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Indians and Rangers



in 19th Century Texas

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A pervasive myth in Texas Ranger history is that the Rangers have always been Anglo white males. Since 1823, however, the organization has counted in their ranks Hispanics, African Americans, and especially in the early years, American Indians.

It is common to assume that all American Indian tribes had an adversarial relationship with the Texas Rangers and that they all fought with and despised the men who ranged the frontier. To be sure, many did actively resist the Rangers throughout the frontier era. There were, however, several tribes who aligned themselves with the Rangers and effectively assisted them in many well known battles. Groups like the Tonkawas, Lipan Apaches, and the Wacos all provided much needed service to the state of Texas. The tribes collaborating with the Rangers shared a common goal: the defeat of the extremely powerful Comanche nation. To the Rangers, the Comanche tribe was hindering American advancement and settlement into Texas. To the allied tribes, Comanche dominance of the region threatened their existence as well as their own settlement. The alliance between the Rangers and the Indians was one created out of necessity and born of the basic need to survive. Separately, they struggled against the tenacious warriors; combined, they presented a serious threat to the Comanche nation.

The various Indians living on the Texas frontier were a mixture of different cultures. There were coastal tribes who existed as hunters and gatherers, others who were primarily sedentary

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farmers, and also nomadic hunters typical of the Great Plains culture. Many of the tribes were traditional enemies of one another, but each group knew whose territory was whose. The arrival of colonists and settlements, however, threw the tribal geography of Texas into disarray. The Indians fought the settlers and Rangers in an attempt to thwart encroachment into their native lands and also combatted other Indian nations who were unwillingly squeezed out of their respective lands and into territories already claimed by other tribes. This constriction of land boundaries instigated many smaller groups of Indians into an alliance with the Texas Rangers, settlers, and military.

Karankawa

One of the tribes the American colonists initially encountered was the now obscure Karankawa tribe. Hunters and gatherers, the Karankawas lived along the swampy marshlands of the Gulf Coast between Galveston Bay and Corpus Christi Bay. The first recorded European contact with this coastal group occurred in 1528 when a Spanish vessel commanded by Cabeza de Vaca shipwrecked near Galveston Island. The Karankawas embraced the Spanish explorers who lived among the tribe for six years. Subsequent contact with Europeans and Anglo Americans was not so conciliatory, however. The population began experiencing a downward shift after Spanish missions were constructed in Karankawa territory in the 18th century. The missions did not just bring Christianity; they brought diseases that quickly spread throughout the tribe. By 1821 the population, already small, was in serious decline resulting from an 1819 battle with pirates off of Galveston Island. The arrival of the Americans in 1822 brought further irritation and disruption into their way of life.

The Karankawas were not part of the horse culture of the southern plains. They primarily traveled on foot or by canoe when they navigated the gulf waters. The bands moved with the cycles of the coastal seasons and engaged in fishing and hunting, gathering bounty extracted from the swamps and marshes to provide sustenance.

Stephen F. Austin and his colonists had a tense and adversarial relationship with the Karankawas and spoke scathingly and derisively about the tribe and their culture. Contrary to popular assumption, it was the fear of Karankawa attacks, not Comanche, which led to the formation of what evolved into the Texas Rangers in 1823. In *The Conquest of the Karankawas and Tonkawas*, Kelly F. Himmel cites Austin's 1821 journal in which he describes an encounter with Karankawas while surveying land for his new colony. In spite of the fact that the meeting was friendly, Austin astonishingly ends his narrative by calling the Karankawas "enemies to man" and concludes his description by advocating extermination as the policy to be used in future interactions with the tribe. Very simply, the small, close-knit bands lived in the immediate region where the colonists wanted to settle.

Tensions between Austin's colonists and the Karankawas surfaced almost immediately. The Karankawas resented the colonists' desire to transform their fishing and hunting grounds into croplands, and this led to violent and deadly confrontations with the settlers. The colonists disregarded the occupation of the Karankawas and constructed settlements within the boundaries of their territory. They did not seem to want to co-exist; they wanted the Karankawas permanently absent from the scene. The settlers actively pursued such an agenda against the tribe, and the Karankawas launched offensive and retaliatory raids into the American settlements. The bands could not compete numerically or technologically, however, with the arrival of more American

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emigrants; the colonists were equipped with far more sophisticated weapons than the Indians possessed. After Austin led a campaign against them in 1824, several bands of the Karankawas entered into a treaty with the colonists, whereupon they agreed to stay out of a specifically designated area. The treaty was impossible to keep, however, as the tribe was a nomadic, hunting, and gathering people. For their own survival, they had to move with the seasons while still remaining in their own territory. In their country, the tribe had to fight the settlers and Rangers, but if they ventured out of their territory, they had to do battle with the Comanches or Tonkawas, into whose territory they had been pushed. The Karankawas' everyday existence was filled with danger and fear.

