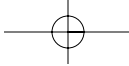




*Captain James Abijah Brooks.*

Courtesy Beverly Brewton and Brooks Family, Pasadena, Texas.



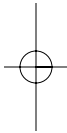
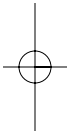
# CAPTAIN J. A. BROOKS

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# TEXAS RANGER



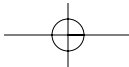
**PAUL N. SPELLMAN**



Number 3 in the Frances B. Vick Series



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One of the pleasures and privileges of doing historical research is communicating and working with other professionals in the fields: librarians, archivists, and authors. First among these persons for Texas history is the staff at the Texas State Library Archives in Austin. Donaly Brice is a steadfast fount of wisdom and a good friend who is always ready to help find those miniscule bits and pieces that an author overlooks or cannot find.

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aid as I looked for Captain Brooks. Fred Romanski at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, helped me sort through the presidential pardon papers located there. And I should mention the aid of reference librarians at the Clayton Genealogical Library in Houston, and those at public libraries and historical societies in Cooke, Collin, Sabine, Ector, and Denton counties, Texas. My visits with the reference staff at the library in Alice proved especially lucrative.

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In the summer of 2004 I introduced myself to Beverly Brewton, the captain's granddaughter, in Falfurrias, and have had several wonderful visits with her and her daughter Suzanne Montgomery, who resides in Pasadena, Texas, where Mrs. Brewton has since moved. They have in their keeping the captain's memoirs and files, photographs, newspaper clippings that he kept, letters and personal notes, his last will and testament from 1939, and the presidential pardon signed by President Cleveland in 1887. They have been so generous to allow me to rummage through all of the papers and use many of the photographs for this biography, and I happily dedicate this book to them.

Ever grateful for the support of my family—Matt and Paula, Kathleen, and the extended kin, colleagues, and friends who encourage me along the way—I am humbled once more to think how much they give to me while I work on these projects.



## INTRODUCTION

CAPTAIN BROOKS STOOD AT THE EDGE OF THE SLIGHTLY ROLLING hills that spread across to the horizon, his eyes fixed on the vibrant colors of the autumn sunset. A slight rustle of wind pressed gently against the field grass. Brooks let his mind wander to earlier that same day, when a wonderful opportunity had been handed him. To be captain of such a company of men was a fond dream, a wish now granted after only a relatively few years in the service. At age thirty-three, the command came to him long before many would have expected it, although those with whom he had served never doubted that his tenacity, his courage, and his bent to organization would be rewarded in this way.

His life of barely three decades had already been a full and adventurous, if not completely satisfying, one. Born far away from where he now stood, the young officer allowed his memory to retrace some of the events that he had witnessed, new lands to which he had traveled, battles fought and won. He had been a restless one all his life, never content to stay in one place or one job. But every time he moved on he seemed to find a new challenge and, having met each one, emerged better and stronger for it. He had left some family behind but always found near or distant cousins at the next stop of his life's journey.

And the newly commissioned captain looked into his future as he stared at the reddening sun. A fascination with the law, both its



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interpretation and its enforcement, made him wonder if another career still awaited him. Law and order were solid principles to which he adhered, and his trek thus far only reinforced that commitment. Perhaps, when he finished this turn in law enforcement, a judge's bench would be next.

The quiet, contemplative moment passed, it was time for the captain—Captain Thomas Brooks of the Massachusetts Bay Colony foot soldiers—to get back to work.



Thomas Brooks, born in Suffolk, England, in 1610, and the great-great-great-great grandfather of James Abijah Brooks, lived out a life remarkably similar to the young man who followed 250 years later. The British colonist was promoted to captain of the foot soldiers' company at age thirty-three, the same age that J. A. Brooks became captain of the Texas Rangers in 1888. Six years later, Thomas sat on the colonial bench as Deputy to the General Court of Massachusetts, a position he held for much of the next two decades.<sup>1</sup> His descendant was a Texas county judge for twenty-eight years following his retirement from Ranger service. Both men were known for their dedication to the law and to the land they kept safe and secured.

This is the story of James Brooks, born and bred in Kentucky during the Civil War and Reconstruction years, restlessly moving to the American frontier as a young man and thence to Texas, a cattle driver, shepherd, miner, and a Texas Ranger at age twenty-seven. His rise to the captaincy, for those days, bordered on meteoric. But his skills with a pistol and rifle, his leadership qualities evidenced over and over, and his perseverance—the Brooks family's motto on their English coat of arms—elevated him above others.

