

## THE STORY BEHIND THE PHOTO

By James Van Richards

Grandson of Alonzo Van Oden



The old photo above has been seen in numerous national magazines, on walls of restaurants, old western postcards, posters, gunfighter books, merchandise price tags, and even on the front of Dallas Cowboy T-shirts but only few know the history behind the men posing above.

The year was 1890. The place was Shafter, Texas; the four men are Texas Rangers Bob Speaks, Alonzo "Lon" Oden, Jim Putman and John R. Hughes. The four men made up a detachment of Company D

of the Frontier Battalion and at the time were assigned to protect the large silver mine at Shafter, Texas.

### Bob Speaks

Bob Speaks was the oldest of the group and about 41 when the photo was taken. He was considered to be the old man of the bunch. Arriving in Texas from Missouri he had served as a government scout, a guide and had been in Texas for about 25 years. Not much is written about Speaks but he apparently had a long period of service on the Texas frontier and is mentioned in several Ranger episodes as being an important partner in helping to keep the peace along the Wild West Texas border.

### Alonzo "Lon" Van Oden

Alonzo Oden was 27 years old in the photo and was nicknamed "Lon" by his companions. His father Aaron Van Oden had been a Texas Ranger who was killed along with a Mexican bandit along the Rio Grande while chasing horse thieves. Lon's mother died before he was one year old and he was raised by his grandmother who was an earnest scholar of Swedenborg and taught the boy of twelve readings from Byron, Shakespeare and the Bible and the ability to write in Spenserian hand script. Lon may have been the only Texas Ranger to keep a diary while on the trail and his writings were kept in a tattered marbleboard -covered book like merchants used for keeping accounts. In 1936, his daughter Ann Jensen published a large number of the original entries in a book entitled Texas Rangers Diary and Scrapbook. . Many entries were in poetry and he has been called "The Rhyming Ranger" in and on the cover of western magazines.

Lon began the first entry by writing "**I'm twenty seven and have just joined the ranger service. I am twenty seven, and have just started a diary...I wonder why. I also wonder what kind of diary I shall keep. This book is large, and the leaves are blank**" Little did he know of the tales and poetry that were to be inscribed?

In just one of the entries Alonzo Oden writes "**I feel a record should be made of the cruelties committed by these Mexican bandits we are always hunting. In years to come, these atrocities will be forgotten, and people will wonder why the**

**Ranger service was necessary. They will think of us as quick shooting, loudmouth, dull witted hypocrites...so in the interest of posterity I will tell of a sight we saw in the Ranger service...and we have occasion to see sights such as these time without end."** (Lon goes on to describe the many very brutal attacks on the local ranchers and the horrible torture and death many had to endure.)

Lon also writes" **I feel so inadequate when we have finished a battle and I look upon bodies of dead men- men who were as bad as the world to see, but men who had been born into this world for a purpose- who are we to end that purpose?"**

After leaving the Ranger service Lon married Laura Carr Hay, a postmistress in Ysleta, Texas and became a rancher near Marfa, and later owned and operated a mercantile store and lumberyard in Sierra Blanca, Texas. He passed away in El Paso but was buried in the family plot in Marfa. Grandson G.L. "Jack" Richards placed the iron Ranger Cross on his grave just a few years ago.

### James Mitchell (Jim) Putman

Jim Putman was 31 when the photo was taken. One account was that Putman and a local sheriff had trailed a noted outlaw Fine Gilliland into the mountains north of Marathon, and when the outlaw had wounded the sheriff and killed his horse. Putnam then also dropped Gilliland's horse. The bandit tried to hide behind the dead horse but Putman shot Gilliland through the head when he rose up to shoot.



Rangers Speaks, Hughes, Putman and Oden on patrol

Another written account was that Hughes , Putman and Oden went down to a San Antonio colony on the Rio Grande to find a particular Mexican criminal when they also ran across the notorious Florencio Carrasco who was also wanted for murder and horse stealing. Carrasco reached for his rifle while the other bandits were firing on the Rangers and Oden shot and killed Carrasco, but Oden's horse was killed by the other fleeing bandits.

In the thirteenth entry of diary, Oden also writes that he and Jim Putman arrested William D. Barbee alias "Pecos Bill" for murder of two men and placed him in the Shafter jail. Barbee sat silently staring into space in his cell all the while and ate little until authorities from Ozona came to pick him up.

