

Museum News: J. Curtis Jones – Buried Treasure!

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Buried Treasure!! Those are two words that get the heart thumping and send the brain on marvelous fancies. Buried treasure is a theme that is quite common in the annals of the Big Bend. Tales of gold stolen by the Comanches and buried near the Comanche Trail in eastern Brewster County, Texas, our neighbor to the west, filled my childhood. But, there



*Cottage Bar Saloon, center, about 1909, rumored location of \$40,000 in buried treasure.
Photo: Terrell County Museum*

were others. An old gentleman rancher would come to my dad's cafe for coffee almost every morning and regale the customers with tales of an Indian woman's mummy deposited in a secret cave on his property in southeast Brewster County. He discovered the cave by accident in a narrow canyon, high up on the canyon wall. The entrance was walled off by a short wall of stone blocks held together by mortar made of dirt and blood. The woman had long black hair and 2-inch fingernails. When he went back to search for artifacts, he could not locate the cave again. In all his stories there was always that element of discovery and ultimate loss.

Terrell County has its own buried treasure tales. The Lost N____ Mine is a prime example of the lost treasure tales. Dr. Elton Miles, my old professor at Sul Ross State University, wrote a book called "*Tales of the Big Bend*" (Texas A&M University Press: 1987) in which he cited at least three variations of that tale, locating the mine at Reagan Canyon in southeast Brewster County, or at Haystack Mountain, northwest of Alpine in the Davis Mountains. Good stories, but no treasure.

In my own experience, I had a man come to the Terrell County Museum several years ago and he told me of his father, who worked for the railroad. At Lozier, Texas, a now defunct station on an abandoned section of the Southern Pacific Railroad, was the site of a terrific freight train wreck on a hairpin curve in the 1920s or '30s. Part of the merchandise on the train was a military shipment of gold bullion in metal strong boxes. His father was sent with the crew to clear the wreckage and he found one of the strong boxes, full of gold. He buried it among the greasewood and cactus with the intent of returning for it, but could never locate it. The son went back once, but he couldn't find it, either. Now the site is on private property and the landmarks have changed. For all intents and purposes, it is lost to the ages.

But, there is another story that not many modern folks are familiar with. This entails buried treasure right in the town of Sanderson, buried on the old premises of Charlie Wilson's Cottage Bar Saloon, across the street from our demolished depot. It was quite the topic in 1928 when old timer J. C. Jones passed away after informing folks of its presence.

Jacob Curtis Jones spent most of his life in Kentucky as a farmer. He was born in McKee, Kentucky, around 1861. He was the oldest of ten children, and his mother died when he was a very young man. He married, but was widowed at an early age, after his wife gave birth to two sons and a daughter. In the 1870 to 1910 censuses he was still living in Kentucky, but shortly after 1910, with his children grown and a second marriage that ended in separation, he moved to Fabens, Texas, and started a cattle ranch, running a store and garage on the side. About 1914 he moved to Lobo, Texas in Culberson County, south of Van Horn, and ran a mercantile for the local farmers and railroad employees. He was the postmaster for Lobo for about twelve years.

In 1926, he was suffering from dementia and was offered a place to live on the C. F. Cox Ranch in eastern Brewster County. Mr. and Mrs. Cox had become very good friends and in the goodness of their hearts, offered him a place of protection. For two years he lived on the Cox place, but by June of 1928 his dementia was becoming serious. The Coxes tried to humor him as much as possible, and they thought he was safe living out on the ranch.

But, he began to get paranoid and thought someone was out to bother him. He procured a pistol and ammunition for protection, but accidentally discharged the weapon and shot the heel off his foot. He did not want to go to the doctor, but the heel got infected and he was forced to go to Sanderson to seek medical treatment. Unfortunately, Mr. Jones waited too long and blood poisoning raced through his system. He only lasted four days at Sanderson and passed away on June 23, 1928.

During those four days preceding his death, Jones raved in his dementia about buried treasure. He spoke of \$100,000 in buried gold at Kerrville, and \$40,000 buried on the Frank K. Harrell Ranch. In another ramble, he told of another \$40,000 buried at the infamous Baxter Curve. In one moment of dementia, he talked of another \$40,000 buried in the yard of the Cottage Bar Saloon in Sanderson.

Fearing that the end was near, he summoned county attorney J. Calvin Stancill and gave him a key to give to Mr. Cox if he died. At this point, Jones was mumbling, fading in and out of consciousness, and Stancill never heard what the key was for. Before they could get more details, Jones died and took his secrets with him to the grave.

Being a lifelong Baptist, Jones was buried at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Sanderson with a graveside service, administered by the local Baptist preacher. Although he had children and aunts, uncles and cousins in Kentucky, there was no one there for the services except a few local people.

It is not known if there was an attempt to recover the so-called buried treasure. After a short time, the story disappeared into history and was largely forgotten. Only recently did I discover his obituary, which laid out the details of his sojourn in Texas and his untimely death. Whether it is based on facts or just another West Texas folktale, only God and Mr. Jones knows, but it is an interesting footnote on the colorful history of Terrell County, Texas.