Captain Brooks served eighteen years in command of Company F of the Frontier Battalion and Company A of the restructured Ranger Force. And after two terms in the Texas state legislature, during which he helped secure the creation of a South Texas county that would then bear his name, "the Captain," as he always preferred to be called, served

## Introduction

that county faithfully as judge until illness forced his retirement at the venerable age of eighty-four.

There has been some confusion over recent years regarding Brooks's first name, James. Almost every book and article written in the last several decades refers to him as *John* Abijah Brooks, although unmistakably his name is James, and his descendants never heard of his even being nicknamed John. The confusion seems to stem from two sources, one of which is the predominance of Brooks himself using his initials J. A. not only in his signature but in nearly every record in his own hand. Many of his colleagues and associates, all of whom called him "Captain," may not have even known his first name.

A prime example of this and a second source of confusion is W. Sterling's autobiography, which has been utilized as an important resource for Ranger history of Brooks's era. Sterling knew Brooks, respected him as a mentor and inspiration for his own career, always addressed him respectfully as "Captain," but calls him John throughout his book. Sterling's *Trails and Trials of a Texas Ranger* contains important eyewitness and personal interviews with Brooks, but as a resource for later Brooks biographical notes, left the captain's first name indelibly incorrect.

James Brooks's life was far from idyllic. Even though the "call of the frontier" was his excuse, his restlessness came from a troubled childhood that witnessed a terrible war fought literally in his own front yard, a war of division that took his father's life and left him and his large family nearly destitute. A teenager during the terrible days of Reconstruction in central Kentucky, James—Bud as his siblings called him—stumbled through an adolescence that left painful memories scribbled on notepads sixty-five years later.

Young Bud Brooks left behind a county famous for its whiskey distilleries but took that part of the county with him as a traveling companion for the rest of his life. In a candid conversation with author Dora Raymond in 1935, Brooks shared an anecdote about when he was "liquoring up one day in a Cotulla saloon," clearly forthright about his problem over the years.<sup>2</sup>

## CAPTAIN J. A. BROOKS, TEXAS RANGER

He eventually found his other lifelong companion, Virginia Willborn of Kerr County, Texas, but along the earlier journey left sweethearts and broken hearts wherever he went. Never a womanizer but hardly ever without a female companion—Florence and Ella and Mag and Ida and Martha and more—Brooks was faithful to his wife of thirty-seven years but hardly attentive. In his family years he doted on his son but practically ignored his daughter.

Before and most certainly during his service as a Texas Ranger, Brooks became renowned for his expert gun handling and sharp-shooting prowess. And Bill McBride, a foreman on the King Ranch, even remembered an elderly shooter: “When Captain Brooks was well past sixty years old, I saw him shoot five shots at a knot on an oak tree. He fanned the hammer of an old forty-five so fast that it sounded like an automatic and hit the target four times. It made him mad when the fifth shot was a little wide of the mark.”<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, some may have thought him too quick with the trigger, and at least one incident nearly cost him a remarkable career that had barely begun. And that moment followed hard on the heels of another confrontation that came within a hair’s breadth of ending his life. Brooks never backed down from a fight, but on some occasions may have stepped in too quickly.

But his dedication to the Texas Rangers, and the state he adopted as his own, never wavered. James Abijah Brooks of Kentucky became a son of the Lone Star State without reservation, committing his life to the orderly, safe progress of Texas until his dying day in 1944. His advancement through the Ranger organization, his election and reelection to the state legislature, and fourteen consecutive votes of confidence by the citizens of Brooks County to keep him on their judicial bench, speak to the loyalty of those who knew him and those to whom he kept his promises.

During many of the eighteen years of his Ranger captaincy, J. A. Brooks found himself surrounded by other equally dedicated leaders of men, as one of the legendary “Four Captains,” whose collective leadership helped bring the Texas Rangers into the twentieth century. One of

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those men, the profoundly religious John Harris Rogers, grew up in the Ranger service alongside Brooks and the two became close friends with almost nothing in common. Rogers, the only one of the four commanders Texas-born, was Presbyterian-raised like Brooks but far more evangelistic, quiet, humble, and likely dedicated to a re-conversion of his colleague and friend who cared more for the campfire toast than a Sabbath prayer. Rogers and Brooks stood side by side at least twice in their illustrious careers when shots being fired could have brought both of them down, and one of those shoot-outs did in fact wound them both seriously.

Two other captains served during that turn-of-the-century era with Rogers and Brooks. William Jesse McDonald, three years older than Brooks, settled in Rusk County as a young man and became the second of the four, after Brooks, promoted to the captaincy. McDonald never saw a reporter or a photographer he didn't like, and his exploits, though not necessarily more exciting or dramatic than the others, nevertheless became the stuff of which legends and myths are made: Quotations claimed to be his became mottos for the Ranger Force itself. A U.S. marshal after his retirement from the Rangers, McDonald was the first of the four to die, of pneumonia in 1918.

