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The Diary of a Ranger's Wife, 1938-1939

BY KEMP DIXON

In March 1932, Leona Spellman celebrated her seventeenth birthday. But she was not happy, nor was her mother, Nora. A few weeks earlier, Nora had yanked Leona out of the high school she was attending in Smiley, Texas, eight miles from the Spellman farm in southern Gonzales County. Leona had been boarding in town, and was living quite a social life. In a diary, she built a list of 47 boys who lived in the surrounding area. She put plus signs by the boys she favored, and minus signs by some of the others.

During a week in January she had listed her evening activities: Sunday, in Nixon with friends; Monday, played cards with friends; Tuesday, attended a ball game and rode horses with a date; Wednesday, danced with several friends in her boarding room; Thursday, danced again; Friday, attended a party; Saturday, attended a party and rode horses with friends. But her social life came to an end on the night Leona went to a dance hall in Westoff with a boy and another couple. Leona and her date were in the back seat in the parking lot when the boy opened a flask of whiskey and took a drink, causing her to cry. Nora's brother witnessed it from across the parking lot, and thought Leona was being molested. He told Nora, who jumped in her car and drove to Smiley to bring her daughter home.¹

Later that spring, a car loaded with an oil well drilling crew drove from San Antonio to Smiley, then on the unpaved highway toward Yorktown, turning off onto the half-mile two-rut road to the Spellman farmhouse. One of the passengers was twenty-four year-old Norman K. Dixon, fine-looking and clean-cut, and the answer to Nora's and Leona's prayers. They married on July 7, 1932.²

Growing up in Vermont, New Jersey, Ohio and Brooklyn, Dixon

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excelled as an athlete, playing several sports in public schools and at the University of Florida. But the Great Depression was underway when his junior year was to begin, and his scholarship suddenly ended, leaving him without the funds needed to stay in school. When Rice Institute offered to enroll him, he traveled to Texas, but arrived too late for the fall semester. He joined the Army Air Corps but was released from cadet training in San Antonio in May 1931 when he slugged an officer for making a pass at his girl friend. After working at different jobs, he gained employment with the drilling crew, boarding at the Spellman home. The oil well failed, as did another one. Now a married man, Norman worked for a time as a farmhand for his father-in-law, Christian Spellman, but he lacked experience and Christian lacked money to pay him. Norman took Leona to the east where he landed a job in a department store in Cleveland. Two years later, with little money and few possessions, they hitchhiked back to Texas. A 20-year-old farm girl with complete faith in her husband, Leona had no concerns about hitchhiking across the country. In Texas, Norman quickly acquired a job as a private detective in Dallas.³

While employed with the detective agency, Dixon gained part-time work at the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition performing a clown-diving act. Overseeing a Texas Ranger exhibit at the exposition was Manuel "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas, one of the iconic Rangers of the 20th Century. Dixon became determined to go to work for the Texas Department of Public Safety as a Texas Ranger if possible, or if not, a highway patrolman. With dogged persistence, Dixon achieved his goal within a year, and became a Texas Ranger working for Lone Wolf Gonzales in the Bureau of Intelligence. Twenty-two-year-old Leona was now a Ranger's wife.⁴

In September 1937 he was assigned to work in Tyler in East Texas with Robert "Bob" Crowder, who would become one of the famous Ranger captains of the century. They worked together until the end of May 1938, when Dixon was transferred to the state crime lab in Austin. During the months in Tyler, Dixon was instrumental in breaking up the East Texas oil well theft ring, the largest in Texas history and perhaps in U.S. history, resulting in the arrests of dozens of thieves and three fences. After that success, Dixon drove west where he played a significant role in breaking up a West Texas oil well theft ring. He also spent weeks working for Gov. Jimmy Allred investigating a scandal involving oil land leases made by the General Land Office. On these and other cases, Dixon spent many days away from home.⁵

When Norman began keeping a daily diary of his Ranger activities on January 1, 1938, Leona decided to do the same. His diaries would continue into 1950; hers would end in October 1939. In her first entry on January 1, 1938, she recorded that she and Norman went to the movies that afternoon with the Crowders, and played cards with them that evening until midnight. On January 3, she and "Mrs. C" went downtown together for doctors' appointments. She refers to the Crowders in her diary 43 times between January 3 and May 31, the Dixon's last day in Tyler. He is "Bob" in her diaries, but she is always "Mrs. C." – never "Lucille." Leona was twenty-three-years-old with a farm girl background; Lucille was a more sophisticated and experienced older woman and mother.⁶

