

Museum News: John Collins – Early Merchant of Sanderson, Texas

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Early day settlers in Terrell County are sometimes shrouded in mystery. They came and established themselves, then drifted out of the historic timeline in the early days of the county, fading from the memories of the local citizens. One of those early families was John and Jane Collins and their sons, Jim and Gus. Leading quiet lives and maintaining moral ethics in the wide open and wild Sanderson, the Collins and their sons built a solid reputation of honesty and established a thriving mercantile business in the early decades of the future county.

John Collins was born Oct. 18, 1834 in New York City to English parents. He spent his childhood on the streets and joined the US Navy shortly after attaining manhood, serving on the USS North Carolina and the USS Monticello before the Civil War. His early service exempted him from fighting in the War, and so he moved to Texas in 1862, leaving his family and all he knew behind.

John settled in Rockport, Texas, in 1872 - 74. It was there that he met Jane Carlion, a girl who was born in County Cavan, Ireland, in May of 1848 and who had recently immigrated to Texas. It was in Rockport that John and Jane married on April 12, 1875.

They spent some time in Rockport in the early part of their marriage, but eventually moved to San Antonio and started their family. Their first child was a boy who they named John James, and he was born in San Antonio, Texas, in Feb., 1880. A second son, Gus, was born in there in 1884.

After a few years in the San Antonio area, they sought new opportunities on the frontier of Texas. The Southern Pacific Railroad had recently extended their line from California to Texas and they moved west to the new town of Murphysville, nestled in the Alps of Texas where the Rocky Mountains passed through on their way to Mexico. The town soon changed its name to Alpine to reflect its quaint mountain atmosphere. The Collins lived there from 1888 to 1890, establishing a small mercantile.

Always seeking to find better business, they moved east to Marathon in 1890 and reestablished their general store. But about that time, Fort Stockton began to empty out as people wanted to live on the railroad, and the railroad settlement of Haymond east of Marathon began to grow larger with the influx of new citizens. About 1893, the Collins family pulled up stakes and moved to the booming metropolis of Haymond, with its fine new railroad station and its increasing population.

However, wanderlust attracted John Collins and his family to Sanderson in 1895. The boys were in need of a school and the rapidly expanding Sanderson had been appointed as a division point on the railroad, attracting men and families to the job opportunities. The town only had a small commissary and was in need of a better mercantile. John Collins established a general store in Sanderson in 1896 and his business increased immediately. The Collins family had at last found its niche.

Although it is not known exactly where the Collins Mercantile was located, most businesses in town were situated along Downie Street by the railroad. The locals were impressed by his honesty and fair dealings, and the business soon expanded. The Alpine Avalanche remarked, "John Collins was a man of honor - his word being as good as his bond...with his honest, square dealing, he soon had a profitable business." The Avalanche said he was frugal, conservative and unhesitatingly honest, and that he had a very retiring disposition.



One of the few photos of Gus Collins, standing on the running board of the switch engine in the Sanderson rail yards. On the ground are H. Q. Sharp, Ray Caldwell and S. E. Peterson.

As the years rolled by, the Collins family found happiness in their new home. Sadly, Jane's health took a turn for the worse and she died of dysentery on November 22, 1905. She was buried at Cedar Grove Cemetery in one of the earliest burials in that place.

John and his boys were devastated by their loss. With his memory lapsing, John went into decline for the next seven years. His business was still thriving, but it was the boys who were clerking and keeping the store going. In 1907 John began to receive a navy pension from his early service years before.

By 1911, matters had gotten out of hand. John was judged insane in November in county court and committed for treatment to the Moody Sanitarium in San Antonio. For the next two months his mental faculties continued to falter, until January 15, 1912, John passed away of "nervous exhaustion." He was brought back to Sanderson and buried at his wife's side in Cedar Grove, but the flood of 1965 destroyed their graves and broke up their tombstones. Their memorials were collected in a common area, where they remain to this day.

Very soon their son, Jim Collins, passed from the historic record at Sanderson. Gus had married Letha Cole of Brewster County in 1905 and produced three sons and three daughters. After his father's death Gus closed the mercantile and liquidated the stock and fixtures. He went to work for the railroad as a machinist and carpenter and followed the railroad for the rest of his life. They remained in Terrell County until the 1920s when they moved to Pima, Arizona. Gus passed away at the Southern Pacific Sanitarium in Tucson, Arizona, in 1950, and is buried in that city.

John Collins was an unusual man in very unusual times in Sanderson. With its wild reputation and high crime rate, men like John Collins came to settle in the town and help create a peaceful, law abiding atmosphere. Through his able efforts and the determination of his family, the town began to become civilized. As the Avalanche said, with his retiring disposition and his frugal, conservative and unhesitatingly honest character, he built a business and a life that was admired and praised. Those are the characteristics that made Sanderson into a modern, civilized place, and we are thankful for the Collins' contribution to our community.