Within a few years of contact with Anglos, the increasingly outnumbered Karankawas were forced to continually flee the expanding Texan settlements and hostile colonists in search of a place to settle. By the time Texas achieved independence from Mexico in 1836, the Karankawas had ceased to be a major threat. The once formidable tribe, still adhering to its traditional way of life, became scattered along the Texas Coast and south of the Rio Grande, constantly escaping settler aggressions. After a final attack by ranchers in Rio Grande City in 1858, the Karankawas were essentially made extinct as a cohesive tribe.

Tonkawa

A surprisingly little-noted tribe in Texas is the nomadic Tonkawa, whose origins commenced around the 18th century with the consolidation of various smaller bands into a unified tribe. This group inhabited central Texas near present-day Austin and San Antonio and became steadfast friends and allies of the Anglo Texans. The first recorded European contact occurred in 1687, when French explorers wrote about the smaller bands that preceded the formation of the Tonkawa tribe. In the years after initial European contact, the Tonkawas suffered a devastating decline in population, likely as a result of newly introduced diseases and constant warfare with other tribes. Numerically weak, they allied themselves first with the Spanish and then the Anglo-Texan colonists against their enemies. The Tonkawas became and remained strong allies of the Texans and assisted them in numerous expeditions against other American Indian tribes, especially their hereditary enemy the Comanches. Many Tonkawa men enlisted as Texas Rangers or served with volunteer companies scouting Comanches. The August 12, 1840, Battle of Plum Creek was such a campaign. After a massacre of Comanche chiefs in San Antonio in 1840, several bands of Comanches initiated a retaliatory excursion into Texan settlements. After demolishing the town of Linnville on August 8, the departing bands were met with a group consisting of Texas Rangers, a volunteer army, and also Tonkawa scouts with their chief, Placido. So dedicated were the Tonkawas to their Texan allies, they joined the chase on foot, jogging while the Texans rode horses.



Placido a Tonkawa



Another battle in which Tonkawa Texas Rangers played a critical role in attaining a Texan victory was the 1858 fight with Chief Iron Jacket's band of Comanches during the Canadian River Campaign, also known as the Antelope Hills Expedition. One hundred thirteen American Indians from the Brazos Reservation, including many Tonkawas under Chief Placido, served under Shapley Ross in a campaign with John Salmon "RIP" Ford into Comanche country. Through the combined efforts of the Brazos Reservation Rangers and Ford's Rangers, a major victory against the Comanches was achieved. Indeed, it was the reserve Rangers who located the Comanche camps and who initiated the first fight with the Comanches by operating as decoys for the Texans in order to draw the enemy into a battle. Brazos Reservation Rangers fired the shots that killed Iron Jacket, one of the principal leaders of the band, and temporarily stunned the advancing warriors. The exemplary service of the American Indian Texas Rangers in this battle did not go unnoticed. In his memoirs, *Rip Ford's Texas*, Ford wrote a report to the governor detailing the results of the campaign, saying that the Indian allies "behaved most excellently on the field of battle. They deserve well of Texas and are entitled to the gratitude of the frontier people."

The Tonkawas maintained a friendship with the Rangers even through the 1854-1859 Brazos Reservation years. Chief Placido often joined the Rangers and actively encouraged his men to enlist as well. They served honorably often for little, if any, pay. Despite the valuable skills of scouting and tracking that the Tonkawas possessed and which were desperately needed by the Texans, it is possible they were recruited in the early and Republic years because it was economically beneficial for Texas. Early Ranger muster rolls reveal that the fledgling Republic did not pay the American Indian Rangers as much as they compensated the Anglo Rangers—not that the Anglo Rangers were paid all that well, either. Yet there was little recourse for the Tonkawas to demand payment even if they contemplated a desire to do so. Of note, however, is that the Rangers practiced diversity in the nineteenth century, if not equality.

