

# Museum News: Granny Babb

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

## Terrell County Memorial Museum

When we moved to Sanderson in the summer of 1990 I knew only a handful of Sanderson people. I had tuned pianos here and had made a trip to attend an auction held by the Reverend Robert Garrett, former pastor of the Methodist Church. Brother Garrett had become a close friend, as I played the piano for the church at Marathon every Sunday. He tried to get me to become a Methodist minister, including arranging a free education at McMurry, but the Baptist side was too strong to be tempted.

When I landed a job at the Sanderson Elementary School in the summer of 1990 we were to move into the A. D. Brown home at 1st and Richard. We came early to clean the overgrown yard and get the house ready for the move.

On that first Saturday morning in August the kids came running to tell me that there was an old lady at the back door who was asking for me. Though she looked familiar, she introduced herself as Anna Lee Babb, and the wheels began to turn in my mind. Suddenly a torrent of memories flooded in, going back to when I was six or seven years old.

Back in the '50s I had been invited to come to Sanderson with a friend from Marathon to visit her aunt in Sanderson, whom she lovingly called "Aunty" in that upper crust way of pronouncing it (awnty.) We less erudite Smiths used the West Texas way of pronouncing it as "ant," as in the insect.

Granny Babb had a square, native-stone tank in her front yard, loaded with goldfish. She had to keep a screen wire lid on it to keep the raccoons out...they loved to eat her goldfish. She lived two blocks away at the top of 1st Street in a little cottage her husband had built for her, a kit house sold by Kerr Mercantile in the early days.

Back in the '50s when I visited her, the trip always ended up at the Princess Theater to see the latest cowboy "shoot 'em-up." I am sorry now that I didn't pay closer attention to the visit with Aunty because she had led a very interesting life. Even in the '90s I didn't get to visit much, but she and my wife became fast friends, actually my wife's first good friend in Sanderson.

Anna Lee Adams Babb was born on February 9, 1906 in Robert Lee, Coke County, Texas. She moved to the Big Bend with her family as a girl when her father bought a ranch in the Study Butte area. They had moved by covered wagon and she said the trip was long and grueling.

Her father and mother were Charlie and Ruth Locke Adams and she had four brothers, Almer Charles Adams, Abner Dom Adams, who ran the "M" System grocery in Alpine, Ruel Adams, who became the Terrell County Clerk for many years and John Quincy Adams, a teacher at Socorro ISD. Her sister Eva Ruth Adams died of typhoid fever in 1915 and Lois "Pat" Adams Yarbrow of Marathon, an archetypical flapper who, with husband Tom and daughter Mary Jack, were very close friends of mine and the reason for the visits to Sanderson in the 1950s.

At the end of World War I the Adams family suffered a tragic loss. Son Almer, who was a U. S. Marine veteran of the European conflict, was traveling home from the war by boxcar. Veterans were allowed to "hobo" on the railroads because of their military service. Somewhere in Kansas he was riding atop a boxcar when a railroad detective challenged him and demanded that he come down. He was in his military uniform, obviously a veteran, but the detective was unreasonable. When Almer pressed his rights and refused to come down, the detective drew his weapon and shot him to death. The detective was charged with murder and went to prison. Granny Babb said that for years her father would go to Kansas for the man's parole hearing to argue against his release. After Mr. Adams was no longer able to make the trip, one of his children would go in his place, and through the years, they were successful in keeping the man in prison.

As for Anna Lee, she obtained her elementary teaching license by taking an exam at Sul Ross Normal School in Alpine, even before she had received her high school diploma. The top two high school grades at Alpine, grades 10 and 11, were conducted as a sub-school on the Sul Ross campus and the teaching certificate did not require a diploma or degree. Her brother Dom was working at Terlingua for the Chisos Mining Company and he persuaded her to take a job teaching at the Molinar school in that tiny farming village. Being raised on her father's ranch at Study Butte, the desolation of the wilderness of the Big Bend did not affect her decision, so she took the position for the 1925-26 school year.

At Molinar, Anna Lee innovated by dividing the classes into upper and lower grades and had the younger ones come in the morning and the older in the afternoon. Her classes went well and she was well thought of by her students, but the following year she transferred to the school at Terlingua, where she met George Edward Babb, an accountant for the Chisos Mining Company who was postmaster and ran the commissary.

Like his boss, Howard Perry, Ed was a Yankee and hailed from Calais, Maine. A World War I veteran, Ed spent his whole career at Terlingua and Sanderson. He was quite a bit older than Anna Lee, but they fell in love and were married in Sanderson in 1927. Granny Babb said they were passing through and stopped at the brand-new Kerr Mercantile building to give their regards to Joe and Jim Kerr. They mentioned that they were on their way to get married, and Joe Kerr insisted they marry at the store, since it was decorated beautifully for the grand opening. And so they were married in the Kerr Mercantile Building.

They remained in Terlingua through the 1930s until the mines went into foreclosure and bankruptcy in the early '40s, Ed running the commissary and post office and Granny managing the company boardinghouse. They moved to Sanderson in 1941 where Ed was employed by Kerr Mercantile for the next 20 years until his retirement. The Babbs had one child while at Terlingua, Mildred Ruth "Billie" Babb Hord, who married Frank Hord of Marfa.

When Ed passed away in 1976, Granny spent almost twenty years as a widow. It was in those final years that we renewed our acquaintance and she became Granny Babb to my kids. My wife spent a lot of time at her house, looking after her as a friend and taking her grocery shopping in Fort Stockton and running errands for her.

In 1993, Granny decided that she could no longer take care of herself and asked us to take her to the nursing home. She was an insulin-

dependent diabetic and was having trouble regulating her dosages. My wife went in one morning to find Granny sprawled in her kitchen floor, drifting in and out of a diabetic coma. So, she packed her bags and checked herself into a facility at Fort Stockton. A few months later her daughter Billie moved her to a nursing home in Houston to be closer to family, and it was there that she died in 1994.

Anna Lee Adams Babb was another of those hardy women who lived in the desolate Big Bend and thrived. She wasn't afraid of anything and could do whatever she set her mind to do. She inspired her students at Molinar and Terlingua, and she inspired my kids at Sanderson. Our life as a family was enriched by having known her and our community benefited from her presence. Twenty years later, we still miss her laugh, her sweet disposition and her wonderful stories.



*Ed and Anna Lee Adams Babb, taken shortly after their marriage in 1927.  
Photo: TCMM*