

# Museum News: When Automobiles Came to Terrell County

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Since Terrell is such a young county, it was a part of Pecos County when automobiles as we know them were invented. [Inventor.about.com](http://Inventor.about.com) says the first self-propelled vehicle was a steam-driven military tractor invented in France in 1769. Most developments in automobile technology up to the turn of the 20th century were made on experimental vehicles, and there were few commercial autos available.

*Panhard and Lavosser, Peugeot, Daimler and Benz* produced the first commercial autos in Europe, but the *Duryea Brothers* built the first gasoline-powered commercial vehicles in the US in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1893.

Contrary to popular belief, Henry Ford did not invent the automobile assembly line (that was Ransome Eli Olds) but he took it to new heights and through clever marketing made automobiles successful and popular. He built his first vehicle, the “quadricycle,” in 1896, but his most successful auto was the *Model T*, introduced in 1908.

Terrell County was born into a modern world in 1905. Wright Flyers soared through the skies, cities were lighting up with electric bulbs, gigantic oil-fired steam locomotives plied the rails, making the older models look like clanking tea kettles, and the roads and trails began to see horseless carriages flitting to and fro. And, of course, affluent Sanderson citizens just had to have the new marvels.

Just who owned the first car in Terrell County is a matter of some controversy in the pages of the Terrell County history book. Since the articles were written and submitted by the families themselves, each one thought they had the first car.

High school student Anna Lee Allen, who won an award in 1936 for her history of Terrell County, says the first auto in Sanderson was owned by rancher N. H. Corder. He brought it in from San Antonio, along with a man to teach Mr. Corder how to drive it and make repairs when it broke down.

Early resident Isabel C. Hunter remembered that the first automobiles were owned by Sheriff Doc Anderson and rancher Henry Mansfield. She remembered that Anderson owned a *Model T Ford* and the Mansfields owned a larger, heavier *Buick*. Not to be outdone, her father bought a *Saxon*.

Mrs. Jim Kerr remembered that when she and Mr. Kerr first came to Sanderson, Mr. J. W. Happle met their train. She remembered that he and Mr. Ed McGinley had the only automobiles in Sanderson.

Charlena Vargas-Prada, in her history of the Chandler family, recalled that Charley Chandler bought a *Model-T Ford*, one of the first autos in the county. When he bragged to a friend that he had zoomed from his ranch to Sanderson at a dizzying twenty-five miles per hour, his friend lectured him, saying, "You're going to kill yourself, Charley. God didn't intend man to travel that fast."

Sanderson old-timer Arthur W. Murray also remembered that automobiles were scarce in the early days. He thought that C.A. Downie owned one of the first autos in the county, driving in from the ranch every Saturday to attend church on Sunday. Charles Downie II owned the first motorcycle, a bright red *Indian*. A.D. Brown owned another. Murray also believed that J. W. Happle was an early day car-owner. He remembered them having a *Dodge* touring car, but Mary Alice Happle Townsend insisted their first car was a *Jackson*.

She also remembered vividly that you had to make special preparations to go “joyriding.” The open cars of the day provided minimal protection from the elements. All automobilists were required to wear dusters...long white or beige jackets akin to lab coats...to protect clothing from dust and dirt. Goggles were also required, since some autos had no windshield. And, hats also were a necessity, but, then, everyone wore hats in those days. Ladies used long scarves to tie down their flamboyant hats to prevent them from sailing out into the pasture. Some early photos show passengers looking like mummies, swathed in their scarves, mufflers, dusters and protective gear.

Now that automobiles were common on the dusty trails and cow paths around Sanderson, the need for repairmen immediately became evident.

Almost from the beginning, the local blacksmith shop received business from those wanting car repairs. Mr. Tom Mayes was a skilled blacksmith and an inveterate tinkerer. Very soon he came up to speed on the early, simple



1921 Ford Model T Coupe with “suicide” doors and grey cloth upholstery. Came with starter and demountable wheels, but speedometer was optional. Cost: \$745.00, F.O.B. Detroit

engines, and body repairs were similar to the wagons he had been repairing for years. His shop was located across from Javelina Hill, at Wilson and Oak.

According to Reuben Mussey's daughter-in-law, he and his brother, Cap, moved to Sanderson and opened a blacksmith shop that specialized in automobile mechanics. They also opened the first *Ford* dealership in Terrell County. But in those days you couldn't buy a model from the showroom floor...in fact, there was no showroom. The first *Model Ts* were selected from a catalog and had to be shipped by rail in sub-assemblies. The Mussey brothers built them up from a pile of parts, piece by piece, nut by bolt.

Later they went into partnership with Bill Ferguson, until their shop was demolished and the new Princess Theatre was put up in its place in 1929. The Musseys moved on, but Ferguson had already built a new *Ford* dealership just west of Kerr Mercantile.

Soon, service stations were built and many talented mechanics called Sanderson home through the years. Some of those early mechanics were Tom Mayes, Reuben and Cap Mussey, the Farley brothers...Dan, Van, Ray and Ernest and bro-in-law Harry Nutter, John Montgomery, Jim Nance, Montie Wallace and Dalton Hogg, to name a few, but there were many more.