

Museum News: Jack Crawford – Scholar, Soldier, Sheriff

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

Terrell County has been blessed with fine law enforcement through the years. Although the first twenty years of the county's life were marred by lawlessness, murder and mayhem, the rise of the new county in 1905 brought the first of a series of tough sheriffs and their deputies who had what it took to clean up the lawless element and make the streets safe for law-abiding citizens.

Such it was for the third sheriff, John Jefferson "Jack" Allen, Jr., who took the reins in 1910. He had come to be a teacher in the one-room school but events and circumstances led him to run for sheriff, banking on his military background, and he won a tight race against incumbent Joe Bean.

Jack was the first-born of the J. J. Allen, Sr. farming family at Liberty Hill, Texas in 1876. Though he knew the life of a farmer, education was valued highly and he was encouraged to strive for a better life than farming. Jack and his three beautiful sisters all went on to higher education after public school.

Jack got his teacher's certificate at State Normal College in Huntsville. But before he could get his first teaching assignment, the trumpets of war began to sound in the land. It was 1898, and the explosion aboard the battleship Maine in Havana's harbor ignited the Spanish-American War.

Young Jack asked his parents' permission to join the fray. Mr. Allen had consented, but his mother had vigorously disagreed. She remembered the terrible toll the Civil War had taken on her own family and she didn't want to chance that for her only son. But, he defied her wishes and broke her heart by joining the National Guard and headed to Cuba.

Jack survived the ten-month war, but got a taste for blood and excitement. The realities of war hardened him and took away the tenderhearted boy.

At his homecoming, Jack married Myrtle Crawford of Alpine and she soon gave birth to their first little girl, Una Maurine. In 1908 Jack got a job as the principal of the one-room school in Sanderson and they made the move to the booming railroad and ranch town.

Sanderson, however, had a terrible reputation for lawlessness and lascivious behavior. The first sheriffs, George Fenley and Joe Bean, had done a marvelous job of ridding the town of the worst elements, but there were still six saloons in operation, and murders and shootouts occurred frequently. It was not a safe place to take his young family.

And, Jack had his work cut out as a school teacher at Sanderson. One day he overheard his big boys bragging on the street after they had played hookey that they would give him a good whipping if he tried to punish them. The next day at the start of school he sent all the children out except the big boys, blocked the windows so they couldn't escape and said, "Well, boys, I'm ready." He took each boy and gave him a sound strapping in the presence of the others. There were no more idle threats made about Mr. Allen.

After two terms as schoolmaster, Jack felt he could do a better job than Joe Bean, so he ran for the sheriff's position in 1910. Jack won and it turned out he was meaner and tougher than his constituents and performed his duties with the utmost care and efficiency. Using his school teacher approach to law enforcement, in his four years as sheriff he solved murders, tracked down train robbers, caught sheep and cattle rustlers, chased Mexican insurrectos who were raiding on the American side of the river, and took time to organize and lead a Home Guard of 60 local men to protect the town from Pancho Villa. Though neither the state nor the county had money for arms or ammunition, he had the Home Guard prepare by marching through the streets of Sanderson, hoisting broomsticks and sotol stalks to their shoulders as mock guns.



Photo courtesy of the Terrell County Memorial Museum
Sheriff John Jefferson "Jack" Allen (1876-1929)
Terrell County Sheriff, 1910-1915

As sheriff, he advised governors, generals, Texas Rangers, secret servicemen and other law enforcement agents about the special nature of ongoing problems in the Trans Pecos. His advice was respected and much sought after. Under his administration, thousands of pounds of guns and ammunition, armaments and materials of war were confiscated before they could reach Mexico, not to mention the scores of men he arrested in their attempts to deliver that material. He proved to the public that he was an excellent sheriff.

However, Jack grew tired of bureaucracy, red tape and a federal and states government that wouldn't cooperate, and chose not to run for a third term. Besides, they had added a second daughter, Johnnie Ruth, to their family and he wanted to spend more time with his wife and kids. They liked Sanderson, but they decided to move to Alpine in 1915 to be closer to Myrtle's parents.

At Alpine Jack bought a ranch down south and ended up spending too much time away from home. With the state of the times he was not going to take his wife and kids to live on the border, so he hired a good man to run the ranch and he took a job in Alpine as city marshal.

In 1917, however, the war cranked up in Europe. Jack was 41 years-old but he looked and acted half that age. His conscience began to bother him as more young men in Alpine were conscripted into the service. The recruiters weren't looking for old men but Jack felt he had a lot to offer with his previous war and law experience. Characteristically, he asked his mother's permission to go to war. He wasn't about to break her heart again.

In July of 1917 Jack went to Camp Logan, Texas, to train with the 33rd Texas Division, Company C, 123rd Field Artillery. He quickly attained the rank of Pvt. 1st Class and operated the big 155mm Howitzers. In France, he fought at Somme, Saint-Mihiel, Picardy and Lorraine, and finally, the huge engagement at Meuse-Argonne. The Germans soon sued for peace.

Jack came home in May of 1919, and mustered out and was appointed postmaster at Alpine in 1920. He also got the son he had hoped for, little James. For the next seven years Jack's family was happy with their new and uneventful life.

As one might expect, though, Jack was a man of action. His life had become a little too sedate and boring. In 1927, a delegation from Crane City came to see him and explained that their little community was beset with gambling, prostitution, corruption and crime. They wanted to clean up the place and make it safe for women and children, and they had heard of Jack's reputation and the excellent job he had done in Terrell County. Mr. O. C. Kinnison, leader of the group, recently had tried to get the governor to send in Rangers, but when the gambling element heard about it they pistol-whipped him in public within an inch of his life. That sealed the deal for Jack and he agreed to run as first sheriff of Crane County. He won, easily.

As soon as he took the oath he went to work. He let the wild element know that there was no place for them in Crane City or County. In short order Crane County became the poster child for law enforcement among the boomtowns, the envy of towns all over the Permian Basin.

Sadly, though, Jack's term as sheriff was cut short in 1929 when he was killed in a freak car accident outside Pyote, Texas. West Texas was stunned to learn of his passing.

Preaching to an overflow crowd of tearful friends from across the region at First Baptist Church in Alpine, the Reverend Buren Sparks said "There were three distinct and outstanding characteristics in the life of Jack Allen, namely, patriotism, enthusiasm and sense of duty. Of patriotism, Mr. Allen served his country in the Spanish-American War, but, not satisfied with this, when the World War broke out, Mr. Allen journeyed back to the old home at Liberty Hill in Williamson County and got the consent of his aged mother for her son to again offer his life in the cause of his country. Of enthusiasm, no matter what undertaking Mr. Allen engaged in he threw his whole soul, heart and energy into the transaction. Of duty, Jack Allen never hunted for soft places to fill, on the contrary, he was always hunting for the difficult places and believed it his duty to fill these places, no matter what the result might be to him personally."

At the closing prayer muffled sobs were heard throughout the building and hardly a man or woman was left unmoved by the sermon, as reported the *Sanderson Times*. Tears streamed unashamedly from the eyes of men and women, alike.

Jack Allen impacted a generation of people. He was a man of honor, bravery and great heart, a man who was fearless in the face of danger. He truly did "hunt for the difficult places to fill" and was an unshirking hero. Not many have equaled his record.