The Role of the Texas Rangers in the Sherman Riot of 1930

Emily Bowles

On May 9, 1930, famed Texas Ranger Frank Hamer was tasked with protecting George Hughes, a black man charged with the rape of a white woman in Sherman, Texas. A mob surrounded and eventually burned down the county courthouse. Hamer fled the courthouse, following a directive purported to be from Texas Governor Dan Moody to “protect the negro if possible, but do not shoot into the crowd” and left the accused to die in the District Clerk’s safe. The mob then roved the town, eventually making it to the jail, hoping to quell their bloodlust by lynching any black prisoners. Texas Ranger Manuel “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas waited for them, armed, and having not received the do not shoot directive from Governor Moody. Dissuaded by the well-armed Gonzaullas, the mob abandoned their attempt at the jail and moved on to destroy the Sherman Black business district.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In response to the situation in Sherman, Governor Moody imposed martial law, and more Texas Rangers joined Frank Hamer and “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas in Sherman to bring order and security to the small town. The circumstances surrounding the riot and the role of the Texas Rangers both in failing to protect Hughes and in the aftermath of the lynching begs the question: Were the Texas Rangers, the most revered lawmen in the state, responsible for their failure to curb the mob violence because of a dereliction of duty, or were their hands tied by the rumored memo attributed to the Governor, rendering Hamer and Gonzaullas unable to fulfill their motto of “One Riot, One Ranger?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In order to fully appreciate the impact of the Sherman Affair, one must examine two things: the history of the Texas Rangers as lawmen and the professional history of the two main Texas Rangers involved to understand how they came to be seen as the heroic yet violent men of pop culture. The Rangers were created in 1835, with a directive calling for companies of volunteers for three to six months at a time. From their earliest days the Texas Rangers have been surrounded by mythos and lore. As an elite law enforcement division, the Texas Rangers earned their memory in pop culture and public perception as heroic and virtuous keepers of law and order. In doing so, they also received their deserved reputation as violent men capable of unspeakable brutality in the name of the law. Small Texas towns under siege by criminals and bandits were thus divided upon finding out that Rangers were called to their town to restore order.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Beginning as volunteers, Rangers provided their own horses and used the first revolving pistol, the five-shot Patterson Colt.[[4]](#footnote-4) They adopted Mexican saddles and Native American horsemanship and became renowned across Texas for their skill as soldiers and at reconnaissance. Anecdotes of their exploits were a fixture in the media, and their individualism – they wore no uniforms and carried no flags – charmed the nation, in spite of the vicious acts committed on campaign. Seeking revenge for the massacres at the Alamo and Goliad, the Rangers exacted their own justice on Mexicans, citizens and soldiers alike.[[5]](#footnote-5)

During the Civil War and into Reconstruction, the Rangers seemed to fade from the public consciousness. This Ranger Force fell under the leadership of four great men with reputations that survive today. The so-called time of the “Four Good Captains” ended with the retirement of John A. Brooks, John H. Rogers, and William J. McDonald in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the Rangers entered a period of poor leadership, with the exception of John R. Hughes.[[6]](#footnote-7) The Rangers’ duties remained focused on the Mexican frontier battling stock thieves during Oscar Colquitt’s two terms as governor, who left office in 1914 with a promise to South Texans afraid for their lives that he would “promptly send the State Rangers to give protection to our citizens, and these Rangers will shoot to kill.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

The decade preceding the Sherman Affair saw a renewed Ranger Force under new governor Pat Morris Neff, who valued the qualities that made the Rangers into the mythic lawmen of the media and worked to change the image that the Rangers earned in the decades following the Mexican War. The 1920s coincided with the resurgence in Texas of the Ku Klux Klan, the self-proclaimed “Keepers of Law and Order. By 1924, however, the Klan was more or less broken, and the Rangers feared the results of the upcoming gubernatorial race.[[8]](#footnote-13) Known as the “Ferguson Era,” 1925 through 1927 “had been a doleful time for the Texas Rangers,” but the accession of Dan Moody to the governor’s seat in 1927 would soon change the Rangers for the better, yet again.[[9]](#footnote-14)