Though many Tonkawas continued to aid the Rangers and U.S. military while living on the Brazos Reservation and were recruited and trusted by both entities, there were others who were not pleased with the concept of Indians living near white settlements. Violent anti-Indian sentiment permeated the region to such an extent that the Brazos tribes were not safe outside the reservation and barely safe inside its own borders. The sentiment turned to action when a large group of settlers led by occasional Ranger John R. Baylor attempted an attack on the reservation. They were confronted by the United States military, which held the settlers at bay. This volatile situation led Supervising Indian Agent of Texas Robert S. Neighbors and Agent Shapley Ross to quickly pack up the tribes on the reservation and flee to Indian Territory in present Oklahoma. The Tonkawas were among the tribes compelled to vacate their homes in order to preserve their safety against the hostilities perpetrated by the settlers and the Baylor faction. Agent Ross and Supervising Agent Neighbors worked diligently to save the reservation tribes, and they both returned to Texas after securing the safety of the Indians. Neighbors, well known and respected among the Brazos bands, was shot and killed within days of crossing the Texan border.

Even while living in Indian Territory far removed from their homes, the Tonkawas remained allies of Texas. Following the secessionist Texan government, the Tonkawas assumed pro-Confederate sympathies during the Civil War. In 1862, they suffered a deadly attack by pro-Union tribes. Multitudes of Tonkawas, including Chief Placido, were killed. Those who survived the attack

fled back to Texas and attempted to re-settle. Many worked as scouts for the military before the U.S. government removed them once again to Indian Territory.

The Tonkawa tribe attempted to remain on their lands by allying themselves with whatever dominant power happened to be fighting Comanches. They became loyal friends to the Anglo Texan settlers and served both Texas and the U.S. Government with honor. The U.S. military and the Rangers used the essential skills the Tonkawas possessed to help them defeat their shared enemy, the Comanches. The Tonkawas in turn used the military and the Rangers to strengthen their own positions in their efforts to crush the dominant Comanches. Both parties saw in each other a much-needed ally. Separately, they would surely have struggled against the Comanches for a much longer period; combined, they were able to force the surrender of a powerful nation.

The Tonkawas paid a high price for their friendship and assistance, however. They were first pushed onto and confined to a reservation in Texas, and then they were forced to a reservation far away from the lands they had helped Texans claim. Their unwavering allegiance earned them the derision of other tribes and the settlers near the reservation who objected to sharing space with Indians. Instead of rewarding the tribe, which the military and Rangers depended on for success against the Comanches, the state of Texas permanently removed them beyond its borders.



Comanches by George Catlin

Comanche

Many of the most well known bands in Texas can be found within the Comanche tribe. The first documented European contact with them occurred around 1743. Originally part of the Shoshone tribe, the Comanches arrived on the plains of Texas from present Wyoming and Colorado around 1723. A contest for dominance of the region ensued against the Apaches who inhabited the area. After an extremely unusual and grueling nine-day battle in West Texas, which the Apaches lost, Comanche dominance was firmly established. By 1750, they controlled all of the southern plains in an area that came to be known as Comancheria (Land of the Comanches). The tribe was quite large, with as many as twelve bands within its ranks. Nomadic and frequently referred to as “Lords of the South Plains,” they were widely regarded as expert horseman and aggressive, skillful warriors.

The Comanches depended upon the buffalo as an essential component to the structure of their society. The meat served as the primary food source not just for the Comanches but also for many plains tribes as well. The buffalo hide was used to make lodge covers, clothes, moccasins,



and robes. Nearly every part of the animal was used in Comanche culture. The process of preparing the hides was arduous labor, but the tribe relied on the sustenance the effort produced. The buffalo literally fed, clothed, and housed them. To supplement their meat diet, the Comanches often traded with more sedentary tribes for plant foods, and they gathered edible, wild foods that grew on the plains: nuts, berries, and roots.

Unlike other smaller tribes in Texas, the Comanches had no political need to ally themselves with the settlers or the military. In the beginning of Anglo settlement, they did not initially pose a threat to the American colonists. Indeed, in the very early years of colonization, the Comanches were somewhat indifferent to the settlers and considered them the problem of other tribes. In an 1833 letter in *The Writings of Sam Houston*, Houston describes the relationship between the Comanches and Stephen F. Austin's colony as friendly. It was not until the settlements expanded into Comanche lands that the tribe began to aggressively resist such an encroachment. They vigorously defended their lands and their dominance over those lands against all enemies, regardless of nationality.

