

3-10-93

Uncle Tom

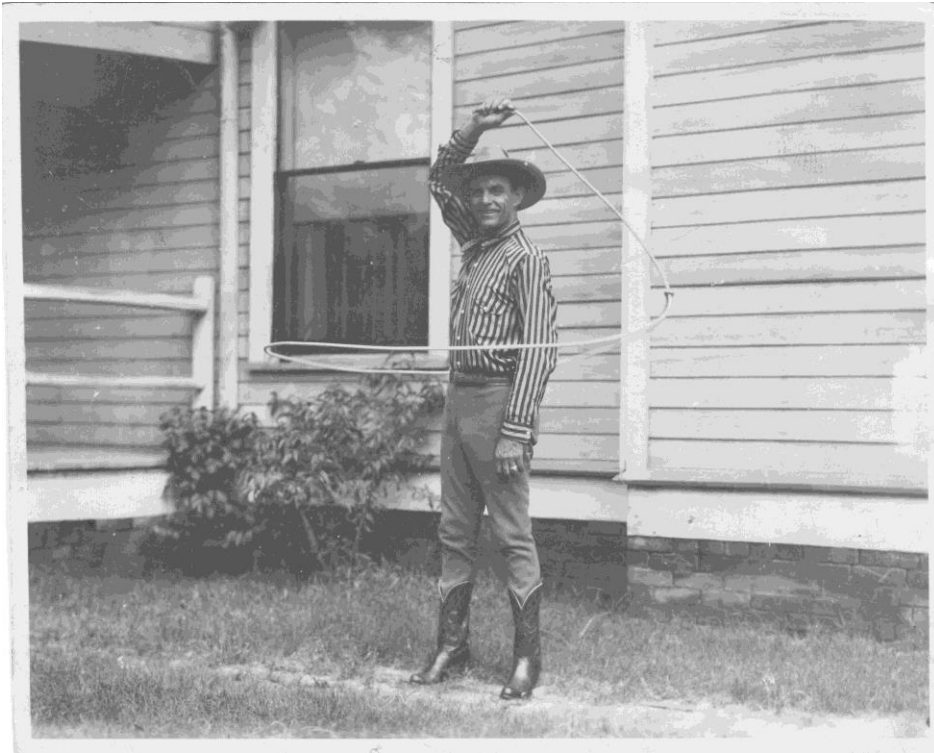
During the second half of the nineteenth century, William (note: Walker) Hickman and his wife Mollie emigrated from Kentucky to central north Texas. William established a homestead just south of the Red River. The land was rolling prairie and proved productive for general farming. William and Mollie had four children, Willett, Thomas Rufus, Nancy (called Nannie), and a son who died of measles in infancy.

The three surviving children proved to be rugged individuals, quite distinct in personality and physical appearance. In her teens, Nannie, her father's favorite, ran off and married Jack Conley, a young man whom her father disliked and mistrusted. Because he considered Jack a wastrel who might dissipate any land or money he came in contact with, William wrote a will which was to haunt the three siblings for many years. He left his property, then consisting of several separate farms, to be equally divided among the three children only after any grandchildren had reached the age of twenty-one. The will was designed primarily to prevent Jack from having any control of the estate and was certainly successful, for Jack died while the grandchildren were still too young to inherit any of the estate. Nannie had six children, the youngest of whom was older than the youngest of Willett's five children. Tom married late in life and had two sons, both younger than any of the other grandchildren. During World War II, some of the Hickman farm property was needed to establish Army camps. After the camps were returned to the estate, only Tom's children were under age. Soon after that there were attempts by oil companies to buy oil leases on the property. This took some time because all the grandchildren were grown and so scattered about the United States that getting the signatures of all thirteen took some time. In addition, the laws of Texas "protected" women from dominance by their husbands. The husbands of the female heirs had to sign the lease papers as well as their wives. The latter had to sign before a notary after their husbands had signed and left the room - to prevent any coercion from the husband!

