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The Keep Ranch Fight

by Eddie Matney

INTRODUCTION

In the year of 1870, as in the past, the state of Texas was in desperate trouble. There were Mexican bandits and Indian raids from across the Rio Grande River. All along the northwestern frontier, there were also raids by Indians coming in from the western plains and from the Indian Territory across the Red River.

Texas, along with the other secession states, had been under a Reconstruction type state government since the end of Civil War in 1865. Ever fearful of more rebellious movements springing up in the Lone Star State, the United States government ordered all armed organized units or companies to be dissolved and mustered out of service. This law caused the state and its frontier counties to lose their Ranger and militia companies, which had provided very good service in controlling the movements of Indian raiding parties. In return, the U.S. military began placing cavalry and infantry companies in forts and posts throughout the state.

In the period from 1866 to 1870, many skirmishes and small-scale fights with Indian bands were recorded. The military forces suffered from being undermanned, ill clothed, and inferiorly armed. Since there was not enough cavalry manpower to put in the field for patrols, the intruding Indians were usually able to get by the patrols or were able to commit their criminal acts and escape before troops could get to the scene. Also, the military used single-shot carbines against the usually superior firepower of the Indians.

On July 30, 1867, Texas Governor James Throckmorton was removed from office. The state was then placed under military jurisdiction, administrated by General Phillip Sheridan in command of the Fifth Military District, headquartered in New Orleans. Texas continued in this situation until 1869, when Edmund J. Davis won a close election for governor. He was generally considered a poor leader by Texas citizens of that period, but he had to follow the unpopular Reconstruction laws dictated by the United States Congress and the Army commanders.

With the election of Davis, Texas was finally allowed to pass laws to form Ranger companies and local militia units for protection against Indian raids, which were once again becoming a severe danger to the citizens of the frontier counties. The combined Ranger units were known as the Frontier Forces, and separate groups were placed along One of these Ranger units was designated as Company F, formed in late 1870. It was composed of young men from the counties of Gonzales, Caldwell, Guadalupe, and Bexar. Company officers were Captain D. P. Baker and Lieutenant Asa Hill. After selecting sergeants and corporals, the company was formed up, totaling fifty-two men.

Although each new recruit was required to supply his own mount, personal gear, and six-shot sidearm, the state supplied the men with the Winchester model 1866 carbine. This gun was a lever-action, caliber .44, rim-fire, Henry carbine, which carried thirteen shells when fully loaded.

Given orders to take position near the Red River, the whole company moved out from its recruitment station just northwest of San Antonio on November 19. The command traveled northwest, accompanied by two wagons carrying camp supplies and food. About sixty miles below Fort Griffin, the men were suddenly caught in a severe norther, the weather turning bitterly cold with a driving sleet. Suffering from lowering food supplies and little protection from the cold, a few of them caught colds or pneumonia. Eventually, the company gratefully reached Fort Griffin for rest and re-supply. The Rangers then moved out, traveling north over frozen ground, and at times, through blowing snowstorms. Finally, they passed by old Fort Belknap, located in Young County, and arrived at Fort Richardson on December 19, 1870. The next day, the command moved into Wise County to a location on Big Sandy Creek, just west of the present community of Alvord. Here they set up their permanent campsite and named it Thompsonville Station.

After settling in, Captain Baker ordered patrols to begin the search for signs of Indians when weather permitted. For a few weeks, little was discovered. Around the middle of January, the weather began to clear off and the snow started melting, which allowed easier patrol duty.

Hearing of Indian depredations in Montague County, Captain Baker ordered eighteen men under Sergeant E. H. Cobb to ride up into the northern part of Montague County. Here they set up a new campsite from which to operate, and they christened it Perryman Station. For several days, the Rangers were occupied with camp duties and patrols but had very little sight of Indian problems.

Early in the morning on February 7, a local citizen named Hinson rapidly rode into camp. He notified the Rangers of an Indian attack on Riddle's Ranch, about ten miles away on Clear Creek, during which several saddle horses had been stolen. Sergeant Cobb ordered the men who had good horses to saddle up, and a detail of eleven Rangers and Hinson were soon on their way. Arriving at the ranch, they were informed that approximately twenty Indians had stolen horses and then departed, heading southeast. Some of the Indians were on foot.

