

The Lost Recordings of the Texas Rangers  
Ryan Ellett

*Originally published in Radiogram, August 2015.*

The Texas Rangers, a Western-style musical group that emerged from the Kansas City radio scene in the early 1930s, is a somewhat enigmatic band. They have a documented history stretching at least two decades, from 1932 to the early 1950s, with unsubstantiated comments indicating they were still performing in the late 1950s, pointing to a potential performing life of a quarter century. During that run the Texas Rangers appeared extensively on Kansas City's KMBC radio until 1939 when they relocated to Los Angeles. There, the group expanded into West Coast and even network-wide shows in addition to motion pictures.

The group's enigma is found not in their history, which has been well-documented in last year's biography (Bear Manor, 2014) co-written with Kevin Coffey. Rather, it seems mysterious, at least to this writer, that so few recordings of their work exist considering their broadcasting career over both local and network outlets.

The focus of this article is two-fold: first, to remind lovers of old-time radio that a minimal presence in extant radio recordings is not necessarily reflective of an artist's volume of broadcasting and, second and perhaps more importantly, to draw attention to these lost Texas Rangers' works in the hopes that some might be tucked away in the dusty corners of someone's collection, or that some of these shows might appear at auction and be recognized as crucial programs that would add to our growing understanding of the Texas Rangers' achievements.

### **Possible Kansas City Recordings**

As mentioned above, the earliest known broadcast of the Texas Rangers (under that name) dates from November 1, 1932. This was a CBS West Coast quarter-hour broadcast originating from KMBC and likely was unrecorded. Other early 1930s (1932-1934) KMBC series that featured the Texas Rangers included *Night Time on the Trail*, *Big Brother Club*, and very likely *Happy Hollow* and *Happy Hollow Barn Dance*. Because of the early dates of these programs and the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that KMBC recorded their series with any regularity, it's reasonable to think no professionally recorded examples of these series will surface. Nevertheless, KMBC is known to have recorded programs in their own studios and there are numerous documentary mentions of recording their own audition programs, especially in the early to mid-1930s.

There are, however, still slim exceptions to this conclusion. *The Texas Rangers*, *Happy Hollow*, and *Happy Hollow Barn Dance* (the Saturday edition of the daily *Happy Hollow* program) were picked up by CBS' West Coast network on and off during that 1932-1934 period. Therefore, this author holds out hope that either the network, some station within the network, or a private individual listening at home, made even a rudimentary recording which will yet be uncovered, giving modern listeners a taste of this early work.

Another hope lies with the *Night Time on the Trail* series. KMBC used this title on and off for many years, well into the 1940s, as a platform for its stable of Western and hillbilly performers. The Texas Rangers are much more likely to appear on any extant episodes from 1939 or earlier than afterwards, since they are not known to have participated on the show after moving to California.

One of the Texas Rangers' earliest dramatic music series was *Life on the Red Horse Ranch*, a 1935-era 65-episode transcribed series that only began circulating in old time radio circles in the last half-dozen years. Ironically, this very early work represents the biggest single example of the group's radio performances. The history of the series and episode details are well documented in the Texas Rangers biography published by Bear Manor, Dave Siegel's and Jack French's *Radio Rides the Range* published by McFarland, and my original overview of the series in the May/June 2011 issue of the *Old Radio Times*. *Red Horse Ranch* needs no further elaboration, then, except for reiterating a desire for some radio or western music historian to uncover episode 46 that, for an unknown reason, is not circulating with the rest of the series.

The one coup that could be undertaken relative to this series would be the discovery of any single broadcast of this series made during its original run on the KMBC station. It was done live, very likely called *Life on the Flying Horse Ranch*, and aired sometime in 1934.

The Texas Rangers' late 1930s radio work was more musical and less story-oriented. The group continued to appear on a self-titled program over CBS West Coast periodically and they also were heard as the Box K Ranch Boys for 65 episodes under Kellogg's sponsorship. These live Kansas City Box K broadcasts, dating from 1937, may have been recorded by the sponsor, though there are no records confirming such was the case. During this same period the group recorded two audition records for a new drama-music series called *Smilin' Valley Dude Ranch* (sometimes called *Smilin' Valley Ranch*). These records are not at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), home to many vintage KMBC transcriptions, and thus may be in a collector's bin somewhere. The auditions were provided to George Halley, one of the station's primary salesmen who operated out of Chicago.

Another late '30s series on which the Texas Rangers were regulars was the Saturday evening *Brush Creek Follies*, a barn-dance style program. Further research awaits, but it may have been a successor to KMBC's earlier Saturday night music show, *Happy Hollow Barn Dance*. The *Follies* was a showcase of the station's array of musical talent, and the Rangers were regulars on the program as individuals, ensembles, and an entire group. A very small handful of episodes are positively known to exist in library archives but since I have not yet listened to them nor have they been identified in circulation, their content can only be surmised from a few surviving notes and documents. The existence of a few recordings, even if not available to the public, is encouraging as it hints that even more may be awaiting discovery since the series ran for many years and even transitioned to television in the early 1950s.

