

Museum News: The Case of the Bungling Chinaman

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

Early day Sanderson was a rough place and men who were transferred to work here on the railroad considered very carefully whether or not to bring their wives and families.

A parade of bad guys, card sharks, grifters and outlaws came and went, leaving by conventional means or in a box.

Murders were almost a weekly occurrence, from the beginning. The earliest record of a killing in Sanderson occurred in August of 1883, scarcely a year after Sanderson was founded. A young stockman came to the tent village, scouting for water for his thirsty flock of sheep, being driven through to Ft. Davis. In Charlie Wilson's Cottage Bar Saloon (just a tent, at that time) he engaged in a card game with a professional sporting man, ending with a bullet in his heart.

Another murder occurred in 1886 when the manager of the depot lunch room shot his new German cook between the eyes, ostensibly for failing to follow orders. True, the irate cook did burst out the back door of the depot, waving a gun, cursing in German and threatening, "I will kill you, after all," but, a hastily called grand jury acquitted the manager on grounds of self defense, right on the spot.

And then, there were the hordes of hobos, bums and drifters who came through on the railroad. Quite often their dead bodies would be found by the tracks, or even sitting upright in the depot waiting room, as one elderly gent was found. Sometimes death was ruled as natural causes, frequently listed in the coroner's case book as "death by indigestion." In other cases the assailant was unknown and long gone.

Part of the problem was the isolation and great distance from the law. Then, as now, good deputies would not stay in such a one-horse town. And, the bad deputies were problematic.

One deputy was bi-vocational, being a deputy by day and running a saloon and pimping prostitutes by night. He arranged for and participated in the assassination of the local school superintendent in a shootout at the post office.

The object of our story today, however, is famed gunman turned lawman turned sports writer, Bat Masterson, who was passing through Sanderson on the train, to report on the 1896 Bob Fitzsimmons - Peter Maher prize-fight to be held in Langtry, Texas.

Prize-fighting had been outlawed in Texas and Mexico, and many other places as well. Masterson had reported the Jake Kilrain/John L. Sullivan fight in 1889, the last bare-knuckled fight before the Marquis of Queensbury Rules were put into effect. In that match, under London Rules the rounds were short and numerous...the fight lasted 75 rounds!

Promoters had tried to stage the Fitzsimmons-Maher fight in El Paso but were met by a contingent of Texas Rangers who were ordered by Governor Charles Culberson to prevent the fight from occurring in Texas.

Leader of the Rangers was Captain Bill McDonald, a tough hombre who was known as "a man who would charge hell with a bucket of water."

McDonald is also purported to be the origin of the famous Ranger motto, "One Riot, One Ranger." This came from his comment to the mayor of Dallas when promoters tried to set the Fitzsimmons-Maher fight in that city. The Rangers sent only McDonald to stop the proceedings. When the mayor asked where the rest of the Rangers were, McDonald is said to have replied: "Hell! Ain't I enough? There's only one prize-fight!"

Captain McDonald is quoted on his tombstone: "No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right and keeps on a-comin'."

But, the promoters were just as determined to have the fight, and had worked out a deal with Judge Roy Bean to hold it on a sandbar in the middle of the Rio Grande, across the river from Langtry, Texas, and Bean's Jersey Lily Saloon.

Masterson and his entourage, along with McDonald and his Rangers, were traveling on the same train, and stopped in Sanderson for lunch.

In the Sanderson depot lunchroom, the Beanery, a Chinese waiter was serving Masterson and his crew. The waiter made a clumsy mistake and an enraged Masterson jumped up with a heavy table caster wheel in his hand and raised it as if to clobber the frightened man.

McDonald grabbed Masterson's arm and said, "Don't strike that man!"

Masterson wheeled to confront McDonald and said, "Maybe you'd like to take it up!"

McDonald replied in a soft voice, "I done took it up."

The dining room fell silent and all eyes were on the contenders. Bystanders were frozen with fear. Here stood Captain Bill McDonald, one of the toughest Texas Rangers ever to ride for the state, confronting Bat Masterson, a legendary gunfighter with at least three and maybe as many as twenty-six notches on his gun handle.

And, to top that, half the room was filled with Masterson's friends and McDonald's Rangers, all heavily armed and ready to fight. The air bristled with electricity, pregnant with suspense.

But, both men were cold and calculating, not given to outbursts of temper which could cloud judgment and get a man killed. After a few tense moments, Masterson's grim face melted into a grin, he put the caster down and sat down to resume his meal without saying another word. McDonald sat back down and the room breathed again.

Writer Robert K. Dearment, recorder of this tale in his book, "Bat Masterson - The Man and the Legend" (University of Oklahoma Press,) observed that if this confrontation had drawn out to its bloody end, it might have been known in western lore as "The Battle of the Bungling Chinaman." Cooler heads prevailed, however, and it never came to be.

Later, the group boarded the train and headed for Langtry. Roy Bean had set up a boxing ring on a gravel bar on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande and erected a narrow foot bridge for the combatants and their supporters.

Bean and the promoters milked the event for all they could. Tickets were \$20, a whopping \$526 in 2014 dollars, and spectators had to pay a toll to use the bridge. Bean timed the event to coincide with a fresh shipment of beer to his establishment, and was charging thirsty participants one dollar per bottle (that's \$26 in today's economy!)

Canvas tarps were strung up as makeshift walls to prevent non-ticket holders from seeing the match. But, crafty boxing enthusiasts seated themselves amongst the lechuguilla and prickly pear on the hillsides above, getting the best view of the proceedings.

For all the hoopla and circus-like atmosphere, the fight lasted 95 seconds, with Fitzsimmons sending Maher to the mat with a crushing, right uppercut to the jaw in the first round. The fight was so short that one spectator, who had traveled clear across the country to see it, turned to a friend to get a light for his cigar and missed the whole fight.

As for McDonald and his men, they weren't allowed across the river and had to witness the fight from El Norte.



Contingent of Texas Rangers, led by Captain William McDonald (front, r), charged with preventing the Fitzsimmons-Maher prize-fight from occurring within Texas borders.

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