

Here is Newt Jones, Indian Territory's first mail rider, who was interviewed by Joseph Kornfeld, '30as, owner of the Oil Features Syndicate and editor of its features, including "Oil Oddities," a popular Sunday newspaper feature. Kornfeld has contributed recently to leading oil trade journals.

Indian Territory's First Mail Rider

BY JOSEPH A. KORNFELD, '30eng.

BACK in the seventies, when the tomahawk and the six-shooter alternately ruled the southwest, when buffalo herds rushed and thundered their mad way across its prairies like black clouds, when outlaws escaped to their rendezvous in its protecting hills, when the hostile Indians were making their last valiant stand to stem the ever-encroaching advances of the white man upon their diminishing hunting-grounds, when the stage-coach represented first-class passenger service—those were the days before Cimarron.

Those were the settings against which was revealed to me an unpublished chapter in the history of Indian Territory; told to me by "one who was there" at the time—by the territory's first mail rider, Newt J. Jones, who was, only a short time later, one of an illustrious, pioneer band of Texas Rangers in actual pursuit of these robbers and the Indians. 'Twas years before the warful Kiowas and Comanches were subdued and placed on reservations in Indian Territory—'twas fifteen years before the '89ers made their hetic "race for land" in the Cherokee Strip; and 'twas fully a quarter-century before the first commercial oil well, in what was to be Oklahoma, gushed its way to the surface on the Cherokee reservation.

It was while on a recent tour of the North Texas oil-fields that I met Jones, in the old village of Archer City in a former cattlemen's empire that once constituted North Texas, but which has become since the field center of that region's most active oil county. Since he was best known as one of Captain June

Peak's Rangers, it was not until late in the interview that I finally learned that at one time, he was Indian Territory's first mail rider before joining the Ranger service.

"My father came to North Texas," Jones began, "back in the forties from Missouri, settling in Montague in what is now the county of that name. At the time of the war between the states he served as an officer. When I was but 19, I heard that the Indians had burned down the stage on the Indian Territory route in the Wichita mountain country in 1874, and that the stage-coach line quit. I rode over to Pauls Valley and talked to the agent for the company about carrying the mail. Charley Mitchell and I were hired with the agreement to make two trips a week. Charley quit later (did the loneliness of that route finally become too much for him or did he find a better occupation?) leaving the entire job in my hands," explained Jones.

"My route was from Fort Sill (in the heart of the Wichita mountains) the starting point, south to Red River station at the southern boundary of Indian Territory and back again. At the time, Fort Sill was the locale of the Tenth Cavalry Colored Troops. They were later moved down to Fort Richardson across the Red river in Texas.

"At Red River station, another rider would meet me and relay the mail to Fort Richardson (now Jacksboro, Jack County). The trip was thirty-five miles straight for the down trip—but not a house nor a store existed along that route at the time."



"What about the Indians?" I queried.

"Well," he reminisced, "once in a while I ran across a few peaceful Indians. I was scared to death, and they knew it. They happened to be peaceful; they wore no war bonnets. Many times, they would even make faces at me."

"I carried the mail in one big pouch. On some days, it was hardly nothing at all and on others it was this big—(Jones indicated by stretching his well-knit hands as far as they would reach).

"Just reminds me," thought Jones. "One time, the postmaster at Red River station 'kicked' about the unusually large shipments of mail. That particular day he received the pouch, he opened it at once and tossed the mail all over the postoffice floor in a moment of disgust—with a sarcastic remark:

"'Seems like you're carrying all the laundry for the troops from up there (Fort Sill).'"

Carrying the mail on the world's loneliest mail route at that time—with only an occasional, peaceful Indian to make face at him, seemed uneventful as flying the air mail by night over a level stretch of prairie land. But what a contrast was Jones to experience three years later when he became a Texas Ranger. Not comfortable, uneventful trips, but journeys filled with privations, half-ration, insufficiency of clothing, dangerous river crossings; encountering not peaceful, fun-making Indians, but hostile Indians on the warpath, ready to arrange an ambush.

"I enlisted with the Texas Rangers," Jones went on to relate, "in Throckmorton County in 1877. In those days, we

were known as the Frontier Battalion, engaged principally in running down cattle rustlers and murders. In 1917, Congress recognized us and provided pensions for us as veterans of the Indian Wars. I was a member of a company of 25 men.

"The Frontier Battalion" explained Jones, "was organized after the Civil War to protect Texas against the Indian and Mexican raids throughout the region from the Rio Grande to the Red River. There was no border patrol in those days."

The Indian raids in the southwest were of more than local significance, for historians point out that, contemporaneously throughout the west, various tribes were waging their greatest efforts to hold off further invasion by the whites. In 1872-3, the little Modoc tribe in the lava lands of northern California defied a great force of army troops for many months. In 1876, Chief Sitting Bull and his Sioux warriors annihilated General Custer's force of about two hundred troops in the upper Missouri river country.

"Fourteen Rangers were killed by the Indians, presumably Kiowas and Comanches," Jones went on to relate, "on the Big Wichita river in Los Valle in Jack county, in 1874. It was by means of an ambush—letting the Rangers ride into 'em, a favorite method of Indian warfare." Then "the Indians would close in" was Jones's terse, poignant explanation of the outcome of the encounter. What price glory for some Rangers!