Maintaining supremacy of Comancheria was not necessarily an ego-driven need to feel superior over other tribes. Dominance of the region also included control of the important resources the land contained. The Comanches recognized that the land sustained their large horse herds and the enormous herds of buffalo they followed. It also provided water for all life on the dry, boundless plains. The bands ferociously defended these important resources that enabled them to live the free, nomadic existence they so cherished. They attempted to repel both European settlement and American Indian advances into their territories. A natural byproduct of the need to maintain control of the land was the necessity to become skillful in warfare to preserve such power.

The Comanches were not only prominent participants, but they actually exemplified the horse culture of the Plains. The introduction of the horse to the Southern Plains in the 1600s drastically altered the lives of the tribes inhabiting the region. They became far more mobile, with an added ability to improve their hunting practices. They could travel greater distances and kill more game once it was located. The horse could also manage the burden of carrying large loads. The increased number of animals killed meant improvement to the lives of the tribes. Large animals, such as the buffalo, provided lodge coverings, food, clothing, and other staples. With an ability to hunt more game, such comforts as larger homes and easily obtained food became possible.

The horse also allowed the tribes to become more aggressive in warfare. Groups like the Comanches could expand their territories not only to travel greater distances to hunt but also to travel greater distances to conquer. The accumulation of many horses also became a symbol of status among the Plains tribes, especially among the Comanches. Horses could be taken from an enemy during a fight, and a courageous warrior could prove his bravery by assembling a large horse herd. The necessity of sustaining such large herds also contributed to the fierceness with which the Comanches defended their lands. The expanse of open plains they inhabited maintained their horses and therefore had to be kept under Comanche control.

Many of the most famous Texas frontier battles involved one or more bands of the Comanche tribe. The U.S. military and Texas Rangers often battled with them as colonists advanced into Comancheria. The Comanches periodically attacked the settlements, killing and sometimes abducting the inhabitants and taking their horses. The colonists ranged the plains, constantly on

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the lookout for Comanche hunting or war parties, and this prompted many skirmishes and battles with various bands. Atrocities were committed by both the tribes and the settlers.

In 1840, groups of the Penateka Comanche sought peace with the Texas government, who entered into the negotiations. Twelve chiefs, along with members of their bands and their families, traveled to San Antonio to meet with the Texans. The Indians were instructed to bring in all their white captives and release them to the government. The bands brought one white female captive and several Mexican prisoners. The teenage girl, Matilda Lockhart, was in poor physical condition and showed obvious signs of extreme abuse. When no other white captives materialized, the intended peace negotiations soured. The government officials ordered the chiefs held until the other prisoners were returned. The chiefs immediately resisted and the military opened fire, killing all twelve chiefs. To the Comanches, violence during peace negotiations was a serious breach of etiquette. The Texans, for their part, did not realize that one band could not speak for an entire nation; they simply wanted the white captives returned. Shortly after the massacre, many bands of Comanches participated in retaliatory raids into Texas. Battles such as the previously discussed sacking of Linnville and the skirmish at Plum Creek were immediate results from what came to be called the "Council House Fight" in San Antonio.



