



Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum

Excerpt of Project Report by Tom Andrews

Winchester Model 1873 owned by J.B. Gillett

The following article has been adapted from a special project report on key artifacts in the Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. This project report was written in 2018 based on extensive research compiled by project intern Tom Andrews.

Winchester Model 1873 owned by J.B. Gillett

Provenance

The provenance of this rifle is impeccable. In his memoir, *Six Years With The Texas Rangers*, Gillett not only tells the story of receiving permission to go into Austin with a group of companions to purchase a case of ten Winchesters, but also specifically identifies the rifle by its serial number. He carried it for the rest of his service with the Rangers and it remained a favorite hunting rifle for many years afterwards. He is known to have killed two men with it, one a wanted murderer, the other an Apache warrior.¹

As to the claim on the old display label in the file that this rifle was lent to Baz Outlaw, there is no evidence to support the claim. While there are at least two occasions where the men crossed paths, it seems unlikely that they were close enough friends that Gillett would lend him his prized rifle. On one occasion, Gillett attested that Outlaw was justified in an altercation, in the other he responded to a saloon where Outlaw was drunk and disorderly. After a tense moment, he convinced the man to leave. It should be noted however that Gillett's name was one of those who supported Outlaw's bid to become a special ranger, so they must have had a civil relationship. In any case, the claim that Outlaw borrowed the rifle is not backed up by any sources and must be considered a legend.

J.B. Gillett Biographical Information

Early Life

James B. Gillett was born on November 4, 1856 in Austin, Texas. He was the fourth child of five, and one of three which survived to adulthood. In the summer of 1868, he quit school and took up fishing and hunting to support himself. On a trip to Brown County to pick up a herd of cattle his father had acquired in exchange for some land, he met frontiersmen and was fascinated by them. Their six shooters and Winchester rifles "fired [his] boyish imagination"²

Ranger Service

On June 1, 1875 at 10 AM, Gillett swore an oath of allegiance to the State of Texas and became a Texas Ranger under Captain Roberts of D Company. He remarked that this was probably the happiest day of his life, realizing one of his greatest ambitions. He and his fellow recruits were issued .50 caliber Sharps Rifles and one .45 Colt Pistol each.³

Buying the Winchester

Some time in December 1875, Gillett along with Privates Nevill, Bell, and Seiker obtained permission from their Captain to go to Austin and purchase a case of ten Winchester 1873 Rifles. The Sharps carbines they were issued overheated easily and because of this were less accurate than the Winchesters. The 1873 was fresh to the market in Texas and could be had for the price of \$50 for the rifle configuration and \$40 for the carbine. Rangers wanting a Winchester had to pay for it out of pocket as well as acquiring their own ammunition, as the State of Texas would only supply cartridges for the Sharps carbine. Due to its superior accuracy, Gillett and many other Rangers of D Company were willing to pay. He acquired a carbine with

¹ James B. Gillett, *Six Years With The Texas Rangers: 1875 to 1881*, ed. Rick Miller, 2016, 72.

² Gillett, 2, 3, 5.

³ Gillett, 31.

serial number 13,401 and “never used any other weapon” for the rest of his Ranger service. He used it to kill “every game animal available in the state” and it was still in his possession as a prized memento of his service at the time of writing in 1921.⁴

Curiously, the Winchester factory records in the possession of the Cody Firearms Museum note that Model 1873 serial number 13401 was received in the warehouse on December 29, 1876 and shipped the next day, presumably to Austin. As all the other facts and even the time of year match, it seems likely that Gillett was simply mistaken about which year he purchased his rifle.⁵

Pursuit of Fugitives

Soon after acquiring the rifle, Gillett used it to kill wanted fugitive Dick Dublin. The Rangers knew where he was camped and surprised him. He fled into the underbrush and Gillett gave chase. He ordered the man to halt and surrender, but was ignored. Gillett took aim and gave one more order to halt. Dublin threw his hand under his coat, appearing to be drawing a pistol and Gillett fired. He struck the man in the small of his back and he dropped dead.⁶

