

# Museum News: Cap Barler ~ The Law in Texas

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## Terrell County Memorial Museum

William Lee "Cap" Barler was a man you didn't want to mess with. A career lawman, he served as a deputy sheriff under his father, Miles Barler, at Llano, Texas from 1911 to 1915. He joined the Texas Rangers in 1915 serving in Del Rio and Eagle Pass. In 1920 he joined the U. S. Custom Service, serving in Sanderson, Eagle Pass, and Falfurrias. He returned to Sanderson where he spent the last three years of his Customs Service career, retiring in 1940.

From 1940 until his death in 1951 Barler worked as a special investigator with a group of Terrell County ranchmen known as Terrell County Ranchmen's Protective Association. His specialty was livestock theft prevention.

Coming from humble beginnings, his father filled him with stories of the Civil War and of outlaws and Indian depredations, which only whetted his appetite for adventure and derring-do.

After the Civil War, Miles married Jane Buttery, and on January 2, 1874, Cap was born in Llano. At graduation from high school and at the tender age of 17, he moved to Mexico and managed a ranch there. This experience enabled him to become a recognized expert on the customs and mores of the Mexican border people.

Eventually he tired of this and his father offered a deputy's job to entice him to come home. Young Cap got a taste of law enforcement, and he was a natural. But, he wanted more.

When he joined the Texas Rangers in 1915 it took him only two years to make captain of his own company, and that earned him his lifelong nickname. He was a quick study and was keen on details and procedure. Col. Homer Garrison, Jr., director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, once said that Texas Rangers "were men who could not be stampeded." That describes Cap Barler to a "T." He was cool and calculating and never got in a hurry.

For whatever reason, Cap left the Rangers in 1920 and struck out on his own as a private investigator in Del Rio and other South West Texas towns, working for banks and other concerns as a private contractor. But it didn't take long for him to become restless once again.

Around 1925, Barler entered the U. S. Custom Service. His experience working in Mexico as a youth made him a natural in the Customs Service. Eventually he landed in Sanderson, where he finished his career. Being so close to the border, Sanderson was a hotbed of bootlegging activities. Barler's expertise made it hard for bootleggers and smugglers to make a living. And he was relentless in his pursuit.

As to matters of love, Barler was a quiet man, but he did marry Euna Bernice Jackson on March 8, 1908. The union produced one daughter, Isla Gayle, but the marriage did not last and they were divorced by September, 1918. His Texas Ranger lifestyle probably made it hard on the marriage.

Eccentricity was a hallmark of Barler's life. He was especially fond of "Chico" the pack mule he rode through most of his career, even to imparting human qualities to the animal. Once on a trip into southern Brewster County with Sheriff J. S. Nance, he insisted on going home by way of Marathon, considerably out of the way and over difficult roads. When they arrived Nance insisted that Barler take care of his business, but Barler said he didn't have any business in Marathon. "Well, why did we come all this way, then?" asked Nance. Barler answered, "Chico had never seen this country before and I wanted him to have the chance to see it."

Another eccentricity was his devotion to details and his compulsion to do paperwork, which bordered on the obsessive. All paperwork was done to the Nth degree of completeness and turned in on time. Sims Wilkinson, who served as the treasurer for the Terrell County Ranchmen's Protective Association, said Barler would refuse his



*"Cap" Barler and his favorite saddle mule, "Chico," somewhere on the trail in Terrell County.*

paycheck until all paperwork was filed. Wilkinson said he was afraid his children might have to return money after his death for any work that was paid for but left undone.

In his personal habits, he was eccentric, also. At 5' 8" with light hair and complexion and blue eyes, he was obsessive about his appearance. He always dressed in his "duckins," overalls made of heavy linen fabric resistant to thorns and snaggy catclaw, as well as his hat and boots. An extremely quiet man, he was hard to "read," which made him very dangerous in a confrontation. No one knew what was going through his mind. He hardly spoke and he never made comments about other men.

Barler was also compulsive about his driving habits...he never raced or went anywhere in a hurry, nor would he ride with men who liked to speed.

Barler was well suited to the life of law enforcement, and his powers of observation were legendary. He never liked to sit with his back to a crowd or the door. One would always find him at the back of the room, facing the crowd and probably making keen observations about the people in front of him.

But, for all his eccentricities and anthropomorphisms, Cap Barler was a kind hearted man. Margaret Farley, in her chapter on Cap Barler in the Terrell County history book, related that during the war years Cap Barler was the unmarried lady schoolteacher's best friend. He was always ready to chaperone them on trips and was always a gentleman. Often he would invite the young ladies to go with him on a job out to area ranches, and would prepare an evening meal from his chuck box over a campfire, to give them a taste of the cowboy way of life.

One of Cap's crowning achievements was to be featured on the cover of Life Magazine for April 10, 1939. He was always proud of that moment and talked about it often.

On November 16, 1951, Cap Barler passed from this world to the next. No doubt Chico, his mule, was waiting for him on the other side of the river, and they are even now tracking rustlers in the splendid wilderness of the Great Beyond.