

Museum News: Grandma Savage... Midwife, Healer, Nurse

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

In early Sanderson there was not always a doctor available to take care of the local population. The railroad often provided a doctor for its employees, and they were allowed to tend to the sick of the community, but due to shortages, sometimes there were periods when doctors were not present. Thankfully, for many years there were five ladies of the town who could be called upon as nurse, midwife or doctor, using patent medicines and “curandera” folk remedies to heal the sick or injured.

Mrs. Antonia Maldonado, “Granny” (Mrs. Joe) Nance, Mrs. Margaret Savage, Mrs. Bartolo (Pancha) Villegas, and Mrs. Joe Wolff could also be called to help in time of need. They knew to sterilize bandages and tools to keep down infection, and they also used folk remedies in their treatments.

Like good doctors everywhere, they all carried their little black doctor bags. According to the Terrell County history book, the children of one family firmly believed that Granny Nance brought newborn babies to the house in her little black bag.

All of these ladies selflessly served and put their lives in danger for the sake of their community, but Margaret “Grandma” Savage probably was the most celebrated of all. Her love for others and devotion to duty not only served as a shining example to her own children, but to all who lived in this community and benefited from her care.

Margaret Kloszner Savage was a very special person. Born in 1855 to Swiss immigrant parents in Minnesota, her family moved from Wisconsin to Iowa to Nebraska, and finally, to Luling, Texas. When Margaret was eleven, her mother passed away and her father relied on her to take care of her four brothers. It might be that her superior abilities as a wife, mother and nurse grew from having to take care of her brothers at that early age.

J.W. Savage came to Sanderson with the railroad as it passed through in 1883. He worked as a “dirt” man, moving the earth with mule-drawn “fresnos,” preparing the roadbed. Later, he worked as a railroad section foreman in various places between here and Del Rio.

He met and courted Margaret in Seguin, Texas, which resulted in marriage in 1875. To that marriage ten children were born.

Concerned that there were no educational opportunities in the small railroad settlements where they lived, Mrs. Savage insisted that they hire a tutor to make sure her children were prepared for the future. They kept special accommodations for the “Professor,” which doubled as a classroom during the day. The arrangement worked very well.

In their first days living by the railroad, Mrs. Savage told of seeing Indian stragglers passing by, though hostiles had been eliminated by 1881. Earlier depredations had made everyone nervous, even though the threat was gone.

Young David Duke once asked if the Indians were bad when she came to Sanderson. She answered, “No, Honey, they were almost human beings, at times. They would come on our back porch where I always had plenty of fresh honey and cold water. They would eat the honey, drink cold water and usually go on about their business. But, I was always behind a locked door with a loaded shotgun and a big dog by my side while the Indians were on the back porch! Usually, they would eat the honey and drink the cold water and leave, so I never had to kill any human beings.”

Margaret, however, could take care of herself and her family when her husband was at work. Adept with rifle and pistol, she often dispatched snakes and hawks with one shot.

And she was fearless in the face of danger. Once a gray wolf got into her chickens. She set her two dogs on the wolf and while they held him at bay, she used a fireplace poker to beat him to death!

After their move to Sanderson in 1899, Mrs. Savage found no doctor here. She began to offer her services as a midwife and nurse. When a doctor finally arrived, she became his “right hand,” as he put it.

Her natural compassion and “mothering” spirit put her on call at all hours of the day and night. And, she always went one step beyond in performing her duties.

Once, she got a call to tend a sick woman on Hominy Hill, near the present-day Church of Christ. She found that the woman was living in a wagon with her children and was sick and pregnant. Seeing their desperate circumstances, Mrs. Savage arranged for food for the family and moved them into a barn where they could stay warm. The woman safely gave birth in the manger of the barn, and her little boys tried to trade the baby for Mrs. Savage’s dog! Of course, as often happened, Mrs. Savage did not receive compensation for her work. She often gave her services freely from the goodness of her heart.

Mrs. Savage did not fear to face mortal danger by exposing herself to serious epidemics as a nurse to the afflicted. Sanderson suffered at least three small pox epidemics, and also outbreaks of typhoid and scarlet fever. Quarantine camps were set up west of town near the present-day intersection of Cargile and US Highway 90. Guards were hired to enforce the quarantine and the sick were moved there to prevent the spread of disease. At great risk to herself, Mrs. Savage moved to the camp to care for the invalids.

In a 1903 letter to his brother, Fred, John Savage was thankful that his mother was home, safe from the quarantine camp, without being infected. He worried that, no matter how serious the disease or the danger to her well being, she refused no one.

More than just a good nurse, Margaret was a good-hearted person who was always ready to lend a hand or give a word of encouragement or cheer.

As charter members of the Methodist Church in Sanderson, the Savages were ever-faithful and ever-present in attendance. Visiting ministers often had meals or spent the night at their residence.

Margaret and her husband treated strangers the same as friends, always willing to help or extend the hand of friendship to old or young. Her cookie jar always brimmed with homemade cookies and her kitchen brimmed with neighborhood children.

Because she loved everyone and always treated others as her own family, she soon became known as "Grandma" Savage to the town. She accepted that name with good-hearted grace for she truly was grandmother to all that she touched.

She was spiritual adviser and mentor to many young mothers in town, and quite a few remarked that they could not have reared their families without Grandma Savage's help.

After many long years of service to her community, Grandma Savage passed away at age 83 on March 26, 1938, after a short illness. Her obituary in the *Sanderson Times* spoke for many: "The death last Saturday of Mrs. J.W. "Grandma" Savage, marked the passing of one of the real pioneers of Texas and this section. She was a resident of Sanderson for more than 37 years, a familiar character, very kind and thoughtful, and beloved by all. Her passing leaves a vacancy that will be hard to fill for, even at her advanced age, she was neighborly and always ready to help those in need.

"With her passed a great store of lore about the early days, the trials of those who fought to advance the western frontier farther westward."



Margaret Kloszner Savage

Courtesy of Alice Evans Downie