The next target for Gillett’s company was to hunt down infamous bank robber Sam Bass. He along with a gang of outlaws had robbed a Union Pacific Railroad Train and made off with \$50,000 in gold coins. Two of the robbers were killed in Buffalo Station, Kansas while resisting arrest, another died of wounds following his capture, and Bass and his companion returned home to Denton County, Texas with their gold concealed in the floor of a wagon.⁷

Bass’s companion, David, fled to South America and was never apprehended. Bass and his money attracted another gang of outlaws and they began robbing trains indiscriminately in the Dallas Fort Worth area. A former comrade, Jim Murphy, was convinced to give up Bass’s whereabouts in exchange for avoiding a life sentence. He agreed, and the man rejoined Bass’s gang. They were immediately suspicious of him, but were convinced not to kill him on the spot by Frank Jackson, who Bass trusted.⁸

Murphy quickly learned that Bass and his gang planned to make their way to Mexico after robbing the bank in Round Rock, Texas and managed to send a note to the Rangers begging them to be there to stop the gang. Gillett’s company made their way to the town and lay in wait. Two sheriff’s deputies came across Bass’s men buying tobacco. In the ensuing gunfight, the two deputies and all of Bass’s men besides himself and Frank Jackson were killed. Bass did not escape without incident however. He was mortally wounded and only able to get on his horse with Jackson’s help. The two fled and Bass was discovered the next day by Gillett and two other Rangers lying beneath an oak tree. He was taken back to town and questioned but refused to give any information on his confederates. He died three days later.⁹

Responding to Apache Raiding

In 1879 and 1880, settlements in Texas near the Mexico border were often raided by Apache warriors. In one instance, while following an Apache party into Mexico, the rangers were informed that they had hit a ranch in San Marcos de Cantarica, killing a herder and taking

⁴ Gillett, 72.

⁵ Jessica A. Bennett, “Letter from Cody Firearms Museum to Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum,” July 5, 2018.

⁶ Gillett, *Six Years With The Texas Rangers: 1875 to 1881*, 122.

⁷ Gillett, 160–62.

⁸ Gillett, 165–66.

⁹ Gillett, 164–67.

four horses and sixteen mules. Along with a party of Mexican volunteers, the rangers set out in search of the raiders. They came to the mouth of the Canyon del Moranos, determined that the Apaches were lying in wait for them, and decided to scale the mountain and come at them from the rear. Just as Gillett was beginning to suspect that there was no one waiting for them in the canyon, shots rang out and he was nearly hit. He returned fire with his Winchester and killed the assailant. The rest of the Apache party kept up their fire and the Rangers elected to withdraw due to their disadvantaged position.¹⁰

In November 1879, The Rangers struck out into Mexico at the invitation of the local government in pursuit of Chief Victorio, who Gillett claims was a better warrior than Geronimo. It is evident he held great respect for his capabilities in battle, and called him “the best general ever produced by the Apache tribe.”¹¹

Victorio and a party of one hundred twenty-five warriors had left the Mescalero Reservation and went South into Mexico on a raid. There, he set up camp in the Candelaria Mountains near San Jose and Juarez, which was an excellent vantage point from which he could see any approaching parties from twenty miles away. A small band went into San Jose to raid the town. They carried off some of the town’s ponies and returned to camp. Investigating the next morning, the people of the town believed from the tracks that Victorio’s group was quite small, and a band of fifteen men set out in search of the raiders and their ponies. Victorio lay in wait for them and the main body of his forces massacred the San Jose party. A second rescue party met the same fate.¹²

When news of this disaster reached El Paso del Norte, a group of one hundred fighters was assembled from the surrounding area to strike back, and a note was sent to the Rangers at Ysleta requesting their aid. Gillett’s commander, Lieutenant Baylor, readily agreed, knowing it would only be a matter of time before Victorio turned his sights to the Texan side of the border. The expedition was unsuccessful in locating Victorio’s band, and the Rangers returned to Ysleta.¹³

