

Museum News: "Baby Born, Name Terrell"

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

On April 8, 1905 Terrell County became the newest county in the State of Texas. It was a momentous day for the people of the newly authorized county, but there was no celebration until July 14, 1905, the day the county was organized..

Old timer Sam Harrell was just a kid, but he remembered the celebration: "I remember the first big barbecue the county had after it was formed in 1905. It was a big celebration. The barbecue was held right where the old red brick school was later built. There wasn't anything there then, most of the town and the depot were to the west of that. They served free beer, soda pop, beef, beans, cakes, etc." Sam Harrell, from *Terrell County, Its Past Its People* compiled by Alice Evans Downie, Rangel Printing, San Angelo, Texas, 1985. For years afterwards there was no celebration on July 4th, and July 14th became the big day of celebration.

Not everyone was happy with the new state of affairs. In fact, it was a day of gloom for the people of Pecos County, many of whom considered the move as an attack on their beloved county, threatening to cut them off at the feet.

Like all political movements, the drive to wean Terrell County from its mother was painful and controversial. And with cigar-chomping, wheeler-dealer Irishman Charlie Wilson involved, there was bound to be some shenanigans, too.

The loss of Terrell County was especially troubling to the leaders of Pecos County. Proposed county lines would have cut Pecos County off completely from its only transcontinental rail route. And with that they would lose special traveling privileges afforded county officials in those days. They, by virtue of their county offices, could travel free on the Southern Pacific Railroad, to any destination, as a professional courtesy.

In hammering out final details, however, a compromise allowed redrawing of the proposed county line to include an 11-mile stretch of railroad in Pecos County to preserve county officials' travel privileges.

But for Sanderson, the reasons for declaring its own county were more practical.

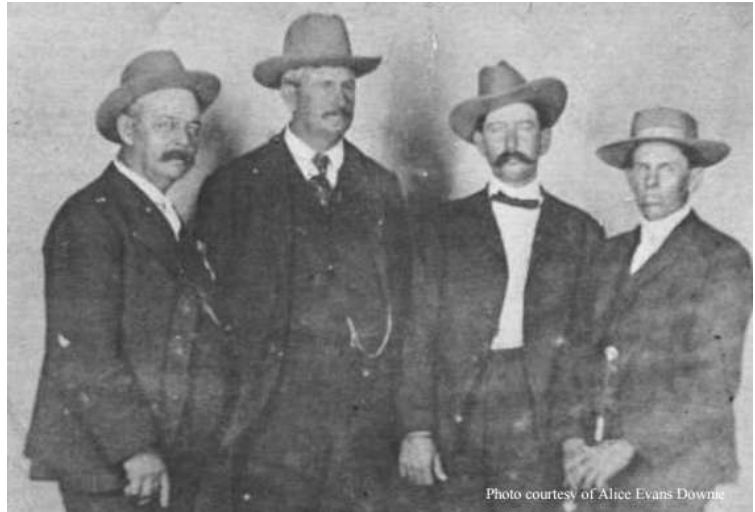
In 1905, the road from Sanderson to the county seat in Fort Stockton was 90 miles in length and barely more than a trail in many spots. Today we breeze through that country in our vehicles, up and down the canyons and over the dry creek beds, in about an hour. In 1905 the trip took the better part of two days, with a guaranteed campout under the stars, going and coming. If the creeks came up, you had to wait. (Well, that still happens today, but at least we can wait it out in our warm or cool cars, as the case may be.)

Once you got to Fort Stockton, the hotels were usually full and you ended up camping on the banks of Comanche Creek, unless you knew someone you could stay with. Jury duty, paying taxes and any dealings with the court was a major inconvenience for the citizens of Sanderson.

Another issue was proper law enforcement in Sanderson. For years there was no deputy or Texas Ranger in Sanderson and the town was wide open. Murders occurred regularly and all kinds of gamblers, bandits, cutthroats and other dark characters roamed the streets and frequented the many saloons with impunity. And then there was the problem with sporting ladies and the "bruised" flowers.

By 1905 the populace had complained loudly enough that a deputy was stationed in Sanderson, but, as today, good men were hard to keep.

But, as in the case of Deputy R.C. McMahan the character of the "law" man could not always be trusted. McMahan arranged and participated in the assassination of town school superintendent Scudder Biggs in a shootout



FOUNDING FATHERS - *Cyrus M. "Charlie" Wilson, Alexander W. Terrell, Joe Kerr, Sr. and W.P. Watkins, Sanderson legislative delegation and their mentor, who promoted the cause for the formation of Terrell County. After a successful battle, Charlie telegraphed home to the people of Sanderson, "Baby born, named Terrell."*

at the post office,. However, the first election brought a tough sheriff, George Fenley, who set out to clean up the county and send all the bad guys packing. He was successful, as were the next two sheriffs.

So, peeling Sanderson away from Pecos County was a good move for its citizens. If they ever wanted Sanderson to become a safe place for families and businesses, they had to take matters into their own hands. Fort Stockton was too far away to care what happened in Sanderson, or so it seemed.

To begin the process, town meetings were held and a delegation was selected to go to Austin to plead their case. Joe Kerr, Sr., Charlie Wilson, H.C. Carmichael, W.J. Banner, and Judge Griner of Del Rio were named to the delegation, with each man paying his own expenses. It was felt that Judge Griner was needed to help with legal questions, and the people provided for his expenses, along with an honorarium..

Upon arriving at Austin the group met with Alexander W. Terrell, an influential legislator who championed their cause. Indeed, the men from Sanderson chose an able mentor to shepherd their bill through the legislature.

But, it was not universally favorable. A disgruntled Fort Stockton group mounted their own delegation, who went to Austin to oppose the legislation. It promised to be a battle royal.

However, this is where it was good to have "Uncle Charlie" in the Sanderson group. All of the men in both groups had served as Pecos County commissioners and officers at one time or another, and in fact, were good friends. Charlie invited the Fort Stockton group to come up to their hotel room and have a friendly nightcap the night before the vote. Of course, he fed them bottle after bottle, into the wee hours of the night.

The next day the Sanderson delegation was present bright and early at the capital and they successfully argued their case. The Fort Stockton delegation? They never showed up...presumably they were too hung over to get out of bed!

Ultimately, the baby was born, the five wise men returned to the west and the king of the legislature went on to do greater things. The defeated tucked their tails and went home. But what became of the baby? He thrived and is still with us today.

It is said that history is written by the winners. In this case, the losers relegated their embarrassing facts to a dusty footnote in their history book.