At this point, another local settler joined the little force. His name was John Harvell, and he was known as a fine tracker. Hoping that the Indians would travel at a leisurely pace, Sergeant Cobb guessed that, with hard riding, his men might catch up with the raiding party out on the open range of the prairie. The group set out at a rapid rate, with Harvell in the lead, and they followed the trail of the raiding party across the rolling swells of the prairie. Mile after mile they rode, with no sign of the Indians. Soon, the toil of the pursuit began to show on the horses, and the men became strung out. Finally, one of the horses gave out, forcing one Ranger to reluctantly turn back and return to camp. The remaining ten Rangers and two citizens rode on.

Around noon, the Rangers discovered a butchered cow that the raiding party had killed and partially eaten. Finding no Indians, the Rangers rode hard and entered Wise County, where they passed an utterly exhausted horse left by the warriors. Sensing that they were closing in on the party, the men galloped forward across the prairie on flagging horses.

Later in the afternoon, the Rangers spied a very unwelcome sign. Another raiding party of Indians had come from the west and joined the fleeing band that the Rangers were following. After discussing the situation, it was agreed to keep on going.

After six or seven miles of following the trail, the Rangers came upon a large swell. Harvell, in the lead, and Sergeant Cobb suddenly stopped. The men had ridden about forty miles since leaving camp. It was late in the afternoon, with about two and a half hours remaining of sunlight. As the strung-out men rode up and gathered around, they looked southeast. In front of them was the head of North Hickory Creek. On the other side, approximately 600 yards away in the low ground between the swells, was the now larger raiding party the Rangers had been following.

THE KEEP RANCH FIGHT

Unknown to the Rangers, they had ridden up on a war party of Kiowas and Comanches. The Kiowas were led by Sittanke, a nephew of old Sittanke, who was a terror of North Texas settlers. The Comanches were headed by Oska Horseback.

As the little band of ten Rangers and two citizens gazed out at the Indians, they perhaps felt that little tinge of fear from such a large number of wildly painted braves. However, the boys wanted a fight, so they dismounted, checked their tired horses, and inspected the loads in their firearms.

The Indians had not posted any lookouts, so they were caught by surprise. They glared up towards the little band of Texans and began shouting loud yells and whoops. Those with horses begin to mount up.

Sergeant Cobb counted forty-one warriors. About half of them had horses, while the others were afoot. Many were armed with rifles, and a few even had pistols. Each brave carried a tough, painted shield of rawhide, which a bullet would not penetrate at a distance. They also carried bows, arrows, and an occasional lance. This war party was well armed, and the sergeant perceived that they were not going to retreat or leave the field.

Shaking their shields or weapons and making terrible yelling noises, individual braves began to make short advances towards the Rangers. Presently, one of the warriors rode to the top of the prairie swell behind the party to see if there were any more of the white men behind the rise. Satisfied that there were not, he rode back to his fellow Indians and stated his findings: that small group of Texans was all there was.

Besides the forty rounds of carbine ammunition each of the Rangers carried, Sergeant Cobb had extra cartridges in his saddlebags, and he handed these out to his men. The sergeant and Harvell had a hurried discussion as to where there might be nearby aid. Harvell suggested that there might be two or three men at the old Keep Ranch house, about three miles to the east. Before the Civil War, two Keep brothers had built the house for use by their cowmen, but it had been abandoned for some time. However, it was occasionally used temporarily by traveling settlers crossing over the prairie. It was agreed that Harvell would ride



for help while the eleven other Rangers tried to keep the raiders in check until his return. The men mounted their horses and watched as their messenger rode off. The Indians watched, too, but offered no resistance to Harvell's passing. Now prepared and shouting words of defiance, the little band of Rangers began to ride down the hill, moving a little farther east and nearer to the yelling Indians.

The Rangers moved closer to the north bank of the creek, described as "resembling a ditch or washed-out road, more than a creek." Several of the mounted warriors made mock charges toward the men. As the Rangers raised their carbines to fire, the braves stopped and returned to the main force. Realizing that the Texans were going to fight, the Indian band moved back a few hundred feet to the crest of the next hill, where they formed in a line of battle. The warriors on foot stood alongside those on horses. Although the Indians were a frightful and imposing sight, the Rangers knew that, in all probability, they had not fought anyone having the new repeating rifles. The men felt that the Winchester carbines would somewhat equalize the fight.

