

Museum News: The Story of White Man

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In the January, 2011, issue of the Museum News, the fourth issue published, I shared the story of Jim Fenley and his horse, Whiteman. Since I only printed 50 copies of the News in the beginning I am sure many people never saw it. I am republishing it here for your amusement.

The first sheriff of Terrell County was George Fenley, but this isn't a story about George. George had a brother who was named Jim and they were partners in 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 town house, only venturing to the ranch in the summers.

Jim had a reputation as one who really liked to dance and he frequented the dances at Wilson Hall in the old Terrell Hotel, down by the depot. He also was a pretty fair hand at the fiddle and often entertained visitors to the ranch with some fiddle tunes and cowboy songs. But he was far better known as an expert horseman and trainer, and this is a horse tale.

Around 1900 Fenley was missing a colt and when he set out on his horse, White Man, he soon found what he was dreading. The colt was half-eaten and partially buried under a pile of leaves and branches, the obvious victim of a bear attack. White Man was having quite a fit, dancing around with an urgent need to vacate the premises. As all horse people know, horses and bears don't mix and horses are literally "scared to death" of them. They will make any effort to put distance between themselves and their hated enemy.

Seeing that White Man was upset, Fenley dismounted and 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, a very ominous sight. Fenley began to pump shot after shot into the beast, but it didn't faze the bear one bit.

Finally he drew a bead on the bear, right between the eyes, and squeezed off a shot...bull's eye! This only infuriated the bear further, and, with one swat of his massive paw, sent Fenley tumbling head-over-heels, crashing head first into a rock. As he lost consciousness with the bear looming over him, Fenley recalled thinking, that's it...no use now...I'm done for.

"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 was standing over him, gently nudging him and neighing to him. The horse was a pathetic sight...head bloodied, blind missing, ear torn off and dangling down by a slim string of skin, he had not shied away in the attack. In fact, Pancha, Fenley's young shepherdess, witnessed the events and swore that White Man charged in and attacked the bear, protecting his master from certain death.

After chasing the bear away, White Man stayed at his master's side to protect and console him. Now this is the horse tale part: everyone knows that horses don't fight bears. It is 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 what of Pancha? Well, White Man figured very prominently in her life, a story of love, kidnapping and general shenanigans!

Once the story of White Man and the brave defense of his master, Jim Fenley, got out, he became legendary all over the Trans Pecos and northern Mexico. Everyone wished that they owned such a brave horse! But...that became a problem. Some men were not concerned that the horse belonged to Fenley, and they were determined that they would possess the horse brave enough to fight a bear, by any means.

Young Pancha, Fenley's shepherdess, became alarmed that someone might steal the boss's horse, 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.



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.

Shortly before the bear attack, Pedro Fuentes, a young man working for Fenley on the ranch, became s w e t h e a r t s with Pancha. He, Pancha and Fenley were the only ones 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 the romance kept up.

After the bear attack Fenley took his family and went back to his parent's ranch at Uvalde to recuperate. When he was well they returned to their ranch on the banks of the Rio Grande, but to his dismay, not only White Man was missing but also a large group of horses. He sent word to the Rangers, and his brother, George, Terrell County sheriff, and a 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 came up, kidnapped Pedro and took him back across the river. And of course the ransom was White Man! Pancha was at her wit's end, wanting to have her beloved back, but not willing to give White Man to the kidnappers. 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 kidnappers. The end result was that Pancha got her man back, White Man got his master back, and the bandidos...? Well, let's just say they had a most unfortunate meeting with the Texas Rangers and Sheriff Fenley.

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 fiesta. As for Pedro, he was decked out in a velvet suit, and his prospective father-in-law, Juan, killed four calves for the wedding barbacoa! And they were needed because a huge crowd from the surrounding area came 'a comer, beber y bailar,' and to wish the new couple well.

A few years later, sadly, Jim's wife passed away and he sold out and moved 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. But tragedy struck again in 1913 when Fenley was murdered in a shooting incident at the old Roberts Grocery Store in Uvalde.