

Museum News: Frank Oswald – The Best Saloon in Sanderson

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Life is filled with drama. Some folks seem to attract more drama than others. Such was the case of our early pioneers in Terrell County. We look back and think of a person by their name and by their achievements, but we forget that they were human beings, as well, with many good things and a few bad things happening in their lives. Frank A. Oswald, early day Terrell County saloonkeeper and mercantile operator is a good example.

Oswald ran one of the nicer saloons in early day Sanderson. Willie Banner was very impressed with the establishment. In an interview in Terrell County Its Past Its People (Anchor Press, 1976,) he said, "It was the nicest one in town, that old Frenchman kept his bar highly polished -- you could eat off of it... He really had it fixed up, too. There were large brass lamps hanging from the ceiling and the bar was one of the prettiest in the area... It was a busy place in those days, I went there frequently. It closed with prohibition and never opened again."



Although not identified, this early day saloon in Sanderson is thought to be Frank Oswald's establishment, according to some, the best in Sanderson. That is probably Frank in the suspenders, behind the bar.

Photo: Terrell County Museum

Banner was mistaken about Oswald, though. He was not French, but of German heritage. Frank A. Oswald was born in Bryan, Texas, in October of 1857, according to the 1880 Bryan census. Oswald was the son of Alexander and Lena Oswald, Austrian and Prussian immigrants. In a time of large families, Oswald only had one sister, Amelia, and no brothers. In the 1880 census his father is listed as a blacksmith, and twenty-year old Frank was listed as a wheelwright, probably apprenticing with his father in the family business, building and repairing wagon and buggy wheels.

It is unclear when Frank married, but probably around 1890 in San Antonio. Clara Besing Oswald was born in 1874 in Texas. Her early history is cloudy. Her father was Henry Besing and her mother was Nannie, and the Besing name is the German word for blueberry or huckleberry. She was one of seven children, four sons and three daughters. Their lives centered in the Lampasas area, but her married life was in San Antonio, where their children were born.

Frank and Clara had a son, Louie, and two daughters, Lena and Beatrice. Their marriage was filled with strife and by about 1896 they were separated, with Frank taking the boy and Clara keeping the little girls, who were two and five at the time.

According to property tax rolls, Frank had bought property in 1891 in the failed county of Buchel, now part of Brewster County. He held the property until 1896, mostly a town lot in Marathon with one horse and two cows. He probably had entered into the mercantile business, but Marathon was too small to support the several stores already there. When he and Clara separated, he took his son and moved to Sanderson in the late 1890s.

Clara had such difficulty with working and trying to raise her daughters that she was forced to put them for a time in the St. Joseph Orphan Asylum in San Antonio. They are listed as inmates in the orphanage in the 1900 San Antonio census. It was not for long, however, as Clara married George C. Haseltine of Fort Stockton about 1903 and the family was reunited and living in Fort Stockton, where George had a number of jobs, including being a deputy sheriff and running an abstract office. According to newspapers of the time, Lena and Beatrice often visited their father and brother in Sanderson. At Fort Stockton, Lena retained the Oswald name, whereas Beatrice went by her stepfather's surname.

Life in Sanderson was very successful for Oswald. He opened a saloon but also ran a small grocery on the side. He ran a first class establishment with the best equipment and decorations, and it became a very popular place.

In June of 1910, Louie enlisted in the U. S. Navy and was gone for the next five years. In those years Frank continued alone in Sanderson, operating his businesses. By 1914 Frank began to suffer from health problems. In June of 1914 he went to El Paso for surgery, and just a few days later, while recovering, he contracted pneumonia and died on September 4, 1914. He was buried at Cedar Grove in Sanderson, but his grave and marker were lost in the 1965 flood. In the next year, Louie left the Navy and came back to Sanderson to run his father's business.

In the meantime, Beatrice married Isaac L. Curry, a barber and professional chauffeur, at the Methodist Church in Fort Stockton in 1911. She was to suffer a failed marriage as well and in a few years she was back living with her parents, bringing with her a daughter, Phyllis. Beatrice got busy and went to secretarial school and got a good job to support herself, but Phyllis remained with her grandparents.

In 1917, Lena married Hubert McGee of Houston. She also had attended secretarial school and became the principal legal secretary for the largest law firm in Texas, relocating to Fort Worth, Texas in 1912. Her marriage produced two children, Doris and Jack in 1918 and 1920. But, she and Hubert divorced and she fell back on her job to support her and her children. She ended her career working for the Department of Justice in Fort Worth. She died in Fort Worth in 1949 and is buried at Greenwood Cemetery in that city.

Clara continued in Fort Stockton until George died in 1937. She had custody of her granddaughter Phyllis, who finished school in Fort Stockton and went out into the world. In 1954 Clara moved to Amarillo where she had two brothers living, and she died there in 1956 and is buried at the Llano Cemetery in Potter County, Texas.

Louie Oswald made a try at running his father's saloon when he came back from the Navy in 1916, but national events put him out of business. The Zone Law passed by the state legislature in 1916 closed all the saloons in Sanderson when Army troops were stationed at Baxter's Curve, eight miles east of town. The law forced closure of any saloon 10 miles from an army installation. They opened briefly when the troops left a few months later, but the Prohibition Act of 1918 closed the saloons again until the 1930s. Louie shut his father's business down, sold the property and contents and moved to California, where he had been stationed in the Navy in past years.

Living in San Francisco where he worked as an auto insurance investigator, he met and married Miss Miriam Lloyd in 1927, a girl born in Idaho to Welsh and English parents. They had at least one child, a girl, and spent the rest of their lives in California. Louie died in San Francisco in 1966 without a male heir. Their Oswald family name ended with Louie.

Sanderson and Terrell County were wide open when Frank Oswald moved here in the late 1890s. There were at least five other saloons here when Frank arrived, maybe as many as nine, but he opened another and made a great success of it. However, when you meet someone in a public place you have no idea what is going on in their lives. Frank and Clara had a trying relationship that eventually failed. Their children were submitted to unhappy times until more stable people entered their lives. Though their story sounds like a soap opera and they experienced things that most people never see, they survived and made something out of their lives. That is the story of all folks who move to Sanderson. We come, we stay and we make something that endures. We may have to start over again or make some major changes, but we survive. That is the pioneer spirit.