Uncle Tom was affluent enough that he offered to buy all the property and his siblings agreed to the purchase but retained the underground mineral rights. Those mineral rights are still occasionally in litigation, necessitating obtaining agreements from the thirteen grandchildren. Fortunately, now the female heirs can sign without the consent of their husbands and in their husbands' presence.

But this is a story about Uncle Tom. He and my father, Willett, were close, and Daddy was very proud of Uncle Tom's fame as a captain in the Texas Rangers. Some of my earliest memories are of Tom - slender, tall, and booted. He was clearly interested in his nieces and nephews but wasn't entirely sure how to relate to us. I always looked forward to his visits because of at least two of his accomplishments: he could wiggle his ears, one at a time or both together; and he was an expert rope spinner. I loved to watch him twirl the rope loop, making it grow larger and larger until he could jump in and out of the circle. When I was old enough to jump in with him, hopping over the loop when he said "Go!", I felt as though I had reached a real pinnacle of success. Martha, Brother, and I loved to run away from him and have him rope us and pull us gently back to him. I

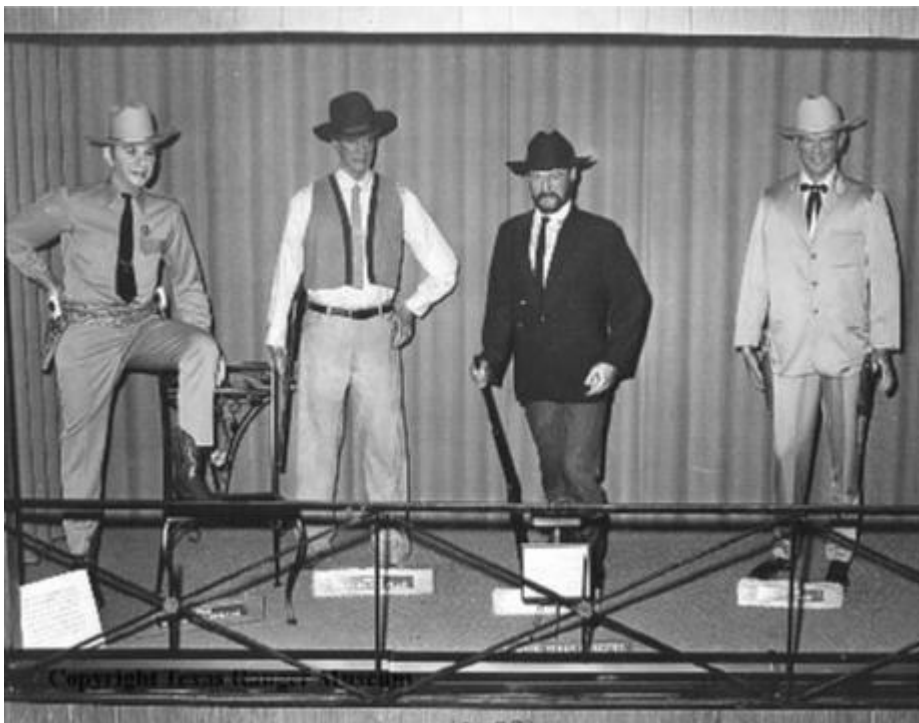
always tried to wield the heavy rope and get the magic loop to twirl, but, alas, it was too much for me. When I tried lighter ropes when I was alone, I was no more successful. Light ropes simply don't cut it.



Uncle Tom always rode in the opening parades at the rodeos held every year in Fort Worth during the Fat Stock Show. Our family usually drove over to Fort Worth for those shows. I enjoyed seeing the sleekly groomed steers and cows on exhibition before the judgments. But the rodeos were the events that caused me much excited ambivalence. I loved the opening parades when the horses and their elegantly attired riders strutted around the arena. I was especially excited when Uncle Tom passed and saluted us by doffing his ten-gallon Stetson to us in the stands. I thought the barrel races by brightly clad women riders were wonderful spectacles. But I hated the bareback steer riding or bronco riding. The frequent falls from the backs of the steer or horses, with the excited animals threatening to gore or stomp the fallen cowboys, were too much excitement for me. I didn't even enjoy the brave clowns who distracted the animals while the cowboys scrambled to their feet and safety. Usually, I enjoyed the calf roping. The calf was so quickly roped, the cowboy dismounting to throw it and tie three of its feet, while the well-trained pony kept the rope taut, that it was possible to admire the skill and teamwork of the man and horse without pitying too much the twisted neck of the calf and its discomfort at having its feet tied. The whole act was over so quickly and was such an intriguing display of the man/horse relationship that I was enchanted. The calf was released and trotted out of the arena so quickly that I hardly had time to grieve over it.

