

They're Still Catching Rustlers in Texas

Outlaws use pickup trucks instead of horses and hide beef in freezers instead of secret valleys, but one tradition of the Old West remains—the man they fear most is the Texas Ranger

By A. A. ADOLPHE



THE SCENE was the Port of Houston, where a political agitator was trying to stir up trouble. "Why be afraid of the Texas Rangers?" he asked the crowd. "They're just flesh and blood like the rest of us!"

A Ranger in the crowd slowly made his way to the front. He didn't say a word—just looked. The loud-mouthed troublemaker paled and backed away. There was no more agitating. He stumbled off his soapbox and caught the next ship home.

Such is the mien and reputation of the oldest and one of the smallest law-enforcement agencies in the United States today. Fifty-two men operating from six stations cover the 267,339 square miles that make up the 254 counties of Texas. They are charged with three principal duties: suppression of riots and insurrection; apprehension of fugitives; and protection of life and property. And, strangely in this modern time, one of their biggest problems is still the cattle rustler.

Col. Homer Garrison, Jr., director of the Texas department of public safety and chief of the Rangers, points out that when the price of meat goes up the theft of livestock rises accordingly.

"In 1959 we probably had more cattle rustling than at any time in our history," he says.

On the Rangers' quarterly crime reports, theft of livestock ranked third, surpassed only by burglary and gambling, and required 4,877 investigations last year.

"It's harder to catch the little fellow these days," draws one Ranger. "He can drive into a pasture in his pickup truck, throw a rope around a cow, haul it off, and have the meat in his home freezer before the owner misses it. But we still catch a lot of them."

Whether he is after the "little fellow" or the big one, today's Ranger uses the most modern methods of crime detection. He has at his disposal the Texas Crime Laboratory in Austin, one of the finest in the world; also armored cars, airplanes, a helicopter, a 21-foot deep-water cabin cruiser, portable power units and searchlights, dragging and diving equipment—even bloodhounds. (Until recently, the Rangers had their own dogs, but they required too much attention and training; now they borrow bloodhounds from prisons.)

Sometimes a Ranger is his own best bloodhound. Recently a rancher reported that several of his Black Angus cattle were missing. A Ranger sergeant loaded his horse into his auto-trailer and went to the ranch to investigate. He discovered that the cattle had been herded into a corral on the adjoining ranch and loaded from chutes there. This was evident from the black hair which was clinging to the sides of a chute where only Here-

fords (red and white cattle) had been loaded.

Next he took molds of the tire tracks and measured them. Here was a stroke of luck. The tracks were considerably wider than those made by most trailers. Word went out to all law-enforcement officers to be on the alert for such a trailer.

Before it was located, another rancher reported cattle missing. The same method had been used here, too, and the same trailer. This time the rustlers had left another bit of evidence. Their trailer had brushed a gatepost, leaving bits of paint. From the scrapings, the Ranger knew he was after a yellow trailer.

Patient questioning finally located the trailer at a local rental agency. The records showed that at the time of both cattle thefts the trailer had been rented to the same two brothers. By now the Ranger had enough evidence to convict both men.

The Texas Rangers were organized in 1823 primarily to defend settlers from the Indians. Indian fighters knew it was far better to fight to the death than to be taken captive, and from this background came one of the basic Ranger principles: never surrender.

Soon the Rangers had the additional problems of Mexican bandit raids in Texas. By 1875 lawlessness and crime in the sparsely settled western counties claimed even more attention. The Ranger had been an Indian fighter and part soldier. Now he became a police officer, too. Distances were great and communications poor, so the men worked without close supervision. This is still true today. Colonel Garrison says: "We tell each man to enforce the law in his district. How he does it is up to him."

BESIDES BEING highly self-sufficient, a Ranger also is noted as a man of action rather than words. In Washington County, a sheriff was shot. His murderer fled to the Brazos River bottoms.

