

# Museum News: The Duchess of Hackberry

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Sanderson is accustomed to seeing its homes move around.

No, not by a wind storm or earthquake or by airing up its tires, although many here have been moved that way.

And, back at the end of the 1950s diesel engines had replaced steam engines on the SP and the market was flooded with railroad housing, so-called section houses that were rendered surplus when the railroad closed its water stops and downsized its workforce.

Sanderson still has a number of those homes that were moved away from the tracks and sold to town folk, including one that started life as a passenger car and a few others that are repurposed boxcars. Almost all have been remodeled, increased in size and generally altered to the point that one can barely recognize their heritage.

There is one, however, that has survived virtually intact, and looks very much the same as it did in the good old days. It has been moved at least twice, and its last move actually saved its life.

The domicile in question is now located in Sanderson near Hackberry and Fourth Street, but it started life just west of the depot, not twenty feet from the tracks.

In 2010, I got the opportunity to take photos of the house, inside and out, for a local real estate broker who was putting the house on the market. As I took photo after photo, I got the sense that I had seen this place before, but not in this location. Certainly, it was like dozens of ranch houses I had visited in the Big Bend throughout my life, but this one seemed familiar.

Going back to my weekday job at the museum, I began to search bird's-eye photos of Sanderson in hopes of finding the origin of this little 2-bedroom cottage.

At last I spotted the house in our earliest town photo, taken about 1903 from a low point on the mountain just south and east of town, aimed to the northwest toward the Harrell Dairy and the depot. Knowing now where to look, I found a photo taken around 1915 to the west of the depot, looking back east, and there she was, in all her glory, unmistakably the house in question. It had turned porch columns with cross buck-style porch railings, and even a hint of the Victorian gingerbread was evident. Much of that decoration was gone now, but it was the house.

Going to a panoramic bird's-eye view of Sanderson, taken about 1920, she jumped out at me again, but not where she had been before. Now she had been moved to the east, adjacent to and east of the north end of the roundhouse.

Here, the photographic evidence thins out, as no one has donated bird's-eye photos to the museum made after the 1920s. The only evidence is a photo of the roundhouse being demolished in 1963, and in that photo the house is no longer there, probably a victim of downsizing with the coming of diesel power.

And that, ultimately, saved its life. Just two short years later that little house would have bobbed down the creek like a cork in the flood of 1965, and most likely would have demolished itself on the railroad or highway bridge. Fortunately, by that time, it had been moved safely to its present Hackberry Street location to be used as non-railroad housing.

Even though the house shows up in our 1903 photo of Sanderson, its construction details hint at a much earlier origin. It was built in a style my carpenter grandfather called "box house" construction. Appearing in the 1870s, box houses were simple, cheap and easy to construct. They were favored in West Texas, and indeed, most of the West, because of our mild climate and the scarcity of lumber.

The builder began by laying out floor joists, nailing them together and covering them to create a square or slightly rectangular platform. The platform was built on blocks, bricks, rocks, or in some cases, cedar or pine posts that were driven into the soil. The oldest part of our now-demolished depot was set on railroad bridge timbers driven end-wise into the earth by pile-drivers.

The next step was to put up four posts at the corners and tie them together at the top with two-by-four plates. This simple frame was braced to hold it square and upright until the third step was completed, the building of the walls.

One-by-ten or one-by-twelve boards were nailed upright to the floor platform and the plate at the top to cover the wall. This was full dimension lumber, not the under-sized, crooked stuff we get now! Thin batten strips were nailed over each upright joint to bind the wall together and seal out the weather. This created a very flimsy wall that still allowed our famous West Texas dust, cold air and even rain to come through. With the addition of 3/8" thick by 4" wide beaded-board to the interior, no one would have known that the walls were less than an inch thick!

In 1934, when my mom and dad moved north of Marathon to the Iron Mountain Ranch for him to be a trapper, my sister Shirley was just a tiny baby. They lived in a basic 4-room box house, a tar-paper shack without the tar-paper. My mother, a town girl, was horrified when they woke up to the first cold spell of winter and found Shirley's crib blanketed with a half-inch of snow that had drifted in through the walls! The baby was warm as toast under all her blankets, but they got busy and papered the walls with newspapers to prevent a reoccurrence.

Since no studs were used in this type of wall construction, there was not much weight to a box house. Some folks in Marathon almost lost their box house in windy March weather; it tried to take off like a kite in the stronger gusts! They had to tie the house down with guy wires and stakes to keep it from blowing away.

When I was a youngster I helped my father demolish several old box houses in Marathon for the lumber, which, for the most part, was better than what we could buy at the lumberyard. But, we had to be extremely careful because the flimsy construction did not take much dismantling to make it unstable and we didn't want the thing to crash down on our heads!

Adding the roof to a box house did a lot to tie it together and make it more or less sturdy. But, the lack of traditional framing made it very economical to construct and perfect for a railroad (or a rancher) trying to hold down the bottom line.

Light construction, however, was also a benefit for houses that very often were moved from one job site to another, as evidenced by our house's meanderings around the Sanderson rail yard.

Box houses usually were built with four rooms. Additions could be made as "lean-tos" to the sides. One enterprising Yankee newcomer at Marathon gathered up four or five box houses from his ranch, moved them to town and joined them to build a palatial, if somewhat unsubstantial house. With plastered walls in and out and a Spanish tile roof, one would never have known that they were in a glorified shanty. His dainty, socialite wife was pleased, though, as they did have to keep up appearances!

So, our little house on Hackberry sits like an aging dowager, a little frumpy with her porch railings and most of her gingerbread gone, but with her heritage and dignity intact. With proper care and addition of a little makeup and jewelry by her new owners, she could become the duchess of Hackberry.



*The Duchess of Hackberry, one of Sanderson's oldest railroad houses still in existence. The rear addition was made after 1920.*



*Porch column bracket, the only gingerbread detail left on the house.*



*Interior detail showing the beaded-board walls.*



*Earliest photo of the depot area, ca 1903. Our house is circled.*



*W. H. Lemons, Jr., railroad car knocker, with our house in the background, showing cross buck-style porch railings. Ca 1915*



*Depot area, ca 1920. Our house is now moved to the north end of the roundhouse, where it sat for the next forty years. Probably the roundhouse foreman's home, someone has taken time to landscape with addition of a lawn and white fence posts.*