

Museum News: Robert Paxton – One of the Big Four

By CW (Bill) Smith

In the beginning of settlement of the Terrell County area, four sheep men figured in the story: Charles Downie, from Scotland; Arthur G. Anderson, from Tennessee; Samuel F. Purinton, from Maine and Robert Paxton, from Scotland. They blazed the trail for others to come and establish sheep and cattle ranches. The one who stayed for the shortest period was Robert Paxton and his wife, Margaret.

In 1881 Charles Downie entered the future Terrell County area driving a herd of sheep. In 1882, Robert Carswell Paxton arrived in the area and the two fellow Scots went into partnership in the sheep business. By 1884, Paxton began selling his land and by 1900 he had sold the land and his livestock to T. M. Pyle, who was starting a ranch with the addition of Purinton's properties, which also Pyle bought at the same time. According to stories of the time, Mr. and Mrs. Paxton moved back to Scotland.

But, the original researchers had very little to go on when they wrote Paxton's story for the Terrell County history book. In fact, Paxton and his wife moved to Ontario, Canada and lived there for some time, before returning to Scotland.

Robert Carswell Paxton was born in Lunden Links, Fife, Scotland on February 28, 1853, to George and Janet Muir Carswell Paxton. He was the fourth of six children, raised on a farm that prized their sheep. At the age of 25, in 1878, he immigrated to the United States and pursued ranching in Florida for a short period. The next few years he moved west but eventually settled in Pecos County in 1882 to run a sheep ranch. He returned to Scotland in 1894 to marry Margaret Donald Baird, born in Kilmarnock, East Ayrshire, Scotland on June 7, 1863. Margaret and Robert went to the New World to build a new life. Margaret came to live on their ranch, which was north of Longfellow and remained in Pecos County after the separation of Terrell County in 1905.

The Paxtons retained much of the European social structure in their new home, and made their place as much like their home in Scotland as was possible.

Their ranch house was modest at two rooms, with a canvas ceiling and a table and two chairs. They had placed matting on the floor to decorate the rooms. Cooking was done outside on a campfire. Meals for visitors were quite elaborate, bringing a taste of home to the Wild West.

Paxton, like many settlers in the area, had well-tended peach trees and grapevines. In addition he had the regular outbuildings and pens found on a sheep ranch. The area was unfenced, except for holding pens at the home place. Of course, the fencing consisted of brush corrals, things that were available locally and did not require outlay of funds to purchase. He had three or four Mexican herders to tend to the 7,000 to 9,000 head of sheep that he had on his ranch. The area was still wild and Paxton and the other ranchers paid for trappers to keep the predators down.

Although there was considerable conflict between sheep ranchers and cattle ranchers, especially in the northern part of Pecos County and the rest of the western lands of the time, the sheep ranchers here had settled in the



Paxton monument at Kilmarnock, East Ayrshire, Scotland



Photo: TC Museum

southwest corner of the county, leaving the free-range cattle ranchers far to the eastern part of the county. There was no conflict here in those days, and ranchers got along far better than in other parts of the country.

According to Roy Holt, a chronicler of those times, the sheep ranchers, in general, bought the land in order to have more control of what occurred there. Cattle ranchers of the time used free-range. There was some indignation by cattle ranchers that the sheep men were buying up all the available land. According to Holt, "There is only one account where a south Pecos County cowboy beat a Mexican herder with his lariat to get him to move his charges off that range. But the tables were turned when the Anglo sheep owner heard of it; then the cowboy was beaten with the same rope." (*The Sheep and Goat Raiser*", December, 1956)

Ranching in the dry Pecos County required the rancher to haul water to the animals, since no surface water was available, except in the monsoon season when creeks flowed and water collected in small basins. Water on the Paxton, Purinton and Downie places was usually hauled from Longfellow where the railroad had established a good well. It was done for many years until wells were drilled and tanks excavated or built on their properties.

Life in the west was sweet for Robert Paxton, but not so much for his wife, Margaret. She was used to a more civilized area and was often beset by loneliness. Although he was fairly successful in his occupation, by the late 1890s Paxton began to divest his properties and stock in an effort to free himself and his wife for a move back to Scotland. He retained enough property near Longfellow to come back on infrequent trips to see his land and visit with old friends. Ship passenger lists in 1907 and 1913 show that he came alone to Longfellow and his old stomping grounds.

For awhile, the Paxtons lived in Ontario, Canada, but repatriated to the old country, where their children were born. Robert passed away in 1926 at Kingussie, Highland, Scotland. Margaret passed away in 1941 at Lundin Links, Fife, Scotland, and they are buried with their daughter at Kilmarnock Cemetery, East Ayrshire, Scotland.

Life in the wilderness was not easy for the early settlers. They had to live by their wits and improvise. The hearty men and women of Terrell County remained and survived, building their own paradise in the forlorn desert of West Texas. In Paxton's case, they gave it a good effort, but loneliness in the desolate environment finally won over and they moved back to civilization. However, their place as pioneers of Terrell County will forever remain.