

# Texas Ranger Tales

by Mike Cox

**I**t can't atone for his murder, or even the apparent contempt of those who buried him, but at least James W. King lies in a beautiful cemetery.

Coyotes barked in the distance and a covey of quail flushed from the brush as a recent visitor walked up the red-dirt road to find King's grave in Loma Vista Cemetery, south of Batesville in Zavalla County. A trio of dove shot past overhead toward the sunset, flying to roost. In the two-acre graveyard on top of the hill, grass grew high and bees buzzed around the sweet-smelling blooming sage.

The present hardly could have been more pleasant, the past scarcely any uglier: King had been buried facing west, a strong insult. Especially for a former Texas Ranger.

Not much is known about King. A fair hand with a fiddle, and presumably with six-shooters and Winchesters, he joined the Frontier Battalion in 1882. He served under various officers in two different companies before enlisting in Captain Frank Jones' Company D in 1887.

When fence cutting got out of hand in Navarro County, the Rangers sent privates Ira Aten and the younger King to work undercover. The two Rangers found catching wire snippers was tough work, but Aten proposed a solution that quickly became famous if not practicable. His idea involved attaching dynamite bombs to fences. If set up properly, Aten theorized in a letter to headquarters, the bomb would explode when someone cut a fence wire. The felony offense would be instantly adjudicated and as word spread, Aten believed, the fence-cutting problem would disappear.

By return mail, Aten got orders to drop the bomb idea and soon he

and King were back on other duty elsewhere in the state. At least for King, it had been a chance to work with an older, more experienced Ranger.

Based on King's Navarro County work, in 1888 Jones ordered King to sparsely-populated Zavalla County. Posing as a dishonorably discharged ranger, King's job was to make cases against cattle thieves.

King made some inroads with the locals with his fiddle-playing abilities, but no criminal cases. The ranger returned to his company and other duties. He reenlisted on Sept. 1, 1889 but three days later, Capt. Jones discharged him for drunkenness. This time it was for real. For some reason, with four dollars in his pocket, King decided to go back to Zavalla County.

Maybe he figured on hiring on as a sheriff's deputy, or doing some cowboying. He must have liked wide-open country, because there was plenty of it in South Texas.

Again, King told folks he had been let go by the Rangers. But that's what he had said before. Certain parties in the county both were annoyed at his reappearance and doubtful of his story.

Details are sketchy, but records say the former ranger was slain on the W.L. Gates ranch near Loma Vista on Feb. 11, 1890. A history of Zavalla County does not even say how he was killed, but in the brush country, it's hard to imagine King died from any other cause than gunshots.

King, his former captain re-ported to headquarters 11 days later, had been "fouly assassinated...by parties who I am thoroughly

convinced thought King was yet a Ranger and on detective work." The captain went on to assure the Adjutant General: "I shall do my best to ferret out the murderers and see that they are punished."

On April 4, three men, Fox Adams, George Rumfield and Will Speer were charged with King's murder on the docket book of Justice of the Peace C.C. McKinney by T.G. Baker. Following arraignment, Judge McKinney released the defendants on \$1,000 bond each.

Tried in nearby Frio County, the three accused killers were found not guilty and presumably went on to live normal lives.

For years, only a mesquite stump marked the former Ranger's lonesome burial spot. At some point, a flat gray granite stone was placed on the grave. The modern marker makes no mention of the ranger's violent demise, merely recording for posterity these words:

**James W. King  
Feb. 11, 1890  
Texas Ranger  
Co. D**

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