

Museum News : Doc Turk, Brushpopper

by CW (Bill) Smith, Curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

People coming to Terrell County in the early days were tough as nails. They had to be to survive and thrive in this desolate, inhospitable country. Times were hard for everyone, but physical hardships and injuries were common among those hardy men, especially those known as "brushpoppers." A very well known cattleman and expert "brushpopper" in early day Terrell County was C.J. "Doc" Turk.

Doc was born in Gonzales, Texas, on February 7, 1874, the son of Charlie H. Turk, a prominent rancher of Zavala County. He came to Terrell County in 1909 driving a wagon, after working on the 7D and XS spreads in central Texas around Uvalde. His wife Effie and son Charlie soon joined him. Effie and Doc and son Charlie and his wife Grace Martin Turk would spend the rest of their years on the ranch.

Doc came to Terrell County to be foreman of the T5 Ranch, under Col. Ike T. Pryor. But, about 1915 he decided he wanted a ranch of his own and began buying up property in northeastern Terrell County.

Doc was an uncommon man. He was a well known and respected cattleman, having run stock in many parts of West Texas. At the 1939 Ozona Rodeo where son Charlie took top money as a roper, he was introduced to the grandstand and received much applause.

Doc's ability as a cowboy was unrivaled. J. Frank Dobie even included a section about him in *The Longhorns*. (University of Texas Press, 1980)

Another author, Ramon F. Adams, in his *Western Words: A Dictionary Of the Range, Cow Camp and Trail*, (Ramon F. Adams, Norman : University of Oklahoma Press : 1945.) defined the term: "The brushpopper knows he will never catch a cow by looking for a soft entrance into the brush; therefore, he hits the thicket center, hits it flat, hits it on the run, and tears a hole in it." Describing the brushpopper's horse, Adams went on to say, "Like his rider, the brush horse is a brute for punishment and as game as they come...Between rides each horse is given a rest to allow the thorns to work out and the wounds to heal. Yet no matter how stove up he becomes, he is always ready to break into the brush at the first opportunity." This pretty well defines Doc Turk, as well. The job at hand was paramount to Turk and he let nothing stop him from achieving his goal.

Another example of his single-mindedness is found in the Terrell County history book, *Terrell County Its Past Its People*. (Alice Evans Downie, San Angelo: Anchor Publishing Company, 1978.) Once Doc and other brushpoppers took a break to go skinny dipping in a waterhole. They saw a stray crossing the creek and without warning Doc jumped out of the water onto his horse and took after it, right through the brush and thicket. He didn't have a stitch of clothing on but he totally ignored the pain (and the nudity.) He let nothing stop him from his duty.

Doc Turk paid a price for that diligence. The book and newspaper articles tell of times when he was so sore and "stove up" that he had to be lifted into his saddle for the day's work.

An article in the *Times* in 1923 reported that he had been riding an "outlaw" on the Buchanan Ranch and it ran through a hackberry thicket, causing him to break two collar bones, a bone on the point of his shoulder, crack a rib and receive numerous bruises about the head, neck and body. But, he never went to see a doctor...instead two doctors motored out to the ranch later to see how he was doing. The *Times* reported that, stoically, he was doing as well as could be expected.

A month later when he finally made it to town the *Times* rejoiced and reported him saying. "I feel as young as ever and can dance and run a foot race with any young man in town."

In 1927 when the Kerr Mercantile building was being inaugurated, quite a big deal for the time, the *Times* reported on all the celebration. As a pronouncement on the affair as a whole and in tones befitting royalty, the *Times* stated, "Doc Turk arrived on a cot, a horse having fallen on him breaking some ribs, but he just had to be there, exemplifying the "Spirit of Sanderson."

Though he was beloved universally and was a smart and talented man, he was always the unassuming gentleman. In his daily diaries there is a tone of concern for friends and relatives and even perfect strangers. He commented on the passing of Joe Kerr and Mrs. de Landes, wonderful and beloved citizens of Terrell County, in the most respectful terms. He even made compassionate comments about two young people, unknown to him, who had died in an auto accident at Emerson. And somehow he managed to keep up with and acknowledge the many birthdays and anniversaries of his multitude of friends and their children.

In the spirit of the Good Samaritan, Doc was always ready to help his neighbor, whether with hard-earned cash or with back breaking effort. A diary entry from the history book shows his humor and thought process. "Yesterday evening two ministers come looking for donations. We gave them \$10. I look like I need someone to donate something to me. My pants are all torn and I look pretty bad. If it don't rain, I will look worse."

The *Times* was right, Doc Turk did exemplify the "Spirit of Sanderson." He not only took care of his own business, he also found the time to support his community. He was a stockholder in Kerr Mercantile and was a charter member of the first Sanderson Chamber of Commerce in 1920. He also "grubstaked" many a cowboy, giving them their start in this country. He truly was one of a kind.

After a lifetime of hard work, love for his family and concern for his friends and community, Doc Turk passed away on Christmas Day, 1944, after a long illness. Effie lived out her years on the ranch, passing in 1972.

As we move into the future the old ways and values are disappearing and a universal selfishness has taken root. Folks like Doc and Effie Turk have become rarities, and unless something changes we are not likely to see their kind again.



Effie and Doc Turk wedding photo, 1899.
Photo: Alice Evans Downie