

Museum News: Tex O'Reilly and the Rio Grande Coyote

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Sanderson history has an unending supply of interesting characters who came and went or settled for life here. From all walks of life and every type of background, both good and bad, they came here to make their home. The lack of law enforcement in its early years and the extreme remoteness of its location made it an ideal hideout for those wishing to drop from public sight. But only a few were of bad character, especially after Terrell County was organized and a new sheriff came to town.

Some folks came to escape a bad situation at home. Serapio Perez had been a lieutenant in Villa's army of insurrectionists, one of the general's favorites, his "El Minuto." But he grew tired of the barbarity of the revolution and feared for the safety of his family. In 1914 he immigrated to the US to escape his sordid Soldier of Fortune past and ended up in Sanderson as an assistant shoe repairman at Ross Blackwelder's shoe shop. Few people knew his history, and his quiet and peaceful demeanor gave no indication of the horrific atrocities and battles he had seen.

And then there were the wild and rowdy guys, such as the Reagan Brothers, who had a mean reputation and all kinds of schemes and shenanigans going at any one time. Their search for the Lost N___ Mine will go down in the annals of folklore, both by the true facts and by the invented tales that cloak that interesting story.

Character after character came and went through our history, making life for the historian very interesting and making an unending supply of stories available

Perhaps one of the most interesting characters who came to Sanderson was a man named Edward Sinnott "Tex" O'Reilly, who moved to Sanderson in 1910 with his wife and two sons to publish a magazine called the *Rio Grande Coyote*. He was born in Texas but reared in Chicago.

Publisher was just the latest of his job descriptions. He had spent years as a mercenary, first as a professional soldier in the US Army serving in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and in the Philippines in the Philippine - American War, and then as a bona fide mercenary in the foreign armies of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Honduras. For a time, he ran an English language school for young men in Kobe, Japan, then crossed the Sea of Japan to China where he became an international policeman in Shanghai. In that turbulent time in China, just after the Boxer Rebellion, he was asked to train a Chinese police force in western military technique. He won the admiration of the Chinese government and plans were made to train an army. But, he decided to come back to the US and get away from the impending war. He also claimed participation in the Rif War in North Africa with the Spanish Foreign Legion and rode with Pancho Villa in the Mexican Revolution. During this time, he reported on the hostilities for the Associated Press. It was in this period that he won promotion to "major" and used that title or "captain" for the rest of his life.

He joined the Mexican Revolution while living in Sanderson in 1911, participating in an expedition into Mexico from Comstock, Texas, with 17 local Sanderson men. They succeeded in holding off 150 federales and rurales in a battle just across the river south of Comstock, losing only one man and inflicting many casualties on the opposing force.

O'Reilly had come to Sanderson to recuperate in the arid environment from a pernicious and stubborn case of malaria acquired while fighting in the tropics. They lived on a small ranch outside of town and he used the publication of the Coyote as a sideline to occupy his time. The few copies he published in the fall of 1910 were well accepted among area editors and appear to be very entertaining, even though no copies have turned up. He served in several capacities in the Mexican Revolution and in close relation to Villa and his generals and witnessed many of the battles first hand. He also served again as an AP correspondent during that time.

After the battle in Mexico in January of 1911 he decided to move his publishing operations to Alpine to use the local print shop as his printer. Shortly after that he removed from Alpine and went back to San Antonio where he got into the newspaper business working for the *San Antonio Express* and the *San Antonio Light*. His Mexican contacts along the border enabled him to continue reporting for AP on the Mexican Revolution.



Around 1915 O'Reilly came back to the US from a tour of duty in Mexico. Tiring of the life of a peripatetic reporter, he decided to stay home and write fiction. He published a book of his supposed true mercenary experiences, covering his time in Cuba up until he returned from Mexico in 1915.

In 1918 he took a different tack and submitted a set of tales featuring Pecos Bill, which he said were gathered from cowboys on the range. In truth, he had invented it all, getting the name from one of his former commanders, General William Shafter, commander of the expedition to Cuba, namesake of Shafter, Texas, and called "Pecos Bill" by his men, Century Magazine published the stories in a series, then collected them together in 1923, and they were wildly popular. Other authors added to the tales, but the core stories were written by O'Reilly.

In the basic story invented by O'Reilly, Pecos Bill was born in Texas and while still a baby his family decided to move by covered wagon to New Mexico Territory. When they neared the Pecos River, Bill fell out of the wagon and was lost to his family. He was found by a pack of coyotes who adopted him and raised him as a coyote. A few years later his brother came and found him and had a time convincing him that he was human and not a coyote. Eventually, he acquired the name Pecos Bill and lived a series of very improbable adventures, including riding a cyclone and using a ten-foot long rattlesnake as a lariat. He was married many times, but his favorite wife was Slue Foot Sue, who he found riding a catfish down the Rio Grande. She wanted to ride his horse, Widowmaker, who would only let Pecos Bill ride him. She climbed on and he bucked her off so hard that she landed on her steel spring bustle and bounced higher and higher until she bounced off the moon. Bill couldn't stop her from bouncing so he put her out of her misery, so she wouldn't starve to death. The story went on and on and other writers added to the tale. The public devoured every story that came out.

In the 1930s O'Reilly and his wife, Sophie, moved to upper state New York and went into semi-retirement. Their youngest son came to live with them but soon passed away. Their oldest son and his family lived nearby. Major Tex O'Reilly passed away at Saranac Lake, NY on December 8, 1946, and is buried with his wife and son in the Pine Ridge Cemetery at Saranac Lake.