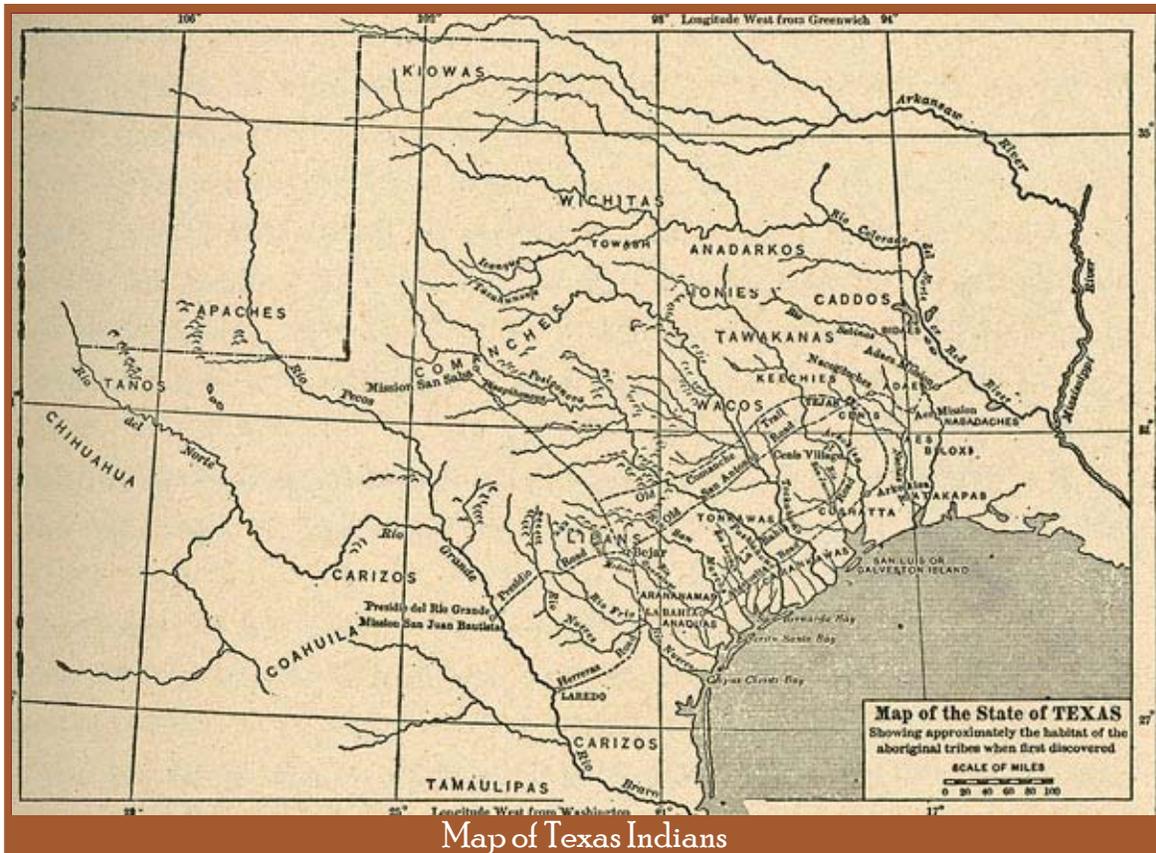
Artist's illustration of a Comanche warrior based upon a photograph of Chief Quannah Parker.

In 1858, a combined force consisting of Indian Texas Rangers from the Brazos Reservation, Texas Rangers, and members of the U.S. military took the settlers' fight into Comancheria and attacked a camp along the Canadian River. The Rangers from the Brazos Reservation were led by Texas Ranger Hall of Fame inductee Sul Ross. This fight is significant in that it brought the battle straight into Comancheria, the home of the Comanches. Thereafter, the Rangers, Indian allies, and military attempted to bring battles to the Comanche homelands.

A serious campaign against the Comanches, however, was stalled by the Civil War and by the Reconstruction Era immediately following the Union victory. During this turbulent time in Texas history, manpower along the frontier was minimal, and security became more about defense and protection and less about offensive tactics. As stability returned, the military and the Texans once again turned toward expansion into Comancheria. Remembering the pre-Civil War victories in the Comanche heartland, they employed tactics such as destroying the bison and horse herds that the bands depended so heavily upon. This contributed greatly to the eventual surrender of the last nomadic bands on the southern plains at the conclusion of the Red River War in 1875.

Waco

The agrarian Waco tribe, a division of the Wichitas, is another American Indian group that had close contact with the settlers and Rangers. The Wichitas arrived in Texas around 1700, and by 1772 permanently inhabited an area in Central Texas along the fertile Brazos River in the present city of Waco. This opportune site allowed the tribe to engage in extensive agricultural pursuits as



well as the hunting of buffalo. Although the Wacos, like the Karankawas, lived near water, they did not fish or otherwise extract the bounty from the river. Rather, they utilized the rich soil to cultivate several hundred acres of land.

The Wacos, small in number, initially allied with the Comanches in the early days of settlement in an effort to retain their land along the Brazos, but the alliance proved to be of a temporary nature. They did participate in raids and hostilities against the American settlers but instigated peace negotiations by 1824 when Stephen F. Austin sent a peace delegation to the village. Austin desperately sought to settle American colonists in Waco Village. He wanted to attack the village but was denied this request by the Mexican government. In 1829, however, the Waco tribe suffered a debilitating assault by a newly arrived band of Cherokees. The Wacos attempted to hold onto their lands but were finally forced to abandon their village by 1837. By the 1850s, they were so acutely reduced in number that they were forced to move further and further up the Brazos as settlers tried to claim their prime land. By this time, they no longer posed a serious threat to the advancing Anglo settlement. After signing treaties with the government, the Wacos were first removed to the Brazos Indian Reservation and later to a reservation in Indian Territory in present Oklahoma. While living on the Brazos Reservation, many Wacos served as Texas Rangers and greatly assisted in victories against the Comanches and their allies. Members of the tribe participated in the battle against Iron Jacket's band during the Antelope Hills Expedition, with one warrior losing his life

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during the battle. He is recognized for his dedicated service on the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum's "Killed in Action" list.