In an instance of foreshadowing worthy of a Hollywood movie, Frank Hamer, now captain again, and federal agent Manuel “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas served together in Borger, Hutchinson County, only a few years before the Sherman Affair. Following the murder of three lawmen in 1927, Governor Moody, along with the federal prohibition administration based in Fort Worth sent agents to clean up the newly incorporated town. Hamer arrived in Borger carrying orders to “remain until the law wins out over the lawless,” and Gonzaullas arrived soon after.[[10]](#footnote-15) The pair – along with others – proved so effective, however, that shortly after their cleanup began, nearly all witnesses fled the town and a case against the guilty parties became impossible to prosecute. While the town was now free of the majority of original conspirators, Gonzaullas’s report warned that a reorganization seemed likely and Borger remained unsafe.[[11]](#footnote-16)

Following Dan Moody’s reelection as governor in 1928, Gonzaullas’s Borger report proved prescient. Criminals murdered the new district attorney John A. Holmes in his garage on the night of September 13, 1929, and Governor Moody sent several Rangers, including Hamer and Gonzaullas, to investigate and restore order. Upon receipt of the Rangers’ report, Moody placed Hutchinson County under martial law for several weeks until all officials called on to resign did so. Their second time in Borger proved successful, and Gonzaullas and Hamer returned to their regular Ranger duties until the following May. The best-known Ranger of his time, Hamer embodied the gruff fierceness of the Rangers in pop culture and boasted an impressive resume that includes the investigation and eventual killing or disbanding of the famed Barrow Gang.

Before his esteemed career as a Texas Ranger, Frank Hamer dreamt of becoming a preacher. By the age of sixteen, circumstances forced him to become either a lawman or an outlaw. Along with his younger brother, and fellow future Texas Ranger, Harrison, Hamer entered into a sharecropping agreement with a local farmer in 1900. The farmer, Dan McSwain, took notice of Hamer’s exceptional skill with a gun and offered the future Ranger captain $200 to murder an enemy rancher. Both Hamer boys told the intended victim that night of the farmer’s plan, and the following day McSwain attempted to murder the elder Hamer, hitting him in the back with buckshot while the sixteen-year-old tried to escape. Following a period of convalescence away from home in West Texas, Hamer returned to the McSwain residence and killed his would-be murderer. Thereafter, he pledged to “pursue outlaws relentlessly and bring them to justice.”[[12]](#footnote-17)

On April 21, 1906, Frank Hamer enlisted in the Texas Rangers as a private at just twenty-two years old. Prohibition saw Hamer join federal service battling bootleggers and busting small town conspiracies and growing increasingly weary of the Rangers he worked with. Faced with several instances of abuse of power upon returning to Ranger duty, Hamer became disenchanted with his cohorts and told Governor Neff that renewing the quality of the Ranger service “would be an impossible task” when first offered the role of captain.[[13]](#footnote-20) As a new captain in the early 1920s, Hamer focused on cleaning up the town of Mexia, seventy miles southeast of Dallas until the Ferguson Era.

The election of Ma Ferguson and subsequent stripping of the Ranger force led to Frank Hamer resigning his captaincy as a show of solidarity and re-enlisting as a private the very next day. This self-imposed demotion lasted until the election of Governor Dan Moody, when Hamer’s captaincy was restored, pay for all Rangers was increased, and one of the “Four Great Captains,” John H. Rogers returned as a Ranger captain after serving eight years as U.S. marshal. The murders of three lawmen in Hutchinson County called Hamer to Borger, where he worked with Gonzaullas for the first time in 1927.

Although lacking a fantastic origin story like Hamer’s, fellow Ranger Gonzaullas was nonetheless driven by the same intense hatred of outlaws and duty to uphold the law. By his own account, Manuel “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas was born in Cadiz, Spain, July 4, 1891, to a Spanish father and a Canadian mother of German ancestry. Gonzaullas served in the Mexican army as a major when he was twenty years old and married Laura Isabel Scherer in 1920, eventually enlisting in the Texas Rangers that same year. During prohibition, Gonzaullas was recruited by the federal government and took leave from the Rangers to become a prohibition agent. As a federal agent, Gonzaullas was increasingly tasked with the duty of arresting and investigating North Texas women guilty of possessing liquor, a necessary duty that Gonzaullas disliked. Gonzaullas returned to the Rangers on July 1, 1924 and joined fellow Ranger Frank Hamer in Borger, Texas, less than a year before the events in Sherman would see the lawmen reunited. Gonzaullas’s exploits as a Ranger continued, and his reputation as fearsome and just by any means necessary only grew until he was called by Governor Dan Moody to return to Sherman – this time not for a trial – but to join Frank Hamer to restore law and order to a town spiraling into chaos.

