

# Museum News: Adventures of Diamond Dick

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

Ernest St. Leon, aka Diamond Dick, was a man who was larger than life and achieved legendary status in his own time. He worked all over West Texas and tied himself to Sanderson history with a stint here as a railroad watchman. He earned the nickname because of a prominent diamond stickpin that he always wore. He was not a sentimental man but the stickpin, given to him by his mother, was a charm for him and he was never without it.

St. Leon was born of French Canadian parents who immigrated to Texas about 1880. After his parents died a San Antonio judge was appointed guardian. Dick was sent to college to prepare for a life of commerce.

But, as so often happens to young men, the military lured him to drop out and join the U. S. Cavalry where he eventually attained the rank of sergeant. He served during the Indian wars and his military career was illustrious.

At his discharge from the service St. Leon joined the famed Company D of the Texas Rangers under Captain John Hughes. There, he served throughout the late 1880s.

Unfortunately, his love for alcohol got him dismissed from the Rangers, but he stayed on as a covert, free-lance operative. He became widely known along the border regions, and assisted in the capture of the Carrasco Brothers, infamous silver thieves who heisted a load of silver ore outside Shafter, Texas. In 1890 St. Leon was reinstated to Company D of the Rangers and remained to the end of his life.

Diamond Dick had a tough reputation. He was not afraid to use his guns, and his devotion to duty was legendary.

Chasing a man who had stolen a horse and buggy in El Paso, St. Leon boarded a train and got ahead of the man, three times, eventually bringing him to justice out of pure “doggedness.” Men he chased seldom got away.

He certainly was not afraid to go into dangerous situations. In tracking Inez Gonzalez, the most-wanted fugitive in Texas at the time, he did the detective work, discovered Gonzalez at his father-in-law’s ranch, went in without back up, certainly enemy territory for St. Leon, and arrested him.

The El Paso district attorney summed up the feelings of many: “‘Diamond Dick,’ who made the arrest, is one of the most diligent Rangers in the Service, and there is not a man better liked by his brother officers. It was he who broke up the big gang of thieves which had for so long a time been robbing the Mexican Central box cars down between Chihuahua and Torreón.”

Another time, he brought two miscreants to justice, catching them in the act of trying to wreck trains outside of Sanderson. The infamous “Baxter’s Curve” near Sanderson was named for the engineer who lost his life when train wreckers loosened the rails and caused a terrific derailment. These two, however, were stopped by Diamond Dick before their mischief turned deadly.

As with most strong-willed persons Diamond Dick was opinionated and would argue a point, sometimes with disastrous results. While working as a watchman for the GH&SA Railway at Sanderson, he got into a heated argument with an old track foreman. The foreman contended that he could defend himself from attack with a simple wooden chair, faster than Dick could with a firearm. Of course, Dick, who was quite a gunman, begged to differ. The words became heated and insults were exchanged.

Without warning, Dick stood up and went for his gun. The old man leaped to his feet and made a grab for his chair. Dick’s pistol went off and wounded the old man in the leg. He could not explain why he shot the man, except that it was a terrible accident. When the doctor arrived he said there would be no lasting effects for the old man, and soon all were laughing at the sudden of the turn of events.



Under normal circumstances, Dick used just the amount of force that was required to take control of a situation. Sometimes the outcome was lethal, but that was not usually the case.

When he and another watchman caught a thief in the GH&SA yards they had to become very forceful. As the reporter commented, “The fellow showed fight, and the officers had to *wipe the earth* with him before he would surrender and allow himself to be taken to county jail.”

It is said that he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword, and that was the case for Ernest “Diamond Dick” St. Leon. While chasing three horse thieves outside of El Paso, Dick’s newly-sworn deputy, a New Orleans medical doctor named Breaux was killed instantly in a gun battle, and Dick was mortally wounded. He still managed to bring the thieves into custody and to justice, but he succumbed to his wounds on Aug. 1, 1898.

It was reported widely in the El Paso press that St. Leon was to have a pauper’s burial. The public was outraged and a subscription was taken up to give him a proper burial.

In reality, St. Leon’s wife arranged to have him buried, and Captain Hughes promised her that she would be reimbursed. Still, the controversy raged. Adjutant General Wozencraft of the Texas Rangers had to publish an article in the papers discrediting the rumor and assuring the public that the Rangers took care of their own, while they lived and after they died.

But, for years there was no marker at St. Leon’s grave in Concordia Cemetery in El Paso. Only in recent times did a hand-crafted cross appear on his grave, and in the last few years his great grandson erected a marble headstone, paid for by the Concordia Heritage Association and the El Paso Historical Society.

As his friend and fellow officer Deputy Sheriff Ten Eyck said, “Diamond Dick was a good officer. He took altogether too many chances, I think, in most cases... I have known him for some time, and a more persistent traveler after criminals I never met in all my life. Running them down seemed to be his only hobby and he seemed to enjoy the chase after them. He was in the field most all the time and ever and always had his eyes peeled for offenders against the law.”

As with most stories concerning Sanderson in the early days and the characters who drifted in out of our timeline, truth is often better than fiction. Folks, you just can’t make up this stuff!