John Reynolds Hughes completed the set. As quiet as Brooks and Rogers, and notoriously perseverant on the trail of a fugitive from justice, Hughes came to Texas from Illinois in 1880, joined the Rangers seven years later, and captained Company D. He retired in 1915 and outlived his compadre Brooks by three years.

These four men exemplified the tenacity and exceptional leadership that helped salvage a Ranger militia destined for the political scrap heap in the late 1890s for being too antiquated, and instead managed to re-tool the unique law enforcement agency and ready it for another century of service to Texas.

When Richard Harding Davis, a reporter and managing editor of *Harper's Weekly*, traveled out to "discover" the West in the early 1890s, he spent time with Captain Brooks and Company F and later wrote about the experience in *The West From a Car-Window*. "The West is still

## CAPTAIN J. A. BROOKS, TEXAS RANGER

not reconstructed,” he wrote. “There are still the Texas Rangers, and in them the man from the cities of the east will find the picturesqueness of the Wild West show and its happiest expression . . . The Rangers are a semi-militia, semi-military organization of long descent, and with the most brilliant record of border warfare.”

“The Rangers’ camps look much like those of gypsies,” Davis continued, “with their one wagon to carry the horses’ feed, the ponies grazing at the ends of the lariats, the big Mexican saddles hung over the nearest barb fence, and the blankets covering the ground and marking the hard beds of the night before.” In a visit with Adjutant General William H. Mabry while at Brooks’s camp, Davis admitted that even the Ranger boss had trouble talking the captain “into relating a few of his own adventures. The result was a significant and complete failure.” Brooks, like Rogers and Hughes, refused to elaborate on what he considered to be just doing his job, Davis noting that “Captain Brooks’ version of the same story the general had told me, with all the necessary detail, would be: ‘Well, we got word they were hiding in a ranch down in Zapata County, and we went down there and took ’em—which they were afterwards hung.’”

Misplacing the events when he wrote later, Davis still made his point when he said: “The fact that [Brooks] had three fingers shot off as he ‘took ’em’ was a detail he scorned to remember, as he could shoot better without those members than the rest of his men who had only lost one or two.” On that same day in camp Davis had been treated to a display of the captain’s shooting prowess as the two fired rifles at a target: “To shoot a Winchester there are three movements,” the journalist recalled. “Captain Brooks, as far as I could make out from the sound, used only one movement for his entire eight shots. When I had fired two shots into space, the captain had put his eight into the board.”<sup>4</sup>

For all of his shooting prowess and reputation as a “fast draw,” Brooks, like his friend Rogers, never dressed the part of the western gunman, preferring a conservative suit to the flamboyant cowboy outfit. “Brooks wasn’t ever strung around with cartridge belts and six shooters hung out in plain view,” a colleague remembered. “He always

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kept his coat on.”<sup>5</sup> Said Brooks himself in a 1935 interview: “We only performed our work as best we saw it, and all this ‘Hell in Boots’ stuff is tommy-rot.”<sup>6</sup>

Four decades later when Ranger Capt. William Warren Sterling wrote his autobiography, Captain Brooks stood clearly as “the man who inspired me to be a Texas Ranger.” Sterling recognized the tenacity of the man that accompanied his sharp shooting skills even during Brooks’s early years as a private out of Cotulla: “Brooks’ steely blue eyes, square jaw and panther quick movements were the marks of a good man to let alone. After sizing him up, the array of local gunmen decided to take him at his face value. He quickly became a veteran.”<sup>7</sup>

Walter Prescott Webb, in his formative study of the Rangers, compared Brooks to the redoubtable Leander McNelly of a generation earlier: “Brooks stood, in his way, equally well, although there was always a distinction in the border’s regard for these two captains. By this, I mean that while the reputation of both McNelly and Brooks was that of strong, just, and fearless men, Brooks had not McNelly’s reputation for insight into the hearts and minds of men.”<sup>8</sup> In the 1930 biographies of *The New Encyclopedia of Texas*, it was said of the then seventy-five-year-old Judge Brooks: “In his public life he has held fast to his ideals, doing his duty as he sees it, and has had the courage to back his convictions in his every action.”<sup>9</sup>

Recruited off the coal trains that chugged from Laredo to Cotulla to San Antonio in 1883, James Brooks joined Lt. Charles B. McKinney’s Company F just in time to narrowly escape a budding La Salle County feud between McKinney and William O. Tompkins. In the six years before he was promoted to captain of that same company, Brooks withstood a harrowing gun battle during the fence-cutter wars in Brown County, the deadly Conner Fight along the Sabine, and a point-blank shoot-out in Indian Territory. Wrote Sterling: “Captain Brooks once told me that the memory of his dear old Presbyterian mother had sustained him in many battles.”<sup>10</sup> And it took a presidential pardon to sustain him in the legal battle following the Indian Territory scrap.