UMKC does have copies of *Happy Hollow*, *Night Time on the Trail*, and *Brush Creek Follies*. Overall, it is just a very few episodes (and possibly just various

audition discs) and their dates are unknown. Still, a glimmer of hope that other copies may exist elsewhere

### **Possible Pre-War Los Angeles Recordings**

At least two series following the group's move to California in early 1939 represent good possibilities at finding lost Texas Rangers recordings. From July to the end of September the group was featured on a series entitled *Under Western Skies*, which starred singing cowboy Johnny Mack Brown. This series aired on Friday afternoons from Los Angeles over CBS with at least 67 stations known to have carried it. Just a few months later, the Rangers won the plum spot of backing Gene Autry on his new series *Gene Autry's Melody Ranch*, which premiered January 7, 1940. They were heard on 22 of the 26 episodes broadcast before its summer vacation in July, 1940. Documentation is fuzzy whether the entire 8-man band performed on the show or if it was limited to the vocal quartet portion of the Rangers. This series originated from CBS' KNX station in Los Angeles and was heard nationwide. The group was canned after the first half season for essentially demanding either more pay or on-air credit for their work. As a coast-to-coast show, this author holds out hope that episodes of *Under Western Skies* may surface along with the earliest episodes of *Melody Ranch*, which are rumored to be held by the Gene Autry museum and may be in preparation for release.

A possible audition from this period may surface some day as well. During the summer of 1940 they recorded an audition record called *Day at Circle J* (also *Life on Circle J Ranch*) that starred Martha Mears and Lou Crosby. The audition was passed around Kellogg and later Lorillard Cigarettes for some time but not known to have aired. Their performances from the 1940 California State Fair in July and August were recorded for broadcast and are mentioned in documents for some time.

In the fall of 1940 *Life on Circle J Ranch* was reworked, picked up the sponsorship of Lorillard's Old Gold Cigarettes, and finally aired as *A Day at Circle G* over CBS' Pacific network. The 13-episode run is known to have been recorded because it was later played by the Michigan State Network and a few other stations. UMKC does not have these transcriptions so possibly they can still be found and saved.

From 1941 to 1942 the Texas Rangers appeared on the Camel Caravan tour, a live roadshow consisting of a number of entertainment acts that traveled up and down the West Coast. I have not done any in-depth research about the Caravan but know at least one episode is circulating from 1938. Documentation of the Caravan tour does not indicate the shows were broadcast but it's possible some were aired as remotes.

### **Possible Post-War Recordings**

Beginning in the early 1940s the Texas Rangers began recording what would become the Texas Rangers Library, approximately 600 transcribed songs that were rented to radio stations across the country. A set of these World Broadcasting transcriptions exist at UMKC and may exist in private hands since numerous sets of the songs were made. These are interesting from a musical perspective but less so

from a radio history perspective as they do not represent actual broadcasts. Rather, the songs were aired by individual stations individually or as a 15-minute show.

The Texas Rangers' primary post-war CBS work was on *Hawk Durango* (later *Hawk Larabee*) beginning in 1946. It appears that only the vocal quartet portion of the group was engaged on the series. A handful of episodes appear to survive from the series' first year, from summer 1946 – to summer 1947, though it's possible they're misdated.

Unfortunately, relatively little has been discovered about this series, despite John Dunning's initial work and Don Ramlow's additions in *Radio Rides the Range*. Despite appearing for the first full season, the contributions of the Texas Rangers were very minor, primarily some vocal bridges. More episodes may yet be found to complement the few that are currently circulating.

The only other Texas Rangers broadcast from this period that can be identified with certainty is the premier episode of *Preview Theatre of the Air* over KFWB, June 27, 1947. It was a local broadcast and unlikely to be found on record. The Texas Rangers returned to Kansas City at the end of the 1940s and continued to perform locally but they made no known radio recordings after leaving California.

For a musical group with a nearly quarter-century history and extensive hours on CBS regional and national networks, the Texas Rangers left behind a frustratingly sparse legacy of radio recordings. Hopefully, sharing an overview of the Texas Rangers' radio programs most likely to exist somewhere, further examples of their on-air performances will be dug up and shared with the old time radio community. Perhaps these "lost" radio shows may not be lost forever.

Series featuring or including the Texas Rangers:

*The Texas Rangers*

*Night Time on the Trail*

*Big Brothers Club*

*Happy Hollow*

*Happy Hollow Barn Dance*

*Life on the Red Horse Ranch*

*Box K Ranch Boys*

*Smilin' Valley Dude Ranch*

*Brushcreek Follies*

*Under Western Skies*

*Gene Autry's Melody Ranch* (episodes 1-26)

*1940 California State Fair*

*Day at Circle J*

*A Day at Circle G*

*Hawk Durango (Hawk Larabee)* (summer 1946-summer 1947)