

## Chapter 16

### The Indian Wars

On the tenth of August, Henry and I, with twenty others were astonished to find ourselves under attack by more than two hundred Comanches. This would be the single largest engagement of the Comanche War to date. It came to be called the *Battle of Arroyo Seco*. At the very outset Henry was wounded in the leg by an arrow.

Out on patrol, we had stopped to rest our horses in the shade of a huge cottonwood tree that stood next to a dry gully. *Arroyo Seco*, by the way, actually means *Dry Gully*. In any event, the enemy seemed to materialize out of thin air. They were within feet of us before we were aware of their presence. Drawing our handguns, we opened fire, and in a matter of minutes, killed scores of our attackers. A few of our company were wounded, but none critically. A war chief, later identified as Essowakkenny, seemed to be directing the attack from a distant bluff. Seeing so many of his warriors dropped, he signaled a retreat. Had he simply maintained the attack, our weapons would soon have been empty.

"We ain't seen the last of 'em," Ben Cage asserted. "They'll be back."

Several of our mounts had been hit and had to be put down. The rest we led into the relative shelter of the gully, where we too took cover. Henry organized us into three fire parties, one of which I commanded. The other two were directed by Ben Cage and Jack Hays. When the next attack came, only one fire party at a time was to respond. The single disadvantage of our repeating arms was the inordinate amount of time required to reload. Henry would command the battle and keep watch in all directions, lest we be flanked.

The charge came moments later, and it appeared unstoppable. I was sure that we were all about to die. And yet, when we opened fire, horses and men went down in a bloody heap. It was as if our attackers had run into an invisible wall. The survivors retreated in disarray. After a hasty conference of war, they came at us again, this time from two sides at once. Again we suffered no casualties whilst inflicting many.

"How many more times will they try that, do you reckon?" someone asked.

"I think we can end it right now," Jack asserted. "Ben, loan me your Kentucky rifle. I want to try for that captain yonder."

All Rangers now carried Paterson Colt revolvers, and many of us had acquired revolving rifles as well. But Ben Cage and a few others had been loath to give up their single-shot long rifles, which afforded the advantages of greater range, better accuracy, and more reliability than did the newer eight-shot rifles. Unfortunately, Ben was not the marksman that I was. I had no idea how good a shot Jack might be. He was new to our company.

"Want me to take the shot?" I offered.

"I believe I can do it, son" said Hays without rancor.

Jack was two years my junior, but the other men sometimes addressed me as *son*, and so he did too. To be perfectly fair about it, I think they imagined me to be no older than fourteen or fifteen years. My actual age at that time was twenty-three.

In any event, Jack made the shot. We all cheered when the war chief on the far bluff toppled dead from his horse. The surviving Comanches then gave up their ambitions to slay us and withdrew dejected.

Whilst I have Jack Hays on my mind, let me tell you a little story about his initiation into our Ranger company. Henry introduced him to us by his full name, *John Coffee Hays*. I, as Henry's *segundo*, always assigned camp duties. Citing the fact that Jack's middle name was *Coffee*, I gave him the task of making coffee each evening and each morning. "And do a good job of it," I advised. "We strung up the last fellow that served us bad coffee."

"You certainly do know how to inspire me to do my best," Jack said good-naturedly.

Unfortunately, his best did not even come close to being adequate. Twice a day for an entire week, he made for us the worst coffee imaginable. Henry threatened to re-name him *John Bad-Coffee Hays*. I watched like a hawk to try to catch Jack deliberately sabotaging the coffee in order to get out from under the responsibility for making it. Either he was too clever for me or he

simply did not have a knack of making coffee. I never figured out which, but I soon gave up thinking about it and went back to making the coffee myself.

Incidentally, Jack came to us not as a raw recruit, but as a seasoned Ranger. In 1837, when *tío* Erastus had captured all those horses down near Laredo, Jack had been with him.

I dressed Henry's leg wound, but it was obvious that he would need weeks of bed rest before he was able to ride again, for he had lost a lot of blood. He suffered himself to be borne by travois to San Antonio. Checking him into the inn, I cared for him as once my mother had cared for my father. Henry's recovery was even slower than I anticipated.

While Henry had turned over command of his own little company of Rangers to Jack Hays, he retained his authority as Ranger commandant. From his sick bed, he continued to direct the Comanche War. Rangers and government officials came and went regularly at *Hostería* Ballardo, which was now the *de facto* headquarters of the Texas Rangers. My family profited immensely.