

Museum News: The Highways of Terrell County

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

In our day-to-day lives we have become so accustomed to modern conveniences that we take them for granted. To pioneers who faced trackless prairies and impassable mountain ranges, our modern system of roads and highways would be astonishing to them. When Charlie Wilson arrived in this little valley in 1882 and had his "This is the place" moment, there was only an east-west scout trail to take folks from one place to the other.

Military roads had been built in the area, tying together Fort Davis, Fort Stockton, Fort Lancaster, Camp Peña and others, and aside from Indian trails such as the historic Comanche Trail, there was nothing else but to launch out into the wilderness and forge your own trail if you wanted to go to spots off the main roads. That, along with Indian unrest, enticed few settlers to the Trans-Pecos.

The railroad changed all of that, of course, and for the first time, along with removal of the native inhabitants, settlement of the Trans-Pecos could begin in earnest.

The original Pecos County was founded in 1871 and stretched along the west bank of the Pecos from the New Mexico line to the Rio Grande near Del Rio. Fort Stockton and Del Rio were just tiny settlements connected by the Military Road, but it skirted far to the north to Fort Lancaster, isolating the future Sanderson.

Reeves County formed from Pecos County in 1883, followed by Val Verde County in 1885. As Sanderson grew larger, its distance to the county seat and the lack of a good road caused difficulty for the residents.

The original trail/road to Fort Stockton had been improved by Charles Downie at the instigation of the Pecos County commissioners in 1895. The original road turned west at the Downie Headquarters and took a long, circuitous route to Fort Stockton making a road 90 miles in length. That, along with lack of law enforcement, caused Sanderson to break away to form Terrell County in 1905. Still, there were no decent roads leading to Sanderson.

One of the first actions of the new county commissioners was to order improvement of streets and roads in Sanderson, with a new road to Fort Stockton to cut off many miles of travel by crossing Big Hill, ten miles north. A primitive road had been carved into the steep canyon slope but it was treacherous and dangerous.

In March of 1906 the county commission authorized the judge to hire a crew to rebuild that portion of the road, directed by Commissioner Charles Downie, the original builder.

At that time there was still a sizeable population of Chinese ex-railroad workers in the area. Downie hired them, along with Piedmontese stone-cutters he found wandering in the desert, to build rock retaining walls which still stand, hardly a stone out of place. These received backfill to build up a suitable road surface. The finished road was still steep and dangerous, but it was much more manageable.

Poor Charles Downie found out how steep and dangerous it was. Going down Big Hill one day with a wagon pulled by his prized pair of matched mules, the wagon broke away and slammed into the mules' hindquarters, breaking their legs. With great remorse he had to put the animals down.

With the Fort Stockton road greatly improved, there still was nothing but the scout trail going east and west from Sanderson. Since most people took the train if they wanted to travel in those directions, there really was no need for



a road.

As car and truck traffic began to increase, the public desire for more and better roads began to grow throughout the state. In 1917, the state legislature created 26 state roads connecting the major towns and cities. Highway No. 3 would go from Orange to San Antonio to El Paso, passing through Del Rio and Sanderson. It would go through Marathon and Alpine, and then north to Fort Davis, eventually connecting to Van Horn, almost what we have today as US Highway 90.

Highway No. 12 would have followed today's Interstate 10 route to the small village of Esperanza, 21 miles west of Sierra Blanca, and continue south following the Rio Grande to Presidio. It would hug the river through private ranch land in the present-day Big Bend National Park and continue down river to connect with No. 3 at Langtry. That would have been a tremendous undertaking, considering the ruggedness of the area. Of course, No. 12 was never built, but Highway No. 3 was completed.

Along with the mandate there was federal and state money to build it. Previously, counties built roads at their own expense. State statute ordered every able-bodied man from age 17 to age 60 to donate a few days every year to road and street construction and maintenance in their respective counties. Terrell County never conscripted citizens to do roadwork, but the commissioners did hire local men and a supervisor to see that it was done. They also ordered prisoners at the county jail to perform such duties, basically, a chain gang.

Highway No. 3 progressed both directions from El Paso and San Antonio, the same as in 1880 when the railroads were built. The finished roads were drained and graded but not paved.

In 1925, the new State Highway Commission took control of design, building and maintenance of highways in the state and disbursement of federal and state funding. Counties no longer could designate highways within their boundaries, but still had to ante up 25% of the cost. In 1932 the state and feds accepted all responsibility for the costs.

The last section of No. 3 was not finished until 1929, the 11-mile section running through Pecos County eleven miles west of Sanderson. By 1933 most of No. 3 had been paved by Franklin Roosevelt's public works projects.

In 1925 all highway names in the US were aligned and No. 3 became US Highway 90 and terminated in Van Horn.

Not all of the roads in Terrell County are paved. The county maintains major dirt roads but most ranch roads in the county are the responsibility of their owners.

The Fort Stockton road was paved in 1935 and became US Highway 285 in 1939. A branch from US 285 to SH (State Highway) 349 was completed in 1961 and became RM (Ranch to Market) 2400. A branch from RM 2400 to Bakersfield in Pecos County was completed in 1993 and called RM 2886. A road paved from Dryden to Sheffield was completed as FM (Farm to Market) 1749 in 1954, and renamed SH 349 in 1990. There are two very short sections of paved road, RM 1865 and RM 3166 branching off of US 90 and SH 349.

Today we see our US Highways in Terrell County being destroyed by heavy truck traffic coming up from the Rio Grande Valley and Mexico. An informal survey done over several years by this writer shows an average of 50 trucks per hour, 24/7, heading north over US 90 and US 285. That number is increasing. Presently, approximately 1200 heavily loaded 18-wheelers per day are going just one direction; no wonder the roads are falling apart.