

Museum News: Blackwelder's Shoe Shop

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

Some folks move to Sanderson, live a few years, and then pass on to other places. You barely get to know them, and then they are gone. As a railroad town, many families moved in for work and then were transferred to other places to follow the job. Such a thing happened in the late 1990s when railroad families made a mass migration east and west when the division point was closed and the work moved elsewhere.



Photo: Terrell County Museum

But, it happens in other lines of work, as well. Back in the 1920s-'30s-'40s there were at least two shoe shops in operation at various times. They dealt not only with shoe and boot repair, they also sold saddles and horse tack. Blackwelder's and Shaffer's dominated during that time with first class shoe and boot repair. And, there was enough business to sustain two shops. People repaired shoes, rather than toss them out and buy new ones. It was a sign of the times as the Depression made many folks cinch up their belts and try to save money.

Tom Shaffer had a shoe shop down on Oak Street, just past Ferguson Motors. There is not a lot of information about him.

The better known of the two was J. R. "Ross" Blackwelder. Mr. Blackwelder and his wife Ethel moved to Sanderson in 1923, bringing their young family with them. They would eventually have four children, Ora Mae, Marilyn, James Leroy and Weldon "Scootie," who graduated from Sanderson.

Mr. Blackwelder was a physically challenged gentleman who was a hard worker and did a good job providing for his family. He had the latest equipment in his shop and sold all manner of leather goods, including boots, saddles and tack. A photo from the period shows a small amount of clothing also being sold from his shop, including vests, pull-overs and even roping gear.

For some years Blackwelder's assistant was Mr. Serapio Perez, a shoe repairman in his own right who later moved to Marfa and opened his own shop. Perez was a very interesting character. He was born in Nochistlan, Sinaloa, Mexico in 1884, served in Pancho Villa's army and became one of his favored confidants. Villa lovingly referred to him as "El Minuto." He served and fought with Villa in many campaigns in Chihuahua and Durango.

Tiring of the dangers and barbarity of that conflict, he immigrated with his young family to the US in 1914, living in Fabens and El Paso before moving to Sanderson in the 1930s. By 1940 he had moved his wife and four children to Marfa and remained there for the rest of his life, passing away in 1960. Had you visited in Blackwelder's shop during that period, you would have never guessed that his quiet, friendly assistant had been a Soldier of Fortune in a very violent era of Mexico's long, tumultuous history.

But as for Ross Blackwelder, he also lived a quiet life, not nearly as glorious or adventurous as his assistant's, but a good life. He was an honest man, an excellent businessman and never asked for a hand out because of his physical condition. He just worked hard and took care of his business and his family.

In 1948 Ross suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. His children were grown but his wife decided to stay in Sanderson and lived out the remainder of her life, passing away in 2006. They are buried at Cedar Grove.

The Blackwelders and the Perezs exemplify the pioneer spirit of Sanderson. They moved to an unknown space on the edge of the wilderness and carved out a home here. And they are the kind of folks we are looking for today, who are willing to come here and build this place up again.