

Museum News: Under the Spreading Mesquite Tree

The Village Smithy in Sanderson

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

One business that was a necessity in the old days was the blacksmith shop. Sanderson seems to have had many men who were capable blacksmiths.

Men who worked at the roundhouse were often blacksmiths by trade originally, as boiler work required the same skill set. Joe Nance, who would become sheriff of Terrell County, was an inventor with patents for guns and trapping devices. He was also an excellent blacksmith who worked at the roundhouse for a time, but he didn't run a shop in Sanderson. He might have helped friends on occasion.

The larger ranches often employed men who also doubled as blacksmiths to take care of wagons, equipment, and the shoeing of horses and mules. Gene Peeples, Block Y master mechanic and blacksmith of Dryden, was such a ranch blacksmith, as well as Montie Wallace, manager of the Downie Ranch, master of all trades and an excellent blacksmith. And then there were those who just practiced blacksmithing on a whim or as a hobby.

But, for actual blacksmith shops, Sanderson had several at different times. Down at the corner of Oak and Wilson, across from the waterworks, stood an old blacksmith shop that served the community in the early days. It was owned by Frank Tessman, who was born in eastern Germany in 1875 and immigrated to the US to live in San Antonio. Mrs. Tessman was also of German descent, but born in Louisiana. They had five children and lived in Sanderson from 1902 until they moved to Arizona in 1917. The Tessmans both spoke with a German accent, and Mr. Tessman, a big, brawny man, was also superintendent of the waterworks for a time. He must have been a good blacksmith because they lived here about fifteen years. Blacksmiths were often asked to work on automobiles after they began to spread throughout the country, and many old timers did not want to do that kind of work, so that may be the reason the Tessmans left.

Some other blacksmiths who opened shop in Sanderson in the early days included Len Fletcher, who worked for a short period. Tom Mayes was another man who owned a blacksmith shop in Sanderson. Mr. Mayes did most of the local horse shoeing, including taking care of horses for the U. S. Cavalry when they were stationed just south of town across the railroad track. This was during the period of the Mexican Revolution when troops were stationed here to protect the town from Mexican bandits, a great fear among Sanderson folks. Mayes had been one of the first car owners and became adept at tying his vehicle together with baling wire, enough skill to become the local mechanic for the town. His ability to get the early cars running gained him the reputation as a qualified mechanic. Unfortunately, he never learned how to drive very well. His son, Archie, said he just "herded" the car around. The two saloons that were open in that period had high board fences around them, supposedly to keep nosy females from seeing men drink. According to his son, Mayes had destroyed parts of those fences more than once with his bad driving skills.

Reuben and "Cap" Mussey went into blacksmithing and automobile mechanics about 1916 when they moved from Longfellow to Sanderson. They operated the first Ford dealership in Terrell County. Customers ordered their vehicle from a catalog and added accessories, such as headlights or windshields, and the Model T's were shipped by rail in pieces and assembled by the Mussey brothers. Their garage/blacksmith shop sat on the spot where the Princess Theater would be built in 1929. There is some controversy involved, as W. J. Ferguson, Sr., received the Ford dealership concession and the Musseys were forced out. About the same time blacksmithing was on its way out and the Musseys sold their property to A. D. Brown, who built the Princess.

Another very colorful person who operated a blacksmith shop in Sanderson in the 1930s was William Pittman Keene, Jr., father of Viola Keene Turner (wife of George Turner.) Keene was born in Brackettville, Texas, in 1890 and was raised around Del Rio and the Devils River country.



After their marriage the Keenes lived in Alpine, moved to Ozona, and then on to Sanderson in 1928. They left and moved to New Mexico but came back in 1933 and Mr. Keene set up his shop.

Their home was located in Sanderson on the east end, down by the highway. At that time there were only a few buildings on that side of town. Mr. Keene was a very talented blacksmith and was well known for his branding irons and handmade spurs, which were shaped like a girl's leg. He received many orders from across Texas and other states as well. Mrs. Keene also had a reputation for her beautiful handwork and her sewing ability with needle and machine.

In that period cavalry from Brackettville would camp in front of the Keene home and below the highway, almost to the railroad. With hundreds of men and horses, Keene had work for days because of the activity going on just outside their door.

Keene, as did most blacksmiths, invented his own tools to do special jobs. A lot of his early work was repairing wagons and he became adept at building wagon wheels. He made a "hub-binder" that was used to make bands for wheels. He made two "wheel runners" which made finding the distance around a wheel much easier. He also invented several tongs for handling odd-shaped pieces of metal. But, even he had to give way to time. He purchased an automatic hammer in the '30s to make work easier. He had done hand-forged welding from the beginning, but in 1936 while in Sanderson, he invested in an acetylene generator to make the gas for a torch, and he began to do modern (1936) welding. The generator was still in perfect working condition when the San Angelo Times interviewed him in 1957.

In 1938 the Keene's pulled up stakes and moved to Pecos where they spent the remainder of their days. Keene worked in his blacksmith shop every day until his death in 1972 at age eighty-two. There are still blacksmiths today, but imagine the huge amount of knowledge and skill that disappeared when William Keene, Jr., passed into the Great Beyond. If God needed a blacksmith, he got a good one!