

Museum News: A Horse Tale

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

The first sheriff of Terrell County was George Fenley. George and his brother Jim hailed from Uvalde and came in the early 1900s to partner a ranch southwest of Sanderson, down on the Rio Grande.

Jim lived year-round on the ranch and his wife and two small daughters lived in their house in town, only venturing to the ranch in the summers.

Jim loved to dance and frequented the dances at Wilson Hall in the old Terrell Hotel, down by the depot. He also was a pretty good fiddler, playing for the dances and often entertaining visitors to the ranch with fiddle tunes and cowboy songs. His fiddle was never far from his side.

Jim was far better known, however, as an expert horseman and trainer, and this story isn't about fiddling and dancing...it's a horse tale.

One time Fenley was missing a colt and he set out on his best horse, White Man, to find it. He soon found what he had been dreading. The half-eaten body of the colt was partially buried under a pile of leaves and branches, the obvious sign of a bear attack. In those days bears roamed quite freely in the Big Bend and caused havoc among livestock owners.

About this time White Man caught scent of the bear and was having quite a fit, dancing around with an urgent need to run away. As all horse people know, horses and bears don't mix and horses are literally "scared to death" of them. They will make every effort to go into a high panic and put distance between themselves and their hated enemy.

Seeing that White Man was upset, Fenley dismounted, left him ground hitched and went afoot to find the bear.

As he rounded a large rock, there stood the bear, all 'rared' up to his full height, snarling and carrying on, enough to make the bravest man tremble.

But Fenley threw his rifle up and began to pump shot after shot into the beast. It didn't faze the bear one bit, but it did annoy him. Finally, he drew a bead on the bear, squeezed off a shot and ...bull's eye... right between the eyes! Again this didn't stop the bear, but now he was madder than H! With one swat of his massive paw he sent Fenley tumbling head-over-heels, crashing head first into a rock.

Dazed and addled and rapidly losing consciousness, Fenley saw the bear looming up over him and thought, that's it...I'm done for...then blackness.

"Señor, señor, wake up!" Fenley awoke to the sound of a young woman trying to rouse him. As he cleared away the dried blood from his eyelids he found, to his amazement, White Man standing over him, gently nudging him and whinnying to him.

The horse was a pathetic sight...his head was bloodied, his bridle missing, his ear torn off and dangling down by a slim string of skin, but he had not shied away in the attack. In fact, Pancha, the young shepherdess, had witnessed the events and swore that White Man charged in and attacked the bear, protecting his master from certain death. Rearing and pummeling with deadly hooves, he chased the bear away and stayed at his master's side to protect and console him.

Now, anyone who knows anything about horses knows that they don't fight bears. It is just not in their nature! Yet White Man loved his master so much he overcame his natural fear and saved his master's life. That's one for the books!

Fenley and White Man recovered from their wounds, but that's not the end of the story. White Man figured very prominently in Pancha's life, a melodramatic tale of love, kidnapping and general horsey hijinks.

Once the story of White Man and the brave defense of his master got out, he became legendary throughout the Trans Pecos and northern Mexico. Everyone wanted to see him (and secretly wished that they owned such a brave horse!)

But...that was the problem. Some men were not concerned that the horse belonged to Fenley...they were determined, by any means, to possess a horse brave enough to fight a bear.

Young Pancha became alarmed that someone might steal the boss's horse while he was recuperating, so she took White Man and turned him loose with a herd of wild horses for safe keeping. But, the determined horse thieves knew just how to get to Pancha.

Shortly before the bear attack, Pedro Fuentes, a young man working for Fenley on the ranch became sweethearts with Pancha. He, Pancha and Fenley were the only humans that White Man would allow to touch him and Pedro very often borrowed White Man to go courting with Pancha.

Pedro decided to go to work for Cruz Mancha's shearing crew at Dryden and left Fenley's employ, but, absence makes the young heart grow fonder and the romance went into high gear.

After the bear attack Fenley took his family and went back to his parent's ranch at Uvalde to recuperate. When he returned to the ranch on the banks of the Rio Grande he found, to his dismay, that not only White Man was missing but also a sizeable portion of his horses. He sent word to the Rangers, and they, along with his brother Sheriff George and friend, Johnny Burris, manager of the D. Hart spread, came to investigate.

When they found Pancha she told them a disturbing story. One night at the shearing camp some Mexican riders kidnapped Pedro and took him back across the river. Of course, they didn't want money for ransom, they wanted White Man!

Pancha was at her wit's end, wanting to have her beloved back but not willing to give White Man to the kidnapers.

However, the Fenley boys and the Texas Rangers knew just what to do. They had Pancha retrieve White Man from the wild horse band and arranged a meeting with the kidnapers. The end result was that Pancha got her man back, White Man got his master back, and the bandidos...? Well, let's just say that their meeting with the Texas Rangers and Sheriff Fenley did not go well.

Pedro and Pancha soon became man and wife, celebrating their marriage with the traditional 3-day fiesta. For her trousseau, Pancha had a white silk wedding dress and veil for the first day, a blue silk dress for the second day and a pink silk dress for the final day of festivities.

As for Pedro, he was decked out in a velvet suit, and his prospective father-in-law killed four calves for the wedding barbecue! And, they were needed because a huge crowd from the surrounding area came to eat, drink and dance, and to wish the new couple well.

Sadly, a few years later, Jim's wife passed away and he sold his part of the ranch to move back to Uvalde for his parents' help in raising his two young girls. White Man went with them and lived a long and happy life on the Fenley Ranch.

Then, tragedy struck again in 1913 when Jim Fenley was murdered in a shooting scrape at the old Roberts Grocery Store in Uvalde. The young girls were orphaned, left to be raised by loving grandparents and watched over by the protective eye of White Man, the horse who fought a bear to save his master.



Photo : Alice Evans Downie

WHITE MAN — *Jim Fenley and his horse "White Man," famous in the Trans Pecos as the horse that fought a bear to save his master's life.*