Indian Territory’s First Mail Rider

BY JOSEPH A. KORNFELD, ’30eng.

Back in the seventies, when the tomahawk and the six-shooter alternately ruled the southwest, when buffalo herds rushed and thundered their mad way across its prairies like black clouds, when outlaws escaped to their rendezvous in its protecting hills, when the hostile Indians were making their last valiant stand to stem the ever-encroaching advances of the white man upon their diminishing hunting-grounds, when the stage-coach represented first-class passenger service—those were the days before Cimarron.

Those were the settings against which was revealed to me an unpublished chapter in the history of Indian Territory; told to me by “one who was there” at the time—by the territory’s first mail rider, Newt J. Jones, who was, only a short time later, one of an illustrious, pioneer band of Texas Rangers in actual pursuit of these robbers and the Indians. ‘Twas years before the warful Kiowas and Comanches were subdued and placed on reservations in Indian Territory—twas fifteen years before the ‘80ers made their hetic “race for land” in the Cherokee Strip; and ‘twas fully a quarter-century before the first commercial oil well, in what was to be Oklahoma, gushed its way to the surface on the southern boundary of Indian Territory and back again. At the time, Fort Sill was the locale of the Tenth Cavalry Colored Troops. They were later moved down to Fort Richardson across the Red river in Texas.

“ snug up to your saddle, man, and draw up the reins,” the lieutenant bawled, “you’re going to be my mail rider.”

The Sooner Magazine

May
were known as the Frontier Battalion, engaged principally in running down cattle rustlers and murderers. In 1917, Congress recognized us and provided pensions for us as veterans of the Indian Wars. I was a member of a company of 25 men.

"The Frontier Battalion" explained Jones, "was organized after the Civil War to protect Texas against the Indian and Mexican raids throughout the region from the Rio Grande to the Red River. There was no border patrol in those days."

The Indian raids in the southwest were of more than local significance, for historians point out that, contemporaneously throughout the west, various tribes were waging their greatest efforts to hold off further invasion by the whites. In 1872-3, the little Modoc tribe in the lava lands of northern California defied a great force of army troops for many months. In 1876, Chief Sitting Bull and his Sioux warriors annihilated General Custer's force of about two hundred troops in the upper Missouri river country.

"Fourteen Rangers were killed by the Indians, presumably Kiowas and Comanches," Jones went on to relate, "on the Big Wichita river in Los Vaile in Jack county, in 1874. It was by means of an ambush—letting the Rangers ride into 'em, a favorite method of Indian warfare. Then 'the Indians would close in' was Jones' terse, poignant explanation of the outcome of the encounter. What price glory for some Rangers!"

"The Indians shot 'em up pretty bad, at Newcastle," recalled Jones when four rangers were killed in 1864 in what is now Young county. 'A right smart twenty-seven days, and I figure crossed nine Texas counties. We headed northwest from Fort Richardson, where we were located, bound for the army camp in Wheeler county out in the Panhandle country. We figured it would take us five days to get there, but it actually took every bit of ten days. We were waterbound at the Big Wichita river for three days. After many privations, we made our way over to the army headquarters. We missed our trail and found out that we might find Duffy at Lee and Evan's store on Sweetwater creek, an outfitting place for cattlerustlers and murders. In 1917, Rangers also killed 'Arkansas' Johnson, another notorious outlaw."

I managed to find out that Jones was a member of a squad of Rangers who were the first group of Texas Rangers to "bring back their man" to civil justice. The story of the incident reads like an account of the Canadian Mounted in the Northwest. Incidentally, this trip crossed over Indian Territory when these Rangers lost their trail while returning their prisoner to Fort Griffin.

Peak appointed Captain Campbell's Company B to "run down" an outlaw by the name of Duffy. Duffy, it was claimed had murdered his own business partner near Fort Richardson, in what is now Throckmorton county. Campbell knew that Ranger Locke was known and had seen Duffy and therefore was assigned to head a group of five select Rangers to "get this man." Newt Jones was one of the squad of five selected.

"The trip," Jones pointed out, "took right smart twenty-seven days, and I figure crossed nine Texas counties. We headed northwest from Fort Richardson, where we were located, bound for the army camp in Wheeler county out in the Panhandle country. We figured it would take us five days to get there, but it actually took every bit of ten days. We were waterbound at the Big Wichita river for three days. After many privations, we made our way over to the army headquarters. We missed our trail and found out that we might find Duffy at Lee and Evan's store on Sweetwater creek, an outfitting place for cattle herders. We made our way over there and after mixing with the crowd finally learned that Duffy at the moment was at Sutty's store a short distance away."

"Sure enough, that was where Duffy was, standing around at Sutty's. Locke spotted him, 'cause he had known Duffy," Jones pointed out.

"Quietly motioning the squad around in a strategic maneuver, and with drawn guns, Locke demanded: 'Put 'er up, Duffy.'"

"I searched Duffy," related Jones. He gave up with little resistance, since he was taken by surprise.

"We made our way back to Fort Griffin, handcuffing our prisoner to one end of the group. There were so many of them. You see, the buffalo head south in the fall and head north again in the spring. We were in constant danger, especially at night, for if the horse was ever stampeded, it would run with the buffalo."

"We didn't know what calendar dates meant on those trips. When campin' time came, it was 'just the end of nother day. Time and again, we lost track of dates."

"On this trip we found ourselves in need of extra clothing, our coats being torn and many of the men suffering from exposure. When we arrived at Fort Richardson we had to find a better supply of clothing before we could go on to Fort Griffin and turn over our prisoner to the civil authorities. All during the trip we were on hait-rations for ourselves and our horses."

"At Fort Griffin, it was the 'end of the road' for us but our journeying back to Throckmorton county to our camp we found that they had gone into winter quarters and that gave us an interesting task finding where they had moved to. Beside, winter had already started addin' to the difficulty in finding the new location. Jones stated."

Through all of his experiences, no suspect ever resisted arrest when Jones accosted him. He was never wounded, but oddly enough, two years after his discharge, he wounded himself by accident while cleaning out a gun. He is now seventy-nine and has been ill only twice during the last few years. Like others of that valiant group of Rangers, they were long-lived, courageous, steadfast, and a hardy band. Captain Peak is now ninety; when Hutchenson died three years ago, he was seventy-seven years old.

After receiving an honorable discharge from the Ranger service, Jones came to Archer County (before it was organized) and engaged in stock farming for fifteen years, breeding Hereford cattle. However, within recent years, he has retired. I can still visualize Newt sitting before the fireplace, enjoying the sunset of life, smoking his knurled pipe, happy and healthy after all his experiences.

To me, he symbolized the Texas Ranger that I have always hoped to meet. "Pardon me, while I answer the door," Newt said, just before I started to leave. "The apartment next door is already rented, sorry," addressed Jones to some oilmen who were headquartering in Archer City, for the town was experiencing its greatest oil activity.

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