

Museum News: George Fenley – First Sheriff of Terrell County

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

The early families that moved to Sanderson sometimes went beyond their family duties and served for the public good. When Sanderson was founded, it soon had problems with lawlessness. The first murder in Sanderson occurred in 1883. It was all downhill from that point on. Rowdy cowboys would shoot up the tiny village, rustlers and outlaws walked the streets with impunity. Much lascivious behavior took place in the saloons and bawdy houses. Sanderson was a bad, bad place, where women could not walk the streets unchaperoned.

Finally, the Pecos County Sheriff had to find someone who was willing to come to Sanderson and uphold the law. Sometimes his deputies were as bad as the outlaws. "Nice" families moved to town and were appalled by the lawless behavior. Businessmen realized that if the town was to survive, the law must be enforced.

Since the Pecos County Sheriff was not too concerned about his constituents in Sanderson, a hue and cry arose to separate Sanderson and its surrounding area from Pecos County and form its own county. Encouraged when other places like Pecos City and Del Rio divorced themselves from the sprawling Pecos County, the county citizens waged a successful battle to declare their independence from Pecos County, and the County of Terrell was born. One of the most important acts of business was to elect a Sheriff who was tough enough to mete out justice and rid the town of its bad reputation. That man was George Fenley, a local rancher who had lived in the area since about 1898.

George and his brother Jim came to the area driving a herd of cattle from their home in Uvalde. They proceeded down to the Rio Grande and set up a ranch with their headquarters near the confluence of the Rio Grande and Maxon Creek in southwest Terrell County. Those early years were hard because the only water available was in the Rio Grande, and high cliffs on the banks of the river made driving the cows to water very difficult. There was little surface water to speak of, and springs were few and far between.

But, the Fenley brothers had an ace up their sleeves. They had a fourteen year-old brother named Guy who had won fame throughout the country as the "Boy with X-Ray Eyes." On a dark night he could wander through the country and see rivers of water under the ground. He had been examined by doctors and scientists but no one could explain this uncanny ability, or deny that he was very successful at finding water. He went down to the ranch and found enough spots to drill wells to provide all the water his brothers needed.

In 1900 George moved his wife and children to Sanderson. He built a small cottage in town where they could stay during the school year, and move to the ranch for the summer. George's brother Jim did most of the work on the ranch, handling the cowboys and overseeing the cattle. George became more involved with affairs in Sanderson, making many friends and building everyone's confidence in him as a tough man with high morals and a strong work ethic.

When the county was organized in 1905, an election for county officers was set for November. George's friends convinced his to run as the first sheriff of Terrell County. In 1902 he was elected as a county commissioner of Pecos County, and he easily won the election as sheriff, even though he really had no experience with law enforcement. He was a quick study and soon chased the outlaws and bad guys out of town. It was a difficult and dangerous job because some of the bad guys needed encouragement to leave, and it took two more sheriffs and the Prohibition Act to finally bring law and order to Sanderson. Seeing that law enforcement really took too much time from ranching, George served one term, and in 1906 he refused to stand for re-election.

By 1906, George had decided to stay in Sanderson and only went to the ranch occasionally, leaving Jim in full control. George expanded their home on Hackberry and began to pursue other opportunities. His wife, Almeda, had been busy as well, and provided five sons and four daughters. The children were Oran (who died in infancy),



Photo: TC Museum

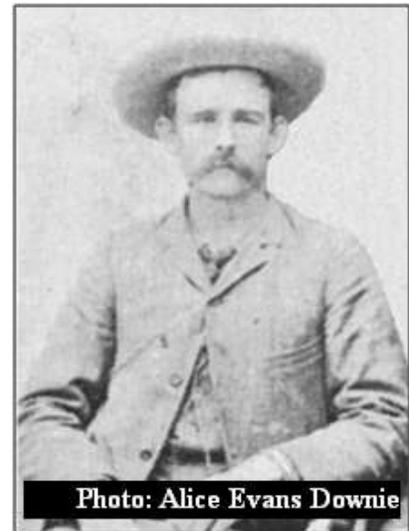


Photo: Alice Evans Downie

Pinkney, Izora, Laura, Georgia, James (who also died in infancy,) Joel and Margaret (twins) and John. By 1911, the house was full of children.

In those years George pursued other lines of business, including fence building, as a contractor providing guayule plants for the rubber factory in Marathon and undertaking. Several folks in the Terrell County history book talked about sneaking a peak in the shed behind the Fenley home to see the coffins that were stacked up for storage.

In researching the family tree, the Fenleys had a surprising family lineage. George's family traced back to Irish royalty in the 4th century, and immigrating to Scotland. In the 11th century, when surnames were adopted across Europe, the Fenley name began as MacFindlaich. At the end of the 11th century the name was anglicized to McFinlay and by the 16th century the name was changed to Finley.

In the middle of the 17th century the family immigrated to Virginia in the colonies. They moved to South Carolina and the name was changed to Fenley. In the early 19th century the family moved to Georgia, where George's father, Joel Clinton Fenley, was born. In the 1850s Joel moved to Texas where he married and remained for life on a ranch in Sabinal Canyon in the Uvalde, Texas area. He and his wife are buried in the Uvalde Cemetery.

George was born to Joel and Margaret Fenley in 1856 and spent his early years in Uvalde on the family ranch. He married Sarah Almeda Elizabeth Ware at Uvalde in 1890. Almeda's family can be traced back to 16th century English gentry. In the 17th century they immigrated to Ireland, but soon immigrated to Virginia. From there they moved to Georgia, and in the early 19th century moved to Uvalde, Texas, where she and George were married in 1890. George and his brother Jim moved to Pecos County (Sanderson) around 1899 and George's family was left in Uvalde. By 1910 he had moved his family to Terrell County (Sanderson) where most of the children were born, and remained there for some time. In 1929 they moved to Nogales, Arizona where he died and was buried on June 28, 1940. Almeda died in Tucson, Arizona, in 1943 and is buried in the Nogales Cemetery by her husband's side.

You really have no idea that a person may have an illustrious family history that stretches back a thousand years. We only see their behavior as we have experienced them locally. George Fenley was a noble man from noble ancestors. It was noble men and women who built Terrell County and Sanderson, and the Fenley brothers and their families are outstanding examples of that nobility.