

TOM CLAVIN

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FOLLOW ME

TO

HELL

McNELLY'S TEXAS RANGERS

AND THE RISE OF FRONTIER JUSTICE



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← TO →
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TEXAS RANGERS
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TOM CLAVIN



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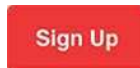
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In memory of my son,
Brendan Clavin

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some readers may be aware that I am the author or coauthor of a whole wagon train of books that are inhabited by a wide array of wonderful real-life characters. But writing about Leander McNelly was a special challenge. Let me amend that: Writing about the Texas Rangers was a special challenge and then there was McNelly on top of that.

This book is not intended to be a history of the Texas Rangers. However, to set the stage for the adventures of McNelly's Rangers in the mid-1870s, it seemed that including as much history of the Rangers as readers would tolerate was necessary. What made this additionally challenging was that one can consult, say, three sources of information on the Texas Rangers and be presented with three different versions of the same event. Just one example is the Texian-Karankawa fight at Skull Creek, which is said to have involved anywhere from eleven to twenty-five Texians and to have taken place in late 1822 or February 1823.

Such contradictions, I have often found, can be attributed to accounts provided by not the most reliable eyewitnesses on the frontier, whether that frontier is Kentucky, Kansas, Arizona, or Texas. But in the specific case of the Texas Rangers, many tales both tall and small have been spun during the last two centuries by a variety of tellers, and some previous writers have cherry-picked the most ... let's say, useful ones. Some researchers and writers have made valiant efforts to separate facts—as best they could be determined—from fiction, and those are the sources I have tried to pay the most attention to.

Because this book is not necessarily a history of the Texas Rangers, not all events and participants leading up to the 1870s have been included. Using my judgment, for better or worse, I have presented an overview of the main events that had an impact on southeast Texas before the Civil

War.

And then there is Leander McNelly. He is one of the more revered figures in the Texas Rangers' history. However, not only was he captain of a company for less than three years but also the men he commanded were not technically Rangers but members of the Washington County Volunteer Militia. And at least four of them wrote about their experiences, with each account differing significantly from the others. These discrepancies do not diminish the achievements of "McNelly's Rangers," but they do indicate that trying to write a true story about them can seem like a Sisyphean task.

But it was one worth undertaking. I am not contending that McNelly was the greatest of all Ranger captains. Very strong arguments have been made on behalf of John Coffee Hays, John "Rip" Ford, and John B. Jones, among others. But many Texas Rangers historians will agree that Leander McNelly was a transitional figure. He represented both the "old" Ranger ways and the new Rangers that evolved into the modern police force of today. McNelly was, without question, the most effective Ranger captain of the mid-1870s when this transition began. As Frederick Wilkins points out in his indispensable *The Law Comes to Texas*: "The Rangers of the 1870s and following decades were little changed from the men of the 1840s and 1850s.... In one basic improvement, for the first time a Ranger force was permanently established. This prospect of permanency corrected a defect in all of the earlier Ranger units; an experienced cadre of Rangers was maintained in service." Frontier justice had arrived.

One might think that McNelly, given his stature in the Texas Rangers' history, was a formidable figure whose very presence caused evildoers to surrender. This was not true physically: He was barely five foot five and 125 pounds, dressed almost like a dandy—brush jacket, duck pants, calfskin leggings, sometimes a beaver hat—and wore his long beard neatly trimmed. However, his men—occasionally referred to as "Little McNellys" in newspaper accounts—followed him because of the force of his personality, devotion to law and order (as he saw it), and undeniable courage. He was indeed one of a kind.

One more note about *Follow Me to Hell*: "Indian" was in common usage during the decades that I am writing about, but it is not nearly as common today. To this author, the word "Indian" is not by itself derogatory when used as a definition of America's aboriginal inhabitants. Still, I have endeavored to use as often as possible persons' names and/or

tribal affiliations to keep usage of “Indian” to a minimum.

Okay, now that we got that out of the way, let’s pretend we’ve gathered around the campfire and a tale of legendary people—especially Leander McNelly—is about to be told.

PROLOGUE

It was a bright, unusually mild late-autumn morning when the men known as McNelly's Rangers rode away from Richard King's ranch on fresh horses and, for those who needed them, new saddles. At a brisk pace, the riders searched for the vigilantes and bandits who had terrorized the Nueces Strip.