The Ranger who was sent to track down the killer spent many a grueling day and night. For the better part of two weeks, he used all his resourcefulness and stamina in pursuit of the fleeing man. His terse report closed the case. It read:

"Searched on horseback and foot. After 275 hours, located subject at Yegua Creek. Subject resisted and fired on Ranger. Subject was killed."

Rangers may make felony arrests without warrants on airplanes, trains, boats, or in automobiles. Because of these broad powers, and because each man must exercise individual initiative constantly, the men are carefully chosen.

For the one or two vacancies that may occur during a year, the department of public safety has hundreds of applicants. They write from every state in the Union, and from many foreign coun-



tries. However, qualifications include a year's residence in Texas, an excellent physical condition, and at least four years as an officer of an outstanding law-enforcement agency. Many of the men come from the Texas Highway Patrol. Some were county sheriffs. Only a handful have left the Rangers for reasons other than retirement in the past 22 years.

So outstanding have the Rangers proved themselves that during World War II the simple mention of "Ranger" caused a problem for the German military. When American Rangers, a strictly GI outfit, landed in Europe from the Mediterranean, both the French and Germans believed they were the storybook Texas Rangers.

The French rejoiced, but not the Germans. The idea of fighting Texas Rangers so demoralized some German units that Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels had to broadcast an explanation. He ended by saying that even if these were the Texas Rangers his Germans could beat them. But it's still questionable how many German troops were convinced.

MODERN-DAY Texas Rangers zealously protect the hard-won reputation of decades. Once a Dallas murderer fled Texas for Brazil. Although we have no extradition treaty with Brazil, the government there declared the criminal an undesirable alien and expelled him. A Ranger was on the American ship to make the arrest when the Brazilian authorities led him aboard.

By the time the ship docked at a small Latin port, however, the prisoner had made friends with a member of the crew, who released him. When the Ranger called from the port to report the escape, Colonel Garrison's instructions were: "Don't come back unless he's with you. Escapes just don't happen to a Ranger!"

The Ranger, with local military police, set off into the tropical jungle determined to uphold a tradition. His next report to Austin read simply: "Apprehension made. Returning with prisoner."

Although you've read a lot about Texas Rangers, you might not recognize one if you saw him. He wears no formal uniform. If he is working in a city, he may be dressed in a business suit. If he is riding the brush country, his clothing may include jeans and chaps. Usually he wears cowboy boots, a broad-brimmed Stetson hat, matching gabardine trousers, and Western field jacket.

Some people even think the Texas Ranger is just a legend from the Old West. Colonel Garrison has a brusque reply to this misapprehension: "Just tell anybody who thinks the Rangers are dead to come down here and start something—we'll give him a lively reception!"

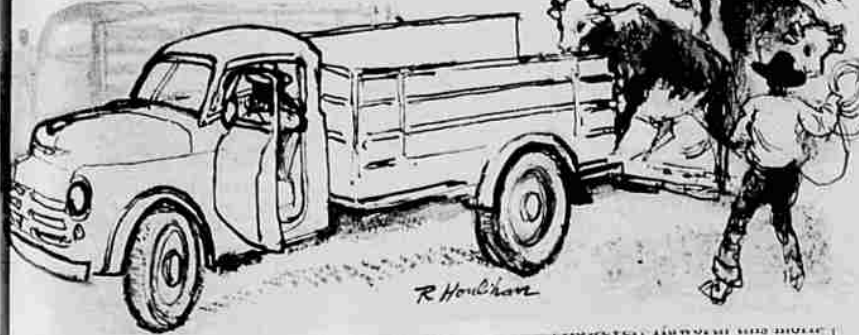
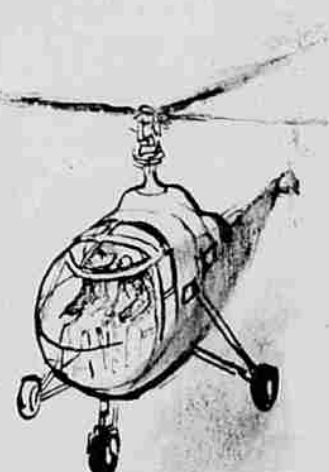


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