

## Museum News: Charles Andrew Downie – First of the Big Four

By CW (Bill) Smith

Almost 137 years ago Charles Downie came into this country driving a herd of sheep. In that early time there were still buffalo skulls on the ground. Indian lodge poles were still standing upright; their camps only recently emptied by US forces. The land was still wild and unsettled, but it was free for the taking, and the southwest corner of sprawling Pecos County, Texas, into which Downie was moving, was perfect for sheep.

But, Downie had not taken a direct route with his first flock as he moved into the area. Starting from Austin, he passed through San Antonio with his sheep and headed west into uncharted country, passing through Kimble County, Sonora, Rock Springs and Langtry. At this time there was no Sanderson so he passed on to the west. Arriving at Haymond, Texas, in Brewster County, the end of the line for the eastward-pushing Southern Pacific Railroad, he eventually drove his herd to Maxon Springs on the San Francisco Creek, one of the few watering areas in a land bereft of surface water. For a time he remained here, but backtracked east to Longfellow and then to the north about twenty miles, where he established his ranch. He purchased a 160-acre tract of property from an early homesteader who was defeated and discouraged by the hostile land. Beginning with that tract, he eventually added to his holdings until at the end of his life he owned about 150,000 acres, running 80,000 sheep, 20,000 cattle, 500 horses and thousands of goats.



Charles Downie had not started out as a sheep man. Born in 1851 in Detroit, Michigan, to Scottish émigré parents Andrew and Mary Downie, he was raised in a Scottish settlement and well versed in Scottish culture, music and traditions. His grandfather, John Downie, had been a weaver of Paisley shawls in Scotland, and had moved his family to the United States in 1848.

According to his grandson, Walter G. Downie, the young Charles held many jobs in his early life in Michigan: bellboy, railroad yard hand, grocery clerk and tea taster. When his father died, Charles struck out for Texas in 1876 to make his way in life. After a short stint as a clerk in a store in Travis County, Texas, he bought property on the Pedernales and acquired a small herd of sheep. It was in 1880 that he drove his flock west, searching for free range. He got to Langtry and wintered at Osmund, a new railroad section town on the GH&SA RR, which was heading west to meet the Chinese labor force coming east with the Southern Pacific. From there he went on to Maxon Spring and back to Longfellow to establish his ranch.

In the early 1880s he went into partnership with Robert Paxton, a fellow Scottish sheep man, but the partnership was dissolved a few years later, Paxton eventually selling out completely and heading back to Scotland with his unhappy wife.

After the railroad was completed in 1883, the town of Sanderson began to grow and Downie made friendships with Sanderson businessmen. He entered into the social life of the town and became involved in county politics.

In 1889, Downie married Josephine Roessler, daughter of Anthony Roessler, a Hungarian geologist, and her mother, Octavia, who was born in Maine to a prominent medical doctor who had moved to Austin to take charge of the School for the Blind. The young woman was raised in the city, and moving to the wilds of Pecos County was quite an experience. Charles had spent most of his time living in a tent on his property. When Josephine moved to the ranch he had erected a stone house and had furnished it with a selection of furniture from disgruntled ranchers who were leaving the country.

The years passed quickly and Charles and Josephine started their family, eventually having four children; Charles, Octavia, Mary and Edward. Their early education was administered by governesses on the ranch until Josephine took them to San Antonio to live and receive better opportunities. Eventually they moved to Berkley, California, for the children to attend high school and college.

Besides his ranch operations, Charles Downie was a great supporter of the institutions of Sanderson and the future Terrell County. In 1908, he helped organize the Sanderson State Bank and served on the board of directors for years. In 1910, he was with the group of parishioners who established the Sanderson Presbyterian church. In 1911 he helped organize the Sanderson Wool Commission Company. He had already served as a Pecos County Commissioner, and when Terrell County was organized he spent many years as a County Commissioner in the new county. He was put in charge of road building, and among his many achievements, supervised the building of the road over Big Hill, north of Sanderson. This was the second road to Fort Stockton that he had built. In 1920, Downie and other prominent Sanderson businessmen established the first chamber of commerce in Terrell County, a successor to the original commercial club that promoted businesses in the county.

In 1922, Charles gave more control to his son Edward in the daily operations of the ranch. Charles moved with Josephine to California and only came east occasionally to check up on the ranch. On May 26, 1928, Charles passed away in San Antonio of renal and cardiac disease. He was buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Austin. Although Edward had run the ranch since 1922, Mrs. Downie turned the business over to the ex-Pecos County sheriff, Dud Barker, and asked him to liquidate the ranch, which he did with fervor. All of the land East of US Highway 285 and south of US Highway 90 was sold, including the equipment to run the ranch. In 1930 Mrs. Downie was seriously injured in an automobile accident and soon contracted pneumonia and died. With her death, dispersal of the historic ranch was halted.

Although the historic Downie Ranch is just a shadow of its former glory, it is still a large ranch in the hands of its heirs. The impact of Charles Downie has been felt throughout the years, as he helped shape the affairs of men and create a new home and a new county from the barren wilderness. He and his family were true pioneers in the absolute sense of the word. But, he was not beset by the idiosyncrasies of many strong-willed men. He had strong morals, a fearful trust in God and was a good friend to his many acquaintances. He rejoiced in good times and he survived the bad times. He worked hard and went to his eternal rest with a good record and a clean conscience. As a true sheep man he was truly a "buen pastore" to his flock of friends and family members.