

# Museum News: A Tragic Christmas Tale

by CW (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

As 2015 comes near, my wife and I will celebrate an important anniversary in our lives. The early years of our married life were marked with many moves. In Marathon, where we started our family, we moved six times in the first ten years, each time moving up to a better house.

In 1989, with five needy kids, a very patient wife and a hungry wolf at the door, I went back to school for my teacher's certificate. In January of 1990 we moved to Pecos for my first school job. Greatly disgusted with the housing situation and the drug and gang problems in Pecos, we couldn't get out of there fast enough.

In the summer of 1990, we moved to Sanderson so I could teach third grade with Dotsie Chriesman at SES, the best thing that ever happened to us as a family.

Next summer, therefore, marks our 25th year in Sanderson, putting us half-way to becoming true Sanderson citizens. (My parents lived in Marathon 66 years, and were considered newcomers until about their 50th year!) Therefore, I think I can share a personal Christmas story in this column. I already told you about Christmas celebrations in Terrell County in the December 25, 2013 edition of the *Terrell County Sun*. I have no new information so I am forced to resort to personal files.

As a youngster growing up in Marathon in the '50s, I was very naïve. I was the youngest of five siblings, with one brother and three sisters. I trusted them, therefore, they could tell me anything and I would believe it. They took advantage of that trust by feeding me misinformation, ie., eating too much salt caused salt diabetes, eating butter gave you the worms, playing with matches made you wet the bed! Well, na-na...na-na...NA-NA! I already wet the bed so I could play with matches as much as I wanted!

But as I grew older I caught on and realized what they were doing...I was no dummy! My parents, however, instilled in me all the regular childhood myths...the Easter Bunny, witches and goblins at Halloween, and of course, Santa Claus. I trusted them implicitly...they would never lie to me. So, excitedly, I counted down the days until the Christmas program at the school, because SANTA would be there!

The custom for years in Marathon (long before this age of paranoia over saying "Merry Christmas,") was to celebrate with much pomp and circumstance at the school. The all-school Christmas program was held in the gymnasium, which served as a gym and auditorium, with a full stage in one end of the building. Doors under the stage opened to long carts of folding chairs which could be pulled out and set up. The gym could seat hundreds and was always packed for events.

The tradition at Christmas every year was that grades 1-12 were responsible for putting on a short Christmas play or musical number. The high school band would play a selection of Christmas carols and then a full Christmas pageant was put on by the high school kids, just like we had at church but on a grander scale. In this year of 1953, the crowd of youngsters and parents in the audience was even bigger than usual.

After the program was over the lights came up and the buzz of excited little voices raced through the crowd. Most of the big kids had already gone to sit with their parents and their little siblings, a herd of tiny, excited bodies dancing on one foot and then the other, impatiently waiting for what we all knew was coming.

On this night I was five years old and part of the milling crowd of pre-schoolers, fidgeting like we needed to go to the bathroom. We were VERY excited!

Throughout the program I strained to hear tiny hoofs prancing on the roof, and wondered how Santa would get in, since there was no chimney on the gym. I was so excited that I hardly paid attention to the program.

Suddenly, the curtains opened to reveal a big cardboard fireplace, center stage. Now the children were near hysteria because they knew that Santa would soon slide out of the fireplace to hand out individual mesh bags containing apples, oranges, ribbon candy, an assortment of nuts, a candy cane and a stick candy with a flower in the center that couldn't be licked away.

On this night, though, a slight problem arose. The cardboard chimney shuddered slightly, trembled harder, then began to rock back and forth. Santa was stuck on a nail in the fireplace and was having trouble getting loose. He couldn't quite touch the floor, but his feet could be seen through the fireplace opening wagging back and forth!

The crowd was in a full-blown tizzy, now, with panicky children chanting, "Santa Claus, Santa Claus, Santa Claus!"

Finally, the nail gave way and Santa fell out onto the stage with a great thud. A shriek went up from the kids and the crowd surged forward to the foot of the stage. Pandemonium reigned as Santa came down onto the floor of the gym and began to hand out bags of goodies as fast as he could. I was carried along with the crush of the mob, and shoved up to Santa. He thrust a bag of candy in my direction, and as the bag whizzed past my face, the knuckle of his fist hit me squarely in the eye and knocked me to the floor!

As I sat there at his feet, stunned, weeping, seeing stars and nursing my stinging eye, I looked up at Santa, and what I saw shocked me into silence. From my vantage point at his feet I could see right up under his long, flowing beard and...it was Tommy Henderson, the local light company man who cussed like a sailor, someone I knew well!

At that point the cold realities of adulthood slapped me in the face...**there was no Santa Claus**, just this nasty-talking meter-reader dressed up in a red suit and fake beard. The sting of reality was worse than the sting of my rapidly blackening eye! I was hurt and disappointed, but mostly I felt betrayed. I was aware that my brother and sisters lied to me regularly, but it never dawned on me that



my parents would lie. If I couldn't trust them, who could I trust? Now my whole pantheon of childhood idols was suspect. Were they real, or were they all lies? And, what about Jesus???

Such was the first great dilemma and disappointment of my childhood.

*From me at the Terrell County Memorial Museum and all our wonderful volunteers of the Friends of the Museum, we wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. In this season of joy it is my fervent wish for you and your family that you never be assaulted by Santa Claus!*