

Old West Stories

Jefferson Parish Kidder

On March 19, 1903, the 22nd Arizona Legislative Assembly passed major legislation concerning the Arizona Rangers. The original organization had been so successful that the size of the Rangers was doubled and the pay increased. Now under the command of Captain Tom Rynning the organization would consist of one captain at \$175 per month, one lieutenant at \$130 monthly, four sergeants at \$110 and 20 privates at \$100. And for the first time the Rangers were issued badges. The silver badges were handcrafted, five-pointed stars with a ball on each point. ARIZONA RANGERS was engraved in blue. The captain, lieutenant and sergeants had their rank stamped on the badge. The privates' badges were numbered. All badges had to be turned in when leaving the force and were given to the successor.



Jeff Kidder was born on November 15, 1875, near Vermillion, South Dakota. His father was the local postmaster and employed Jeff as a clerk. Jeff spent almost all of his wages on ammunition as he endlessly practiced with his revolver. Jeff was almost born too late for his ambitions. He wanted to use his pistol in the same manner as the Old West characters that he read about. But the frontier was fast becoming civilized. In 1901 his father moved to California for health reasons. Jeff was 26 years-old and still single, so he moved to Arizona where there were still some wide open spaces. He worked for a while as a miner and then a lawman in Nogales.

On April 1st he became one of the first Rangers to enlist in the 1903 expansion. He was not always concerned about his appearance, but his revolver was well-oiled and in good condition. He was considered one of the fastest draws in the southwest and never stopped practicing. Only Harry Wheeler was considered as equal to him as a marksman among the Rangers.



Kidder (photo) was very heavy-handed with people he considered to be troublemakers and on several instances gave the Rangers a black-eye. One day on the streets of Nogales he ran into two men who gave him offense. After he manhandled both men he continued down the street until he ran into two more men. He told them they would have to get off the street. When one of the men named Radebush questioned his reasoning Kidder executed his quick draw and struck him with it in the face. Convicted of assault, he was fined \$50 and retained his Ranger commission.

When Tom Rynning resigned his post as captain, Lieutenant Harry Wheeler was promoted as the third and final Captain of the Rangers. Two men were considered for replacement of Wheeler as lieutenant, Sgt. Billy Old and his close friend Sgt. Jeff Kidder. Both were highly efficient law officers and handy with their firearms. Billy Old was more level headed and received the promotion.

One of the problems along the border was the sale of arms and ammunition to the Yaqui Indians in Sonora, Mexico. Fred Rankin, a peace officer out of Naco, Arizona, reported that the Mexican government would give him and Kidder forty percent of the value for all smuggled arms they would recover. In one battle with the Mexican smugglers, Kidder shot the arm off of one bandit and Rankin killed the horse of another. The bandits fled and the two law officers recovered 10,000 rounds of ammunition and other contraband.

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In 1905 Kidder's father died leaving him an inheritance. He bought a new silver-plated, single-action Colt .45 with a five-and-one-half-inch barrel. He continued his endless practice and by 1907 had to send the pistol back to the factory for replating and other repairs. He could shoot equally as well with either hand.

On New Year's 1906 in Douglas, Kidder and a local police officer were riding near the train roundhouse when a man began crossing the railroad tracks. Kidder called out, "Hold on there, we want to talk to you." Instead the man began running and fired a shot at Kidder. Kidder drew his pistol and shot three times. One hit the man in the right eye and dropped him immediately. They hurried to the fallen man to discover it was Tom T. Woods, a local bartender, and a .38 revolver on a .45 frame lay nearby. In his pocket Kidder found a sack of .38-.40 cartridges. He was unconscious but still alive. He was taken to the hospital but never regained consciousness.

Kidder was aware of his reputation and insisted that a trial be held. At his hearing no unfavorable evidence came forward and the prosecuting attorney moved for a dismissal.

On April 1, 1908, Kidder received a letter from Captain Wheeler reminding him that his enlistment expired each year on that same day. Wheeler was on a field trip and invited Kidder to meet him in Naco, Arizona, to be sworn in for another year. The next day Kidder placed ever-present little dog Jip across his saddle and started for Naco. He spent the night at a ranch house and arrived in Naco on April 3. Then he announced he was going to cross the border into Naco, Sonora, Mexico, to meet a friend.

On Friday, April 3, 1908, he crossed the border with Jip by his side and made a thorough search for his friend without success. Around midnight he entered the back room of a cantina with Chia, a new girl in Naco. He would say later that he was asking where to locate a fugitive. When ready to leave he discovered that his last silver dollar was missing and accused Chia of stealing it. She screamed for the police who were evidently waiting outside of the door. They rushed in and one of them got off a shot that struck Kidder in the middle and knocked him to the floor. Even then he managed to pull his revolver and shot one in the knee and one in the thigh. He then managed to stumble to the border fence where he managed to hold off the Mexicans until he ran out of ammunition.

He was then badly pistol whipped before they finally dragged him off to jail. His watch, Masonic key and fancy colt was taken from him. He was thrown in a cold cell without cover or medical attention. When word of the fight reached the American side, Mexican officials were contacted and Kidder was allowed to be taken to a private home but not to leave Mexico. On Saturday an American doctor was allowed to visit and the prognosis was not good. The best was that he might live. He hung on all day Saturday and was visited by many of his friends. During the night he began to weaken and by 6:00 Sunday morning he passed away.



Sergeant Kidder on the right
Thanks to Marshall Trimble for the photo

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A Mexican judge then released the body and it was taken to the Palace Funeral Home in Bisbee. Kidder's skull was so badly crushed from the pistol whipping that embalming fluid ran from his eyes and nose.

Kidder's body was shipped to his mother in California. Jip followed his master's coffin to the train depot. The Rangers thought they would adopt the dog but Jip continued to try to run away and find Kidder. A collection was taken up and Jip was sent by train to be with Kidder. Kidder was buried in the Inglewood Park Cemetery in Inglewood, California.



**NOTE: The year of death is wrong. He died in 1908.
Thanks to Don Green of Torrance, CA, for the photo**

Source: *The Arizona Rangers*, by Bill O'Neal