

## Museum News:

# Judge Jack Ross ~ Second Terrell County Judge

by CW (Bill) Smith, Curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

Terrell County, Texas, has had more than its share of great men and women, the ones who shaped it in its beginning and sustained it through the years. Each generation had its shining stars...friends to all, filled with community spirit and possessing talent and a certain eagerness to see our county and its towns grow and strive to be the best.

Our young folks don't know much about these people and that is a shame. They need to know that even if we are a small place in the middle of a wilderness, strong leaders can rise and move to the forefront. They need to know that all things are possible if we persevere, put our faith in our talents and the Almighty and have the courage of our convictions.

That certainly was true for our second county judge, John B. "Jack" Ross. He came to that position because Judge Joe Kerr, our first county judge and arguably one of the best friends this town ever had, decided to give up the judge's bench and spend more time on business and family. Jack Ross was elected in November, 1910.

Ross was no stranger to the operation of a county. He served as the first county and district clerk of Zavala county at its organization in 1884 and remained in that position for the next seventeen years. He excelled as a county official, and that experience prepared him for his successful stint as county judge in Terrell County.

Jack Ross was born Oct. 1, 1849, in Franklin County, Alabama, the son of John and Mattie Burns Ross, Alabama farmers. He followed the family trade until moving to Texas in 1874. He married in November, 1875, to Jennielind Downs of Colbert County Alabama, daughter of Isaac Downs. The marriage produced five daughters and three sons, including Daisie Ross Martin; Sallie Blanche Martin; Jacque Lou Burling and Tina Ross East of California, the children who survived to adulthood.

They first lived in Uvalde County where Jack worked as a school teacher. From there they moved to Frio County where he operated a mercantile business for a few years.

Then he spent four years as a cattleman in the newly-organized Zavala County. Being a popular and well respected citizen of Zavala, he easily won election to the clerk position in the fledgling county. During those years as clerk he also studied law and passed his bar examination, practicing as a lawyer after leaving office in 1901 until his removal to Terrell County in 1904 to help with its organization.

Amiable and outgoing, Judge Ross gained many friends and associates, both as a lawyer and as a practicing real estate broker selling many properties in Terrell County.

Ross was an avid baseball aficionado, as well as following sports in general and enjoying hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. He was a member of the Woodmen of the World and the Sanderson Commercial Club, forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce.

A man of faith, Jack Ross was a member of the Church of Christ, in word and deed. His many talents and abilities made him a Renaissance Man, one of many multitalented entrepreneurs of Terrell County.

With Judge Kerr's decision to stand down in the election of 1910 Ross was the obvious choice of the electorate to take his place. Transition of the government to the new regime was smooth, instilling a feeling of public confidence that the torch had been passed to capable hands.

Under Judge Ross's tenure a major rebuild of Big Hill on the road to Fort Stockton was accomplished, and electric lights were installed in the town of Sanderson. It was also in this time that a public health officer, Dr. F. V. Reeve, was added to the county administration, in time for the latest outbreak of small pox and creation of a quarantine camp outside the town on today's Cargile Street. Improving the quality of life in the town, multiple contractors petitioned to put in water lines.

Another first was construction of the graded road up to the western county line, the precursor to U. S. Highway 90, which would eventually connect with Marathon and Alpine.

In 1914, Ross authorized a Home Guard with Sheriff Jack Allen as commander to protect against possible raids by Pancho Villa and warring factions of the violent Mexican Revolution, which sometimes spilled over onto American soil. Under Jack Ross's leadership the first River Riders were engaged, with the county paying part of the expenses

for patrolling the border to reduce thievery by Mexican insurrectos and stop the movement of tick-infected livestock from Mexico.

The outbreak of World War I saw an outpouring of patriotism with the enlistment of many fine young men and women in the armed services and nursing corps. At home under Judge Ross the Liberty Bond programs and associated drives raised money for the war effort.

But along with the good came the bad. Besides epidemic disease, a disastrous fire in downtown Sanderson threatened to dampen the enthusiasm of the burgeoning town. A whole section of buildings burned to the ground in June, 1917. The able leadership of Ross and other county leaders encouraged the populace and kept panic to a minimum. The replacement buildings were an asset to the community and brought a modern look to the area.

In another incident, a freak flash flood came roaring down the canyon behind the present-day Eagle Stadium causing widespread damage to homes, outbuildings and pasturage. Under Ross's leadership plans were executed to throw up a dike to minimize the effects of future flooding.

At the height of Jack Ross's popularity and enduring governance of the county, another tragedy struck the small community, one that was not easily remedied.

On December 30, 1917, Judge Jack Ross died unexpectedly of pneumonia. He had been rushed to Sabinal, Texas, where old family friend and former Sanderson resident Dr. S. B. Hudson had retired. His condition was far too advanced to save him. He was 68 years of age.

Sanderson reeled in shock at the news of Judge Ross's death. He could not easily be replaced. T. R. Kuykendall, brother-in-law of Joe Kerr and bookkeeper of Kerr enterprises was appointed as judge until the fall election. He agreed to take the position, as long as it was not a permanent appointment.

G. J. Henshaw was elected the fourth county judge in November, 1918 and his administration lasted until 1939. He was an able successor to carry on in the broad footsteps of the universally beloved Judge John B. "Jack" Ross.

To her credit and displaying the love that both she and Jack had for Sanderson, Mrs. Ross continued to live in their home here until her death in 1932.

Today, Jack and Jenny Lind Ross rest in peace at Cedar Grove Cemetery, shining examples of a cadre of respected and capable early pioneers who helped create this place we call home.



*Judge John B. "Jack" Ross, second county judge of Terrell County, 1910-1917. Taken from his portrait in the Terrell County Commissioners Court Room.*

*Photo: Bill Smith*