

Museum News: John Franklin Nichols, Fifth Sheriff of Terrell County

C. W. (Bill) Smith, Terrell County Museum

Even Terrell County can be swept up into historic events that affect the whole community. June 4, 1918 was just such a day in the life of the county. On that day Sheriff Doc Anderson was called to Harrell's Ex-Pecos County Saloon to quell a disturbance. A local cowboy was drunk and threatening the saloon patrons with his handgun. Sheriff Anderson took care of the call because he knew the man who was causing the disturbance, and special circumstances demanded special handling by law enforcement.

Cowboy Ed Valentine was a troubled young man. His wife had died leaving him with two young daughters to rear by himself. He was troubled and under a lot of pressure when he went to Harrell's Saloon to drown his sorrows. Sheriff Anderson knew him, knew his story and was an astute judge of character. He felt that things had gotten out of hand and he just needed to talk Valentine down and get the weapon away from him.

But, as often happens with drunks, the cowboy's behavior was unpredictable. Anderson stepped into the saloon and Valentine immediately gunned him down with two shots, one to the heart.

The death of Sheriff Anderson left not only a vacuum in the hearts of almost everyone who knew and loved him, it left a serious vacancy in law enforcement in a time when the sheriff and his deputies were extremely important for public welfare during the turbulent Mexican Revolution, which raged just twenty miles from Sanderson and often spilled over onto American soil. He and his men were often busy tracking insurgents, smugglers, rustlers and criminals.

The Terrell County Judge and Commissioners recognized that a new sheriff needed to be appointed before things got out of control. The commissioner from Dryden had a solution. A new resident to the Dryden area, John Franklin Nichols, had been police chief of Knoxville, Tennessee, for four years, according to the *San Antonio Express*, and was a real professional. He had a good background in law enforcement, and with a population of about 95,000 people and with dozens of employees at the time of his service, Nichols knew how law enforcement was supposed to work. Besides, he was straight as an arrow, honest, and unmarried, and he would be perfect.

When Nichols was approached about taking the position of sheriff, he was reluctant. He had enjoyed his years in law enforcement, but now he just wanted to be a rancher at his place on Bone Watering, a desolate piece of real estate south of Dryden on the Rio Grande that suited him just fine. He had come to Terrell County in 1915 because his brother, Joe, had come out in 1913 and filled his head with tales of the wild and woolly West, some of the last frontier in the country. Ranching was perfect for him.

But, Nichols knew that the county was in a bind. Likely candidates were not to be found locally...he was it. Being a good-hearted man, he decided to take the job, but only for the remainder of Anderson's unexpired term. That would give the commissioners time to search for a new man. Nichols was sworn in on June 12, 1918, as the fifth sheriff of Terrell County.

John Franklin Nichols had a sterling upbringing. He was born in Lenoir City, Tennessee, on August 8, 1873, to S. H. and Sallie Eldridge Nichols. He was joined by two younger sisters, Martha and Ethie, and two brothers, Joe and G. A. The Nichols were God-fearing people, raised up in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. With a strict, Scottish upbringing, Nichols grew to be an ethical, moral man. His honesty was admired universally and his word was gold.

Although his term as sheriff was uneventful and short, nevertheless he did an outstanding job and the citizens knew that everything was under control. He served from June of 1918 until January of 1919 when the new sheriff, J. J. Nance, took over. The torch was passed without event and he received the thanks of a grateful community.

After his term of service was over, Nichols headed back to Bone Watering to take care of business, along with his brother and business partner, Joe. When he felt that his affairs were in order, he went back to Tennessee to woo his sweetheart, Mary Louise McMeen, daughter of a prominent family in McMinnville, Tennessee. They were married in 1923.

Louise was from a wealthy family, and she herself, had a successful job selling special editions of the Bible, unusual for a well-to-do woman of that time. She was accustomed to the fine things of life, including slaves and personal maids. But, her upbringing was impeccable and she was a very gracious Southern lady. Imagine the culture shock when she moved to



Louise and John Nichols, holding young Billy Savage.

Terrell County to live in a two-room ranch house with dirt floors, no water or electricity, and miles from civilization over rough ranch roads with many gates to open and close as they passed through. She had brought her heirloom furniture to the marriage and was faced with not enough room or a proper home in which to put it. So, she stored what was necessary and fit the rest as best as she could into the rustic shack. If she was unhappy, she never showed it, and they lived a very contented existence on the cusp of civilization.

The Nichols were devout Presbyterians and united with the church in Sanderson. They became leaders and served faithfully, never missing a service, even though the road to Bone Watering was grueling and long. Nichols served as an elder of the church from 1928 until 1950, and Mrs. Nichols served as president of the Women of the Church for 1934-'36 and 1942-'44. In addition, Nichols was a member of the Knights Templar, Shrine and Masons and locally active in the service groups. Mrs. Nichols was a leader and founding member of the Culture Club and involved in Eastern Star and other organizations. They took their civic duties seriously.

As the years rolled by the Nichols rejoiced in all the blessings of ranch life, as well as agonizing over flood, drought, wildfire, dust storms and fluctuating cattle prices. They were a gracious couple whose soft Southern accents charmed all who met them. Although they were not blessed with children, they had many nieces, nephews and cousins who often came to visit. Their house was always full, especially after they sold the ranch in 1944 and moved into Sanderson.

By 1950 and advancing in years, the Nichols decided they needed to be closer to family and medical assistance. They sold out and moved to San Angelo, but eventually moved to Greenville, Texas, where many of their relatives had relocated from Tennessee. They spent their last years there in declining health, but with great joy. John Franklin Nichols passed away on December 5, 1957 at the age of 84 years. He was laid to rest at Forest Park Cemetery in Greenville, and Louise followed at the age of 88 years on June 19, 1971.

Although John Nichols' service to Terrell County was brief, it was important in continuing the rule of law in a potentially dangerous time. His steady hand at the helm prevented lawlessness and mayhem in a town and county that had known murder, betrayal and grief through its early years, and which was always just under the surface, ready to spring forth once more. He kept that from happening, and the citizens of this county honor him for his diligence and expertise.