The Indian party now sat quietly and almost motionless. All their painted faces looked towards the little band of men, watching to see what came next. In spite of making taunting motions and yells, Sergeant Cobb and his men could not draw an attack. Someone suggested a charge, so the Rangers crossed the creek and galloped their horses toward the center of the warrior line. Realizing that help could not arrive before nightfall, the men knew that there was no hope of retreat or of taking prisoners by either side. It was to be a fight to the death. When the Rangers were about eighty yards from the line, they saw that the Indians were going to fire. The men suddenly reined to a halt, dismounted, and dropped to the ground. Bullets whistled over their heads and into the ground but, astonishingly, not a man or horse was hit in this first volley.

As the Ranger force returned the fire, the combined war party suddenly made their charge down the slope of the swell towards the men. A. J. Sowell, one of the Rangers in the fight, described the charge:

The Indians evidently were not aware that we were armed with repeating rifles, and it seemed, were trying to run in on us, before we could reload; as they generally did the settlers. But we gave them two more rounds, in quick succession. Some of our balls cracking loudly, on their dry buffalo hide shields, and they fell back in some confusion. One horse, having been killed, and evidently, some of them Indians wounded, from their actions. One of them went off into the prairie, and remained alone, some distance from the fight.

After regrouping, the warriors again charged. Those on horseback went around either side of the Rangers while the braves on foot made a straight-on rush. The mounted Indians leaned over on the side of their horses, thus presenting very little target for the Ranger guns but also resulting in inaccurate fire from the warriors. Spreading out, the little force of Rangers was able to drive back several charges. There was much noise and gunfire, but beyond a few horses being hit, little damage was done by either side.

With another determined attack, the Rangers killed one brave and one horse. As yet, none of the Rangers or their mounts had received any serious wounds. It would seem that the Indian plan was to wear down the men with repeated attacks and then finish them off with a determined rush. However, their charges were not coming in close because of the almost constant fire from the repeating rifles of the Rangers.

The skirmish had now been raging for almost an hour and a half, and the sun was getting low in the western sky. The noise of the fighting combatants rose over the prairie, while the smoke from the guns lay heavy in the air. Sergeant Cobb then made the decision to move the men back for better protection, perhaps 400 yards to the hill behind them. Still firing to hold back the Kiowa and Comanche warriors, the men mounted and began to move to the low ridge. The Indian braves saw the hated Texans riding off toward the north and thought they were giving up the fight. Launching another determined attack, the raiders soon closed in. Ranger Gus Hasroot was bringing up the rear of the command because his wornout horse was moving very slowly. He looked back and found a warrior advancing to spear him. Swinging his carbine and firing a lucky shot, Hasroot thankfully saw the Indian fall from his horse, dead. The men, noticing Gus' situation, wheeled their horses and returned to give him protection. As the mounted braves rode around the Rangers, the warriors on foot came up shooting. Again, there was a lively fight as the Indians now pressed their attack hard. Several wounds were inflicted on both sides.

Billy Sorrells, only sixteen years of age, was hit in the left side by a pistol shot. Though seriously wounded and bleeding badly, he dismounted and continued to shoot from behind his horse. He continued to fight until he was no longer able to stand and was forced to lie down.

Oscas Horseback, the Comanche leader, gathered his men and made another close charge. Several Rangers fired at him, and he and his horse were instantly killed. The Indians wheeled away and moved back. Authority now fell on the young Kiowa leader named Sittanke. He rallied his men and the Comanches for another, perhaps final, attack.

The sun was now on the western horizon, and nightfall would soon be upon the field. Sittanke rode among his warriors and formed them up for yet another charge. Sergeant Cobb moved the Rangers around the wounded Sorrells, in order to protect him, and prepared his men for the charge that all knew would come shortly. The Rangers dismounted and observed their sergeant out in front, ready for the fight.

The combined Indians charged at full speed. Those with guns fired away, while the remaining braves shot their arrows. Their strategy seemed to consist of coming straight toward the little group. Blazing away with his pistol, Sittanke was within a few yards of the Ranger line when he received a bullet in the chest. Dropping his shield and pistol, he hung to his saddle until he rode through the Ranger line. Dead by then, he fell off his horse. Another brave was also killed, and several were wounded in this charge.



