

Museum News: Judge Jesse Henshaw

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

George Jesse Henshaw, fourth county judge of Terrell County, was an unusual guy. He was the playboy judge, an immensely popular man with friends everywhere and not an enemy in sight. He was an inveterate, lifelong bachelor, but like the proverbial sailor, had a girl in every port. He served as county judge in very eventful times, and his list of accomplishments set the county on a path to becoming a modern entity.

Henshaw was born March 19, 1876, in Atascosa County, Texas, to Landa Watters Henshaw and Mary Dossey Henshaw. He was the fifth of their seven sons and one daughter.

Landa and Mary Henshaw were farmers, and Jesse was raised to know hard work. When his public education was done, he aspired to read law and obtained his law degree from the University of Texas in 1909, with work at Baylor. He practiced law in San Antonio for three years, then was elected county attorney of Atascosa County for two terms. After his service in Atascosa County he was appointed assistant county attorney of Terrell County in the absence of County Attorney A. T. Folsom, who was on leave of absence. After Folsom's return Henshaw practiced law in Terrell County and was associated with the Sanderson Drug Company.



In 1914, Henshaw was elected County Attorney of Terrell County for two terms, and then was elected as fourth County Judge. He took over from Judge T. R. Kuykendall, who served briefly after County Judge J. B. Ross passed away suddenly.

Judge Henshaw served with distinction for the next 20 years. During his regime some very important milestones were reached in the county. Before his election there were few roads in Terrell County, especially east and west. To travel to Del Rio other than by rail, one had to go up to Sheffield to cross the Pecos, then down to Del Rio. Under his leadership and lobbying efforts, the state designed and built the first road to Del Rio and on west to Marathon and Alpine, eventually becoming U. S. Highway 90. It was one of the first highways completed by the State Highway Department in West Texas.

In 1930, Judge Henshaw and the county commissioners decided that the 1906 courthouse had become a liability rather than an asset. The roof and windows leaked and the building was being damaged at an alarming rate. Under Henshaw's leadership it was decided to dismantle the old building, reuse the best of the materials and build a new, larger courthouse. The original architect, Henry T. Phelps, was called in to design a new courthouse. His building was done in Mediterranean style, the only courthouse in the state of this motif. In one step the county was moved into the modern era.

In another key move Henshaw went to Austin to lobby the legislature into creating a common school district for all schools in Terrell County. The fourth largest county in the state, Terrell had an assortment of small schools in the railroad communities along the Southern Pacific Railroad and in small ranching settlements. Funding for those schools was borne by private individuals. By bringing all the schools under one governing district, public funding could be applied with assistance from the state. In 1929 the Terrell County Consolidated School District #1 was created to simplify administration of schools in the county and greatly improve the chances for all students to get a good education. Becoming a consolidated school district enabled the voters to authorize issuance of bonds for the construction of the new high school building at Sanderson in 1930, the Dryden school, the Independence school, and a small school near Watkins.

In another move to improve the life of students in Terrell County, Judge Henshaw, at the request of the Sanderson Culture Club, began a Health Inspection Program every year with the aid of a county nurse.

Beyond and above his accomplishments and duties as the head county executive, Judge Henshaw took on civic duties. He was president of the Terrell County Chapter of the American Red Cross, ex officio County Superintendent of Schools, chairman of the Agricultural Adjustment Committee, appeal agent for the Selective Service and Chairman of the County War Board. A great lodge man, Henshaw was an active Rotarian, a Masonic leader, a 32nd Degree Mason and was active in the Order of the Eastern Star. He served the Sanderson Chapter No. 136, Eastern Star, as Worthy Patron in 1918-1919.

In addition to his civic and governmental duties, Jesse Henshaw was a bon vivant, everybody's favorite party guest. He enlivened any gathering with his wit and charm and chaperoned many events for the youth and young adults in the community. A bit of a rake, he would spend his lunch hours at the high school across the street from his office in the courthouse, visiting the young ladies. An especially favorite time for him was at the start of the school year when all the new lady teachers arrived for duty. But, above all, he was a gentleman of the highest character and morality. He was by no means a predator.

In 1939, at age 63, Henshaw decided that his career as a public servant had come to an end. He declined to run for office after spending 20 very successful years as the county judge. But he was not to sit idle. He immediately set up his law office and began to take clients, as well as continue his civic and lodge duties. The coming of World War II was an especially trying time for him as head of the County War Board and appeal agent for the Selective Service. He saw many of his young friends go to war, some never to return. Their tragic fates lay heavy upon his brow.

The years rolled on until June 12, 1943, a Saturday. After a particularly trying week Henshaw visited with his doctor about a nagging pain in his chest. Suddenly and without warning G. J. Henshaw collapsed and died of a massive coronary thrombosis. A blood clot in his heart took his life. The man about town, the so-called playboy judge, had passed to his eternal reward. The citizens of Terrell County and all Far West Texas were shocked to learn of his demise. His body was prepared for burial and sent back to his family cemetery at Pleasanton, Texas. There, on a warm late spring day he was committed to the earth, buried with his mother and father and five brothers. No one had done more for his beloved Terrell County, and his friends realized that they had lost a great citizen and devoted friend.