



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 It has been superseded by this online archive of Texas Ranger history.

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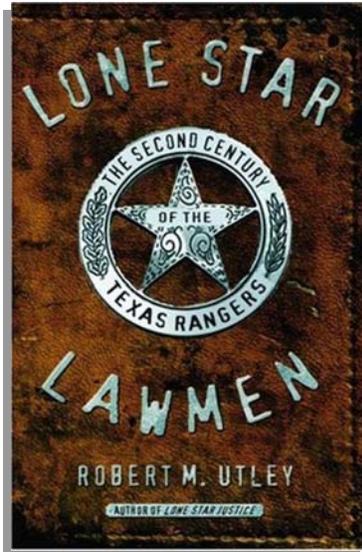
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Funded in part by grants from
the Texas Ranger Association Foundation

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Lone Star Lawmen

The Second Century of the Texas Rangers

by **Robert M. Utley**

New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Appendices, endnotes, selected bibliography, index, photographs, maps.
xiii + 390 pages, hardcover \$20.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-515444-3.

The catalog for **Amazon.com** currently lists more than 5,000 books related to the Texas Rangers. Aside from a handful of new autobiographies and biographies, few works published during the last 50 years offer new source material or original insights. Most rehash well-known events, offer controversial interpretations for the sake of controversy, or are reprints of classics. Thankfully, there have been a few exceptions, notably Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler's *The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution* and Stephen Moore's *Savage Frontier* series. But new scholarship is rare, and the majority of books serve primarily to keep the story of the Texas Rangers in print.

Books about the Texas Rangers are almost as old as the Ranger service itself. During the Mexican War, battlefield newspaper correspondents created significant public interest in the Texas Rangers. At this time, the Rangers were unorthodox and colorfully costumed militiamen who had left the Texas Ranger service to assist the US Army against Mexico. *Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch's Texas Rangers*, the earliest book to be widely circulated, was published in 1847 during this popularity. In the ensuing 160 years, the Rangers have been a subject of fascination to generations of biographers, historians, and readers.

Conspicuously absent, however, are histories of the service since the formation of the Texas Department of Public Safety in 1935. A casual observer might assume that the history of the Rangers ended with either the 1901 or 1935 reorganizations. Many authors have claimed to be writing the definitive book about the modern Texas Ranger service, but nothing has materialized.

Robert Utley's *Lone Star Lawmen: the Second Century of the Texas Rangers* is the first attempt at a comprehensive history of the modern Texas Rangers since Walter Prescott Webb wrote his legendary *The Texas Rangers: a Century of Frontier Defense* in 1935. *Lone Star Lawmen* is the second volume in Utley's survey of Ranger history,



and although parts of it are likely to be controversial, it is not revisionist by nature. Ranger enthusiasts will find it to be essential to an understanding of the modern Texas Ranger service.

Webb's book was the last survey of modern Texas Ranger service. It remains the best-known general history of the organization and is a massive book (584 pages), published to coincide with the Texas Centennial in 1936. Despite errors of fact, omissions, and the embellishment of charismatic figures, *Texas Rangers* remains the gold standard for Ranger historians. The University of Texas Press claims that it has never gone out of print since its publication 71 years ago. Webb's previous breakthrough book, *The Great Plains* (1931), also shares that distinction.

Webb and Utley were able to research and write their works because of extraordinary access to active and retired Texas Rangers. Webb was Texas's leading historian of the 1930s, and he became fast friends with such luminaries as Captain Frank Hamer, John R. Hughes, and Manny Gault. Like Webb, Utley's reputation and networking with Ranger enthusiasts provided him access to the modern equivalent of those legendary figures.

In many ways, Utley's book is a logical continuation of Webb's work. However, Webb had an additional aim: he hoped to contribute to the survival of the Rangers. While Webb was working on his book, the Texas legislature debated and then created the Texas Department of Public Safety to diffuse widespread political corruption. Many doubted that the long independent Rangers could retain the organization's position and prestige or survive the creation of the DPS. Webb crafted *Texas Rangers* to promote the contributions and heritage of the Ranger service and build support for its survival. Failing that, the book was to be a eulogy for the legendary Texas and American organization.

How much did Webb help the Texas Rangers? No one knows, but the Ranger service emerged from reorganization as the flagship investigative division of the Texas Department of Public Safety. Webb's book was a bestseller, and it further burnished the luster of the Texas Ranger service. The Rangers became one of the main themes of the 1936 Texas Centennial, which featured a visiting Shirley Temple dressed as Ranger. In the next decade, dozens of Hollywood western movies featured Texas Rangers as lead characters.