On January 20, Norman left for Austin and Houston to investigate the General Land Office oil-lease scandal, leaving Leona alone for about three weeks, with only her dog, Honeyboy. Two days later at 2:00 P.M. Leona walked with Honeyboy to the Crowders. "Stayed there all night," she wrote in her diary. She did not return home until 7:30 the next evening. The following night she "saw a show by myself for first time since we've been in Tyler." On January 26, she wrote to Norman that she was "getting used to being alone. Not scared at night." Two days later, she saw a movie downtown. "Rode home with Mrs. C. on bus & stayed with her till dark." But the next night she read a mystery novel. "Will probably have nightmares if I sleep at all." On February 2, she stayed overnight with the Crowders. With Bob out of town the next night, she stayed with Lucille.⁷

On February 5, she received a letter "from Norman saying he can't come home yet. I considered going home [the Spellman farm]." But when she found out the vet would charge \$3.50 a night to board Honeyboy, she changed her mind, and spent the night with the Crowders. Finally, on the next night, "about ten A.M. heard HB [Honeyboy] raising Cain on front porch & in walked Norman. Were we surprised & pleasantly!" She was pleased when he walked in again the next night in time for supper in the midst of an oil theft case, and again on the following night, though at 2:00 A.M. The next night, February 9, Norman was gone "all nite." On February 10 he was home "at mid-nite."⁸

Norman Dixon's work hours included nights and weekends, which was typical for Texas Rangers. To stay alert he became addicted to cigarettes, rolling his own to save money, and lighting his next cigarette with the butt of the last one. He had no money to spend nights away from

home in motels, nor did the Ranger budget allow much beyond meager salaries. Sheriffs, with whom he worked throughout his Ranger career, also had stingy budgets, but they had empty jail cells where Dixon could at times stay overnight. Whether he was one county away from Leona or a few hundred miles, long distance calls were expensive and usually out of the question. During the three weeks away from January 20 to February 8, their few contacts were by letter.

In the meantime, the lonely Ranger wife was suffering bouts of illness. On January 13, she "cleaned house thoroughly. Feeling sickish for about a week. Worse today. Norman out of town." The next day: "Still feeling upset – no appetite." On January 17: "Sick – ate practically nothing." January 18: "Sicker – fruit and juices. Heaves." January 19: "Worse. Nothing to eat all day." January 21: "Still sick. Rain. Homesick." On February 8: "Almost fainted looking at patterns in dime store & had girl call a cab." On February 14: "Went to see Dr. Brown & after a thorough examination was pronounced O.K. I was well pleased with him. Limped part way home with hip pains." Leona was pregnant.⁹

On February 17 while Norman was testifying at a trial of an oil field thief in Suphur Springs, Leona was again spending the night with Lucille Crowder. But Sunday, February 20, was a day Norman and Leona spent together at home: "Norman wrote reports & I spent practically all day in the kitchen cooking & washing dishes, with time off to read the funnies. At bedtime, he skinned me at 'checkers' & I him at 'Parcheesi.'" Another form of entertainment for the Dixons was the movies. When Norman was at home, the Dixons often went downtown to see a movie. At other times, they gathered with the Crowders to play Bridge. When Norman was out of town, Leona and Lucille often walked or took the bus to downtown to shop. At other times Leona often walked alone during the day to the Crowders or to downtown, sometimes with Honeyboy.¹⁰

On Sunday, March 13, for the first time during their stay in Tyler, the Dixons attended church and Sunday school. At 9:30 that evening, Norman and Bob Crowder joined a manhunt searching for bank robber Harry Wells. Norman did not return home until 6:30 on Monday night, only to leave again an hour later. On Tuesday Leona wrote, "Norman home at six A.M. – caught Wells at 1:30 A.M. – Norman slept till 2 P.M." Norman did not return home immediately after the capture. Instead, he joined other officials at the sheriff's office in Longview to interrogate Wells. Norman wrote in his diary that Wells "voluntarily told of bank robbery and hi-jackings & battles." By the time he returned home, he had

not slept for forty-eight hours.¹¹

Leona was meticulous in cleaning house wherever they lived. On March 17 she "was busy all day" cleaning and ironing. The next day, "I cleaned house thoroughly, scrubbed floors and front stairs. Washing & ironed living room curtains." She also cooked meals regularly whenever Norman was home, as she did on Wednesday, March 23, when "Norman brought highway patrol boy home for supper. Without notice." The "boy" could not have been much younger than Leona, who was twenty-three. On Thursday she ironed "all afternoon and was late getting supper." Cooking, ironing and cleaning were common on-going chores for Leona. Their rental houses always had hardwood floors, never carpets. Grocery stores were filled with unprocessed products, not prepared meals. Fast food restaurants did not exist.¹²

