

Museum News: Herman Couch and the Big Canyon Ranch

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

Herman Albin Couch was born to Ed and Myrtle Elvira Henderson Couch on Nov. 26, 1908 at Zephyr, Texas. He joined his only sibling, older brother Chalmer Virgil Couch, who was born in 1905. Chalmer was a sickly boy and was never able to work. The marriage did not last and the Couches soon divorced. Chalmer and Herman went with Myrtle, but Herman did not get along with his new stepfather and soon went to live with his Grandmother Henderson.

At the age of 12, Herman struck out on his own and went to work in the oil fields at Mexia. After two years he headed west and ended up on the Big Canyon Ranch in Terrell County.

The Big Canyon Ranch was legendary even in the early days. It was named after a huge canyon that stretches from Brewster County in the west to near Sanderson in the east. Owned originally by two Pennsylvania steel and iron industrialists, Andrew and J. J. Dull, the Big Canyon Ranch enclosed in excess of 109,000 sections of land. They had received the land in 1882 from the railroad building through the area, in exchange for steel rails. The railroad received 16 square miles of land for every mile forward through the country, giving them millions of acres as a bargaining chip. The Dulls hired R. W. Prosser to manage their



Herman and Mildred Janes Couch

ranch, but, probably, they never saw the property.

In 1903 the Dulls sold their holdings to a consortium of men from Menard, Texas, including N. H. Corder, Irv Ellis, Will Bevans, Lee L. Russell and R. R. Russell. They formed the Big Canyon Ranch, and in 1905 a large section of land at Dryden was added to it.

Eventually, eighteen ranches were

carved from the original holdings, creating parts of Prosser and Brown, E. W. Hardgrave, R. N. Allen, Albert Appel, J. M. Corder, Hill and a part of the Alexander Mitchell ranch.

When Herman Couch arrived in 1922 the Big Canyon Ranch was a different world. Largely unfenced, the huge flocks of sheep were shepherded by Mexican herders using traditional European techniques, moving the sheep through the environment and never letting them overgraze.

For their cow operations they hired 25 to 40 cowboys at all times. In those days the ranch ran about 5000 head of cattle, 24,000 head of sheep and kept about 250 saddlehorses for the operation.

Shearing operations occurred at two points on the ranch, in large sheep sheds using shearing equipment operated by a large steam engine. Each shed had a capacity of 40 shearers who worked daylight to dark.

The old Dull Brothers main headquarters consisted of 27 buildings that served various purposes. Herman found the commissary to be an interesting place. Such a large operation required many herders, who had to receive supplies to stay in the field. Herders picked up their supplies at the commissary every 15 days, and the commissary operation ran like a big general store.

Herman worked for the ranch for about two years, and then moved on to other ranches, both here and in Oklahoma, including the Monty Corder Ranch and Buck Pyle, who had extensive holdings all over Texas.

Meanwhile, in the late 1920s, the Big Canyon was fenced into pastures, but some of the pastures were thirty or more square miles in size. After that, sheep herding was phased out and the animals were run free-range in an effort to improve the bottom line.



Breaking horses on the Big Canyon

Herman Couch was an exceedingly good cowboy and proved to be a good manager. He returned from a job as foreman at the Figure Three Ranch in Schleicher County in 1934 and became foreman and manager of the Big Canyon Ranch. He began a project to consolidate buildings and tear down those that weren't needed.

A Big Canyon Ranch practice he thought needed improvement was the breeding and use of mules on the ranch. Herman disliked working with mules and called them "snakey devils." He maintained that they killed too many lambs and calves and weren't worth the effort. He couldn't wait to get rid of what he called suicidal mules that "jump away from something on one side and fall in a hole on the other." So, as soon as practicable he got rid of them and went to an all-horse operation.

In 1935 Herman married Miss Mildred Janes of Comanche, Texas. Mildred was the quintessential rancher's wife, who was an avid gardener, a wonderful cook and a superb seamstress. He and Mildred adopted two children and set about raising a family and grandchildren.

In 1952 Herman was able to become a partner in the ranch and he and Mildred took up residence at the main ranch house. In addition to Big Canyon he also operated the Rocking R Ranch in Schleicher County. Together it all became Russell, Spencer, Lewis and Couch, Inc.

When he wasn't running the ranch, Herman was a civic leader. He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church in Sanderson, a Lifetime Director of the Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Association, a director of the Sanderson State Bank and a director of the Big Canyon Trapping Club.

After ranching in Terrell County for seventy years, Herman Couch passed away at age 91 on Dec. 16, 1999. Mildred followed at age 98 in 2011.

Although they were not of the generation that settled Terrell County, nevertheless Herman and Mildred Couch were pioneers in the true spirit of the word. The world was a better place for having known them.

Photos: "Terrell County Its Past Its People", Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell Co. Heritage Commission, 1978.