

Museum News: Fireworks

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, Curator
Terrell County Memorial Museum

In the old days the Fourth of July was always celebrated with fireworks. Nobody talked about burn bans, they just let the skyrockets, cherry bombs and the roman candles fall where they may, regardless of what part of the town or countryside caught fire.

My brother and I loved the Fourth. Besides the experimentation with fireworks, it was a time for the family barbecue, in which all 75 Smiths aunts, uncles, cousins (lots and lots of cousins) and grandparents, not to mention the horde of Oatmans from my mother's side, showed up at our dad's Big Bend Cafe in Marathon. It was the only place big enough to hold all of us, short of renting the Community Hall. My dad just put up the CLOSED sign, then it was business as usual, except for the many hands that made the workload easier than a regular business day.

I have no idea where we got our fireworks because in the "good old days" there wasn't a fireworks stand on every corner as today. Instead, in Marathon, we had a beer joint on every corner! I suspect we loaded up with fireworks in El Paso when we made our monthly visits to see grandparents and to re-stock the cafe from the El Paso Restaurant Supply.

We were already detonating our armament on the way home with stealthily lit firecrackers thrown out the car window, which my mom hated because of the stench of gunpowder, not to mention the inherent danger of open flame inside the car (though she never complained about firing up her Viceroys or their attendant stench!)

But, sadly, those heady days of youth are over, with drouthy times and county-mandated burn bans reining in the fun. Except this year, in Sanderson, we could have read a newspaper in our front yard from the light of bombs bursting in air, directly over our house. Apparently the citizenry never heard of a burn ban... What's that??? Burn ban??? Spell that for me...

Fortunately for Sanderson we have always had an excellent volunteer fire department, and when the whistle sounded (or when the phone alert system goes into operation these days) men (and women) came running to help save people and property.

In Sanderson the early day firemen were not always properly trained. The Terrell County history book tells of an early fire in which the volunteer fireman enthusiastically chopped a hole in a kitchen door to gain entry, only to turn the knob and walk in through the unlocked door!

But training aside, the fire department has been indispensable throughout Sanderson and Terrell County history. An early action of the Terrell County Commissioners Court was to issue \$500 to support the local fire department. Everyone realized that fire could wipe out the fledgling community.



FIREMAN, FIREMAN! - *The Texas-Louisiana Power Plant, which stood on the present location of Javelina Hill Park at Wilson and Oak, caught fire and burned in 1929. Standing, watching the blaze are l-r, Wallace Henshaw, lineman; S.S. Daggett, roundhouse foreman; C.A. Moreland, power plant manager; and, walking toward the group, Bob Henshaw. Photo courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum*

Mary Alice Happle Townsend recalled that the early firemen had a fire pumper wagon which they pulled to fires. They were supplied suitable fireman's clothing and equipment and were ready for whatever may come. A railroad steam whistle at the roundhouse would signal the fire and men would come running from all parts of town. The fire wagon was kept in a small building at Persimmon and Oak, the present-day site of the old Dudley Texaco station. Her father, J. W. Happle, was the first fire chief.

Always needing funding, the fire department often staged public events to raise money for the cause. The Grand Masquerade Ball of February, 1911, was one such event. Admittance was sold at \$1.00 per ticket, a steep price in those days (\$24.39 with today's inflation!) even if it was for a good cause.

An early conflagration in Sanderson occurred in 1917 with the loss of Farley's General Store and a confectionary and outdoor picture show belonging to the Bohlman's, which sat on the corner of Persimmon and Oak St. Barrels of gasoline were stored outside Farley's Store and when they ignited, they blasted off like rockets, creating quite a spectacular scene. It was feared that the whole town would burn, but the fire eventually was brought under control.

Though fire is a serious matter, the book mentions humorous moments as well. From a 1902 *Trans-Pecos News* article young Fred Savage was reported as having seen billows of smoke rising from the direction of Mrs. Upton's home. Fearing a large house fire, he began running down the street, excitedly yelling, "Fire! Fire!"

When he arrived at Mrs. Upton's yard, young Fred found a blazing inferno ... under the wash pots as Mrs. Upton prepared to do her laundry! In very sarcastic tones the *News* wondered if Fred would be fined for creating a false alarm!

Very serious occurrences of fire, then as well as now, were the prairie fires which broke out frequently. Loss of pasture and fences could spell doom for sheepmen and cattlemen alike, not to mention annihilation of hapless wildlife caught in the path of destruction.

Although it was common practice elsewhere to fire the prairie to speed up the appearance of grass in the spring, fires in the country around Terrell County were not welcomed. The history book has an article by Judge O. W. Williams, early day rancher in Pecos County, which discusses the dangers and destructiveness of range fires in the area.

Often started by sparks from early GH & SA steam engines, fires would rage in the southern part of the county, sometimes running for 40 miles or more before burning out. And it still happens today. Recently, sparks from a careless welder in the northern part of the county destroyed hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of oil field seismograph cabling. The recent Big House fire at Fort Davis was most destructive, spanning the distance from just outside Marfa to within the town of Fort Davis itself.

Today we have very fine firefighting equipment and volunteers who undergo training for the various types of fires they might encounter.

Especially dangerous are the fires that might arise from railroad tank car leaks or wrecks. Hazardous materials shipped on the railroad may require special handling by professional hazmat crews, but initial containment is up to the local firefighters.

But, they are following a long line of tradition and service by the Sanderson VFD. It is comforting to know that, as always, there are men and women waiting to go into action to risk life and limb for the sake of their community.