Their captain was Leander McNelly. Most descriptions of him echo that of Doug Swanson in his book *Cult of Glory*: “[He] was short, gaunt, thin of voice, and racked by tuberculosis. To a newspaper correspondent of his day, he appeared as ‘the very reverse of robust.’ One of his own men—an ardent admirer—described him as ‘sick and puny ... a little runt of a feller.’ At the peak of his career, he was sometimes so weak he could barely stand.”

But his company of Rangers would obey his every word and display as much bravery in action as he did. Now, in November 1875, they were undertaking their most dangerous mission yet. To enforce the law, they might have to go south of the Rio Grande ... even if an invasion of Mexico triggered a war.

As they neared the border, McNelly told his men to stop and rest—and double-check their pistols, rifles, and ammunition while they were at it. They did so, then drank from their canteens, mopped their weather-beaten faces, and readied themselves for arriving at the river.

Once the Rangers were rested enough and prepared to get on their new mounts, their captain addressed them: “Boys,” McNelly began, “I may lead you into hell, but I’ll get you out if you do exactly as I tell you to do. I’ll never send you into a battle, I’ll lead you. All I ask any man to do is follow me.”

The forty men climbed up onto their saddles, formed a phalanx behind

their captain, and headed south. Once in sight of the Rio Grande and the inhospitable terrain beyond, many of McNelly's Rangers wondered if this was only their first view of hell, and they inched their horses closer to the captain.

– ACT I –

COLONISTS AND CAPTAINS

No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right and keeps on a-comin'.

—Ranger Captain Bill McDonald

CHAPTER 1

“TEXIAN DEVILS!”

It is generally agreed that Stephen Austin created the Texas Rangers with a few strokes of his quill pen in August 1823. In this call to arms, he did indeed use the word “rangers,” but before this missive there already were “rangers” in Texas. It would take two years before Austin’s group were called the Texas Rangers.

When Anglo settlers first arrived in 1821 and began to put roots down in the fertile soil of the eastern section of Spanish Texas, the most serious threat they faced was the tribe known as the Karankawas. There were close to two thousand members of the tribe spread out between Galveston Bay and Corpus Christi Bay. They had a fearsome reputation—purportedly, they practiced cannibalism with captured and killed enemies—and an appearance few white men had encountered before. The Karankawa men were tall and muscular. During the summer they wore deerskin breechcloths or nothing at all, and in winter they donned buffalo and deer robes. Their bodies were painted and tattooed and pierced with small pieces of cane. They often smeared themselves with a mixture of mud and alligator or shark grease to ward off mosquitoes. The women also painted and tattooed their bodies and wore knee-length skirts of animal skin.

Anglo settlers suddenly appearing with ambitions to establish ranches and farms on traditional hunting grounds were not greeted warmly by the Karankawa. Immediately, there was conflict. One incident resulted in the death of two Anglos—or “Texians,” as they began to be called. They were attacked and killed as they were transporting corn on a raft up the Colorado River.¹ Robert Kuykendall, a Kentuckian who was one of the original Anglo settlers, called upon two dozen other colonists to join him in a revenge ride. They knew the Karankawa had a camp on a tributary of the Colorado River known as Skull Creek, and that was where they rode.

The Karankawa were indeed there. The colonists stealthily approached,

and after a quiet preparation of weapons, they attacked. Caught completely by surprise, the tribe's men, women, and children tried to flee. Many could not outrun the Texan long rifles. When the firing stopped, there were between nineteen and twenty-three Karankawa bodies left behind. This battle would turn out to be the first of many between Texans and the native inhabitants during the next six decades.

Having been so successful in their first foray, Kuykendall and another colonist leader, John Jackson Tumlinson, thought it a good idea to have a sort of militia always ready for future provocations. The Mexican government approved, and 1823 saw the establishment of a ten-man unit, to be led by Moses Morrison, who had served in the U.S. Army. They were not technically Rangers but pretty much served as such until Stephen Austin gave them a name. Their original purpose would expand to include battling interloping Mexicans, cattle rustlers, and others lumped together as bandits or "border ruffians." Many Mexicans soon came to calling them *Los diablos tejanos!*—"Texian devils!"

