

Museum News: River Riders

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

T. H. (Dick) McDonald and Clem Stout started riding the river in 1915 when they were just kids. River riders were needed because roaming bands of cattle rustlers were a big problem for ranchers in the Trans Pecos. Even though George Fenley, first sheriff of Terrell County, had cleaned up the town of Sanderson in 1905 and kicked the bandits, cut-throats and grifters out of town, the problem was only transferred to the immediate area west of the Pecos.

With the coming of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, an even greater problem arose when small raiding parties of Mexicans were sent out to scavenge for whatever food and material they could find to help the war effort. The Rio Grande meant nothing to them as a boundary and their raids frequently brought them to American soil. The land north of the Rio soon became a prime supply area for the warring factions.

Local ranchers, who were hit hard and losing a lot of cattle to the hungry Mexican armies, couldn't afford the losses. The US government couldn't or wouldn't protect the vast area and there weren't enough Texas Rangers to do the job either. Eventually, the counties agreed to pay for horse feed if the ranchers would supply men, horses, firearms and everything else for a river patrol program.

Dick McDonald was a rancher's boy, and when he had time to spare from his ranch duties, he rode the river. He came to Sanderson with his parents, William and Rosa Stout McDonald, one of twelve brothers and sisters. The McDonalds had come to this country in covered wagons around 1910, driving a herd of cows, horses and some four thousand goats. They settled twenty miles south of town, right on the river on a place aptly named the "River Ranch." They also leased other properties, but life was tough for them in those days. As the kids grew older they finally moved to town, but Mr. McDonald died in 1929 at a young age, forcing some of the older kids to drop out to support the family.

Dick's friend and first cousin, Clem Stout, also came to Sanderson as a boy with his family and in later years was a welder and worked on area ranches. He, too, rode the river for a time, as did many other local men throughout the years.

Starting at so young an age, Dick and Clem soon learned that river riding was a dangerous pastime. Once Dick encountered two Mexican riders dressed in vaquero outfits, with crossed bandoleer ammunition belts and huge floppy sombreros. Dick noticed as they talked that the men were eyeing his gear, and that aroused his suspicion. When they asked where he was going, he lied, and then took a different trail. Later he came up behind them and found them waiting in ambush on a high ridge above the trail he told them he was taking. Obviously, he literally "dodged a bullet."

Bandits in the area were hated by Mexicans and Americans alike. Dick came upon a bandit camp that had recently been raided by Villistas. Men and women alike were massacred and the carnage was total. Spanish dagger plants around the camp were festooned with the impaled bodies of the victims, many with obvious signs of torture. That horrific scene haunted his memory for the rest of his life. And, it made him very cautious in his work.

In 1923, after the revolution was mostly over and the need for river riders had waned, Dick and Clem went back to work as cowhands.

Then, in the 1930s, the smuggling of contraband and livestock became a big problem on the river. An even greater threat was the raging bovine epidemic, hoof-and-mouth disease, which was swarming up out of Mexico with infected strays and rustled cattle. These animals began to infect the largely clean cattle herds in the US with the dreaded disease.

Once again the river rider program intervened to control that problem, this time under the direction of the US Department of Agriculture. Dick McDonald and many other men went back to river riding and the program lasted until about 1954 when the epidemic was thought to be over.

Typically, the river riders worked in pairs, each rider patrolling an 11-mile section of river every day. One went upstream and one went downstream, switching territory the next day.

Some riders took their families with them to camp out on the river's edge. In an article for the *Big Bend Sentinel*, columnist Lonny Taylor quoted Mojella Moore of Marfa, wife of river rider Eddie Moore, talking about their minimal living conditions.

"It was a government tent," Moore said, "but it was better than the adobe house the other rider lived in."

Among other locals who were river riders were Son Turner, Herbert Winston, Henry Skelton, Ira Cox, Blackie Woods, Joe Graham and many other Terrell, Val Verde, Brewster and Presidio County men.

After his river riding days, Dick had a long, illustrious career in the ranching business and finished his years managing the Strauss Ranch in Brewster County.

The river rider program is still with us. In 1906 the USDA began the National Cattle Fever Tick Eradication Program. Texas Fever ticks were decimating Texas cattle herds and many ranch outfits were on the verge of going under. In time ticks were eliminated from most of Texas, except from quarantine areas bordering the Rio Grande.

In Mexico the Texas Fever tick is endemic, with practically no program in place to stop its spread. To stop it from coming back into Texas the USDA employs 60 "tick" riders, who serve much as the old river riders did, watching for smugglers and controlling strays.

The tick problem continues to grow worse as ticks become immune to the only 'tickicide' allowed in the US. That means that river riders, or, the modern "tick" riders, will probably always be with us. But, with immigration and Mexican drug cartel issues today tick riders have had to alter their routine.

Riders can no longer move freely along the river in exposed conditions, due to sporadic gunfire and outright bushwhacking from Mexico. Also, inspection and treatment centers along the border on the Mexican side have been closed due to the violence of warring cartels. All inspections are done in the US, now, considerably adding to the program's budget. Resulting state and federal budget problems threaten to curtail tick rider efforts.

So...much like conditions a hundred years ago, river riders today are faced with new dangers and challenges. It's a tough, hot, dirty

job...someone has to do it, and these guys do it well.



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie
Dick McDonald and Clem Stout - River Riders