

Thomas Harbo Rynning

Tom Rynning was born on February 17, 1866, in Beloit, Rock County, Wisconsin, and became an orphan at age 12. He worked in a Wisconsin sawmill for a year before going to live with his sister in Chicago where he spent three years working as a stair builder. In 1882, at the age of sixteen, he went to Texas and became a bullwhacker outside of Del Rio. He then hired on as a cowboy on a ranch in Texas' Davis Mountains and made two trail drives to Dodge City. All of his life his ambition was to become an Indian fighter and in February of 1885, outside of Del Rio, Texas, he enlisted in Troop D of the U.S. Eighth Cavalry to fight in the Indian Wars. Private Rynning was sent to Arizona where he rode dispatch for General Crook and then as a packer for General Miles. After the Apache wars ended, Rynning fought in Indian skirmishes from Texas to Deadwood, South Dakota, before mustering out as a sergeant when his five year hitch was up. He then made a visit to his boyhood home of Beloit and found his friends all gone and nothing was like he remembered. He gravitated down to Chicago and worked the World Fair for a while.

Turning down an offer from Buffalo Bill to join his Wild West Show, Tom went into engineering and specialized in building bridges for the Southern Pacific Railroad. This took him back to Arizona where he was when the Spanish American War began and he enlisted with the First Volunteer Cavalry, soon to become known as the Rough Riders. He was quickly appointed as a sergeant and then promoted to lieutenant when the unit moved to San Antonio. In Cuba he fought side-by-side with Leonard Wood and Theodore Roosevelt and they became fast friends. When Captain Bucky O'Neill was killed at San Juan, Lieutenant Rynning led the charge up San Juan Hill. After the war he returned to Arizona and his contracting business.

On August 27, 1901, Tom married Margaret Eve Rollins. He was 35 years old, and she had just turned 19. They had three daughters. In 1901, the Arizona legislature

had established the Arizona Rangers to combat all the lawlessness in the territory. Burt Mossman was selected as the first captain and after the first year he resigned. Governor Brodie appointed Tom as the new captain and he received his commission on August 29, 1902. Under his leadership, he and his dedicated band of Rangers, never numbering more than 25 at any one time, virtually eliminated major crimes in the territory.

They also were called upon to quell union disputes on more than one occasion. He even led a band of Americans into Mexico to dispel a large union uprising a few miles below the border.

Tom served as captain for five years and was then appointed by President Taft as the last warden of the Yuma Territorial Prison. While there he convinced the governor that living conditions were just too poor and that he could build a new prison at Florence, Arizona using only his contracting skills and prison labor. He was given permission to commence work. The prisoners were paid in time. For each day they worked they received two days in time. At the completion of the facility an appraiser from Washington gave an appraisal of \$1,500,000. The actual cost had been \$182,000. He stayed on as warden at Florence until 1912 when a Democratic president was elected and replaced him. The Republicans returned to power in 1921 and Tom was again appointed as warden and his wife and three daughters returned to Florence. In 1932, the family returned to San Diego permanently, and two years later he was commissioned as a deputy U.S. marshal for the San Diego area where he also served as undersheriff. On June 17, 1941, at the age of 75 he was peacefully working in his garden when he was struck by a fatal heart attack. Tom and Margaret are buried side-by-side in the Fort Rosecrans Cemetery on Point Loma in San Diego, California.



Sources:

"Gun Notches, A Saga of Frontier Lawman", by Captain Thomas H. Rynning as told to Al Cohn and Joe Chisholm, and "The Arizona Rangers" by Bill O'Neal