Seeing their leaders now dead, the war party no longer wanted to face the withering fire of the Rangers. They turned away and retreated out of range. Sensing that they now had the Indians on the run, those Rangers who were not wounded mounted their horses and charged west after the retiring warriors. The Indians on foot were running ahead of those on horses. The mounted warriors turned their horses and shot at the Rangers, trying to keep them from their

As the Rangers' ammunition was now getting low, Sergeant Cobb ordered his men back to young Sorrells, lying injured on the prairie. After checking his wound, it was decided to take Sorrells to the nearest help—the old Keep Ranch house, about three miles east. The men lifted the injured Ranger onto his horse and then set out at a slow pace, one man on either side to support their courageous comrade. As they rode along, the men watched and listened in the growing darkness for any Indian warriors that had not given up the fight.

As the Rangers marched, they were met by Harvell, who had returned with only one man, a Mr. Ferguson. Harvell had found no one at the Keep Ranch, so he had ridden about three miles farther to a mill located on Clear Creek in Denton County. He found a few men working and informed them of the fight taking place about six miles west on the prairie. Ferguson, a local Indian fighter, agreed to return with Harvell. The rest of the men set out to spread the warning to the other settlers along Clear Creek that a band of Indians was in the vicinity. Arriving at the ranch house after dark, the Rangers carried Sorrells inside and laid him down. The men believed him to be near death from loss of blood. A

doctor known to be in the community of Bolivar, a few miles east, was sent for. In the meantime, the men ministered to the boy as best they could. Billy Sorrells, although badly wounded, would make a full recovery. He was the only man on the Ranger force to sustain a serious wound in those hours of close combat with a determined enemy that outnumbered the Rangers four to one. A. J. Sowell later wrote that there were seven Indian warriors killed and an unknown number wounded: "The Indians had been worsted on this trip, and driven beyond the settlements before they did much damage."

Lieutenant Asa Hill was back at the Ranger station in western Wise County.

When informed of the fight, he wrote a report to Texas Adjutant General Davidson:

*Thompsonville Station Wise Co.
February 9th 1871
Adjutant General James Davidson
Austin Texas*

Dear Sir

I have the honor to report to you a fight with nine of our men, and forty Indians well-armed with Henry rifles, needle guns, six-shooters, bows and arrows. One of our men severely wounded. Two Indians killed dead on the ground and quite a number wounded.

On the morning of the 7th inst., Sergeant Cobb who is commanding at Perryman Station received word that Indians had gone east to the settlements, down Clear Creek. He started immediately and followed the trail about 30 miles and came in light of the Indians on the high prairie near the corners of Wise, Cook, Denton and Montague Counties. The Indians were well armed and half their number was mounted on good horses. So soon as the Indians discovered our men, they retreated to a dreaan of high grass, just over the first rise with infantry concealed and cavalry formed on right and left.

As our brave boys dashed up, the Indians rose and attempted to surround them. The chief was instantly killed, but clung to his horse until his horse dashed through the lines and kicked him loose just in the rear of our men. This gave them check for a few moments.

Little Billy Sorrells Son of Mr. F. M. Sorrells was wounded in the hip with a six shooter ball. The Chief had two six shooters. Billy was wounded in the first charge but fought bravely to the end. They got the Chiefs horse, with his very fine silver

bridle worth forty five dollars, his extra fine bow and quiver, and his richly adorn cap with plumes, and was about to lift his scalp when the enemy dashed up to rescue the body of their Chief which brought them again in close combat. Gus Hasroot being a little to one side an Indian dashed upto him to spear him. The boys all thought Gus was all gone up, but he made the lucky shot that dropped the Indian dead before him, but a few steps. A. J. Sowell while contending and exchanging several deliberate shots with one, was satisfied he had got him badly hurt, judging the staggering retreat he made.

