

Museum News: The Southern Pacific Depot Part 1

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

A true icon of the wild west, the Sanderson Depot was a symbol of the determination of a rugged band of pioneers who carved a new life for themselves from the unrelenting environment of the last frontier of Texas. The story of the Depot is the story of Sanderson.

In its long life it witnessed the worst and the best that life had to offer. From common train robbers to honored presidents, from moments of abject defeat to moments of glorious success, from the most primitive modes of transportation to the gleaming pinnacles of technology, the depot ... and Sanderson ... saw it all.



Photo courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum

It is a story that began in 1882, when there was nothing here but a Seminole Scout trail winding its way through mountains and valleys, and ferocious wildlife living in endless miles of cactus. It is the story of 3000 Chinese and 3000 Irish immigrants punching their way through the wilderness, laying ribbons of steel that would bring civilization, for better or worse, to West Texas. It is the story of daring men who seized the opportunity to create huge ranches and wring a living from the land, the story of men of all races who came to work for the railroad and better their lives with a higher standard of living. It is the story of men and women who were strong of body and mind and with great determination, who dared to make a new life for themselves and their children. It is the story of the depot ... and Sanderson.

The depot of the Galveston, Harrisburg & San Antonio Railway, a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad, was one of the first buildings constructed in Sanderson, Texas in the fall of 1882, shortly after rail-laying crews got to town. It was built in sections of yellow pine at a company sawmill in northern California and hauled to Sanderson on flat cars for assembly. Built to Southern Pacific plans, it was based on Common Standard Depot #3, similar to other SP depots throughout the Southwest, but with enough changes to make it a unique construction with no exact twin anywhere else in the SP System.

Originally about 130' in length and 30' wide, the structure had equal extensions on either side of the central two-storey depot master's residence. The east end contained a lunch room, locally known as the "Beanery." The west end contained a freight warehouse which handled smaller items and mail. A much larger freight house was constructed in 1899 to the east of the depot to handle the massive shipments of the wool and mohair business, which dominated the Sanderson economy for years.

In 1913, a 50' extension was added to the west end creating a new passenger ticketing and waiting room area, a baggage handling facility, along with a Railway Express Agency office, a Western Union telegraph office and a bump-out bay window for the station operators to see incoming trains. There is no evidence that the original station had a bay window, since operator bay windows were not standard until after 1895 when semaphore signaling was introduced to the SP system.

The original depot was quite drab in color. Standard practice before 1905 was to paint SP properties slate gray with a dark red or green shingle roof. A 1903 photo indicates our depot was painted in that color scheme.

In the early 1900s, the SP sent paint gangs throughout the system to repaint all SP properties with a new color scheme...crème (yellow) walls with brown trim and highlights, and dark green paint for the roof.

Although some depots added sand to the paint in the lower portion of the walls to control damage from carts and discourage vandals, the Sanderson depot did not.

There is no doubt that the depot in Sanderson was the center of social life in the community for years. The railroad was the only easy way in and out of Sanderson in the early days and four passenger trains a day made scheduled stops. And at every arrival large crowds of people from town wandered down to the depot to watch travelers get off of the train to run to the Beanery ... dining cars were not a part of the Sunset Limited passenger service for many years and hungry passengers had to fend for themselves.

The Beanery was run by at least two companies. From the beginning it was designated a lunch stop and soon was taken over by Chinese managers. Due to many complaints from customers, the Chinese were booted out of GHSA restaurants across the system in 1899 and the Brown News Company of Kansas City took over. They sold magazines, newspapers, books, tobacco products, fruits, nuts and novelties from newsstands located in train stations. Passengers could also get candy, gum and snacks from "candy butchers" or "news butches," Brown News employees who walked through the train making sales. Meals were not available on the trains so a stop at the depot lunch room was a necessity if you wanted a decent meal.

In 1914 the Brown News was absorbed by the Van Noy Interstate Company. Operations continued, but as dining cars were added to the passenger consist the need for depot dining rooms began to decline. Van Noy began to concentrate on railroad hotel operations and eventually became the Host Marriott Corporation.

But back in Sanderson the operation remained unchanged and Van Noy ran the Beanery franchise for many years, under the direction of a long list of local managers.

Many young Sanderson men, known as "hashers," and young women, who were jokingly referred to as Beanery Queens, were employed by the Beanery, and it was the place to go for a hot meal or a date with your sweetie.

Some of those early employees were Frank and Shella Weigand, managers, "Little Miss Anita" Fisher, Gilbert Lopez, Helen Lemons, Ervin Grigsby (who worked as a 'hasher'), the Fishers (also managers), Irvin Robbins, Polly Jenkins, Ray Hernandez and many others.

On a darker note, Mary Nell Hinkle and Ray Hernandez of Sanderson recalled that the Beanery had segregated seating for the white, black and Mexican clientele, which lasted up until the Beanery went out of business in the late 50s.

Early photos show a white lattice fence around the east end of the depot, where the Beanery was located. Fences were probably put up for crowd control. Apparently there was such a stampede for the dining room when the train stopped that people were injured and tempers flared.

But for the most part the Beanery was a very popular place with railroaders, who only had to cross the tracks from the roundhouse or yard to get a hot meal. And it was well patronized by the townsfolk, too. (continued next time)