### John Reynolds Hughes

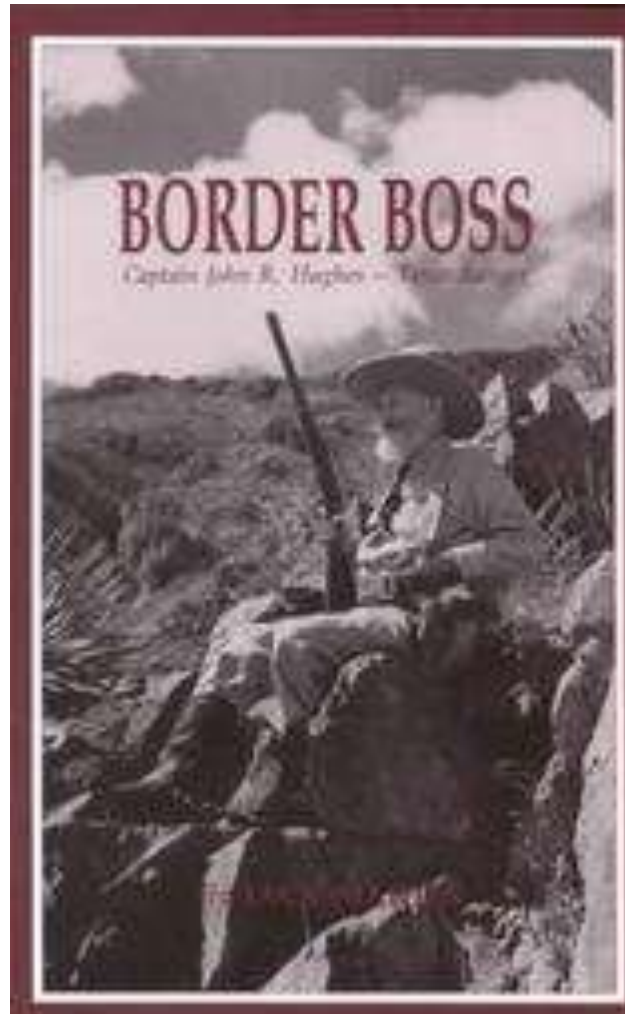
The fourth man in the photo is perhaps the most famous Texas Ranger of them all. John R. Hughes was born in Illinois, left for Texas and began ranching. There were problems with cattle rustlers and John used his natural abilities to track them down. Ranger Ira Aten was so impressed with Rancher Hughes that he

asked him to join up with the Texas Rangers. By enlisting in the Frontier Battalion, Hughes realized that he could track down fugitives and get paid for it at the same time. It didn't take long to make the decision. On August 10, 1887, Hughes signed on, mustered in by Adjutant General W. H. King at Georgetown, Williamson County. Now in the Frontier Battalion, John Reynolds Hughes would hunt down murderers, smugglers, and sheep, cattle and horse thieves along the Rio Grande, recovering thousands of dollars of property. He would also have to kill in the line of duty on more than one occasion. It was dangerous work.

The exploits during his long career are varied and hair raising. Along with other Rangers, John's active career was spent chasing border ruffians, escaped criminals and rustlers. The famous western writer Zane Grey spent some time with Hughes while he was on the job. Later, his friend Grey wrote the famous book *The Lone Star Ranger* and dedicated it to Hughes and the Texas Rangers. It is written that his book was also the basis for the character of radio and movie fame, the Lone Ranger. Thus, some have concluded the Lone Ranger was based on the life of John R. Hughes.



John Hughes was dubbed "The Border Boss" and the book in the illustration below describes his life and exploits during his long tour with the Texas Rangers. John R. Hughes lived to be 92 years old and is buried in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin, Texas.





Texas Ranger John R Hughes

Postscripts:

1. Much of the material above was obtained from the original Texas Rangers diary that was handed down from Jack Richards to brother Jim Richards who is now in possession of the original pages. The old pages that were published probably remained at the publisher and have been lost, but there are large numbers that have been preserved along with several old photographs. Grandson Jack Richards transcribed "The Remainder of the Diary" before his passing in a typed manuscript, but many of the entries were personal and have only been disseminated to members of the family. There are many interesting tales in the diary, too numerous to mention, but the stories tell a lot about what life was like along the wild West Texas border before the turn of the century. An ultimate goal is to donate the original diary pages to the Texas Ranger Museum in Waco.

2. Some of the material was obtained from columnist Lynn Ashby's Houston Post article in 1979 and the Texas Rangers Dispatch Magazine. Other comments were provided by the Western Outlaw History Association. Copies of the photographs are part of the collection of western history photographs at the University of Oklahoma.