In August 1823, Stephen Austin resided at the colony he had established on the Colorado River in Spanish Texas. The colony contained a coastal prairie good for grazing and farming. He noted in his diary, "The country is the most beautiful & desirable to live in I ever saw."

But looking past the beauty, Austin could clearly see the dangers. He was becoming increasingly alarmed because, as he wrote to local authorities, "The roads are full of errant thieves united with Indians." With Mexican authorities apparently helpless to protect their own citizens, let alone the newcomer American settlers, Austin took matters into his own hands. He wrote and issued a plea for men with their own horses and guns to gather as a sort of militia. Austin vowed to pay fifteen dollars a month to each man. However, because he was strapped for cash, his offer really was that each month a volunteer would earn fifteen dollars' worth of land. At the time, the only thing Stephen Austin had a lot of, in addition to trouble, was land.

Most significant about this call to arms was Austin's writing that men were being sought "to act as rangers for the common defence." By 1823 in North America, a militia was a well-known entity. But for the first time in a Texas document the word "rangers" was used. To this day, it is one of the most familiar words associated with Texas.

LUCKLESS LIBERATORS

One reason for the military impotence of Mexico on its northern border was that it had only recently wrested itself free from Spain and had plenty of political and financial housekeeping to do. Mexico had to worry much more about repelling an invasion by a spurned Spain than the safety of Texians.

Spain had not immediately joined France early in 1778 to enter the Revolutionary War on the side of the Americans. It was not quite as strong militarily as France and took more seriously than its neighbor the possible consequences of supporting insurgents against a monarch. Eventually, though, Spain provided some significant assistance to the rebelling Anglo colonists, much of it thanks to Bernardo de Gálvez.

The governor of Louisiana, barely in his thirties, eagerly embraced Spain's somewhat reluctant decision in June 1779 to recognize the United States as an independent nation. Gálvez used his soldiers to thwart British attempts to close the Mississippi River, which allowed for transported goods and raw materials to eventually find their way to the colonies along the East Coast, with some of its ports having been blockaded by the British. And Gálvez led a campaign east that threw the British out of West Florida, a satisfying revenge for the British having taken Florida from Spain two decades earlier.

But the biggest benefit Gálvez had for Texas was the creation of the cattle drive. To feed his troops as they pushed disheartened redcoats back from Baton Rouge to Natchez to Mobile, and on to Pensacola, Gálvez purchased two thousand head from ranchers in the San Antonio area who had vaqueros drive them north and east. The cattle drives continued until hostilities against the British ended in 1782. The effectiveness of these dusty treks demonstrated that ranching in Texas and moving thousands of tons of beef to available markets could work.

Suddenly, there was a rush of Spanish Mexicans wanting to become ranchers. The government made it easier to do so by granting a square league (4,428 acres) to every man who paid a fee and intended to raise stock. In the San Antonio region especially, that stock was cattle. With so much grazing land available for each owner and farming a more risky and low-return enterprise, after the war ranching looked like the way to prosper, and many men did.

Governor Gálvez, though only age forty, died in November 1786 and thus did not live to possibly regret the help he had given to the American cause. With the United States growing in productivity and confidence by leaps and bounds, Spanish authorities in Mexico began to wonder how expansionist the former colonists would become. The nascent nation's economy soon outpaced that of the New Spain territory, becoming twice as productive by 1800.

The population trend looked rather worrisome too. In 1790 the U.S. population was 3.7 million and that of Mexico was 4.8 million. But half of Mexico's population was composed of Indians who, unlike the Americans, were dwindling in numbers and did not contribute much to the economy. Inevitably, as the number of Americans grew, they would be spreading out to new territories, which included west and south of the Mississippi River.

The Spanish authorities were right to be nervous about northern intruders. A warning of what was to come for Mexico can be found in the brief but mercurial career of Philip Nolan.

He had been born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1771. By the late 1780s, the teenager was in New Orleans as a bookkeeper for the trader James Wilkinson, who did much of his business with Spanish merchants and lawmakers. Having learned to speak Spanish fluently by twenty, Nolan secured a trading passport from the Spanish governor of Louisiana and set out to trade with the Indian tribes across the Mississippi River. Nolan either overlooked or ignored that the passport was void in Spanish Texas, and soon his goods were confiscated by Spanish authorities. Before returning to New Orleans, he lived with the Indians for two years. Thanks to trading with them, Nolan had at least fifty wild horses with him when he got back.

He made a second trip to Texas in 1794, with another passport from the Louisiana governor. He made acquaintance with Spanish Texas governor Manuel Muñoz and the commandant general of the Provincias

Internas, Pedro de Nava. Though this offered more promise, Nolan was sent packing again, but this time he had two hundred and fifty horses trailing behind him.

Three years later, in the summer of 1797, Nolan left for Spanish Texas with a wagon train of trade goods, which he successfully brought to San Antonio, where he tried to insinuate himself in local society. He was instead given a one-way ticket out of Texas. Nolan arrived in Natchez with several hundred more horses.

He should have quit to enjoy the proceeds from selling the horses, especially after he was unable to obtain any more passports. Instead, Nolan persuaded some thirty frontiersmen to accompany him to Spanish Texas, where they would seize riches and land and create a kingdom for themselves. The expedition crossed the border in October 1800 and headed north of Nacogdoches to capture wild mustangs. The Spanish soon heard of their activities and created their own expedition.

The following March, a Spanish force of one hundred and twenty men left Nacogdoches. They encountered Nolan and his followers just upstream from where the current Nolan River flows into the larger Brazos River. Several of the Americans surrendered immediately to the Spaniards. Nolan did not and was killed. His ears were cut off as evidence for the authorities back in Mexico City that he was dead.²

Even after Nolan was dead some of his followers continued to fight until they were promised safe passage to return to Louisiana. First, however, they were taken into Mexico, where authorities decreed one of the men must die for their resistance. After die were cast, the unlucky Ephraim Blackburn was hanged. The others were not sent to Louisiana but spent several years being rotated among several Mexican prisons.

The political landscape changed in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase. President Thomas Jefferson's ambitious acquisition of 820,000 square miles meant even more far-ranging explorations. Texas was not part of that transaction, but that was only fine print to hunters, farmers, and others looking to hike and ride toward new horizons. In addition, a few Spanish authorities had the idea of encouraging Indian tribes to move south to Texas. They could roam freely to hunt, and their presence would deter white American adventurers. How long this might work became moot when Mexico began to catch the revolution fever. It had begun back in the homeland.

Because it really could not effectively do otherwise, Spain had gone along with Napoleon's quest to become the ruler of Europe. But in 1808, he determined that cooperation was not nearly as enjoyable as conquest and attacked Spain. It was not long before Charles IV and his son Ferdinand VII were removed from their thrones and replaced by Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's older brother. The subsequent war of resistance in Spain caused ripples in Mexico, where many of the political leaders, and those who wanted to be, were not fighting French occupiers but each other. In the process, they moved away from Spanish supervision altogether.

One would-be ruler of an independent Mexico was Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. His defeat and execution in the summer of 1811 by forces loyal to Spain was one of several attempts to liberate Mexico. Another revolutionary leader was Juan Bautista de las Casas, whose demise that same year was more gruesome—he was shot, decapitated, and, as a warning to other rebels, his head was put on display in a plaza in San Antonio.

Such grisly conclusions to revolutionary efforts did not end the fighting among various factions. And what had spilled over into Mexico splashed on Spanish Texas too. A blacksmith with bigger ambitions than shoeing horses, Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara believed he could succeed where others had failed. Displaying plenty of hubris, he traveled to Washington, D.C., and was not only granted a meeting with James Monroe but also encouraged by the secretary of state to stir things up back home.

This Gutiérrez did, recruiting an army that, on March 28, 1813, defeated royalist forces at the Battle of Salado. Four days later, Gutiérrez arrived in San Antonio and declared himself the head of a new government. And to be on the safe side, he had the dozen or so leaders of the army he defeated brought back to Salado Creek, where they were hacked to death. On April 6 Gutiérrez proclaimed Texas independent.