At the end of March, the Dixons moved to another house in Tyler. While Norman was out of town on April 2 tracking down oil field thieves, Leona spent the night at the Crowders. On April 3, "I came home from Crowders about eleven thirty. Mrs. Dutton [the Dixon's new landlady] said woman across the street threatened to shoot H.B. if he came on her lawn. Upsetting. Norman still gone." Leona faced another problem on Thursday, April 7: "Feeling upset because plumber hadn't come to do the work needed to be done before we moved in. I had reminded Mrs. Dutton each day & plumber came at 3." But on Friday, she wrote, "Called plumber as work done yesterday wasn't satisfactory.... Norman still gone." On Saturday: "Called plumber twice & he promised to be over during afternoon, but wasn't. Norman home about five, thank goodness, & all my troubles ceased."¹³

At the end of May 1938 the Dixons left Tyler and moved to Austin, where Norman worked in the state crime lab for the next several months. He was home most evenings – except for occasional investigations out of town or when he played baseball or basketball. On June 14, Manuel "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas and his wife Laura took the Dixons to their home where Gonzauillas, chief of the Bureau of Intelligence, which included the crime lab, and Dixon worked on a speech the chief was to give later in the month, while Laura and Leona visited. Dixon spent the next two days polishing the speech. He was now a speechwriter for the chief while Honeyboy was a problem for Leona. On June 17, Honeyboy "'rolled' again in forbidden stuff." On June 26, the dog got a chicken bone caught in his throat. Two days later: "H.B. came in covered with fleas so I bathed him – washed six out of my hair."¹⁴

When Christian and Nora Spellman visited their daughter and son-in-law on Friday, July 15, the Dixons took them to the Paramount Theater for a special showing of a Popular Science film on the Texas Rangers, including scenes of the crime lab, "though," wrote Leona, "only saw one side of Norman's face once." Later that day the Dixons rode with the Spellmans to their farm house near Smiley for a two-week vacation. On Saturday, Leona wrote that Norman was "looking better already." A week later, she wrote that he was "looking grand." But Norman did not forget the crime lab, for which he collected hairs and fiber from "pigs, sows, horses, cows, calf, mules, cat, dog, jackrabbit, cottontail, cotton boll, corn silk."¹⁵

About three weeks later, on Tuesday, September 13, Leona "packed suitcase PM. Norman home at 5 & keeping state car. Slight cramps. Called Dr. Klotz 10:35 P.M. Hospital at 11:00. On Wednesday: "Frederick Kemp Dixon born at 8:10 A.M." Nine days later: "Dr. Klotz instructed & advised me on care of baby on morning visit, nurses gave me notes on it. Nurses visited me all this A.M. for chats. Nice. Mom & Norman here at 2 P.M. Norman brought candy for nurses. We came home at 3:30 P.M. Dr. [Klotz] here at 6:30." This was the first baby Dr. Klotz had delivered, and he wanted to make sure the baby was fine. The nine days Leona stayed in the hospital after giving birth was not unusual at the time. The next morning, "Norman carried me to [kitchen] table and bathroom. Norman to work, Mom worked, I stayed in bed." On the following morning, "I stood on feet and walked around first time today."¹⁶

Three days later on September 28, Leona wrote: "I fixed breakfast first time & Norman ate before leaving. Mom left 9 A.M. for Smiley....I worked all day, washed diapers, cleaned house, etc. Tired." On September 29, "I bathed baby 1st time - washed gowns, etc....Ironed P.M." Her busy daily routine was now busier than ever with the baby, who had good days and bad days. On October 2: "He loves his bath, never cries, thank goodness." On October 6: "Baby slept most of day, good all nite." But on October 9: "Up with Kemp at times all this nite." However, on October 10: "Kemp good all last nite, awake only to nurse at 10-2-6, feeling good today." But on October 13: "Baby trouble all day. Spoiled? We wonder." However, on October 15: "Baby good all day."¹⁷

Like the newcomer, Honeyboy was sometimes the focus of attention. Twice during August nights, prior to the baby's birth, Honeyboy roamed the neighborhood, once on a "mid-nite barking spree" and on the other occasion "raising thunder" until midnight, causing Norman

to climb out of bed to find him and bring him home. On one night in November, Leona wrote, "Gave HB bath & rid him of fleas. What a job! 40,000,000 (?) fleas and ticks." On a night in December, she wrote, "HB out all nite." But by January 6, 1939, the Dixons had moved to a new rental house in Austin, and Honeyboy seemed to have improved his behavior: "HB sticks close to new house – stays in back yard, insists on N [Norman] playing with him when he comes home. I don't have a chance."¹⁸

