

An Unbelievable True Story

By James Van Richards

I never knew my grandfather. I was given my middle name for him. He was christened Alonzo Van Oden, and like so many of us of this generation that lost our grandparents at an early age, he passed away before I was born. Alonzo was from Tilden, Texas and like his father, served as a Texas Ranger when that state was still considered to be part of the Wild West. His father had shot and killed a noted Mexican bandit on the trail near the border, but unfortunately the bandit's bullet found its mark as well and the two died on the spot. They were both buried under a pile of rocks at an unknown remote desert location.

What was unique about Alonzo was that he was the only ranger to keep a diary about many of his experiences on the trail while patrolling the Mexican border from Presidio to Ysleta and El Paso. He had chosen a record keeping type book with a marbled pattern exterior cover, and the pages had become so worn over time that it was held together by bits of red ribbon. The entries were written in Spencerian handscript, which was apparently the style of writing just before the turn of the century.

Alonzo, after having served at the ranger station at Ysleta, had married a postmistress there and had two daughters. One was named Ann Oden, who was my aunt. Mrs. Oden had lived in the El Paso valley but had met a dashing cavalry officer from Fort Bliss and later moved to Dallas to become a writer under the name of Ann Jensen. After Alonzo's death, Mrs. Jensen arranged to have parts of her father's diary published in the early 1900's under the title "Texas Rangers Diary and Scrapbook" by the Kaleidoscope Press. This book is still in several libraries but few copies exist. (In Dallas, Mrs. Jensen was to gain a reputation as Texas most famous psychic which may have played a part in these events to follow but will be perhaps be saved for a later story in itself.)

The published book version of the diary has several illustrations consisting of photos and sketches of Alonzo and other ranger pals that were made from plates set along the borders of text for the process of printing. As with many of the materials used in printing books, this material was set aside somewhere because it was of no further use after publication. The printed book containing excerpts from the diary was mostly handed out to the members of the family and was not widely circulated. Much time elapsed and the book was basically forgotten.

Many years later, after Ann Jensen had passed on, a very strange sequence of events event happened to our family. Mrs. Jensen's younger sister Mamie Oden Richards and my father had settled into retirement in New Braunfels, Texas, a quiet small town on the Comal River north of San Antonio. My father was very active in the small town doing odd jobs for the neighborhood folks and was always looking for materials to work with. One day he walked into the local hardware store to exchange some conversation with the familiar storeowner and saw a number of

wooden blocks perched neatly on a back shelf. My father, always looking for odds and ends inquired as to what the hardware owner was going to do with those blocks. (Dad always used small blocks of wood in his carpenter work). The hardware owner said that he was cleaning up and that my dad could have them and neatly wrapped them up. My father carried them home that day and stored them in the garage near his workbench. How long they stayed there I will never know but the uncanny part of this true story follows.

One day, my mother went into the garage and decided to look around and perhaps do some tidying up, as was her nature at times. She saw the blocks and asked my father what that pile of stuff was and he said "Just some old pieces of wood that I found downtown and might find a use for sometime".

Mother carefully unwrapped one of the wooden blocks, turned it over, and there before her was the metal image of her own father, Alonzo Van Oden. Attached to the block of wood was one of the long, lost plates that had been used in the printing of Alonzo's diary a half of a century before..... All of the diary images had come home.