By August, Gutiérrez had vacated his command and was gone, and more fighting ensued.³ Because of the dizzying array of leaders and atrocities committed by loyalists and insurgents, plus the deaths of a few Americans who had rashly fought for independence, the U.S. government washed its hands of Texas. Best to ignore it, especially given that there were millions of acres to the north to be explored, tamed, and settled once the native inhabitants were brushed aside.

To make things official, the secretary of state in the new Monroe

administration, John Quincy Adams, and Luis de Onís, Spain's minister to the United States, negotiated a treaty in 1819 that ceded Florida to the United States and defined the Red and Sabine Rivers as the boundary between the United States and New Spain, which included Texas. That should calm things down, at least as far as American ambitions were concerned.

THE LONG REPUBLIC

Hopes for a peaceful period during which Americans minded their own business were dashed by James Long. The Adams-Onís Treaty quickly proved unpopular with men outside Texas who were eager to do business and otherwise settle inside the territory.

One of them was the twenty-six-year-old Long. Born in Culpeper County, Virginia, he had become a U.S. Army surgeon and saw action at the end of the War of 1812 in the Battle of New Orleans. Afterward, he had settled in Natchez. Because of his army and combat experience, Long was voted to command an expedition that had the highfalutin goal of conquering Spanish Texas.

Among the two-hundred-man invasion force serving under Long that gathered in Natchez were José Félix Trespacios, a Mexican who had escaped imprisonment for fomenting rebellion against Spanish rule in Mexico, and a twenty-three-year-old Jim Bowie, originally from Kentucky. Long also attempted to recruit the French pirate Jean Lafitte and his men, but Lafitte turned him down, having too much to do trying to hold on to the colony he had established at Galveston.⁴ Several of Long's recruits were former French soldiers who had founded and quickly abandoned a settlement in Texas known as the Champ d'Asile in 1818 and were ready to try again.

By June, the Long expedition had arrived in Texas and captured Nacogdoches. Long was proclaimed the first president of the new "Republic of Texas," also called the "Long Republic." Despite this initial success, the surgeon-warrior's independent republic lasted just four months. His army eventually grew restless, and many men returned to the United States.

A Spanish force routed Long and his remaining nation builders in October. The deposed president escaped to Natchitoches, where he began

raising money to equip a second expedition. He joined survivors of the first one on the Bolivar Peninsula in April 1820, confidently (or foolishly) bringing his pregnant wife, Jane, and three hundred troops. Though Long restored elements of the former government, the expedition stalled for more than a year as men deserted and were not replaced. On October 4, 1821, Long and his troops seized Presidio La Bahía, but four days later Spanish troops forced them to surrender.

Surprisingly, given how exasperated Spanish authorities had become with American interlopers, James Long was not immediately executed. He was imprisoned for a time in San Antonio and across the border in Monterrey. In March 1822, he was transported to Mexico City to plead his case before the Mexican president at the time, Agustín de Iturbide. Alas, this was, at last, the end of Long, who was shot and killed by a guard on April 8. It is believed that the former ally Trespalacios, who conveniently had been freed, had bribed the guard to kill Long.⁵

The failure of the Long expedition might have demonstrated that white Americans could not successfully establish enclaves in Texas. But during this time the Spanish authorities had a much bigger worry—losing their colony altogether. Back in the home country, Ferdinand VII had become king after Napoleon had been defeated. His attempts to rule with an iron fist were resisted, enough so that in 1820 he was forced to acquiesce to a more liberal constitutional monarchy. An attempt to create a similar form of government in Mexico independent of Spain was successful.

Mexico's political fragility encouraged people of varying backgrounds who had found their way to Texas in less sensational ways than armed expeditions to change the complexion of the territory. As Randolph Campbell points out in his history *Gone to Texas*, "By the early 1820s the lure of Texas had brought a truly diverse population to its eastern woodlands. The Nacogdoches area had Hispanic ranchers and farmers, and the town proper had merchants of varied national origins. Anglo-Americans lived in small settlements and on isolated farms scattered from the Red River southward to the Neches. Finally, Indians, particularly the Alabamas, Coushattas, Caddos, Cherokees, Delawares, Shawnees, and Kickapoos, likely outnumbered settlers of European origin."

And then there was the man who would become the most prominent early American settler of Mexican Texas. By the time Mexico was establishing its independence, Stephen Austin's journey had begun.