Toward the end of his life, Webb realized that *Texas Rangers* needed a major revision to correct errors and to bring it up to date. Unfortunately, he died in 1963 before the project gained momentum. In the decades that followed, there were persistent rumors that various authors were contemplating a revised edition of the work. Nothing materialized, though, and for 72 years, all published histories of the Texas Rangers ended in 1935. A literary "sound barrier" came to exist through which no writers could seemingly pass.

There are four reasons that writing modern Ranger history can be a challenge. First, there is the conservative and traditional nature of the service. Most Rangers view themselves as part of a continuum stretching back to 1823—the Texas equivalent of General McArthur's famed "long gray line." They have the same dedication to duty,



honor, and country as West Point officers. Gaining frank access to those who live this tradition is a privilege, even for those with the stature of Walter Prescott Webb or Robert Utley.

Texas Rangers sometimes decline interviews with naïve and unprepared writers expecting instant access and credibility. While many Rangers are approachable, others are like veteran soldiers who are reluctant to discuss their accomplishments or the intense moments of their careers. Ranger service is an intensely personal and individual accomplishment.

A second difficulty in writing modern Ranger history is the spotty nature of 20th century records. Until recently, Texas DPS regularly discarded closed-case files, obsolete records, and even employee files because the agency did not have the time, training, or resources for historic preservation. There are often more records available about the Texas Rangers of the 1870s and 1880s than those from the 1940s and 1950s.

Today, many surviving records go to the Texas State Library and Archives in Austin. Copies of these records and other documents from private sources or the families of Rangers are preserved at the state-sanctioned Texas Ranger Research Center in Waco.

Self-fulfilling prophecy is a third reason for the lack of books on modern Ranger history. Authors and publishers frequently divide Rangers into "horseback Rangers" and "motorized Rangers." Everyone is familiar with the horseback Rangers because they are featured in thousands of books, television programs, radio shows, and movies. There is an implicit assumption among many authors and publishers that all of the romance, adventure, and interest are vested in the horseback era. Therefore, there have been few books written about the modern era. Until the *Walker: Texas Ranger* television series, many outside the Lone Star State even thought the Rangers were no more.

Lastly, some have questioned whether modern Rangers would measure up to legendary predecessors such as Jack Hays, Frank Hamer, and Rip Ford. While the service of many early Texas Rangers was remarkable, they also benefited from cumulative fame and occasional enhancement. Some Rangers grew increasingly irritated at this notoriety, and they wrote or dictated their own stories. For instance, Frank Hamer set the record straight through the book, *I'm Frank Hamer*.

Today's retired Rangers and their colleagues in other branches of law enforcement vehemently disagree with the notion that those who serve now are any less qualified or accomplished than those in the past. An elderly Ranger once commented, "They are better educated and as street smart as we ever were. I don't know if we would have made it into the Rangers if they had been our competition."

Robert Utley has managed to overcome most of these barriers to writing 20th century Ranger history. His stature has given him access to living Texas Rangers, and his research skills have enabled him to find the documentation to compile the first comprehensive history of Rangers in the 20th century. In so doing, he has largely corrected and extended the work of Walter Prescott Webb.



Lone Star Lawmen begins with the Mexican Revolution. This is the singularly most difficult, controversial, and complex period of Ranger history. The Rangers contended with political intrigue, poor leadership, decades of hostility with Mexico, militia groups popularly (but incorrectly) considered to be Rangers, and civil strife approaching that in modern Iraq. This era remains a hot topic of scholarly debate, with Utley and authors Sadler and Harris holding opposing viewpoints regarding the era.

This turmoil was followed by prohibition, the oil boom, and the gangster era. All of these events were familiar to Webb, and he wrote *Texas Rangers* during many of them. But Webb lacked the perspective of time, and he relied more upon oral history than the actual documentation of the era. Utley has benefited from distance and scores of historians working in parallel fields such as the Texas oil industry.

Leaving Webb's era behind, Utley truly makes his own contribution to Ranger history. He documents the political maneuverings that resulted in the founding of the Texas Department of Public Safety and the uncertainty of the placement of Texas Rangers under the organization.

Utley is the first person to record the contributions of Homer Garrison to the Ranger service. Garrison was a legendary chief of Texas DPS who valued the Rangers, their history, and their contributions. He served 30 years and helped to solidify public perception of the role and heritage of the Texas Rangers.

For the last three decades of the 20th century, Utley has been able to interview participants in nationally covered events such as the Branch Davidian and Republic of Texas standoffs. He also covers the spectrum of major felonies that the Rangers investigated during this era, such as kidnappings, strikes, high-profile homicides, and political corruption. What emerges is evidence of why the Rangers are still around today: perseverance, innate skill and ability, and a dedication to Texas and its people.

Now that Utley has opened the door, there will doubtless be other studies of the modern Texas Rangers. We can only hope that they will display the same balance, depth of research, and understanding of context that has made this such a valuable contribution to the field.

Review by: Byron A. Johnson, Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum