

Museum News: Jack and Sydney McKee

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

People who grew up in Sanderson in the 1920s-30s-40s-50s-60s and attended Sanderson High School remember with great fondness and affection one of the most memorable teachers in the school's history...Sybil McKee Savage. By all accounts she was a stern disciplinarian, ever maintaining order and decorum in her classroom, but she was beloved as a kind-hearted mentor of many generations of students. But this story is not about Sybil Savage...it is about her father, "Jack" McKee.

Jackson Walker McKee was born in Limestone County, Texas, at a place called Tehuacana, home of Trinity University at the time. Jack attended Trinity one year, and then the family, along with his father's brother, moved to Crockett County and Ozona to start a ranch.

It was at Ozona that Jack made the acquaintance of a rancher's daughter, Sydney Overstreet, and a romance ensued. She completed high school in the spring of 1898 and on September 21, 1898, they were married. Sybil, their oldest, was born in 1899 and Myrl, their second and last child, was born in 1901 while they lived on the Crockett County ranch.

In 1905 the little family moved to a place in Edwards County and Sydney taught her girls at home for a while, but soon, they took a town house in Rocksprings and the ladies moved to town. Not able to bear the loneliness on the ranch by himself, Jack sold the place and moved to town.

Looking for another trade rather than ranching, Jack happened upon J. C. Stansell of Sanderson, local depot agent of the railroad but owner of Sanderson's first telephone company. Stansell was ready to sell the telephone company and Jack was the man. In 1914 the deal was closed and the McKees moved to Sanderson to take over the business.

Sydney was not one bit happy about moving to Sanderson. Her parents got a ranch outside of Sanderson when Sybil and Myrl were just babies, and rented the Jim Kerr home, across the street from the future Kerr Mercantile building, which at the time was still Boozer's Boarding House. Jack took Sydney and the girls to Comstock and put them on the train for a visit, which turned out to be a nightmare. During the first night, drunken cowboys rode through town shooting out windows and firing on street lights, which were simple kerosene lamps mounted on cedar posts. Sydney and the Overstreets were terrified and did not sleep. The next day a dead body was seen across the street from the Overstreet's home and lay there too long for Sydney's sensibilities. Then, to top it off, a train robbery east of Sanderson resulted in two dead rain robbers being displayed publicly at the depot. Sydney was horrified and did not even want to ride the train back to Comstock, so Jack had to come across country to pick them up and she vowed never to set foot in Sanderson again. Now, 1914, here she was, moving to Sanderson!

After a difficult start, Sydney and Jack and their little family settled into living quarters in a house that was located between today's Sanderson Bank and the Sanderson Tire Center. The telephone equipment was moved from the Stansell home on Persimmon, the two-storey across from the medical clinic, and business continued as usual.

For several years the family ran the business with Jack taking care of the technical aspect and Sydney and the girls and a host of Sanderson girls running the switchboard.



*Jack McKee, rancher,
1898*



*Sydney and Jack McKee and
little Sybil. 1901*

In 1925 Jack and Sybil decided to sell the phone company. Jack went to work for the railroad and remained for 12 years until his untimely death in 1937. A tooth extraction resulted in an infection, lockjaw set in and he died at the age of 61. Modern antibiotics were invented the next year, but not in time to save Jack McKee.

Sydney continued in Sanderson, pursuing her interests and supporting many organizations. She and Jack were members of the Eastern Star and Jack was a Blue Lodge Mason, a member of the York Rite, a Royal Arch Mason and a Knight Templar, associated with the Alpine Commandery. He also was an elder in the Presbyterian Church, and superintendent of the Presbyterian Sunday School. He was a gifted singer and sang in the church choir.

Sydney was active in the Presbyterian Church and the community and was the principal leader in a fund-raising program to build a Sunday school addition to the new church. She was charter member of the Women's Auxiliary of the church, and also charter member of the Culture Club and a mainstay of the PTA and the Mother's Club. She taught Sunday school at the church until a few months before her death in 1960.

Early in her marriage Sydney became interested in photography and ordered a kit and camera to take pictures and then develop them in her own darkroom. Through the years she amassed a treasure of glass plate negatives from her hobby, all lovingly developed by her hand. She was also interested in sewing and volunteered for the Red Cross, especially in sewing projects for the boys in the service and for those in need. She also volunteered in the Tuberculosis Christmas Seal program and the Sanderson Cemetery Association. Through her efforts and those of other members Cedar Grove Cemetery was expanded and modernized with fencing, plantings and curbing.

The McKees valued education and were great supporters of the school system. That was carried through at home and their daughters both attended university and became teachers of English, much to the delight of generations of students.

The Jack McKee family exemplified public service. They gave freely of their time and money to support the town and its organizations and were able champions of the education of its children. Through the efforts of two generations they made this a better place to live and left many lasting memories among the younger generations. They were true pioneers.



Myrl and Sybil McKee