Sgt Cobb withdrew his men in good order to a better position not taking time to secure the Lo much desired Scalp. The Sergeant came out bloody all over, but could not give a Satisfactory account of it. The Indians pow-woed and yelled mournfully over the remains of their Chief, and warriors that was killed and wounded. The Sgt. Took Billy to the nearest house and secured a good physician to attend him till our Surgen [sic] could go up and left two of our men with him.---

*Your most obt Ser.
A. C. Hill
Lieut Co F
Frontier Forces*

Sgt Cobb, A. J. Wilhoit, Billy Sorrells led the party into the fight. A. J. Wilhoit was first to open fire on the enemy. Gus Hasroot had his clothes filled with holes from the balls of the enemy. Should anyone doubt any part of this lengthy letter, Those two citizens who witnessed the fight will make affidavit before the proper authorities.

Our good Surgeon Dr. C Gillespie went up with them last night to give attention to our young brave soldier Billy. I do assure you Genl Davidson, that Sgt. Cobb managed nobly as well as his brave squad who so promptly obeyed every order. Two citizens of that vicinity stood and witnessed the whole affair. All the citizens say with one accord, and proudly too, they never saw Rangers like these, to contend with such great odds. Allow me to give you the names of the entire squad to hold in remembrance.

Sgt. E.H. Cobb.—Wm Caruthers. George Howell. D. W. Edwards. J. R. Ewers. A. J. Sowell. Wilhoit. Darkin Cleveland. Wm. R. Sorrells. Gus Hasroot.

The Indians waved their battle flag defiantly with their death mark on it, to all Texans. The Chief in his clownish movements tried to daunt our brave boys but they had not forgotten their brutal work so recently committed, on the Families in that vicinity. They were

like the boys who remembered the Alamo.

On February 27, 1871, Adjutant General James Davidson issued a general order to all companies of the Frontier Forces:

*Adjutant Generals Office
State of Texas, Austin, Febry. 27, 1871
General Orders
No. 4.*

The thanks of the people of Texas, are hereby tendered to Sergt. E.H. Cobb and the following detachment of Company F Frontier Forces, for the great gallantry displayed by them in their recent engagement with (40) forty Indians in Denton County.

*Sergeant E. J. Cobb Commanding
Private A. J. Wilhoit
W. Caruthers
George Howell
D. W. Edwards
J. R. Ewers
A. J. Sowell
Darkin Cleveland
W. R. Sorrels
Gus Hasroot*

Sergeant Cobbs action in successfully engaging such overwhelming odds is deserving of the highest praise and should be emulated by other companies of the Ranger Troops now on the Frontier of Texas By order of the Governor & Commander-in-Chief

*(Signed) James Davidson
Adjutant General Of Texas*

NOTE:

While researching the Keep Ranch fight, this writer became curious as to where the exact location of the ranch is now to be found. After speaking to several area folks and finding no one familiar with the location, this writer decided to use the available information in the stories of the fight for possible direction.

Mr. Ferguson was the local Indian fighter recruited by John Harvell to help in the Keep Ranch fight, and he related his story in the C. A. Bridges book, *History of Denton Texas*. He states that the location where the Rangers first sighted the

Indians is on the rise or swell exactly where the Slidell school was later built.

In his book, *History of Slidell*, C. A. Bridges writes:

The north fork of Hickory Creek passed between the building and the town. . . . The college building was located exactly on the county line with half in of it in Denton County and half of it in Wise County. The exact line passed diagonally through the north and south corners of the building. For about forty years, this school house was locally known as the 'Slidell College,' even though the idea of it becoming a college had long since faded.

A. J. Sowell, one of the Rangers, stated that after stopping and observing the Indians, the Ranger force rode a short distance along the swell to better observe the warriors. This would probably place them just north of the head of Hickory Creek, a few hundred yards east of the present community of Slidell, which is situated just inside the Wise County line.

This writer believes that the sight of the fight is located in the fields that are still open on the immediate east side of Slidell. To reach Slidell, travel on FM 455 from either east or west. At the present local school building, located on the immediate north side of FM 455, drive east one-half mile. An unpaved road will enter from the northwest at a sharp angle. At this point, a large open field is on the north side of FM 455. This writer believes that FM 455 sits on the swell or rise that the Indians retreated to when first sighted by the Ranger detail. Hickory Creek can be seen approximately 1,800 feet north. Approximately 500 to 600 feet north of Hickory Creek lies the prairie swell from which the Rangers advanced to begin their charge against the raiding party. On the east side of the field is a farmhouse. Just to the north, past the house, is a building housing Steve's Cycles, a motorcycle business. This writer believes the cycle shop is in the approximate center area of the fight.

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