"The Indians shot 'em up pretty bad, at Newcastle," recalled Jones when four rangers were killed in 1864 in what is now Young county. 'A 'right smart bunch' of redskins made a raid there and only one Ranger escaped to tell the tale.

"About this time, the first trial of Indians was to be held in North Texas, it being at Fort Richardson in 1871-2. It seems that the Indians had murdered members of a supply train enroute to Fort Belknap, killing all save one. Not until 1874 were the Comanches and the Kiowas put on the reservations in Indian Territory."

"Now, about the outlaws?" I queried.

"The outrageous activities of the notorious Sam Bass and his outlaws," Jones went on, "caused the then Governor of Texas to organize a battalion to put an end to these depredations. The Governor called on Captain June Peake then chief of police at Dallas to come to Austin to talk over the matter and lay plans for the organization of the troops. Peake was chosen captain since he was acquainted with Bass' escapades in Denton County.

"Our company followed Sam Bass's

bunch shortly after he had completed a robbery of \$60,000 in twenty dollar gold coin, one day in 1877. On one trip we were just 15 minutes behind him. We did not catch Sam Bass but another group of Rangers caught and killed him the next year over near Round Rock in Palo Pinto county. Another company of Rangers also killed 'Arkansas' Johnson, another notorious outlaw."

I managed to find out that Jones was a member of a squad of Rangers who were the first group of Texas Rangers to "bring back their man" to civil justice. The story of the incident reads like an account of the Canadian Mounties in the Northwest. Incidentally, this trip crossed over Indian Territory when these Rangers lost their trail while returning their prisoner to Fort Griffin.

Peak appointed Captain Campbell's Company B to "run down" an outlaw by the name of Duffy. Duffy, it was claimed had murdered his own business partner near Fort Richardson, in what is now Throckmorton county. Campbell knew that Ranger Locke was known and had seen Duffy and therefore was assigned to head a group of five select Rangers to "get this man." Newt Jones was one of the squad of five selected.

"The trip," Jones pointed out, "took right smart twenty-seven days, and I figure crossed nine Texas counties. We headed northwest from Fort Richardson, where we were located, bound for the army camp in Wheeler county out in the Panhandle country. We figured it would take us five days to get there, but it actually took every bit of ten days. We were waterbound at the Big Wichita river for three days. After many privations, we made our way over to the army headquarters. We rested and found out that we might find Duffy at Lee and Evan's store on Sweetwater creek, an outfitting place for cattle herders. We made our way over there and after mixing with the crowd finally learned that Duffy at the moment was at Suttly's store a short distance away.

"Sure enough, that was where Duffy was, standing around at Suttly's. Locke spotted him, 'cause he had known Duffy," Jones pointed out.

"Quietly motioning the squad around in a strategic maneuver, and with drawn guns, Locke demanded: 'Put 'er up, Duffy.'"

"I searched Duffy," related Jones. He gave up with little resistance, since he was taken by surprise.

"We made our way back to Fort Griffin, handcuffing our prisoner to one of our men at night since we were a small group and to eliminate night guards to watch over him. We missed our trail and crossed into Indian Territory by mistake, going too far to the East (into

what is now Harmon county, in southwestern Oklahoma).

"We struck a herd of buffalo drifting south. We rode fully two days past the herd and during the time never saw the end of the group. There were so many of them. You see, the buffalo head south in the fall and head north again in the spring. We were in constant danger, especially at night, for if the horse was ever stampeded, it would run with the buffalo.

"We didn't know what calendar dates meant on those trips. When campin' time came, it was 'jus the end of 'nother day. Time and again, we lost track of dates.

"On this trip we found ourselves in need of extra clothing, our coats being torn and many of the men suffering from exposure. When we arrived at Fort Richardson we had to find a better supply of clothing before we could go on to Fort Griffin and turn over our prisoner to the civil authorities. All during the trip we were on half-rations for ourselves and our horses.

"At Fort Griffin, it was the 'end of the road' for us but our journeying back to Throckmorton county to our camp we found that they had gone into winter quarters and that gave us an interesting task finding where they had moved to. Besides, winter had already started adding to the difficulty in finding the new location." Jones stated.

Through all of his experiences, no suspect ever resisted arrest when Jones accosted him. He was never wounded, but oddly enough, two years after his discharge, he wounded himself by accident while cleaning out a gun. He is now seventy-nine and has been ill only twice during the last ten years. Like others of that valiant group of Rangers, they were long-lived, courageous, steadfast, and a hardy band. Captain Peak is now ninety; when Hutchenson died three years ago, he was seventy-seven years old.

After receiving an honorable discharge from the Ranger service, Jones came to Archer County (before it was organized) and engaged in stock farming for fifteen years, breeding Hereford cattle. However, within recent years, he has retired.

I can still visualize Newt sitting before the fireplace, enjoying the sunset of life, smoking his knurled pipe, happy and healthy after all his experiences.

To me, he symbolized the Texas Ranger that I have always hoped to meet.

"Pardon me, while I answer the door," Newt said, just before I started to leave.

"The apartment next door is already rented, sorry," addressed Jones to some oilmen who were headquartering in Archer City, for the town was experiencing its greatest oil activity.

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