

Museum News: Ancelmo Bankhead – Saddle Maker

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Living in West Texas, we are not confronted with people and situations that are "normal" for other areas. Almost every other place has a mix of races and cultures, and in this age they are diverse. In the early days, however, the Terrell County area was dominated by three cultures, with one culture disappearing very quickly. The first settlers in the area were American Indians, filtering in from other parts of North America. The landscape was so barren that it required a sturdy, stalwart people to live here.

As the ages rolled along, the Indians were forced out by Mexicans and Anglos. The inhabitants of the mid- to late-1800s were a mix of Indians, Hispanics and Anglos, with the Indians being driven out or assimilated into Mexican and Anglo cultures.

But, in 1882, with the arrival of the railroad, a new culture moved into the area...the Chinese...and they stayed until the 1920s in Terrell County. On a much smaller scale, black people moved into the area, almost exclusively with railroad and ranch crews. Black cowboys and shearers from that period are quite famous for their abilities and natural proclivities for taking care of animals.

In the 1900 Pecos County census for Precincts 2-4, the Sanderson and Dryden areas, there were eight Chinese men listed (no women) who worked at the Beanery, the railroad restaurant in the depot, and at the Wilson Hotel as cooks, waiters and managers. At the same time, there were some twenty black citizens listed as cowboys, shearers, day laborers on the railroad and their families. Many of these folks had Hispanic surnames and were émigrés from Mexico. But, a fair number were born in Texas, Georgia...even one from Jamaica. If the women worked outside of the home, they were exclusively washerwomen. A few of the men were servants in more well-to-do households, but mostly they cowboied or worked as shearers. It is known that a few black men worked as porters on the local passenger trains, but they were not included in local censuses, since Sanderson was not their home terminal.

Some of the black citizens were quite well known in this area, including George "7-D George" Adams, a professional cowboy of the C. F. Cox Ranch and who remained here for life. He came from the 7-D Ranch at La Pryor, Texas, and that name stuck with him for life. Strictly a cow man, he disliked sheep and would deal with them only if ordered to do so. He was born about 1844 and passed away in 1939, making him approximately 95 years of age at his death.

The character of this biography, however, is Ancelmo Bankhead, a black man who had a background in stock raising, but who spent his life in Terrell County as a saddler and a boot and shoe repairman.

Armstead "Ancelmo" Bankhead was born in Victoria County, Texas, on August 25, 1878. He was one of five sons and three daughters born to Armstead and Henrietta Cole Bankhead. Armstead senior was born in Arkansas in 1848 and Henrietta was born in Virginia in 1855. The name, "Armstead," translates from old English roots meaning "a hermit's place," but his nickname, "Ancelmo," means "God's protection," and he led a successful life blessed by God.

Although Ancelmo is not mentioned in the 1900 Pecos County or 1910 Terrell County censuses, he arrived about 1918-19 and settled in Sanderson, where he spent the rest of his life. Ancelmo was a confirmed bachelor and spent his life without a mate. For many years he was the only black man in town, but he was treated with respect, probably because he was an expert saddle maker and shoe and boot repairman.



Photo: Alice Evans Downie

Bankhead Saddle Shop on Oak Street, ca 1935

Ancelmo shows up in the records of Terrell County history book from 1919 through 1923 when he ran a saddle, boot and shoe repair shop for W. L. Harper. Harper worked on the railroad and owned the building on Oak Street, but he hired Bankhead to manage it for him while he was on the road. Bankhead stayed in the Oak Street building until his passing in 1944.

Bankhead's first shop was located on Downie Street, facing the railroad and just three buildings east of the Ex-Pecos County Saloon, as remembered by Ervin Grigsby when Grigsby moved to Sanderson.

Although there were other boot and shoe shops at the time, Bankhead was an expert saddler and built many saddles for local ranchers. Apparently he was very skilled at his trade and made a fair living for years.

In the 1920s, Bankhead was appointed as a deputy sheriff under Sheriff J. J. Nance in his second term. One incident with Officer Bankhead was mentioned in the *Sanderson Times* for December 16, 1927:

"Shooting Affray in Southeastern Part of City on Sunday Night.

"Last Sunday evening the Mexican population were (sic) enjoying a dance at one of their club halls when one of them became very boisterous, according to reports, and was placed under arrest by Deputy Sheriff A. Bankhead. The man, so it is stated, resisted arrest and in the argument that followed someone slugged Bankhead just back of the left ear, knocking him down. The officer was dazed for a few minutes, jumped up and commenced shooting in every direction, so he stated, to scatter the crowd." What Officer Bankhead lacked in finesse, he made up with unexpected action.

About 1939, Ancelmo Bankhead began to suffer from kidney disease. On March 24, 1944, he passed away from uremic poisoning. After not responding to a neighbor's calls, he was found dead at his home in Sanderson.

Ancelmo Bankhead was a well known figure in early Terrell County history. He provided needed services in a time when folks had to go to larger places, even for minor repairs to their leather goods. His saddles were quite famous among local ranchers and cowboys and it was a real prize to own a Bankhead saddle in those times. The fact that he was a black man did not seem to matter to local citizens, who were used to all kinds of men and women in their community. If there was racism here, and there was, it was not aimed at Bankhead. Racism is fueled by ignorance, but Ancelmo Bankhead proved over and over again that he was a worthy citizen of the community and a valuable craftsman. Racism has a hard time existing when a person is known and beloved by his friends and acquaintances, and Ancelmo Bankhead was just that...a good man and a real pioneer.