

Museum News: The Beanery

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

One of the establishments in Sanderson that is remembered the most frequently was the Beanery, the restaurant found in the depot. The depot of the GH&SA was completed in 1885, according to the 1885 company report of the Southern Pacific Railroad, parent of the GH&SA. From the beginning Sanderson was designated an eating stop for the passengers of the trains that passed through frequently.

Until about 1920, dining cars on the passenger trains of the SP were infrequent, so eating houses had to be maintained along the route to take care of customers' needs. Some smaller items could be purchased on the trains from wandering salesmen known as candy butchers, along with cigars, cigarettes, newspapers and early magazines, but for a full meal the passenger had to depart from the train and eat at a depot restaurant. It was a system developed on railroads across the United States, and one of the more famous establishments was the Harvey House on the Santa Fe, which seemed to set the standard for railroad restaurants and hotels.

On the Southern Pacific the first restaurants were operated by the very Chinese who helped build the railroad. They generally served American food and were accomplished cooks and managers. The system worked for decades but the Chinese "problem" began to raise its ugly head as "real" Americans resented the influx of Chinese immigrants. Complaints, whether warranted or due to simply hear-say racism, began to build to the point that business for the depot restaurants was failing in some areas. The railroad decreed that as of July 15, 1900, all Chinese managers and employees would be sacked and "Americans" employed in all positions. At this point, certain businesses sprang up to manage the railroad restaurants, including the Brown News, which ran the restaurants and sold sundries aboard the trains.

The first public mention of the Sanderson depot restaurant was from a short 1885 news article about a killing at the Sanderson station. A Mr. Fox, who managed the restaurant, got into a scuffle with his newly-hired German cook. Ugly remarks were made and threats exchanged. Later in the day Mr. Fox was walking behind the depot and the German cook charged out the back door with a pistol saying that he he would kill Mr. Fox, anyway. Fox drew his own pistol and fired, but the pistol misfired. The second shot hit the cook in the lungs and as he turned to run back into the building, a third shot hit him in the head, killing him instantly. A hastily-called jury of railroad workers and bystanders was assembled and the death was ruled self-defense.

At some point in the next few years the Chinese took over the restaurant and things ran smoothly until they were summarily fired and Brown News took over. Most of the early accounts in the Terrell County history book mention the Chinese running the restaurant. They also ran a restaurant that was located behind the Wilson Hotel in a long, adobe building.

Brown News ran the depot restaurant, which at some point became christened "The Beanery," until 1914 when they were absorbed by the Van Noy Railway Hotel and News Company and the Brown News name was dropped. From 1914 until 1917 the name remained the same, then the name changed to Van Noy Interstate News Company and the official name of the Beanery was the Van Noy Interstate Restaurant. Locals, however, still called it the Beanery.

Eventually Van Noy expanded into other areas, especially hotels, and became the Host Marriot Corporation, a name quite well known today.

From the 1920s through the 1950s the Beanery thrived. As dining cars were added to the passenger trains railroad business began to drop off, but locals and railroad employees frequented the place.



Travelers gathered in front of the Beanery entrance, about 1920.



But in its hey-day, the Beanery was a very busy place when passenger trains arrived. Crowds of people would gang up in front of the Beanery entrance and early in its history a fence was put up to control the pushing and shoving crowds. In the early days something that angered women travelers was that the dining room was reserved for men only. Proper women were thought not to want to mingle with men while eating, so they could order food but had to eat standing up. And that was not all. The dining room was segregated into three areas...an area for whites, one for blacks and one for Mexicans. But as society moved into the age of integration those rules were removed.

The Beanery was a great source of employment for local youths. Before labor rules were instituted, youngsters could wash dishes and bus tables, and many of the teenagers of the town worked as waiters (hashers, as they were known) and waitresses (Beanery Queens.) Many young people's first job was at the Beanery.

Meals were quite good and very inexpensive. The Sanderson Times for March 18, 1938 advertised a meal featuring tomato and rice soup, cottage cheese and pineapple salad, celery hearts, stuffed olives, barbecued spring chicken, green beans, snowflake potatoes, ice cream, tea or coffee for 90 cents. A Christmas special in the Sanderson Times for December 9, 1938, featured chicken dinner every Sunday for 40 cents. And considering the American penchant for large portions, they were probably hefty servings.

As passenger business slowed down in the 1950s the railroads began to look for a way out of providing the service. The freight business was much more lucrative. By the 1960s passenger trains had grown shorter and trucks were carrying mail and express freight. In 1970 the U. S. government formed Amtrak and the railroads donated their passenger equipment to the new corporation. By this time the Beanery had moved from the depot and was operating up the street in the brick building built by Dr. Hudson just after the turn of the century, between the Terrell County Tax Office and the St. Francis Hotel. But, it was no longer the same standard and the Beanery disappeared.

In this day and age nothing is left of the depot but a vacant lot. It is hard to believe that for many years the depot was the heart of Sanderson, with huge flocks of town folks turning out to gawk at passengers as they detrained to run to the Beanery for a quick bite. Pictures from the period show life pulsing around the depot as people of all ages wandered about the property, gathering the latest news and sharing gossip. The train yard was full of men working on the cars, pounding on steel at the roundhouse or switching crews shuffling cars around to build train consists, the steam engines chuffing and breathing fire and smoke, the hiss of escaping steam punctuating the air. And when the engineers blasted their whistles to announce the departure of a crack express, the crowds invariably jumped a foot off the ground, not expecting such a loud noise from the bellowing beasts. Gone...all gone...just a cherished memory for those who can remember it.



Curley Banks and Mom Clymer standing in front of the Beanery entrance.