An International Murder

At a Christmas festival in Socorro, New Mexico in 1881, the event which would later prove life altering for Gillett occurred on the steps of the local church. A.M. Conklin, editor of the *Socorro Son*, requested that two drunken men be quiet and behave in the church. When he made his exit later, one of the men pulled his wife away from his side and the other shot and killed her. Abran and Enofrio Baca fled the town and were pursued in all directions, but evaded capture and crossed into Mexico.¹⁴

As luck would have it for Gillett and the Rangers, the county judge of El Paso was Jose Baca, uncle of the wanted men. He also maintained a shop in Ysleta, the county seat of El Paso. Gillett set a watch over Judge Baca’s home in the hopes that the murderers would seek shelter there. After nearly a month, he began to suspect they had gone elsewhere, but one morning in late March, the watchman spotted two well dressed Mexican men who were strangers sitting on the porch of Baca’s home. Gillett and other rangers rode into town and arrested the two

¹⁰ Gillett, 230–33.

¹¹ Gillett, 239.

¹² Gillett, 240–42.

¹³ Gillett, 243–46.

¹⁴ Gillett, 301.

men, believing them to be the Baca brothers. He then set out for New Mexico to take them to justice.¹⁵

On the road, they were overtaken by Judge Baca and an interpreter, who asked Gillett to stop so that he might talk with their prisoners. After a short conversation, the Judge asked Gillett what the reward was for the capture of Abran Baca, which was five hundred dollars. After some hesitation, the judge offered Gillett seven hundred dollars if he would let Abran go. He then raised his offer to one thousand dollars, but Gillett claims to have informed the judge that there was not enough money in El Paso County to buy him off. When the party reached Socorro, it was discovered that Gillett had in fact captured Abran Baca, but the second prisoner was his cousin, Massias Baca. Gillett was given the five hundred dollar reward for capturing one of the murderers and returned to camp.¹⁶

Later, in April, Gillett learned that Enofrio, the second murderer, was working at a store in Saragosa, Mexico. Gillett pondered what to do with this information, as a previous attempt to have the Mexican government arrest a fugitive had resulted in the man being set free after influential friends had prevailed upon the local authorities. He decided to take the matter into his own hands, and set out to capture him with the help of fellow ranger, George Lloyd. They reached the town without incident, and he went into the store alone, grabbed the man by the collar, and ordered him out with his pistol drawn. The customer the fugitive had been helping fainted and two other customers ran from the store. Gillett made his way outside with his prisoner and put him on Lloyd's horse for their escape. As they left, he saw a group of men readying their horses to give chase.¹⁷

In the chase that ensued, the Rangers had to move their prisoner onto Gillett's horse once Lloyd's began failing. With two miles to go until the border, a group of mounted men emerged from the cloud of dust behind them. Gillett counted nine men in all, and they closed the distance to within six hundred yards, after which they began firing on the Rangers. Luckily, no one was hit. Before they could get any closer, the party reached the Rio Grande and dove in, driving their horses straight through a shallow ford. As soon as they reached the opposite bank, the pursuers gave up. With a wave of his hat, Gillett made his way back to camp.¹⁸

Back in camp, Gillett received a dressing down from Lieutenant Baylor, who he had not informed of his plans knowing he would not approve. In response to the lieutenant's questions as to why he had committed "this flagrant violation of international law and common sense", Gillett replied that not only had he wanted the reward for the capture of Baca, he wanted the notoriety of having kidnapped a murderer in Mexico and living to tell the tale. He delivered Baca to Socorro, where an angry mob hung him from a tree. Gillett was saved from legal trouble after the kidnapping by a letter Lieutenant Baylor wrote to the governor of Texas.¹⁹

The End of Ranger Service

The fame and notoriety Gillett had hoped to gain from his kidnapping of the Baca fugitive came true when he was offered a job as a railroad guard at three times his Ranger salary. He spoke to Lieutenant Baylor and they agreed that he should take the job. On

¹⁵ Gillett, 302.

¹⁶ Gillett, 302-3.

¹⁷ Gillett, 303-5.

