

# Museum News: Buck Pyle, Cattleman Extraordinaire

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

When you mention the name “Pyle,” some folks think of Gomer Pyle, the erstwhile Marine of TV fame (1964 - 1969.) Shazam! Has it really been fifty years since “Gomer Pyle, USMC” first went on TV?

Some older folks remember Ernie Pyle, the Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent who died in the line of fire on a Pacific island in World War II. His gripping stories of the day-to-day life of the regular GI in foreign foxholes held millions in their spell.

But, out in West Texas, (and Central Texas, East Texas, North Texas and South Texas, for that matter,) the first association with the name Pyle, for many, is our own Buck Pyle, rancher and cattle trader deluxe, who once owned or, through partnership, controlled some 960,000 acres of ranching territory in Texas, New Mexico and Mexico, and some 20,000 cattle.

Truly a man who cast a long shadow, Pyle was a frequenter of Sanderson and Terrell County. Well thought of, respected and beloved (though he would frown at that appellation) by many, he was a man of great honor and wit who had friends, literally, everywhere.

Forest Barnett “Buck” Pyle was born at Memphis, Texas, in 1896, to a staunch Baptist family. He didn’t keep the name “Forest” for very long. He told an interviewer once, “I asked Mama, why in the hell did you ...? She says, ‘Well, your Aunt Mary...’” One can almost see his mother’s eyes rolling as she spoke! He came by the name “Buck” while in kindergarten at Clarendon, Texas. A man who was digging holes on the school property knew Buck’s uncle, Buckner Barnett, and began to call little Forest, “Buck.” The other children on the playground picked it up and the name stuck.

Pyle’s father worked as a cattle inspector and had his own ranch, and Buck grew up knowing cows, inside and out. But, he was not just another old-time, uneducated, stereotypical cowboy. His Grandfather Pyle was a teacher who taught Latin at the small school that eventually became Baylor University. He also was a circuit-riding Baptist preacher who sold Bibles on the side and, at one time, published a newspaper in Newlin, Texas. Grandfather Pyle instilled a desire for education in his children and grandchildren, and Buck eventually attended Clarendon Junior College, Sewanee Military Academy, an Episcopal prep school in Tennessee, eventually graduating from the University of the South, which was associated with Sewanee. He was a fraternity man, rushing and then pledging Phi Delta Theta. No...not your old-time, stereotypical West Texas cowboy, at all.

But, it wasn’t all school. When Buck was twelve, he hired out on the JA Ranch, which bordered Charlie Goodnight’s buffalo pasture near Palo Duro Canyon in the Panhandle. Buck actually knew Goodnight, though there was a huge age difference. One day, while riding herd on the JAs near Goodnight’s pasture, they came upon a ten-acre plum thicket. The plums were ripe, so Buck rode over to get some fruit. Suddenly, a buffalo bull jumped up from the brush, not ten feet from him and his horse. He told an interviewer, “...the horse just came back that-away, and I went right around his neck. Like to scare me and horse to death ... this old bull just went ‘woo, woo, woo,’ lopin’ off that-away ...”

After college, Buck came home and began working throughout Texas. In 1924, Buck, his father and brother, and Mr. Jim West, Sr., formed the West-Pyle Cattle Company, just outside of Sanderson, Texas. When Mr. West wanted to incorporate the company, he and Buck’s father had a falling out and West talked Buck into joining with him under “The West Cattle Company,” name, with Buck’s father and brother, Horace, keeping the West-Pyle name. When Mr. West died in 1932, Buck and West’s sons gathered all the cattle into the West-Pyle Ranch and The West Cattle Company was absorbed into the West-Pyle Cattle Company, under the “P Bar” brand.

In the ensuing years they accumulated several ranches, including one in Harris County at Clear Lake, one at Van Horn with 316,000 acres, two at Logan and Belem, New Mexico, the Chupedera in South Texas with 146,000 acres, the Longfellow ranch in Pecos County with 211,000 acres and a 46,000-acre ranch at Marathon, among others. When asked how he managed such large, dispersed holdings, he commented, “By God, I stayed on the job...One time I told them down there that I worked 26 hours a day out of 24.” And, he probably did.

He was asked by an interviewer if he ever used an attorney for contracts and how he handled sales. Buck remarked, “(By) Lookin’ you in the eye and sayin’, ‘It’s a trade.’” It was that simple for Buck, “When I traded with a man, if he didn’t come up to his part, he never traded again.” He claimed that he never got into trouble with that business practice, except when the West brothers got into a squabble and required a contract to bar against problems. In twenty years of business, he only had five written contracts.

The partnership dissolved in 1952, about the time that Buck hit 65 and retired to live his remaining days in the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio. He always favored the Gunter for business transactions, which often were carried out in its ornate and eloquent lobby. Buck first visited the Gunter in 1909 when it opened, and was to return time after time through the years.

In 1928, while riding horseback in a Shriner’s parade with Florence Fenley, western author and daughter of Terrell County’s first sheriff, George Fenley, the two took a mischievous turn and rode into the Gunter Hotel lobby to amaze and

amuse hotel patrons. Reportedly, he was a little “liquored up,” but that prankish nature showed itself many times. And, he was good-natured when the tables were turned on him.

Back in the 20s, Pyle came to Sanderson to do business. Pranksters knew that the early day cars would not move if one of the rear wheels was even a fraction of an inch off the ground. While he was inside the Sanderson State Bank taking care of business, they put a small jack under the rear axle and jacked up one wheel so that it was not quite touching the ground. When Buck got in to leave, the car started fine, but he could not get it to budge an inch. After minutes of frustration, trying to discover the problem, the local bystanders got a belly laugh as Buck stomped off up the street to find a mechanic, all the while turning the air “blue” with his comments!

Pyle lived in the Gunter for the next 38 years, usually sitting in the lobby in an armchair, reading the newspapers and engaging patrons in conversation. He became so well known to the hotel staff that eventually his favorite chair acquired a small brass plate engraved with his name. He was kind to the employees, and one maid became his personal housekeeper for years. During his stay the hotel began giving birthday parties for him every November 3.

In 1989, Buck Pyle died shortly before his 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. But, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, the hotel gave him one last party, a time for reminiscing about the legend living amongst them for so long. Long-time friend Wayne Christian, remembered, "... one morning Buck walked out of the lobby to get a newspaper and a wino approached him and asked for a quarter. Buck said, 'Get over on the other side of the street, I'm working this side.'"

Mary Alvarado, his long-time housekeeper, recalled with tears the last thing he said to her "He was a very nice, sweet person. He said, 'I hate to leave you in a wheelchair, but my time has come and I have to go.'"

And so, another Terrell County legend passed into history. Today, in addition to his favorite armchair graced with his personalized nameplate, there also is a small bronze of a cowboy riding herd on a longhorn, sitting atop a marble pillar in the Gunter Hotel lobby, memorializing the hundreds of cattle deals that took place in that very spot. Chances are good that Buck Pyle made many of those deals, all by “Lookin' you in the eye and sayin', 'It's a trade'” (and, of course, with a firm handshake.)



*Forest Barnett “Buck” Pyle, legendary cattleman.*



*Terrell County rancher Dick Corder and Buck Pyle, shown visiting at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio.*