Captain Frank Hamer, Sergeant J.B. Wheatley, and privates J.R. McCoy and J.W. Aldrich arrived in Sherman on May 8, 1930, charged with protecting a black man, George Hughes, accused of raping his white employer’s wife, Pearl Farlow.[[14]](#footnote-24) The following day was a Friday, and the Rangers escorted Hughes from the jail in Gainesville, Cooke County, to the second-floor courtroom in Sherman to await jury selection and the judge’s decision on venue change. Presiding judge, R.M. Carter, banished all but those directly involved in the case from the courtroom. Those removed from the Grayson County Courthouse met on the lawn in front of the building with hundreds of other civilians incensed by the crime of the black man who remained inside.[[15]](#footnote-25)

The mob swelled as the day progressed when people from surrounding towns joined their neighbors in downtown Sherman, and soon a rumor began to spread: Governor Dan Moody had ordered Captain Hamer not to fire directly into the crowd of now thousands. To further incense the already volatile crowd, the victim, Mrs. Farlow, arrived at the courthouse in an ambulance and was carried into the building on a stretcher as the trial began. At the sight of the victim, the mob surged into the courthouse in an attempt to lynch Hughes, and Judge Carter sent the accused, the jury, and officials to a fireproof vault in an office. When three shots fired above the heads of the crowd failed to stop the encroaching crowd, the Rangers tossed tear gas bombs into the crowd, temporarily vacating the first floor. The Rangers remained on the staircase while Hamer conferred with the judge and lawyers on the second floor, urging for a change in venue immediately as “the trial could not be held without bloodshed” in Grayson County.[[16]](#footnote-26)

As the fire department evacuated the jury, judge, and lawyers from the upper floor of the courthouse, the crowd rushed the building again. Hamer wrote later of this onslaught that

One of the agitators walked to the foot of the stairway and asked me if I was going to give the prisoner up to them. I told him we were not. He said, ‘We’re coming up to get him.’ I said, ‘Well, if you feel lucky, come on up. But if you start up the steps, there’ll be a lot of funerals in Sherman tomorrow.[[17]](#footnote-27)

Hamer then aimed low and fired buckshot into the crowd, wounding two men as another man attempted to charge the back entrance and was promptly shot in the foot by one of Hamer’s Rangers.[[18]](#footnote-28) The Rangers then focused their attention on moving Hughes from the besieged courthouse into the jail for his protection, but the prisoner refused. Hughes chose to take his chances locked in the fireproof vault where he believed he would remain safe from the crowd rather than descend the ladders out the second-floor windows into the throngs of angry citizens below.

By Hamer’s account, the mob then poured gasoline into the building, and it was soon engulfed in flames as the Ranger captain, “rushed to the judge’s office to release his prisoner… no one knew the combination to the vault. Hamer rushed through the crowd, frantically searching for... anyone with the combination” but found no one.[[19]](#footnote-29) The Rangers left the prisoner in the vault and fled not only the courthouse but Grayson County itself, as former University of North Texas student Donna Kumler writes, “mindful, no doubt, that for the first time in their history, the adage ‘one ranger, one riot’ had proven ineffective.”[[20]](#footnote-30)

As they left the scene, the body of Hughes was removed by the crowd from the vault and dragged through town chained behind an automobile. Hamer went to Howe and then McKinney to contact Governor Moody about the situation as the Texas National Guard unit from Denison attempted to disperse the mob.[[21]](#footnote-31) As the night wore on, the violence escalated and Hughes’ body was taken from the town square and dragged through the Black business district of Sherman. Acting on the report from Captain Hamer, Governor Moody dispatched four more Rangers to bring order to the town: Captain Tom R. Hickman, Sergeant M.T. “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas, and Privates W. H. Kirby and R.G. Goss. Three of these additional Rangers arrived in the early hours of Saturday morning, bearing orders from Governor Moody to investigate matters and apprehend the guilty parties, as well as a rebuttal of the “don’t shoot” order, while Gonzaullas arrived before them, leaving Dallas immediately after having heard from Governor Moody.

