

Museum News: In the Beginning...

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Men and women have come to the area of Terrell County, Texas for thousands of years. Paleo-Indian groups wandered throughout this unforgiving desert area, in ages lost to history. Subsisting on the sparse plants and animals and even sparser sources of water, they somehow thrived and survived. Living in caves, overhanging cliffs and brush lodges they followed game trails and gathered plants, seeds and fruits to augment their diets.

Some parts of our area, such as the Bonfire Shelter at Langtry, a bison-kill site, date from 9200 B. C. to 6000 B. C. This was a time when late Ice Age animals such as mammoth, bison, camels, horses and sloths were still in existence. But by about 8000 B. C. these creatures had disappeared. The climate became much drier and plant and animal populations changed to reflect the new environmental changes. It was a harsh place, but for the most part, the human settlers were unmolested for thousands of years.

Jumping ahead through the Archaic and the Late Prehistoric eras, we find a new development. As time progressed, the original population wandered through the huge area of the Trans Pecos, following the food as it came into season and hunting the animals they could find and subdue, much as they had always done. But at the beginning of the 18th century of the modern era new groups began to move into the area. The Apaches came first, followed by the Comanches. The old ones were forced out, assimilated or destroyed. The new cultures were hunters and traders and often very warlike. The relatively peaceful times of antiquity had changed.

With the movement of new native peoples into the area, there also came an influx of totally foreign invaders. The first European travelers entered the Terrell County area about 1535. Shipwrecked on the Texas coast, Cabeza de Vaca and his rag-tag stragglers were trying to get back to Mexico and the Spanish colonists. He passed to the south of the area and wandered on, seeking salvation and safety.

The following is a timeline of successive Spanish and Mexican incursions into the Terrell County area:

-1581 - Fray Augustin Rodriguez and two other Franciscan missionary priests, along with a contingent of nine soldiers, entered the area to explore for prospective converts. Their travels took them up into present-day New Mexico where they met martyrdom.

-1582 - Antonio de Espejo led an expedition to New Mexico and Arizona in search of Fray Rodriguez and the missing missionaries. Discovering their fate, the expedition marched east searching for riches, to the Pecos River, and passed through the Terrell County area in the Trans Pecos on their way to the confluence of the Rio Concho and the Rio Grande.

-1589 - Caspar Castaño de Sosa led an expedition through the Trans Pecos in search of a way to New Mexico. Accused of making an illegal incursion by Spanish authorities, he was caught and banished to the Philippines where he died at the hands of slave insurrectionists. Eventually his name was cleared, but posthumously.

-1683 - Captain Dominguez de Mendoza and his expedition are beleaguered by controversy. He undoubtedly saw more of Texas than any other explorer up to that point, but the exact areas of his travels are hard to pinpoint. He most certainly passed by the Terrell County/Trans Pecos area on his way to the San Angelo area and other spots, but the details are in conflict with historian views.

-1729 - Capt. José de Berroterán explored the southern border of the area, from Eagle Pass up to Ciudad Acuña and the Langtry area. Near Dryden it is said that he erected a large wooden cross. His expedition was declared a failure and he was charged by the governor of Parral with "laxity of duty."



Photo: Public Domain

-1735 - Blas María de la Garza Falcon had an illustrious military and political career. In his expedition to explore the area of Nueces County he found Berroterán's cross at Dryden and named the spot Santa Cruz de Maya.

After this period Spanish exploration seemed to bypass the Terrell County area. The next incursions into the area were led by American military explorers:

-1848 - Hays-Highsmith Expedition led by Captain John Coffee Hays with Texas Ranger Sam Highsmith tried to map a trade route between Chihuahua and New Orleans. In the Terrell County and Big Bend area the expedition almost starved to death, but they survived. They made recommendations to build a road through the Big Bend.

-1851 - Lt. Nathaniel Michler had a very illustrious career in the army as an officer, geographer and surveyor. Under Major William H. Emory he helped map the boundary between Mexico and the United States after the Mexican War. In his work he passed very close to present-day Sanderson.

-1856 - Lt. Edward Hartz made the first camel expedition through the Trans Pecos. Eventual abandonment of that project left wild camels roaming the area for years afterward.

-1859-60 – the U. S. Army conducts several camel experiments, with the Terrell County area being crossed by caravans of camels. The animals were being tested to see if they could traverse the area better than horses and mules.

-1860 - Brevet Major W. H. Echols leads a survey of the Comanche Trail with camels and mules, crossing through the Terrell County area. Part of the Comanche Trail passes very close to Terrell County, through Brewster County, just to the west.

After this period the Terrell County area and all of the Trans Pecos was hindered to settlement by hostile Apache and Comanche groups. Military trails skirted the heart of the Big Bend in their effort to connect to El Paso. From Del Rio the trail went up to Fort Clark at Brackettville, Fort Lancaster at Sheffield, Fort Stockton, Fort Davis and Fort Hancock. Sub-forts and encampments were scattered through the area at springs and waterholes, such as Camp Peña at Marathon and Camp Maxon at Maxon Springs, to prevent Indians from reaching water.

Not much success at controlling the Indians was made until Lieutenant John Lapham Bullis and his Seminole Scouts were brought into the area. By 1881, Bullis and his "Black Watch" soldiers had cleared the area and settlers could finally venture in to make ranches and homestead the land.

But Indians were not the only inhabitants of the Trans Pecos. Shortly after the Spanish and the Mexican government began sending expeditions into the area, Mexican settlers drifted across the Rio Grande to take up fertile land along the scarce rivers and streams and engage in subsistence farming. Many of those folks were Native American/Mexican mix and in that respect, the Native Americans were not driven out.

Real settlement began in earnest when the Southern Pacific/Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad pushed through in 1882. As water stops were created every eight miles for the little iron horses, workers had to move to those places to maintain the track, water and equipment. Those places needed services for the inhabitants to survive and the more important areas such as Marfa, Alpine, Marathon and Sanderson began to become centers of commerce. With the arrival of sheep and cattle ranches more services were needed to take care of the blossoming populations. And so, the beginnings of Sanderson and Terrell County may be shrouded in the ancient past, but a steady march of progress into the future had begun.