

Museum News: Sanderson Waterworks

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One of the most serious issues for the first settlers in Terrell County, indeed, all of West Texas, was finding a dependable source of water.

In some places natural, spring-fed waterholes were available. And, of course, those who settled near the Rio Grande had no problem with water. But, those who settled near the Pecos River found the water scaly and brackish, and quite nasty to drink. One lady who settled with her family on the banks of the Pecos said that no matter how long you boiled beans in that water, they just rattled around in the pot!

My wife and I commiserate with those remarks. We lived out of state in the first years of our marriage in a place that had similar water. Being loyal Texans, we had to have our frijoles, but when she tried to put beans on to boil they turned black in the water and morphed into strange, mutant creatures, much like the sci-fi B-movie monsters of the 1950s. The only way we could have beans was to use our pressure-cooker, which cooked the beans in less than an hour, and they were delicious!

Water at Sanderson in the first twenty years was a problem for the town folk and the railroad. Well after well was drilled with no success. The water situation for the railroad was even worse.

From the beginning until about 1899 the railroad had to run a water train from Marathon every day, not only to supply its steam engines here at the depot and roundhouse, but to supply the needs of the town.

Most of Sanderson was located south of the tracks in those days, to be near the water supply. Being near the supply of wood for the steam engines was also a plus to the “sticky-fingered” town folk.

The railroad finally evicted the town and banished them to the north side of the tracks when thievery of wood, coal and water from the railroad stockpile threatened to put them out of business.

For two or three years prior to the turn of the century, city father Charlie Wilson tried in vain to find water for his town. In June of 1899 he drilled a successful well about three miles west of town, close to the railroad tracks, bringing abundant flow at a depth of 360 feet. By November, the railroad had erected a pump house and the daily water train from Marathon was discontinued.

That momentous event assured the future of Sanderson. Closer to town, Wilson drilled a successful well at the foot of Javelina Hill and began to sell water to the residents. Young Fred Savage was hired to deliver the water, charging 25¢ per barrel. Later, he purchased a mule-drawn water tanker and Juan Nuñez delivered the water. But Wilson, who had nurtured the town for over twenty-five years, had other plans.

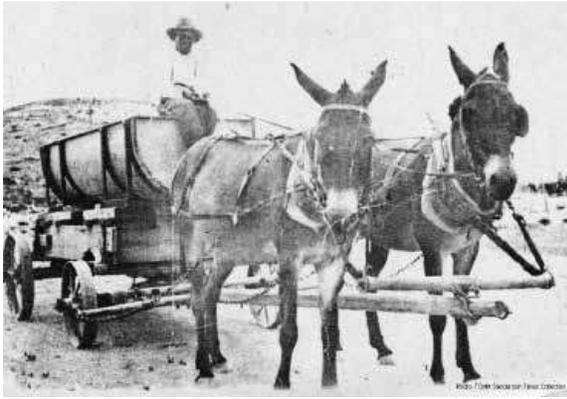
In 1906, he made a deal with locomotive engineer and local entrepreneur Ed McGinley to sell most of his Sanderson and Terrell County holdings, including the fledgling waterworks. McGinley developed plans for a town water system and in 1907 drilled a new well at the Javelina Hill location. He built a rock water storage tank high up on the hill, which still stands, and fashioned square water mains from cypress planks that were held together by steel bands. The mains ran down Javelina Hill to Oak and the rest of the town and for the first time, water was delivered to each residence that enrolled in the waterworks. Will wonders never cease!

McGinley also installed an electric generation plant at the same location in 1912 and Sanderson became one of the first towns in the area with its own water and electricity systems.

In 1917, Ed McGinley sold his holdings to Joe Kerr and Kerr added an ice plant to the complex. No other town of its size in the area could boast of all the modern conveniences afforded the citizens of Sanderson. Joe Kerr sold the waterworks and electric plant to Texas-Louisiana Power in 1926, but, unfortunately, the waterworks building along with the ice works and the electric plant caught fire in 1929 and burned to the ground. Very soon thereafter, a new plant was constructed across the highway from the waterworks location, and went into operation in July, 1929. The “new” building still stands.

In 1934, Texas-Louisiana filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, a victim of the Depression. It was succeeded by the Community Public Service Company on Jan. 1, 1935, which operated the utility up into the 1970s when it became Texas New Mexico Power Company. The ice plant was phased out and the CPSC divested itself of the waterworks. The Terrell County Water Control and Improvement District was formed and took over the waterworks. Both entities are still in operation.

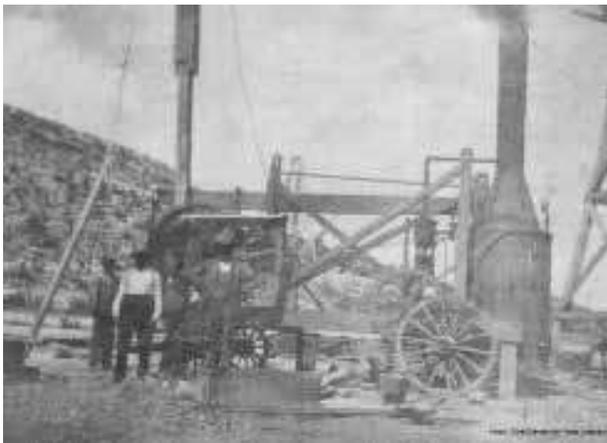
Today, all that remains of the old complex is the stone water storage tank on the hill and a few broken foundations. Like other historic structures in Sanderson, little remains of the industrious endeavor of our early entrepreneurs and promoters, who attempted to modernize the town to create a better business climate and bring modern life to the citizens of Sanderson.



Juan Nuñez drives the water tanker for Charlie Wilson's waterworks. Photo courtesy Terrell County.



Fred Savage delivers a barrel of water to the Y. C. Slover tent in the north part of Sanderson, long before water was piped to the residents. Photo courtesy Terrell County.



Early day steam-powered water well drilling outfit, drilling a new well at the foot of Javelina Hill and adding to the one drilled by Charlie Wilson, who had sold his water system to Ed McGinley in 1907. Photo courtesy Terrell County.