



Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum

Excerpt of Project Report by Tom Andrews

Colt Single Action Army Revolvers owned by Tom Hickman

The following article has been adapted from a special project report on key artifacts in the Firearms Collections of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. This project report was written in 2018 based on extensive research compiled by project intern Tom Andrews.

Colt Single Action Army Revolvers owned by Tom Hickman

Provenance

Both pistols are inscribed "Captain Tom R. Hickman" and "Company B. State Ranger Force" This would place the pistols as having been finished sometime between 1921, when he was promoted to captain, and 1935, when he resigned from the force. Additionally, the pistols were originally loaned to the museum by Hickman's wife, providing an excellent chain of custody.

Tom Hickman Biographical Information

Early Life

Thomas R. Hickman was born on February 21, 1886 in Cooke County Texas to parents Walter B. and Mary Ann Hickman. He graduated from Gainesville Business College in 1907, and soon after joined the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show. Later, he was appointed deputy sheriff of Cooke County.¹

Ranger Service

On June 16, 1919 Hickman was appointed a private in Texas Ranger Company B by Governor William P. Hobby. He quickly attained the rank of captain in 1921. In the 1920s and 30s, he was assigned to maintain order in the North Texas oil boom towns. Additionally, he worked on the Oklahoma border dispute and had several encounters with bank robbers. Most famous of these was the Santa Claus Bank Robbery in Cisco, Texas. Along with the majority of the Rangers, he was fired by Governor Miriam Ferguson when she took office in 1933. He rejoined the force, but in 1935, he resigned after a dispute with Governor James Allred. Reportedly, the two men disagreed over how the new Texas Rangers organization was to be run under the Department of Public Safety.^{2 3}

The Santa Claus Bank Robbery

On December 24, 1927, a group led by a man dressed as Santa Claus entered the First National Bank of Cisco and robbed it. The leader of the group, who played the role of St. Nicholas, was Marshall Ratliff, a local resident. The bank tellers were able to sound the alarm and the city police responded quickly. In the ensuing firefight, police chief George Emory Bedford was killed. The robbers escaped in a 1926 Buick sedan with \$12,200 in cash, \$150,000 in securities, and other valuables. After a short distance however, they ran out of gas and had to abandon their loot.

After a manhunt led by Hickman which lasted eight days, the group was captured, with one killed during the skirmish. One of the robbers was sentenced to death and executed. Ratliff

¹ Kenneth B. Ragsdale, "Hickman, Thomas R.," Texas State Historical Association, n.d., <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fhi02>.

² Ragsdale.

³ "Tom Hickman, Texas Ranger," Texas History Notebook, 2015, <https://texoso66.com/2015/06/18/tom-hickman-texas-ranger/>.

later escaped jail and killed a jailer on his way out. He was quickly recaptured and, on the next day, was taken from the jail by a mob and lynched.⁴

Rodeo Career

Hickman's rodeo career began when he joined the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show, but continued later in his life when he was made judge of the first American Rodeo in England in 1924. In 1926, he judged the first rodeo held in Madison Square Garden. In 1930, he toured Europe with the Simmons University cowboy band, now Hardin-Simmons University.⁵

Later Life

During the 1950s, Hickman served as sergeant at arms for the Democratic Party at state conventions. On January 14, 1957, Governor Allan Shivers appointed him as a member of the Public Safety Commission, the governing body of the Department of Public Safety. In February 1961, he was made chairman of the commission, a position which he held until his death the following year on January 29, 1962.⁶

History of Colt Single Action Army Pistols

The Colt Single Action Army Revolver was contracted and issued in large quantities by the U.S. Army during the Indian Wars. In addition, it was carried by numerous legendary individuals from the Old West, including lawmen and outlaws alike. It has earned a gamut of nicknames, including "Peacemaker," "Frontier Six-Shooter," "Equalizer," "Hog-leg," and "Thumb-buster."

The original production ran from 1873 through 1940. Standard barrel lengths were 4-3/4," 5-1/2," and 7-1/2." Grip types can be found in oil-stained or varnished walnut or eagle and shield pattern hard rubber. Unadorned hard rubber grips were introduced at approximately serial number 165000. Grips were also available in ivory and pearl. Finishes were typically blued with the frame and hammer casehardened. Nickel plating was also common.

Barrel markings can be found in two variations: "+COLT'S PT. F.A. MFG. Co. HARTFORD, CT. U.S.A.+" for serial numbers up to 24000, and "COLT'S PT. F.A. MTG. Co. HARTFORD, CT. U.S.A." for serial numbers ranging from 24000 to the end of production. Patent date markings can be found on the left side of the frames in several variations. The two line marking of the 1871 and 1872 patent dates (S/N 1-34000), the three line marking of the 1871, 1872, and 1875 dates (34000 – 135000), and the two line marking of 1871, 1872, and 1875 (135000 through end of production). A rampant colt trademark can be found stamped next to the dates.

Serial numbers were stamped on the cylinders up to about serial number 120000. Around 140000, the transverse, spring-loaded catch for the cylinder pin was introduced.⁷

⁴ "Tom Hickman, Texas Ranger."

⁵ Ragsdale, "Hickman, Thomas R."

⁶ Ragsdale.

⁷ Flayderman, *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and Their Values*, 100–101.

Information Specific to these Firearms

These pistols bear serial numbers 342778 and 342806. Both feature fine engraving in a leaf pattern and are inscribed "Captain Tom R. Hickman" and "Company B State Ranger Force". The serial numbers indicate that these pistols were manufactured in 1921. It is unknown if they were engraved by the factory or finished by a third party for Hickman. Both feature bull's head and eagle grips with medallions marked "Estados Unidos Mexicanos".