On nights when Norman was home, he and Leona often played cards, sometimes with company, but often just the two of them. On Sunday, August 28, Leona beat Norman at Rummy. On Monday she beat him again, "leaving him very sad." He lost on Tuesday, for the third night in a row. On many nights they listened to radio programs. On June 22 during their first month in Austin, they listened as "Joe Louis knocked Max Schmeling out in 1st round." On October 30, they avoided the panic caused nationwide when listeners thought Orson Well's play "War of the Worlds" was real and that aliens had invaded the country. Instead, they listened to the Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy show.¹⁹

After Louis beat Schmeling on the evening of June 22, the Dixons went to a ball park where Leona watched Norman play baseball. After baseball season ended, he played basketball, as he did on January 8, 13, and 15, 1939. When he came home after his game on January 13, Leona wrote, "Stiff, sore, & skinned, but feeling victorious. Says he's getting good. Ha!" But Norman's job was changing, resulting in more days out of town. Instead of working in the crime lab, he took on assignments that sent him to other parts of the state. He was in Austin on January 17, but basketball on that day was out of the question. It was inauguration day for Texas's new governor, W. L. "Pappy" O'Daniel. Norman attended the event at the University of Texas football stadium and that evening he walked the streets to ensure the peace. Leona was downtown in the afternoon to watch the parade. "Streets packed," she recorded. "Some mob!"²⁰

On January 25 Norman and Chief Gonzauillas left Austin for a court hearing in South Texas. On the next day, Leona wrote, "I sleep with a gun under my pillow." In February, Norman investigated a "white slavery" case in Dallas and a gambling case in East Texas. On February 24, "Norman left A.M. in state car for 'points unknown' to be gone one week or so. Woe is me." On February 28, she was invited by Mary Wray, a friend, to her house that afternoon. "I rode street car over there 2:30

P.M. 1st street car ride. Enjoyed it. Home at 6 P.M." She relied more and more on friends for company as Norman's trips out of town continued. During the first part of May, he was in Galveston, Houston, and other towns east of Austin working on a murder case. On May 12, Leona wrote, "No company. Worst. Rather scared."²¹

Norman returned home on May 13, "looking tired and sleepy," only to find visitors: Mary and Forest Wray. For the next few days he was out of town again on the murder case, returning home on May 19, ready to rest and recuperate. Instead, the Wrays came over to visit. They came over again the next night "with Norman still irritated at outside interference. Tired of the 'social whirl.'" Perhaps aware of this, the Wrays did not revisit at night until May 21, 22, 23, and 25. However, on that last visit, Norman was in Houston on a bank robbery investigation and to handle some "labor troubles." Norman was back on June 3 in time to take Leona to a lawn party in honor of Colonel and Mary Nell Garrison at Camp Mabry, DPS headquarters.²²

The next day Leona recorded something that every marriage faces from time to time, but nothing like this was mentioned anywhere else in her diary: "N & I gripy at each other. Some 'get-together.'" Another unique incident occurred on June 15 when Norman crashed a state car on a bridge about six miles out of Austin on his way to Hallettsville to investigate a bank robbery. Six days later Leona wrote, "[B. F.] Spain spilled beans re N's accident." On the following day, she confronted him: "Norman home 4 A.M. from Tyler. He had to admit to accident, said he totally demolished 1938 Ford. Whew!" Another opportunity for Leona to berate Norman occurred a few weeks later. On July 24, Leona wrote, "No word from Norman - a little worried because he expected to be back last nite." After he came home the next night, "I told him a thing or two. I think next time he'll tel[ephone] if delayed long." It worked. On Saturday, July 29, Norman had Ranger Joe Thompson telephone "to say N. wouldn't be back till Tues. Blue."²³

August 1 brought good news: "Norman tel. early from Camp Mabry to say he would still have his job after Sept. first. Was he tickled. I baked cake, fried chicken, & had Wrays for supper for celebration. Also, \$25 raise in Sept." More good news on August 19: "Norman has state car assigned to him now." More confirmation on Friday, September 1, that Norman had learned a lesson: "Captain Ham called early A.M. to say he talked with N. last nite & he thought he might be home Sunday." More good news on October 15: "The Crowders popped in. Pleasant

surprise." Two days later Leona closed out her diary: "Crowders left 11 A.M. & Kemp cried so they rode him around block. We really enjoyed their visit." Leona had begun her diary on January 1, 1938, writing that she and Norman spent the day with the Crowders. Her diary had come full circle."²⁴

