

Terrell County Memorial September, 2014
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

The Adventures of Diamond Dick

This newsletter very often deals with persons who were larger than life, who had achieved legendary status in their own time.

Ernest St. Leon, aka Diamond Dick, was such a man. He worked all over West Texas, including a stint as a railroad watchman at Sanderson.

He earned the nickname because of a prominent diamond stickpin that he always wore. He did not appear to be a sentimental man when dealing with perpetrators and suspects, but he had a soft side, as indicated by wearing the stickpin given to him by his mother. It 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. He went to college to prepare for a life of commerce.

But, as so often happens to young men, the lure of the military enticed him to drop out and

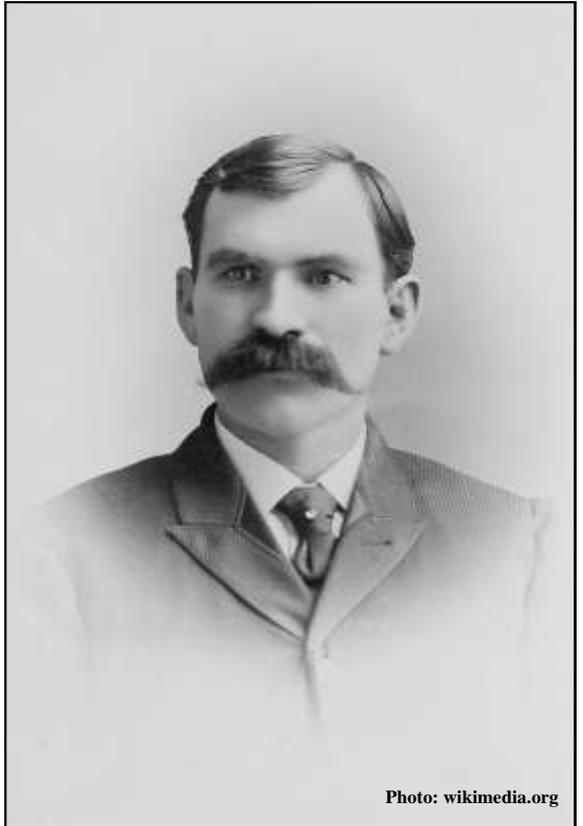


Photo: wikimedia.org

Ernest St. Leon, better known to friends and foes as Diamond Dick, is shown in this portrait, sporting the diamond stick pin given to him by his mother, and which earned him his moniker.

join the U. S. Cavalry, where he eventually attained the rank of sergeant.

His military career was illustrious, having fought during the turbulent period of Texas history when settler incursions on Native American lands caused a serious threat to the health and safety of all.

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

Unfortunately, his love for alcohol got him dismissed from the Rangers, but Hughes wisely kept him on a contingency basis as a covert, free-lance operative.

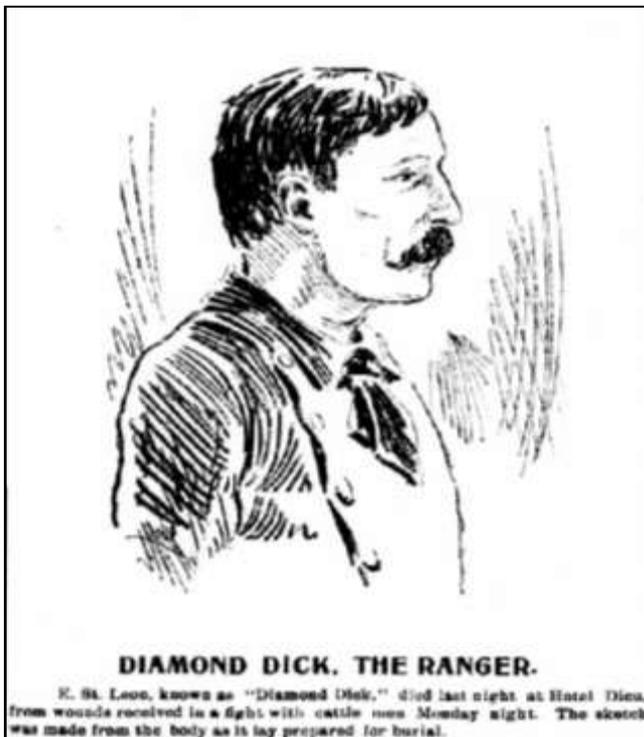
He became widely known along the border regions, and assisted in the capture of the Carrasco Brothers, infamous silver thieves who heisted a load of silver ore from the Fronteriza Mining Company, outside Shafter, Texas.

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." When Diamond Dick got on your trail, you might as well give up because he certainly wasn't going to let you get away.

He was instrumental in arresting Inez Gonzalez, who at the time was the most-wanted fugitive in Texas. He did the detective work, discovered Gonzalez'



whereabouts, then simply went to Gonzalez' father-in-law's ranch 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. To Dick's horror his pistol went off and when the smoke cleared he saw that he had 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 suddenness 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 man in the GH&SA yards with what was believed to be stolen goods, 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." Shades of Rodney King!

In another incident, Diamond Dick and another officer were called to Sister's Hospital in El Paso, where a man who had gone insane had become violent and was holding hospital staff at bay, while threatening everyone with a knife.

When Diamond Dick and other officers arrived, the large, extremely powerful



man panicked and dove under a bed. Dick's solution was to take a rope and lasso the gentleman's feet, then proceed to drag him out from under his cover.

It still required six men to subdue him and take the knife away, but they successfully got him into a paddy wagon and hauled him off to jail. Sadly, insanity was common in his family, with his father, brother and two sisters all becoming insane at an early age.

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.

Dick's death caused a small scandal that threatened to tarnish the Texas Rangers' name.

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, head 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.

Along about the time that Diamond Dick was in his prime, dime novels bearing his name began to appear. Whether they were named for Ernest St. Leon, or he was nicknamed for the magazines is unknown at present. It is most certain, however, that the fictitious accounts were not nearly as heroic as his actual life.

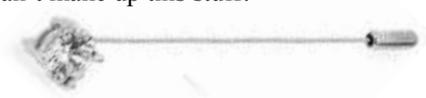
As his friend and fellow officer Deputy Sheriff Ten Eyck said, "Diamond Dick was a good officer. He took altogether too many chances, I think, in most cases... I have known him for some time,



Photo: villanova.edu

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!



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