Local officials congregated at the Grayson County jail roughly two blocks west of the town square and met Sergeant Gonzaullas there. Gonzaullas stood guard at the entrance to the jail to protect the federal prisoners within, “armed with his pistols, a Thompson submachine gun, and a sawed-off shotgun.”[[22]](#footnote-32) Members of the mob arrived at the jail, but Gonzaullas managed to hold them off, likely due to his arsenal, reputation, and willingness to shoot into the crowd. As Saturday progressed, the crowd was thwarted at the jail and moved on to exact even more violence in the Black business district, burning buildings down and searching in vain for someone to lynch and sate their bloodlust. By 10:30 pm Saturday, May 10, Governor Moody imposed martial law.[[23]](#footnote-33)

At dawn on Sunday, the Rangers began their investigation alongside county law enforcement and the Texas National Guard. Into the next week, men and women were arrested and placed in the Grayson County jail, and soon rumors began to swirl that a jailbreak was imminent to free them. Submitting to martial law, the Rangers took a backseat in authority to Texas National Guardsman Colonel Lawrence E. McGee. Martial law lasted until May 24, 1930, but the Rangers appear to have left Sherman some time before then, leaving the rest of the cleanup to the Texas National Guard.

A perfect confluence of circumstances led to the riot that became known as the “Sherman Affair,” and there are several events that can be seen as turning points. The delayed change in venue by Judge Carter, the failure of the police to disperse the crowd at the first sign of violence, the spectacle of the victim’s entrance to the trial, George Hughes’ refusal to leave the courthouse for the jail, Captain Hamer’s inability to rescue Hughes from the vault, and most importantly, the “don’t shoot” rumor that Governor Moody directed to the Rangers contributed to the destruction of the Grayson County Courthouse and much of the Black business district in Sherman.[[24]](#footnote-36)

When questioned about the riot later, Judge Carter “remarked that the ‘don’t shoot’ rumor did irreparable harm to the situation.”[[25]](#footnote-39) There was even criticism amongst the Rangers themselves, with Gonzaullas remarking after the fact that “Hamer should simply have ‘shot the hell’ out of the mob, then at once called for help.”[[26]](#footnote-40) A suggestion that on the surface seems reasonable, but then again, that was Texas. Likely every member of that mob was armed.

Historian Robert M. Utley wrote that according to the motto, “One Riot, One Ranger,” a single Ranger could quell an incipient riot.[[27]](#footnote-41) Within hours of the first signs of a riot, there were eight Texas Rangers in Sherman. “The Sherman Riot was as inspirational as embarrassing,” for the Rangers, a testament to the difference in how Hamer and Gonzaullas handled their duties in preventing and then ending the riot.25 While the Rangers were touted as an exceptionally heroic force who could quell a riot with a single Ranger, this proved inaccurate for the “Sherman Riot.” Instead, the mob ruled in Sherman, dragging Hughes’s body through the streets and burning down the Black business district. Gonzaullas, alone, was able to disperse the mob at the jail but was unable to disperse the riot. Ultimately, both Hamer and Gonzaullas overcame the “Sherman Incident,” their reputations remaining as heroic Rangers, not those who could not dispel a mob.

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Glad you spelled Donna’s name correctly here. It is incorrect just about everywhere else.