But his ceremonial rodeo appearances were hardly the essence of Uncle Tom's life as a Texas Ranger Captain, although they probably were the most enduringly exciting part.

The grown-up talk between Uncle Tom and Daddy about Tom's work as a Ranger were adult conversations that I early learned to tune out. I'm sorry now, for I'd like to be able to remember first hand information about the working of that law enforcement institution. But, alas, by the time I was old enough to enjoy listening to their talk, Uncle Tom had retired from the Rangers. I know that he traveled a great deal, going to whatever part of the state demanded a concentration of law men, even though the boast of the Rangers was "One riot, one Ranger." Whatever his duties were, he was well known, even famous in a limited area. He traveled to Europe when I was ten or eleven years old, meeting the Prince of Wales and performing for the president of France. A wax museum on the grounds of the State Fair of Texas in Dallas has a very life-like image of Uncle Tom. There he retains his romantic youthful image: tall, slender, booted, the way I'll always remember him.



(Editor's note: Tom Hickman is on the far right here. On the left is his one-time Sergeant and later also a Captain, Manuel T. "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas. Not all of the details in these two memoirs are completely accurate.)

4-29-97

Tom Hickman, My Uncle

Seeing the name of Tom Hickman in print is always a shock to me and a thrill, too. He was my uncle. Stories about him appeared in Texas newspapers during his life. His effigy appears in the Wax Museum at the Texas State Fair Grounds, and an idealized, larger than life-sized bronze statue is located in the entrance to Love Field, the commercial airport in Dallas. His Texas Ranger fame seldom is recognized outside the state of Texas, so I was surprised recently to see his name, with no further identification, in a book by an author from Charlotte, North Carolina. She knew about him because she has written and published the memoirs of her father, a salesman with a large territory in Texas and Oklahoma in the teens and twenties.

Uncle Tom, born Thomas Rufus Hickman in 1886, was the younger brother of my father, Willett. I saw Uncle Tom often when he was still active in the Texas Rangers, at that time a storied peace organization in Texas' tumultuous growing days prior to the thirties. Today it is the Texas State Police. My knowledge of Uncle Tom's service to the Rangers is scanty. He was a Captain in my earliest memories. I wish I knew more about his rise to that rank. Our family myth retells the famous story of his arriving on the train in Marshall, Texas, in response to a call for help in putting down a town-wide riot. The delegation meeting him was shocked to find him appearing alone, but he justified his appearance alone with the laconic phrase, "One riot, one Ranger!" The story had an aura of oft-told myth already in the mid-twenties; I suspect that other Rangers told the same story about themselves!

Uncle Tom was tall, slim, and handsome, with flashing black eyes and an almost bow-legged stance to lend an appearance of reality to his riding horses, first in the Rangers and later for show. My dad, two years older, several inches shorter and a number of pounds heavier, had a career in the oil fields, presumably prosaic in comparison to Uncle Tom's occupation, although I realize now that the development of the oil business in Texas had its own myths. Looking back, I can remember Daddy's pride in his brother, accompanied by an almost classic sibling rivalry which ended in a typical love-hate relationship. I remember Daddy's telling the "one Ranger" story, but most of the conversation about Uncle Tom was of the adult type which didn't interest me.

Daddy's ambivalent feeling toward his brother was obvious when my young brother was born. The baby was named for Mother's father, Thomas Roland Dunlap. Daddy noted that the initials for Thomas *Roland* Hickman were the same as for Thomas *Rufus* Hickman, and that Roland was *not* named for his brother. Uncle Tom said he was glad for the difference because he hoped to name his first son for himself.