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In the next decade and a half, as captain, the Kentucky native participated in the controversial De La Cerda incident involving his trusted sergeant A. Y. Baker, the Catarino Garza Wars in the lower Rio Grande Valley, the El Paso prizefight in 1896, and kept the peace for most of a year in the oil boom town of Batson Prairie. He, like most Rangers of that era, suppressed his frustration over a state judicial system that more often than not acquitted or mistried the cases of the brigands tracked and captured, harnessing that aggravation and pointing to the next trail; Brooks only rarely mentioned it and instead concentrated on the job at hand. Most Ranger records and letters of commendation indicate his particular skills at tracking horse and cattle thieves in the Rio Grande Valley while in command of Company A.

In 1890 he paused long enough from his adventures to court and marry Virginia Willborn, kin to two famous Rangers and quite the frontier horsewoman, able to ride and shoot with the men according to family recollections. Their children, Corrinne and John Morgan, were raised in Alice and Falfurrias and mostly by their mother. Ever a law enforcement agent more than a husband or father, Brooks seemed to spend his family time, especially after Virginia's death in 1928, almost exclusively with his son, who in later years succeeded his father on the Brooks County bench.

The Brooks descendants recall "Pat's" (as his daughter called him) bouts with his whiskey, his long absences from home when young John Morgan kept food on their table by hunting in the rough South Texas country, and the derogatory comments aimed at his daughter when the captain was at home. His remarks about Corrinne's "ugly, fat arms" forced her in emotional despair to wear long-sleeved outfits all of her life: she never married, and mourned the loss of her mother for years ever after. At the same time, photographs of the judge around Alice and Falfurrias show him almost constantly with his son proudly by his side, and his granddaughter has fond memories of her visits to his Falfurrias home in the 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

In 1904 J. A. Brooks looked toward retirement, buying property near the small railroad town of Falfurrias and hooking up with wealthy

## *Introduction*

rancher Ed C. Lasater. The two men would eventually work together to create a new county—Brooks County, in South Texas—despite raucous opposition from factions all around them. Brooks's two terms in the state legislature were spent exclusively working toward that objective, and the rewards of the new county's name and a judgeship launched his second career into the next three decades. Illness and age finally caught up with the old Ranger, whose retirement in 1939 left him only five more years to live. Even to those last days, though, many remembered him saying "I've still got one more good fight left in me."<sup>12</sup>

But Brooks's hardest fight was a lifelong struggle with the Kentucky companion that drove him and haunted him. His family long-remembered that each trip from home, every trek to the Austin legislative session, Brooks packed "a starched white shirt and a bottle of Kentucky bourbon whiskey."<sup>13</sup> Liquor chased him up the Chisholm Trail in 1879, and ran him south to San Antonio the next year. It shadowed him in Cotulla and Vernon and Alice, and in Falfurrias. It caused a rift with his children that finally brought a chastened confession too little, too late. It wore him down and may have finally killed him; indeed, it was his fatal flaw.

But the specter of alcoholism never kept him from completing the tasks of either career. Hardened on the trail, consumed by the challenge of bringing law and order to the wide-ranging state he had adopted, James A. Brooks garnered and kept a high and well-deserved respect from friend and foe and citizen alike throughout his life. He battled the ravages of whiskey as he battled every criminal, every fugitive, and came out victorious, if bloodied, on the other side.

A scholar recently wrote of Brooks: "Tall, lean, and tough, he was also modest, quiet-spoken, and courteous, and possessed of a high sense of duty fortified by determination, courage, and a mind that grasped both the larger mission and the immediate task. A masterful marksman, horseman, and outdoorsman, Brooks proved smart, energetic, and persistent, and displayed his usual qualities of leadership." Specifically regarding his efforts in the Batson oil boom days, "Brooks confronted a new challenge, met it decisively and creatively, pointed



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the way for Rangers to come, and confirmed his stature as one of the four great captains.”<sup>14</sup>

This is the story of a man who endured a hard life in a hard country, calloused and courageous, flawed but never broken, as much an example of the frontiersman as any who rode the trail alongside him. He is the prototypical Texas Ranger of both legend and harsh reality, who to his last day believed he had one fight still left in him.