

Museum News: Charlie Wilson, Father of Sanderson, part 1

By CW (Bill) Smith

Cyrus M. "Uncle Charlie" Wilson was born in Fleming County, Kentucky, in June of 1847, but spent his childhood in Paris, Edgar County, Illinois, where his father was a blacksmith. Charlie's father, Andrew Wilson, was born in Fleming County, KY and his mother, May, in Faquier County, Virginia. He had a brother and two sisters, and a half sister from his mother's first marriage. Paris was a sleepy farming community on the Illinois-Indiana border, and his father was a very busy man. Being raised in a blacksmith shop, Charlie learned skills that stood him well in later life.



"UNCLE CHARLIE" WILSON - *Cyrus M. "Uncle Charlie" Wilson, as he was affectionately known by the citizens of Terrell County, was a man, larger than life. Breeding pug dogs was his hobby and he often gave them away as gifts.*

At the start of the Civil War Charlie was far too young to enlist, but as soon as he looked old enough he enlisted as a Private in Company H of the 64th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, 1st Battalion, Yates' Sharp Shooters, on February 3, 1864, at the tender age of sixteen. He fought in battles and skirmishes in Alabama and Tennessee, where his battalion joined with Sherman's army in its siege of Atlanta. During the conflict he was wounded twice, once in the left hand and once in the throat, but the wounds were not serious and he continued to fight. His regiment marched across the south, finishing the fighting at Bentonville NC. He and his company mustered out on July 11, 1865. During his time of service he attained the rank of Corporal. Here his military record ends.

After the war Charlie soon immigrated to West Texas to begin the life of a frontiersman. Although some writers have stated that Charlie was a soldier at Fort Concho and Camp Peña Colorado south of Marathon, there is no record of his re-enlistment. The 1880 Census for Presidio County, Texas, however, shows that he was a bartender in Fort Davis. This was during the Buffalo Soldier years at the Fort so it is unlikely that he was soldier at that time, and he does not show up on the roster of officers of the period. At any rate, he lived and was a well known character in West Texas from the earliest post-war days.

In the early 1880s, the Southern Pacific Railroad in the west and the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad in the east were building a new, all-weather southern transcontinental rail route, which was scheduled to meet at some location in southern Pecos County. In that period Pecos County was huge, encompassing present-day Terrell, Val Verde and Pecos Counties.

Charlie got wind of the surveyors' plans and was shrewd enough to figure out that a division point would be located roughly half-way between San Antonio and El Paso. Studying the lay of the land, he decided that the natural bowl in the topography where present-day Sanderson, Texas, sits was a natural spot for a town. He hurried to purchase all the available land in the area.

The first thing Charlie built was a saloon to serve the thirsty rail crews when they got to town, some 3,000-strong. This won him the everlasting enmity of the Southern Pacific Railroad. For the next thirty years they waged an ongoing feud, in which he usually gained the upper hand.

Tales of his exploits with the railroad were widely known and enjoyed in the small, growing community. When the railroad arrived they found that they had to purchase property from him on which to build the depot, roundhouse,

crew bunkhouse and other company buildings. Everywhere else the company received over 16 million square miles of property from the states as they passed through, but here, they had to buy a few acres, and it was very irritating to them.

On top of that, he (and the whole town) often swiped wood, coal and water from the railroad's huge stockpile. It is theorized that most of the town located on the south side of the tracks, just for that very purpose. Soon the railroad banned building on the south side and forced people to relocate to the present position.

And then there were the property line disputes. The railroad re-surveyed their property by the depot and found that Charlie's Cottage Bar Saloon was sitting partially on railroad property. Charlie didn't dispute the fact, but when they demanded he close his saloon, he got his own surveyors and found that the last two stalls of the roundhouse sat on his property. He proceeded to close the Cottage Bar and move his operations to the last two stalls of the roundhouse. He stood his ground until top officials with the railroad came to make a deal allowing him to retain his Cottage Bar Saloon in exchange for their roundhouse stalls.

Then there was the time that Roy Bean moved to town to open a competing saloon. In the night Charlie sent someone to spike Bean's whiskey barrel with kerosene. The next day, one taste sent Bean's customers (and Bean) away. He and Charlie remained friends, but always at arm's length. They continually bested each other in a series of pranks and deals. This escapade earned Sanderson the name, "Town Too Mean for Bean."

(Story concludes in the next edition.)