the time they would raid the casino and run to the end of the building, all the gambling equipment would have miraculously disappeared. No matter how hard they tried or how fast they ran, the Rangers could never seem to catch the casino in operation.

Johnny Klevenhagen became an exclusive member of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame not only because he was one of the hardest working Rangers in history, but also one of the smartest. He ordered his Rangers to march into the club when it opened, sit down in the casino, not take anything free gratis, and stay there until they closed. At first, the club operators didn't take the Ranger threat seriously. When the Rangers walked in, the band would even play "The Eyes of Texas."

The owners didn't laugh for long. With the Rangers sitting in full view, the customers' activities ground to a halt—if the customers came in at all. The owners were soon begging Klevenhagen for mercy, but he wasn't having any part of any deal except to shut them down. Before long, the owners threw in the towel and the Balinese Room closed.



That was only the beginning. The Rangers next checked into the Buccaneer Hotel near the beach, and they didn't check out for three and a half years! When the Rangers did leave, gambling on Galveston Island was finished.

Unfortunately, when the Rangers checked out of the Buccaneer Hotel, Captain Johnny Klevenhagen had been dead for two and a half years. As Ed Gooding said, "A heart attack may have been the official cause of his death, but don't you believe it. He literally worked himself to death."

by Robert Nieman

[For a full description of the Galveston casino wars, see the book, *Ed Gooding: Soldier, Texas Ranger.*]

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