Uncle Tom's visits were often exciting because he could easily be coaxed into performing rope tricks for me in the back yard. He handled the long rope with ease twirling it with an ever-widening loop at the end, jumping into the circle made by the loop and continuing to circle the rope about his body. He could cause the loop to rise above his head or descend

almost to the ground; sometimes he would satisfy my begging to be included in the circle, either by stepping to me while the loop was whirling around his head or telling me when to jump into the circle when the loop was on the ground. He would generally conclude the demonstration by suddenly causing the loop to rise above his head and roping the closest unsuspecting niece or nephew near him. When we asked Daddy in Uncle Tom's absence to show us how to twirl the rope, Daddy would oblige but with much less success than we hoped. He could do it but he lacked practice and didn't appear as dashing as Uncle Tom always did. When I was alone, I spent many futile hours trying to duplicate any part of Uncle Tom's rope demonstration. Alas, I never could accomplish any part of it. When I saw Will Rogers performing the same maneuvers absent-mindedly twirling a small rope while he told stories, I didn't think he was as good as Uncle Tom, although Will Rogers *was* funnier.

The conversations between Daddy and his brother seldom gave me any information about Uncle Tom's earlier years in the Rangers, an organization which all Texas children knew about and idealized. He and Daddy talked about several men in the Rangers, the oft-repeated mysterious name of "Gonzales" being the only one I remember. He probably was a captain, too, but I don't think I heard anything about him, or indeed about Uncle Tom, that would capture the imagination of an eight- to ten-year-old girl. I recall in a somewhat confused way the end of Uncle Tom's career. It was politically involved. The villain in the story was Governor Allred, a man for whom Tom had only scorn. Uncle Tom had no children at the time, in fact it was several years before he married; but he insisted that he would have a son who would challenge Governor Allred's son, who already existed, as an act of vengeance in the name of the family. Years later when his first son was born, he named the child Thomas Rufus, but always called him "Dogie" and wanted him to become adept at some physical activity so as to challenge the older Allred son. Alas, Dogie was a peace-loving youngster who devoted himself to artistic pursuits when he grew up.

Every year until the advent of the Depression, which came to my notice around 1932, our family would drive from Dallas to Fort Worth in order to attend the rodeo and exposition called the Fat Stock Show. I was always thrilled to see Uncle Tom ride in the opening ceremony of the rodeo, looking handsome in decorated boots and silver studded, fringed chaps, riding a handsome black horse with much silver on his saddle and reins. He would often join us after his ceremonial duties were over, and I enjoyed sitting by him and hearing about the intricacies of the calf-roping, bronco-busting, or bull-riding activities of the rodeo proper. I enjoyed watching the cooperation between the cowboy and the horse in roping the hapless calf that was released, but I thought that the horses were the real heroes as they kept the lasso taut so that the rider could leap to the ground and tie together three hooves of the captured calf. The other events I seldom watched because they seemed pointless and unnecessarily cruel and dangerous. Uncle Tom would explain that all the activities had been necessary during the early days of ranching in Texas. The rodeo, he said, was originally a means for the cowboys to hone their skills between roundups or during the driving of the cattle north for sale in Kansas City.

When I was about twelve, Uncle Tom married Tina Knight, several years his junior. Aunt Tina had the most beautiful complexion and long brown hair I had ever seen. It was only at the time of that marriage that I learned that Uncle Tom had had a tragic earlier marriage. Uncle Tom and Aunt Tina went on a romantic honeymoon to England, where he presented a horse to the Prince of Wales and rode with him in the English countryside, so much different from the Texas countryside where he had ridden as a Texas Ranger.

After the European trip, Uncle Tom and Aunt Tina moved to a farm in Cook County, not far from the farm where he and his brother and sister had grown up. I always enjoyed visiting them but was never entirely sure why anyone would want to live on that treeless, hot, dusty land. He survived Daddy by only a few years, leaving Aunt Tina with two adolescent boys, Dogie and David.

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