Leona's life as a Ranger's wife continued into the 1950s. During the years of World War II, they lived in McKinney, where Norman was in charge of eight counties between Dallas and the Red River. In the post-war years, his reputation as an investigator grew as he conducted investigations for the governor, the state legislature, and the attorney general. During one of his lengthy investigations away from home, Leona wrote Norman a letter: "Dear Norman, received, read, enjoyed your note. Have been having lots of fun and hope you have been getting lots of rest. Everything fine here. Am now on my way to town and haven't much time, but you can't say I didn't write. Will be surprised by my surprise when you get home. Love, Leona." This note, written during a long absence of Leona's Ranger husband, was considerably more uplifting and cheerful than entries she wrote in her diary during his lengthy absences in earlier years, indicating that she had learned to adjust to the life of a Ranger's wife.²⁵

By 1948, Norman Dixon was stationed in Austin as the special investigator for Colonel Garrison, the DPS director. Among his investigations as a Ranger were Texas A&M when cadets and veterans rebelled against the administration after World War II; the University of Texas where legislators made charges that it harbored Communists and Gays; the Phantom Killer who preyed on young lovers parked on country roads near Texarkana; and the most famous cold case in Texas history, involving the murders of a California socialite and her beautiful daughter on a lonely highway near Van Horn in West Texas.

By 1953, his role as a Texas Ranger ended as he took on a bigger assignment as chief of the Internal Security Section of DPS with agents stationed around the state to keep a close eye on the activities of Communists. Leona, after raising two children, began a career with the State of Texas. They built their dream house in Austin in 1956, living there the rest of their lives. Norman died in 1992 at the age of 84; Leona in 2011. She was 96.

ENDNOTES

¹ Leona Spellman's 1932 Diary, Author's Collection.

² Interviews with Tommie Spellman Bullock, February 22, 2010, and Leona Spellman Dixon, February 23, 2010.

³ Norman Dixon, "Chronology: The Life of Norman Kemp Dixon," Norman Dixon Personal Papers (hereafter "DPP"). Written during Dixon's retirement years, the Chronology contains a paragraph or so on each year of his life from 1908 to 1956; interview with Leona Dixon.

⁴ Dixon, "Chronology," DPP; *Houston Chronicle*, August 16, 1936.

⁵ Break-up of the East Texas oil theft ring: *Longview Daily News*, April 28, 1938; similar articles appeared on April 28 in the *Corpus Christi Times* and the *San Antonio Light* and on April 29 in the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Dallas Times-Herald*, and other newspapers. Break-up of West Texas oil theft ring: NKD Diary, May 9-27, 1938. General Land Office scandal: Land Office Irregularities, Department of Public Safety Records, Texas State Archives (hereafter "TSA").

⁶ Leona Dixon Diary (hereafter "LSD Diary"), January 1- May 31, 1938.

⁷ Norman Dixon Ranger Diary (hereafter "NKD Diary"), January 20, 1938; LSD Diary, January 22-29, February 2-3, 1938.

⁸ LSD Diary, February 5-10, 1938.

⁹ LSD Diary, January 13, 17-19, 21, February 8, 14.

¹⁰ NKD Diary, February 20, 1938; LSD Diary, February 17, 20, 1938.

¹¹ LSD Diary, March 13-15, 1938; NKD Diary, March 15, 1938.

¹² LSD Diary, March 17-17, 23-24, 1938.

¹³ LSD Diary, April 3-10, 1938.

¹⁴ LSD Diary, June 14, 17, 26, 28, 1938; NKD Diary, June 14-16.

¹⁵ LSD Diary, July 15-16, 23, 1938; NKD Diary, July 15, August 1, 1938.

¹⁶ LSD Diary, September 13-14, 23-25, 1938.

¹⁷ LSD Diary, September 28-29, October 2, 6 9-10, 13, 15, 1938.

¹⁸ LSD Diary, August 24, 28, November 3, December 2, 1938, January 6, 1939.

¹⁹ LSD Diary, August 28-30, June 22, October 30, 1938.

²⁰ LSD Diary, June 22, 1938, January 8, 13, 15, 17, 1939.

²¹ LSD Diary, January 25, February 24, 28, May 12, 1939; NKD Diary,

February 21-22, 24-28, March 1, 1939.

²² LSD Diary, May 13, 19-25, June 3-4, 1939; NKD Diary, May 15-19, 25-June 3, 1939.

²³ LSD Diary, June 4, 15, 21-22, July 24-25, 29, 1939; NKD Diary, June 15, 1939.

²⁴ LSD Diary, August 1, 9 September 1, October 15, 17, 1939.

²⁵ Leona Dixon to Norman Dixon, Undated, DPP.