1. Donna Kumler, “’They Have Gone From Sherman:’ The Courthouse Riot of 1930 and Its Impact on the Black Professional Class” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Texas , 1995) (Context); Brownson Malsch, Captain M.T. “*Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas, the Only Texas Ranger Captain of Spanish Descent* (Austin, TX: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1980), 94 (Quote). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The general information on both Captain Frank Hamer and Sergeant Manuel “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas can be found in their biographies: John Boessenecker, *Texas Ranger: The Epic Life of Frank Hamer, the Man Who Killed Bonnie and Clyde* (New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2017), H. Gordon Frost and John H. Jenkins, *“I’m Frank Hamer”: The Life of a Texas Peace Officer,*(Buffalo Gap, Texas: State House Press, 2015), and Brownson Malsch, Captain M.T. “Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas, the Only Texas Ranger Captain of Spanish Descent (Austin, TX: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The first century of the Texas Rangers is chronicled in leading works such as Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense,* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1935), Harvey N. Castleman, *The Texas Rangers: The Story of an Organization that is Unique, Like Nothing Else in America*, (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1944), N.A. Jennings, *A Texas Ranger*, (Dallas, Texas: Southwest Press, 1930), and Robert M. Utley, *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers*, (New York, New York: Berkley Books, 2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robert M. Utley, *Lonestar Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Instances of this violence against Mexicans and Mexican Americans can be found in N.A. Jennings’s *A Texas Ranger* and Charles Robinson III, *The Men Who Wear The Star: The Story of the Texas Rangers*, (New York, New York: Random House Publishing, 2000), as well as Utley, *Lone Star Justice* and Webb, *The Texas Rangers.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Utley, *Lone Star Justice*, [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “Colquitt Would Quickly Settle Naco’s Troubles,” *San Antonio Express*, December 10, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Information on Klan activity and the Governor’s response regarding the Rangers role in upholding the law and preventing racial or criminal behavior by the Klan can be found in Robert M. Utley, *Lonestar Lawmen*; and Proctor, *Just One Riot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
9. Utley, *Lonestar Lawmen*, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
10. Utley, *Lonestar Lawmen*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
11. Boessenecker, *Texas Ranger;* Frost and Jenkins, “*I’m Frank Hamer*”; Malsch, “*Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas*; Utley, *Lone Star Lawmen*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
12. Frost and Jenkins, “*I’m Frank Hamer,”* 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
13. John Boessenecker, *Texas Ranger: The Epic Life of Frank Hamer, the Man Who Killed Bonnie and Clyde* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2017); Frost and Jenkins, “*I’m Frank Hamer”* 96 (Context). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
14. Klumer, “They Have Gone From Sherman,” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
15. This treatment of the account of the “Sherman Affair” relies on the dissertation of former University of North Texas, Donna Kumler, “They Have Gone From Sherman” and the following newspapers: *Dallas Herald, Dallas News, The Dallas Morning News, The Denison Herald, Denton Record Chronicle, Gainesville Daily Register, San Antonio Express, Sherman Courier, Sherman Daily Democrat, Sherman Daily Register,* and the *Sherman Democrat.* May, 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
16. Klumer, “They Have Gone From Sherman,” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
17. Kumler, “They Have Gone From Sherman,” (Context); Gordon and Jenkins, “*I’m Frank Hamer,”*164 (Quote). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
18. Gordon and Jenkins, “*I’m Frank Hamer,”*;Boessenecker, *Texas Ranger*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
19. Gordon and Jenkins, “*I’m Frank Hamer,* 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
20. The role of the Texas Rangers is covered extensively in Kumler, “They Have Gone from Sherman”; the Texas State Archives, Adjutant General Department Records, The Sherman Affair, May 9-June 11, 1930, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas, as well as briefly described in some of the personal correspondence of Hamer and Gonzaullas found in The Official Historical Center of the Texas Rangers by Appointment of the State of Texas, Texas State Library and Archives, Waco, Texas, United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
21. Malsch, *“Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas*, [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
22. Klumer, “They Have Gone from Sherman,”; the Texas State Archives, Adjutant General Department Records, The Sherman Affair, May 9-June 11, 1930, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas; The Official Historical Center of the Texas Rangers by Appointment of the State of Texas, Texas State Library and Archives, Waco, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
23. The following area newspapers covered accounts of the imposition of martial law: *Dallas Herald, The Dallas Morning News, The Denison Herald, Denton Record Chronicle, Gainesville Daily Register, Sherman Courier, Sherman Daily Democrat, Sherman Daily Register,* and the *Sherman Democrat.* May, 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
24. Malsch, *“Lone Wolf” Gonzaullas*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
25. Klumer, “They Have Gone From Sherman,” 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
26. Utley, *Lonestar Lawmen*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
27. Utley, *Lonestar Lawmen*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)