

Museum News: O bury me not...

By CW (Bill) Smith, curator
Terrell County Memorial Museum

"O bury me not on the lone prairie."
These words came low and mournfully
From the pallid lips of the youth who lay
On his dying bed at the close of day.

Life in Sanderson and the Big Bend at the turn of the nineteenth century was harsh. Besides the lawless aspect, citizens had to cope with rampant disease and epidemics. The mortality rate for small children was especially high, and the number of infant graves at local cemeteries gives mute witness to the hazards of living in a time before inoculation and vaccination for common disease.

Throughout Sanderson's early history, wave after wave of epidemic disease swept through the small community, taking a terrible toll. Small pox, cholera, typhoid, scarlet fever and influenza were very serious and frequent threats. Even the diseases we consider common today...measles, mumps, chicken pox...could be a serious threat to the life of small children and the elderly in a day when medical care was at an early stage of development.

Sanderson, however, was blessed by the railroad policy of having a doctor on staff at all times to tend to its employees and their dangerous occupations. Railroad doctors generously were made available to the general public, as well, but, even the best doctors only had the barest minimum of treatments and effective medications available. So, life for parents was made even more difficult, beyond the rigors of trying to provide food, clothing and shelter for their children. As today, parents worried about the health of their youngsters.

Recently, a local lady brought to the Terrell County Memorial Museum a reminder of just how frail life was in those days, the epic icon of an early day family tragedy. The lady said she had something she wanted to give to the museum, something she had hauled from place to place in Sanderson since moving here in the 1990s. When she first moved to Sanderson, she was in her new backyard and discovered a peculiar stone. The rectangular slab of local limestone had markings carved into its surface. Upon closer inspection she discovered this inscription:

C.H. SHANK
DIED FEB. 15TH 1901

The stone was lying loose on the ground, not marking a particular spot, but it definitely was a grave marker. She had no other information about it and no idea where it might have been placed originally. It was common in the early days of Sanderson and other small towns in West Texas to bury loved ones close to home. There were no official cemeteries in Sanderson, and because of the lack of refrigeration, bodies were interred quickly, especially those who had died of disease.

Sometimes, however, families could not bear to be separated from their loved ones, and they kept the burial site very close. Such was the case of a ranch family at Marathon, as told to this writer by old-timer G.E. "Bud Fisher" Martin in the 1980s. Bud said that a ranch family had moved to town and into his present home to allow their children to go to school. In the course of the year their baby died of disease, and the mother was so distraught that she wouldn't allow the child to be buried at the local cemetery. She had her husband dig a small grave in the yard so that she could be close to her baby. Bud said that for years afterward a large stone marked the spot, until it, too, finally disappeared. He and this writer were probably the only ones who knew the story, and now he is gone, too. This is as good a reason as any for our Sanderson lady's tombstone yard ornament.

In 1915, when locomotive engineer and entrepreneur Ed McGinley was building the second railroad bunkhouse that still sits across the street and west of the Sanderson Bank, he unearthed pieces of coffins and human remains. Work had to be stopped until he could get permission from the county commissioners to have the graves exhumed and moved to the new Cedar Grove location, then known as Evergreen.

The same thing happened to a cemetery that was located at the present-day intersection of Cargile and Oak, and was moved in 1923, according to a public notice in the *Sanderson Times*. Still another cemetery is located behind a



Hand-hewn marker stone for 14 year-old C. H. Shank(s,) who probably died of disease in 1901 and was buried in the yard of his home on Pine Street. Photo courtesy of Bill Smith

local motel on East Highway 90 in Sanderson, according to an article in a recent *Terrell County News Leader*, and it has never been moved. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know the location of all the individual graves that probably are scattered throughout the town.

Doing a little research, census records were soon found for two "Shanks" families living in Sanderson in 1900, while it was still a part of Pecos County. Apparently, the person who carved the tombstone ran out of room before carving the final "s" on the name, but the initials matched perfectly. This was the family. Census records related that Mr. Charles L. Shanks was a carpenter who was employed by the railroad. He was married to Cemantha Matilda Moore and had two sons, Hubert C., age 12 (listed as Charles Hubert in all other records,) and Robert F., age 9. Just five doors down was Paul Shanks, who also was married, with two daughters, Evira A., age 4, and Burtha C., age 2. Paul's occupation was listed as "tanker," possibly a water-hauler.

Further research showed that Charles and Paul were brothers, born into a family of ten, whose father had emigrated from Germany in the mass migration of Germans to Central Texas in the mid-Nineteenth Century. The elder Shanks had married a South Carolina woman. As for C.H. (Hubert) Shanks, according to his tombstone he died on February 15, 1901, and was buried in the yard of the residence his father owned on Pine Street.

The Terrell County history book indicates that a wave of epidemics swept through Sanderson at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. Typhoid fever was especially frequent, reported as occurring in 1902, 1903, 1904, 1907 and 1909. An outbreak of scarlet fever occurred in 1902, with serious outbreaks of small pox in 1903 and 1913. In the 1903 small pox epidemic a tent camp was set up outside of town. Praxedis Arredondo was hired as a guard by the commissioners to prevent victims and their nurses from leaving the quarantined area, and to stop visitors from coming to the camp and risk the spread of the disease. During the 1913 outbreak, a camp with two guards was established.

As for poor Hubert Shanks, we probably will never know what took his life, though disease is a good possibility. The sad circumstances of Hubert's demise bring to mind a poignant image of the bereaved family holding a customary wake in their living room for their fourteen year-old son, who, by the way, was not the only death for this family. This poor mother had already endured the loss of two little ones, and now this young one, standing on the cusp of manhood. The distraught family, unable to bear the thought of being separated from their child, chose to lay their young one to rest in the yard of their home, where the mother and father could lovingly tend to his grave.

Life, however, never remains static. Situations change, and, for whatever reason, about 1905, the Charles L. Shanks family pulled up stakes and moved to San Angelo, Texas. It must have been heart-rending to leave their child behind, though they could have had the body exhumed and moved to a more permanent, familiar resting place. However, there is no record for a second grave for young Hubert at a new location. The Shanks ended their days in San Angelo, Mr. Shanks passing in 1940 and Mrs. Shanks in 1941, apparently buried in unmarked graves. Information on their death certificates was supplied by Robert F. Shanks, their sole surviving son, proving that at least one of their children lived to adulthood.

In many respects, the Shanks' story was common for emigrants and settlers throughout the west, who had to bury loved ones by the side of the trail in their journey to a new life. This writer's own great grandfather died in such a manner. On a trip from Oklahoma to Texas to buy horses, he died suddenly and was interred somewhere on the prairie near Anson, Texas, his grave lost forever.

The Sanderson of 1901 was certainly no different than Tombstone or Dodge City...the danger from physical violence was ever-present, and the threat of disease exposed every home to the chance of unexpected death. Thankfully, years of law enforcement and advances in medical care have eliminated most threats to our well-being in this small community.

"I wish to lie where a mother's prayer
And a sister's tear will mingle there.
Where friends can come and weep o'er me.
O bury me not on the lone prairie."