

# Museum News: The Death of Scudder Biggs

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

One of the most unsettling stories from Sanderson's abundantly colorful past provides ample evidence that it was a lawless and dangerous place to live. Being so far from the county seat in the years before it became a county in its own right, the lack of local law enforcement left the town open to all kinds of excesses. Prostitution and gambling were only the tips of an iceberg of graft and corruption that was so troubling to decent folks.

Sanderson, a dangerous place, had a hard time keeping a deputy here to maintain the peace, and sometimes the deputy was not the solution but the problem itself. Pecos County Deputy Sheriff R. C. McMahan was a case in point.

McMahan hailed from Tennessee and came to Sanderson before 1900 as a crooked Monte dealer. McMahan had been convicted of sheep rustling in Maverick County a few years earlier, but somehow received a full pardon from Governor James Hogg.

Then, defying logic, McMahan was hired by the Pecos County Sheriff to be the sole lawman in Sanderson. McMahan continued leasing Charlie Wilson's Cottage Bar Saloon, with gambling and sporting ladies on the side.

Henry Scudder Biggs first appears in Sanderson records in the 1900 Pecos County census as a boarder in Charlie Wilson's household, along with his brother Edgar. Scudder was born in Arkansas in 1873 to circuit-riding Methodist minister William Henry Harrison Biggs and raised in a disciplined household to respect the law and God's Word and uphold a high standard of righteousness.

He attended Coronal Institute, a Methodist school in San Marcos, Texas, graduating in 1895, and taught school in Bee County for about two years. He came to Sanderson in 1897 to teach school and was known to be an honest, intelligent, respectable man and gifted teacher.

Biggs was appointed census-taker for Sanderson in 1900 and he performed his duties with customary zeal.

In 1901 Biggs married Lillian Wood in Runge, Karnes County and brought his bride home to Sanderson. He also was appointed Justice of the Peace to fill an unexpired term and was elected to the office in 1902. The next year, little Corinne was born to the happy couple and life was good.

In 1902 Biggs bought the *Pecos County Pickings*, the only newspaper in Pecos County and changed the name to the *Trans Pecos News*. It was a great newspaper.

Biggs and McMahan began to have a social connection as they and their families traveled and attended the same social functions. They seemed to be friends, but McMahan's connections to the less desirable and dark underbelly of Sanderson surely troubled Biggs and his wife.

In May of 1903, Biggs was approached by a man troubled by McMahan's pursuits. He asked Biggs to write a letter to Sheriff R. B. Neighbors in Fort Stockton to complain about McMahan's reputation and reputed illegal activities and ask that another deputy be appointed. Biggs went one step further and added his own comments to the letter about the situation.



When Neighbors received the letter he sent it on to McMahan, who was incensed! It was probably at this point that he began to plot against Biggs.

Enlisting the aid of his shady friend, Ed Bell, McMahan asked him to help out. Bell was a bartender and pimp for McMahan's whores and was easily convinced. The attack would take place at the Post Office on the ground floor of Wilson's Hotel.

Biggs expected that there would be trouble. He knew that McMahan was prone to violence and his friends urged him to carry a pistol for protection. Biggs, a God-fearing, gentle man, did not own a gun but he acquired a pistol and prepared for the worst. As a precaution, he sent his wife and daughter away to visit family.

In the Sanderson of May, 1903, there were four passenger trains that stopped every day. The last train arrived about 9:00 p.m. and delivered the mail. Most town folks came to the depot for the arrival of all the trains, and especially head to the Post Office at the Wilson Hotel to pick up their mail. McMahan planned to be there with his liquored-up crony, Ed Bell, to settle their differences. Now, the trap was set.

Once at the post office, McMahan and Bell approached Biggs and asked him to step outside for a word. Once outside, McMahan asked if Biggs had sent the letter to Sheriff Neighbors. Biggs answered, yes, and with that remark McMahan struck Biggs in the face with his pistol. Bruised and bleeding, Biggs ran back into the store and sounded an alarm.

At this point, Bell and McMahan entered and lead began to fly. Ed Bell was struck multiple times and Biggs was hit four times, once in the back. With shaky aim, Biggs gave McMahan a flesh wound in the arm, then staggered forward and fell dead behind the counter.

Bell made it outside to the front porch of the hotel, where McMahan had already gone and exclaimed to his co-conspirator, "You are the cause of me getting killed!" Then, he fell dead at McMahan's feet.

Texas Rangers at Marathon were summoned and came to take care of the situation as circumstances demanded impartial law enforcement officers. When they arrived they took McMahan into custody for the murder of Scudder Biggs.

Meanwhile, the town was in shock. Biggs was a beloved and well respected member of the community, and though the town folk had grown accustomed to violence in their streets, the death of this good man was just too much.

Biggs would be sent to Runge, Texas, for burial and his body was prepared for transportation by train.

The morning for its departure was a sparkling spring day, the sky as clear as crystal, the surrounding mountains and canyon walls like cutouts propped against the cloudless blue sky.

But, the bright skies were obscured by dark clouds of grief. Pallbearers lifted the casket into the wagon and a crowd of small children, the professor's students gathered behind the wagon. Some of the smaller ones did not understand what was happening, but the older ones knew only too well that their beloved teacher and mentor was making his final journey, and they wept bitter tears.

The sad cortege moved slowly forward and the young ones and their elders followed silently. Bystanders removed their hats in sad salute as the great man who had taken a stand for righteousness passed by and into history.

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As for McMahan, he was tried, found guilty for his part in the brazen murder and received twenty years in the penitentiary. That ruling was overturned by the State Appeals Court and a retrial at Del Rio set him free. There was no proof that he had actually shot Biggs, even though eye-witness testimony placed him in front of the Wilson Hotel reloading his pistol after the event. God, however, would take care of that.

A few years later, McMahan and a friend were walking down the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks a few miles east of Separ, New Mexico in a driving rainstorm and were struck and dismembered by a passing freight train.

Decades later, long-time resident Bill Savage said this about McMahan: "Now if he had gone out and stolen a horse, or even a cow, they'd have hung him for sure. But like nowadays, murder was a mere misdemeanor."