

SANDERSON AND TERRELL COUNTY TEXAS

THE LAND, THE PEOPLE, THE HISTORY

The history that an area produces is in no small part the result of the land and the people it attracts. Terrell County is no different in this respect. As you read this article you will encounter much that is admirable about the human spirit and some things which are less so. Always present however since the start of human habitation in this area has been a spirit of adventure and tenacity. The land demands it.

THE LAND

With an annual rainfall which averages 11 to 12 inches and a limestone based soil created from a long ago shallow sea, the land supports various cacti, creosote bushes, sage, sotol, candelilla, gamma grasses, juniper, and the ubiquitous mesquite. Wild animals living here are the whitetail and mule deer, the javelina, wild turkey, white wing and mourning dove, quail, and the occasional elk or wild sheep. Predators include the coyote, the grey fox, the bobcat, the raccoon, the ring-tailed cat, and the cougar (mountain lion). Ranching and oil and natural gas are the major income producers in the county. The land supports sheep and goat grazing and in the wet years cattle can be grazed. Ranches are large and many of them are still actively run by the descendants of the original settler families.

THE PEOPLE

American Indians (the Comanche, the Apache and their prehistoric ancestors) are believed to have been the first inhabitants of this area. A largely agrarian tribe called the Jumanos were also here but lived only along the Rio Grande.

The first white men to explore the area were Spanish explorers. It is believed that Cabeza de Vaca was the first of these in 1538. He and his men had originally landed in what is now Florida but a series of events put them washed ashore on the Texas coast. Much of the early Spanish exploration was intended to bring back gold and silver to the Spanish treasury. DeVaca, finally able to get to New Spain (Mexico) told a story of cities of gold and precious gems. Many a Spaniard traveled the southwest in search of the "Seven Cities of Gold". Indians were converted and often turned into slaves as they were encountered. The Indians revolted in the early 1600s, driving the Spaniards out for a time. With horses taken from the Spaniards the Comanche and Apache reached a new level as warriors and hunters. The Spaniards, Mexicans, and early white settlers came to fear them. There were substantial numbers of Mexicans who settled here as a result of internal problems in that country.

THE HISTORY

This is not a detailed history but is intended only as an overview composed of interesting facts, places, events, and people. Dates are given but topics are not in chronological order.

FOUNDING OF SANDERSON AND DRYDEN

The towns of Sanderson and Dryden both came into existence because of the railroad built through the area. Both were started and named in 1882. They remain the only two towns in Terrell County. Charley Wilson, a former soldier at Fort Concho bought up one square mile of land next to the railroad right-of-way in what is now Sanderson. He subdivided it and slowly sold it off as its value increased with the railroad's arrival. He also started the first saloon in town.

Dryden became the headquarters for the Pecos Land and Cattle company which was a huge ranching operation in the 1880s. Stock pens were constructed in Dryden for holding livestock destined to be shipped on the railroad.

THE JUDGE MEETS HIS MATCH

Judge Roy Bean (the law west of the Pecos), although never a lawyer, was appointed as Justice of the Peace for precinct number 6 of Pecos County by the Pecos County commissioners court on August 2, 1882. He established his court in Langtry in a 14 foot by 20 foot wooden building which he furnished with a bar and poker tables (and also a jury box).

The judge's saloon at Langtry was so successful that he decided to open another one in the growing town of Sanderson in October of 1883. It had billiard and pool tables, poker tables, champagne, beer, and whiskey. Charley Wilson, the land speculator and saloon owner, didn't take kindly to the intrusion. He spiked the judge's whiskey barrels with kerosene. Shortly after, the judge closed his Sanderson saloon and concentrated his efforts on Langtry. Sanderson became known as the town too mean for Roy Bean.

MEYERS SPRING

About 12 miles north of Dryden sits an oasis in the desert. It is Meyers Spring and its waters have attracted humans since pre-historic times. There are pictographs on the bluff walls from which the waters flow. They are considered some of the most valued in North America and represent examples of at least three different time periods. Arrow heads and other workings found at the spring date from pre-historic to historic periods. The Comanche used it as a base camp for 2 or 3 months out of the year until the late 1870s. The spring was garrisoned by U. S. Army troops out of Fort Clark in Brackettville from 1881 until 1884. It was known as Camp Meyers Spring. The most well known of its army occupants were the Black Watch which was comprised of black Seminole Indian scouts led by Lieutenant (later Brigadier General) John Bullis. Besides fighting the Indians the scouts were in-

strumental in leading cavalry forces to the Indians. Though small in numbers, three of them were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their acts of bravery. Bullis returned to the spring 20 years after relinquishing command of the Scouts and erected a new water tank there. It still stands today.