¹⁸ Gillett, 305-6.

¹⁹ Gillett, 306-7, 310-11.

December 26, 1881, J.B. Gillett received a voluntary discharge from the Texas Rangers. His job with the railroad did not last long however, as he resigned after one month. He proceeded to get a job in the city of El Paso as a marshal's deputy. He was then promoted to marshal when his boss resigned.²⁰

End of Law Enforcement Career

In the spring of 1885, Gillett received an offer to become ranch manager of the newly formed Estado Land and Cattle Company. He accepted, and on April 1, 1885, J.B. Gillett ended his ten year career as a law enforcement officer.²¹

Ranching and Later Life

Gillett held his position at Estado for six years before resigning to go into business for himself. He acquired two ranches, the O6 and the Alpine. On May 1, 1889, he married Lou Chastain in San Marcos. They went on to have seven children together. In May 1904, he sold the Alpine ranch and bought a farm in Roswell, New Mexico. The family moved there and stayed until April 1907, when the farm was sold and they returned to Texas, where Gillett bought the Barrell Springs Ranch.²²

In 1921, Gillett wrote his memoir, *Six Years with The Texas Rangers*. It was published in 1926 and later condensed into a textbook which was used in the public schools of seventeen states. He retired at the aged of 67 and moved to Marfa, Texas. On June 11, 1937, he died of heart failure at the age of 81.²³

History of the Winchester 1873 Rifle

The Winchester 1873 Rifle was produced between 1873 and 1919, with an approximate 720,610 manufactured. The 1873 was offered in three calibers, 32-30, 38-40, and 44-40. They fed from a tubular magazine below the barrel and were fitted with iron frames and side plates. Stocks were commonly oil stained walnut, with some examples varnished. The finish was blued with hammers, levers, and butt plates casehardened, and occasionally receivers as well, but this was less common. Serial numbers began at 1 and can be found on the lower tang. Markings included "MODEL 1873" and Winchester, which can be found on the upper tang. Caliber markings are usually found on the bottom of the elevator block. Winchester name and address markings can be found on the barrel with King's Improvement patent dates.

The 1873 was produced in three models with minor variations and in three configurations, the musket, rifle, and carbine. The Early First Model 1873 is characterized by the dust cover which is mortised in the forward section of the frame. The checkered oval thumbrest is separately affixed. There are two screws on the frame above the trigger, a lever latch which fits into lower tang with threads, and the upper level profile curves away from the trigger. Serial numbers for the early first model range from 1 to roughly 1600. The Late First Models have a trigger pin which appears below the two frame screws above the trigger, an improved type lever latch without visible threads, as well as a trigger block safety. Serial numbers for Late First Models run from 1600 to 31000. The Second Model reconfigures the dust cover to slide on a

²⁰ Gillett, 322,331-333.

²¹ Gillett, 333.

²² Margaret F Peirce, "Gillett, James Buchanan," Texas State Historical Association, n.d., <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgi25>.

²³ Peirce.

center rail on the rear section of the frame, secured by screws. Serial numbers run from 31,000 to 90,000. Lastly, the Third Model incorporates the dust cover rail into the frame as a single machined part. Serial numbers run from 90,000 to end of production.²⁴

Information Specific to this Firearm

This is a late first model 1873 saddle ring carbine. In spite of the name of this variant, it does not sport a saddle ring. It is unclear if this component is missing or if it never had one in the first place. The serial number is 13401, placing the rifle in the middle range of the late first model production. This along with the style of dust cover, integrated into the frame and with an oval thumb rest, mark it clearly as the late first model. There is a three piece cleaning rod in the butt stock with a cloth wrapped around it. The label which was once attached to the butt stock is in the object file and is a short poem. The authorship of the poem is unknown and may or may not have been attached during Gillett's ownership. The old wall label included claims that he used it to shoot "a marauding apache" and "at least one murderer." Further, it claims he lent it to the "Bass Outlaw," likely meaning Bazzel Lamar "Baz" Outlaw, who returned it shortly before his death.

²⁴ Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Values*, 307–9.