

Museum News: Mr. Joe Kerr, aka "Pelo Negro"

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

Reminiscent of the old John Wayne movie, "The Three Godfathers," Sanderson also had three godfathers. The first was Cyrus M. "Charlie" Wilson, who founded the town in 1882. The second was Ed McGinley, who bought Wilson's holdings in 1906, making capital improvements to the water system and installing the first city-wide electric generation and transmission system.

The third godfather, Mr. Joe Kerr, probably did more than anyone in turning Sanderson into a thriving commercial center. Had it not been for the uncommon financial genius and the whole-hearted efforts of this good-hearted man, Sanderson could not have achieved the prominence it attained through the years.

It is hard to list Mr. Kerr's achievements, for there were many. He was a key organizer in the efforts to carve Terrell County from Pecos County, and was the first county judge. He (and others) started the first state bank in Terrell County and served as its president until his death. He built the first wool house, the first ice plant, a fine hotel, arguably one of the finest mercantile establishments in the Southwest, helped start the first commercial club promoting the town and county and the first Chamber of Commerce. He was a Rotarian, an Elk, a Knight of Columbus, first superintendent of the common school district, chairman of the local Red Cross, a leader in the Boy Scouts, etc., etc., etc. To learn all of his accomplishments it is best to find a copy of the Terrell County history book and do some reading. His name is often mentioned in the period 1901-39.

But beyond the accomplishments of a tough, shrewd businessman, there was the kind, caring heart of a gentleman.

Mr. Kerr had a heart of gold. He bankrolled an army of businessmen and cowboys. When personal fortunes took a turn for the worse, one could go to Kerr's and order groceries and Mr. Kerr would hold the ticket until you could pay. When misfortune came, Mr. Kerr was first in line to help. Even when death came calling, Mr. Kerr would loan his wagon and driver to carry the deceased to the cemetery.

Mr. Kerr was friend to all, regardless of race, color or creed. When his Catholic community needed a church building, he and the other members organized men and materials and a beautiful edifice was built on Oak Street that served for years.

He was beloved by the Hispanic community because he showed no prejudice or superiority to them. They were the ones who gave him the name "Pelo Negro," honoring his striking personal appearance ('coal black' hair and flashing black eyes.)

Mr. Kerr was an avid supporter of commerce in Sanderson. Before chambers of commerce were popular, he and other public-spirited men started the Terrell County Commercial Club in the early 'Teens. In 1920, they chartered the first Chamber of Commerce.

By 1920, Mr. Kerr had added these titles to his resume: president of Kerr Mercantile Co., County Judge, County School Superintendent, president of Sanderson State Bank, secretary-treasurer/manager of the Sanderson Wool Commission, owner of the Sanderson Water Works and owner of a large, working ranch.

Mr. Kerr's story was a true American success story.

Born on January 21, 1872 in Mt. Charles, Donegal, Ireland, Joseph Neal Kerr came to the United States as a small child with his family, settling in Atascosa County, Texas. His early years were spent in Campbellton, Texas, where he was in the mercantile business and served as a deputy sheriff. He attained early acclaim as one of the posse that took down famed outlaw, Gregorio Cortez. According to the *Houston Daily Post*, July 11, 1901, Mr. Kerr was inducted into the Texas Sheriff's Association at its annual meeting and was given special commendation for courage and "nerve" in his heroic action. The caricature is from that article.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Kerr arrived in Sanderson on October 1, 1901, seeking his fortune. Setting out from San Antonio with no definite destination, he was taken with the town and the location and decided it was a good place to settle, with plenty of opportunities for success.

Less than a week after arriving he had purchased one-half interest in the Hancock & Hancock store, which sat on the corner of 1st and Downie streets, just down from the GH&SA Railroad Depot. The store had a small bank associated with it and the new Hancock & Kerr's became a success. By 1905, Joe Kerr was the sole owner and the name changed to "Joseph Kerr Store."

As Mr. Kerr's responsibilities began to grow with involvement in his many business and civic ventures, in 1907 he asked his brother, James, to step in and help him run the store. In 1913 James became a partner and the name changed to "Kerr Mercantile Company, Inc."

But business was not all that was on his mind. In 1916 he married Miss Josephine Robinson and they eventually set up housekeeping in the former Ed McGinley home, which he purchased along with all of McGinley's Sanderson holdings in 1917. That deal made him the virtual owner of Sanderson and its utilities. He became the biggest landlord in town and soon began improving his properties.

He built one of the first ice plants in the surrounding area and made improvements to the water and light system.

He built a new hotel on the site of the old Terrell Hotel and it was the finest between San Antonio and El Paso.

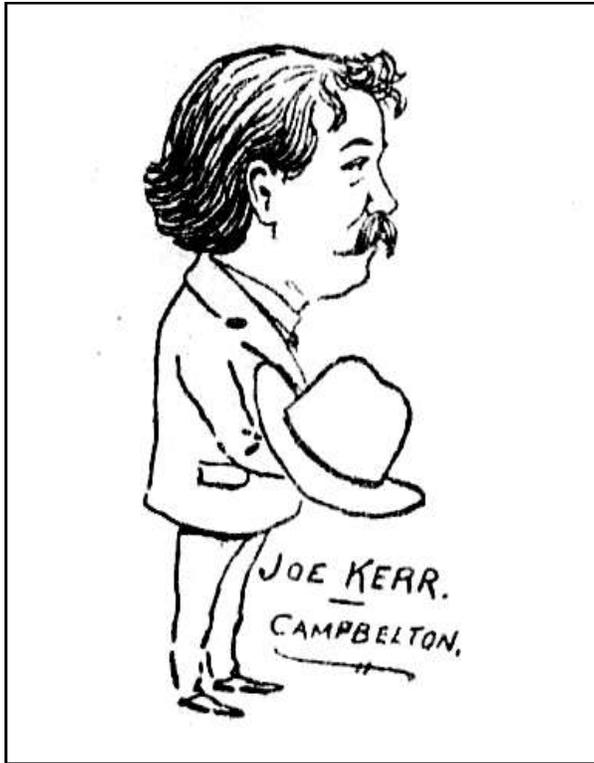
In 1927 he opened his flagship store on the corner of 1st and Oak St, the most modern and luxurious in all of rural West Texas. There was no finer or more well stocked store anywhere.

Throughout his whole life, Joe Kerr was devoted to his community and its well being. At every turn he was planning and brainstorming ways to make Sanderson and Terrell County a better place. Through the efforts of his good heart, he helped make Sanderson a booming center of capitalism in a harsh, unforgiving wilderness. It rightfully can be said that Sanderson and Terrell County reached their zenith during his years of leadership and promotion.

Sadly, Mr. Kerr's health began to decline, and on June 29, 1939, he passed away. The community was shocked at the news. He was universally mourned, and the regard with which people held him is exemplified by an entry from Doc Turk's diary:

"Mr. Joe Kerr is very low. It don't seem possible that he might not come back. His place will be hard to fill. I for one will miss him for

he has been a friend to me. He has helped me in many ways. I don't see how I could have carried on without him."
Many in Sanderson, Terrell County and West Texas could say the same thing.
Mr. Kerr was laid to rest in the family plot at Campbellton, Texas.



Caricature courtesy of *The Houston Daily Post.*, July 11, 1901