THE OUTLAW TURNED SHERIFF

David L. Anderson, also known as Billy Wilson and "Buffalo Billy" was born in Ohio in 1861. He moved with his family to Texas while still a child. As a young man he began rustling livestock. He changed his name to Billy Wilson and went to Dodge City, Kansas where he hooked up with Dirty Dave Rudabaugh around 1878. In late 1879 or early 1880 they went to Lincoln, New Mexico and joined up with an outlaw gang called the Rustlers which was led by Billy the Kid (William Bonney). On December 23, 1880 at a rock house in Stinking Springs, New Mexico Billy Wilson, Billy the Kid, Dirty Dave Rudabaugh and Tom Pickett were captured by a posse led by Pat Garrett. Convicted of counterfeiting and robbing the U.S. mail Wilson was sentenced to serve 7 years. He escaped in 1884 and wound up in Sanderson where he married and started a family. In 1885 he ran into Pat Garrett who was living in Uvalde. Garrett recognized him and after talking for awhile he became convinced Billy Wilson had become a decent law-abiding citizen. He used his influence to get David Anderson AKA Billy Wilson a presidential pardon from Grover Cleveland in 1906. Before receiving the pardon Anderson had been elected sheriff of Terrell County in 1905. He became one of Sanderson's most beloved citizens. On June 4, 1918 Sheriff "Doc" Anderson went to Harrell's saloon to quell a disturbance. A drunken ranch hand from Fort Stockton named Ed Valentine, whom Anderson knew, was brandishing a pistol and threatening to shoot anyone who tried to enter the saloon. He shot Anderson in the chest as he came through the door. Two other shots quickly followed, killing Anderson. Some of the town folks had armed themselves and kept Valentine from leaving the saloon after Anderson's death. He was finally killed by R.M. Gatlin, a Dryden lawyer, with a borrowed 30-30 rifle. Gatlin had ridden into town just minutes after "Doc" Anderson had been killed.

THE LAST TRAIN ROBBERY IN TEXAS

On the evening of Friday, March 13, 1912 at 12:05 A.M. two masked men attempted to rob Train #9 of the Southern Pacific railroad. They boarded the train as it was pulling out of Dryden after taking on water for steam generation. They instructed the engineer to stop the train at the first iron bridge east of Baxter's Curve which is approximately mid-way between Dryden and Sanderson. Once the train was stopped they had the train's crew uncouple the passenger cars and caboose from the rest of the train. The

engine with the mail and baggage cars then went across the bridge and about half a mile further down the tracks. The robbers then proceeded with the holdup. One of them stayed with the engineer while the other one took David Trousdale, his helper, and the porter to the mail and baggage cars. Trousdale was the Wells Fargo express agent assigned to the train. He was responsible for the mail, the baggage, and any other items of value carried by the train. As they passed by a shipment of iced oysters, Trousdale picked up an ice maul and hid it in his jacket. When the robber bent over to open a package which Trousdale had pointed out as being valuable, Trousdale killed him with several blows to the head from the ice maul. He armed himself with the robber's rifle and gave a revolver to his helper and the porter. They turned off the lights in the car and went to the back of it to wait for the second robber to come looking for his friend. Trousdale dispatched him with a single shot to the head when he came back and looked into the car. The engineer then backed the train up, the other cars were coupled, and the train proceeded to Sanderson. Trousdale helped unload the dead bodies and turned over the six weapons the robbers had been carrying. The robbers turned out to be Ole Hobek and Ben Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick was known as "The Tall Texan" and had achieved notoriety for his participation in robberies with the "Hole in the Wall" gang led by Butch Cassidy. The dead train robbers were displayed in Sanderson and then buried in the town's Cedar Grove cemetery. An irony in this event was that both Trousdale and Kilpatrick traced their family roots back to the same county in Tennessee. THE SANDERSON FLOOD OF 1965

Our last story is probably the one which best demonstrates the strength and the character of the people who call Terrell County home. Even though rainfall is usually sparse over the course of a year there are the occasional desert thunderstorms that can dump over 5 inches of rain in an hour or two.