Lipan Apache

The nomadic Lipan are one of several branches of Apache and the one most closely associated with the southern plains. The Apaches originated in Canada and arrived in Texas around 1530. Prior to the introduction of the horse, they settled in villages and were primarily agricultural. The arrival of the horse enabled them to hunt buffalo with more efficiency and make it their primary food source. By the late 1600s, the Lipans were established in Texas and bitterly resisted Spanish colonization. The Apaches dominated this area until the arrival of the Comanches, who became their enemies. After the battle with Comanches in 1723, the tribe split and the Lipan migrated toward the southeastern part of Texas. Many Lipans allied themselves with Texas against the Comanches, and they enlisted as Texas Rangers.

The Lipans enjoyed a long-standing friendship with the Texans from the beginning of colonization. Texas Ranger units composed entirely of Lipan Apaches under Chiefs Castro and Flacco can be found in Ranger muster rolls as early as 1839. They also recognized the need to form an alliance against the more powerful and numerous Comanche tribes. By joining themselves with the Texans and actively working with them as Scouts and Rangers, they also created protection against their enemies and at least partially sustained their position on the plains. Their incalculable support of the settlers and Texas government did not go unnoticed. The impact of Lipan Apache friendship in the early years of Texas settlement is recognized and appreciated to this day. In 2001, the Texas State Senate adopted a resolution publicly recognizing the enormous contribution of the Castro family, many of whom served as Texas Rangers, for their invaluable assistance to the settlement of the state.

Conclusion

The Karankawa, Tonkawa, Comanche, Waco, and Lipan Apache tribes attempted to hold onto their lands and lifeways utilizing their own unique methods.

Tribes like the Karankawas were formidable enough at the onset to instigate the formation of the Texas Rangers but were prevented from mounting a long-term struggle against the colonists because of their small population. Still, they tried to maintain their traditional coastal culture of hunting and gathering. To be sure, the Karankawas did not passively accept non-Karankawa settlement of their lands simply because they were at a numeric disadvantage. Once colonists began pouring into their region, the tribe reacted aggressively. Numerically and technologically, though, they were unable to compete with the ever-increasing settlers.

Other tribes, like the Tonkawas, Lipan Apaches, and Wacos aligned themselves with the Rangers and supplied much needed assistance to the Texans, especially during the Republic years. In the end, however, it was not enough. The tribes who rendered such invaluable aid to their allies were ultimately removed from the state sooner than the tribe they fought so strenuously to subdue. There certainly were remnants of Tonkawas, Lipans, and Wacos that remained in Texas, likely joining other tribes scattered throughout the state. Muster rolls for 1860 include names from various tribes, so even after the disintegration of the Brazos Reservation and the hasty removal to Indian Territory, the Rangers still utilized the services of American Indians from the former reservation.



Enlistment of American Indian Rangers decreased, however, once the primary nature of Ranger service shifted from frontier defense to law enforcement. Texas Rangers no longer had need of the tribes to help them against the Comanches and so no longer sought their services.

Most bands of Comanches, especially the northern ones, fought the onrush of Texan settlement and the Rangers protecting the surge until the U.S. military stepped in after Reconstruction. Once the Rangers and military began destroying the bison and horse herds, the Comanches ceased to remain a viable threat. The nearly fifty years of fighting non-Comanche settlements, combined forces of Texas Rangers, and American Indian Rangers, as well as tribal warfare and the influx of settlers had taken its toll on the once powerful tribe.

In the early years of Ranger history, American Indian involvement with the organization was vital to the success of Texan settlement. The Rangers depended on the assistance of their Indian allies, and the Indians depended on the Rangers to achieve their shared goal of crushing the Comanches. In the end, though, the Rangers benefited the most from the alliance. Despite the valuable assistance given to the Rangers and the state of Texas, the Indian Rangers were not allowed to remain in the state they had helped both entities to claim.

Indians and Rangers in 19th Century Texas

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