The town of Sanderson fell victim to the flash flood waters generated by such a storm. The normally dry Sanderson Creek rampaged out of its banks in the morning hours of June 11, 1965. Houses and commercial buildings were swept away by the waters. Railroad rails were twisted and broken by the force of the water. Roads and building foundations were swept away. The majority of the houses destroyed were on the east side of town in an area called El Ranchito. Over half the town of Sanderson was gone in about 45 minutes. Brave men of Anglo and Mexican heritage risked their lives to save each others families. People who had reached safety went back into the waters and often

lost their lives attempting to save others. After the waters receded the final death count was 26 people. The bodies were buried in a mass grave in Cedar Grove Cemetery along with those who had been swept from their graves by the flood waters. It was believed two people were never found.

In true West Texas tradition the other neighboring communities pitched in with men and resources to help Sanderson recover. The counties of Pecos, Brewster, Val Verde, Upton, Ector, Crane and Crockett all sent help. Sanderson was rebuilt and a series of 11 dams were completed by the U.S. government in the 1980s to guard against a future flooding.

EPILOGUE

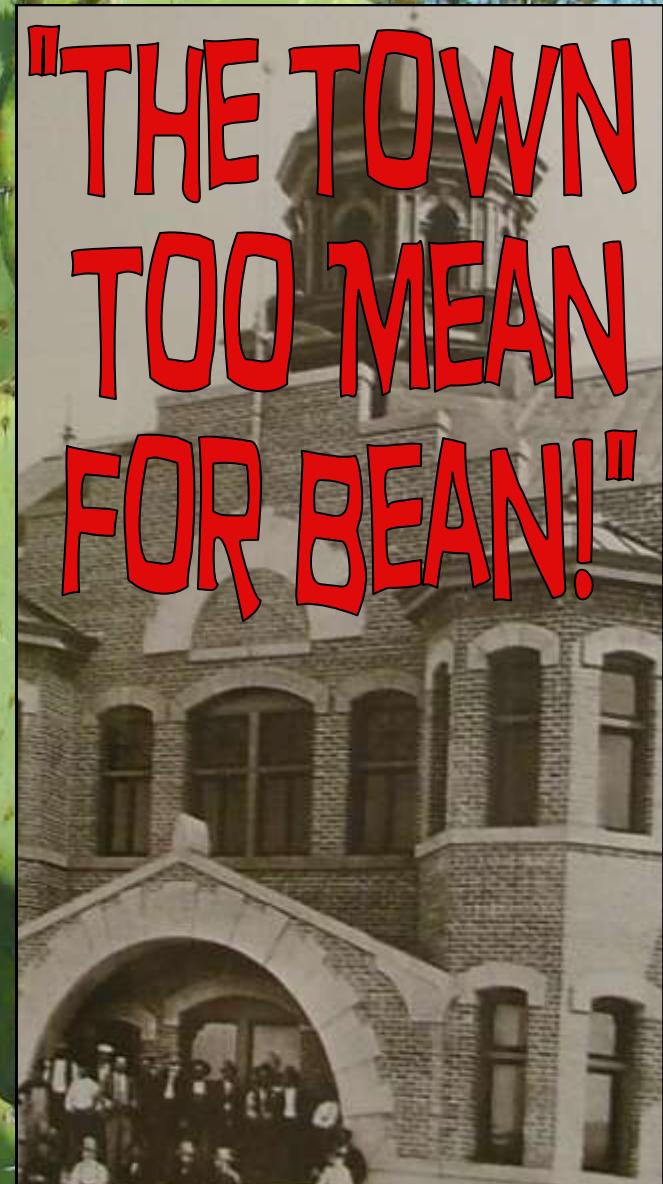
The people of Terrell County continue their lives in the towns of Dryden and Sanderson and on the ranches which cover the county. The towns have both gotten smaller. Sanderson lost most of its railroad workers when steam engines were replaced by diesels and the crew layover was moved to Alpine. Ranching, county services, the school district and the Border Patrol are the major employers. Tourism is in the process of being promoted as the area has a lively history and the people and wide open beauty of the land are worth experiencing.

At the Visitors Center in Sanderson there are two source books available for purchase. The first is entitled [Terrell County Texas: Its Past, Its People](#). It is a compilation of articles which was edited by Alice Evans Downie. The second book is [The Sanderson Flood of 1965](#), written by Russell Ashton Scogin. Both are highly recommended.

Written by Bill Hawn



"THE TOWN TOO MEAN FOR BEAN!"



SANDERSON
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TERRELL COUNTY
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TEXAS