



# Museum News

## The Railroad in Sanderson, Texas

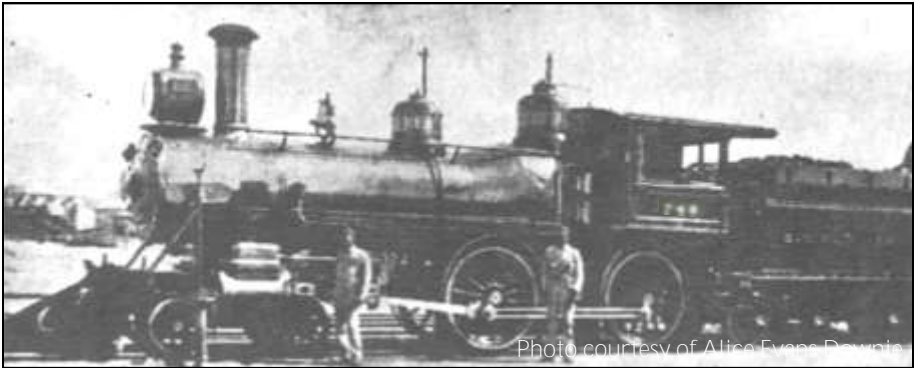


Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downette

The history of the railroad and Sanderson is long and colorful. Sanderson is here because of the railroad, and the railroad was its chief benefactor for over a century. It is safe to say Sanderson and Terrell County would not be what they are today had it not been for the railroad.

In 1882 two teams of men, each about 3,000-strong, were diligently trying to create the great southern transcontinental rail route for the Southern Pacific Railroad. The first group, the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad, a subsidiary of SP, was composed of mostly Irish rail workers. The other group of workers, the Southern Pacific itself, consisted of mostly Chinese, and both groups were aiming to connect at a point in West Texas, near the Pecos River. The struggle was long and hard, and the railroad had to blast through the

roughest terrain in Texas, under the most hostile and intemperate conditions.

Only a year before, in 1881, Lt. John L. Bullis of the US Army, and 80 Seminole scouts, known as the "Black Watch Troops," successfully removed the last hostile Indians from the area. With the threat of hostile attacks, kidnappings and depredations effectively eliminated, settlers and homesteaders were able to move into the Trans Pecos of Texas with no fear. And, the railroad could safely build its route, with the only threat coming from the environment itself.

As surveyors pushed ahead of the rail crews, plotting the final route and laying out stations and water stops, they eventually came to the Big Bend of Texas. Frontiersman Charlie Wilson ran a saloon in Ft. Davis, Texas, and became privy to railroad plans to establish a division point

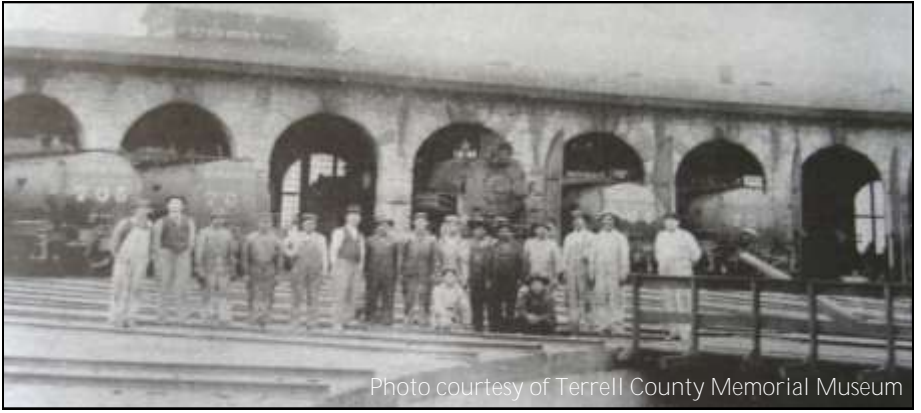


Photo courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum

with depot, roundhouse and crew quarters, roughly halfway between San Antonio and El Paso. Probably getting a peek at the surveyors' maps, he surmised that the most likely spot was in a canyon in the edge of the Edwards Plateau that widened out into a natural bowl, the perfect place to put the new facility.

He knew that the rail company was getting free land as an inducement by the state for building the new railroad. For every mile forward, the railroad received sixteen square miles, on either side of the route. But, he also knew that they only received the land as they passed through. He made a hurried trip to the ideal location, had it surveyed, and purchased the site of the new town. Then he set about building a makeshift saloon, with plans for a permanent building. He would be ready and waiting for the 3,000 thirsty Chinese as they built the railroad right to his front door.

In 1882, when the railroad arrived, they found that the land was already purchased, and that they would have to buy property from Charlie Wilson on which to build their rail terminal facility. They really didn't like having a saloon right next to their crew camp. Drunken employees were inefficient and caused accidents, and they were on a tight schedule. This didn't sit well with them, and for the next 30 years the railroad feuded with

Charlie over every possible situation.

As the rail crews pushed on through to the finishing point, some 50 miles away, construction crews and carpenters began to set up the depot, which was brought in by sections on flat cars from company sawmills in Northern California. Sander-son received a Standard #3 depot, but modifications made it unique among stations in their system. With a minimum of Victorian embellishment, it was a utilitarian structure that fit well in the wild west environment. At 150 feet long by 30 feet wide, it was a large structure sitting in the middle of nowhere.

For the roundhouse, locally-quarried limestone was cut and dressed into large blocks by Irish stonemasons, and carefully fitted together into an impressive edifice. Shaped to fit the arc of the 80-foot turntable used to turn engines for the return to their home facility, the roundhouse had 14 stalls with arched, keystone openings, heavy wood doors to secure its contents and stove pipes strategically placed above the engine smokestacks to vent the toxic smoke and gases.

At one point the railroad tangled with Wilson over the roundhouse. Southern Pacific suspected that Charlie's Cottage Bar Saloon was built partially on railroad property. A new survey proved the fact and he was given notice to close his bar and remove it. Wily Charlie had his own

survey done and found that the last two stalls of the roundhouse were built on his property. He immediately closed his bar and began to set up a saloon in "his" roundhouse stalls. Turning a deaf ear to local managers, he would respond only to the general manager of the railroad, who came in a special train and persuaded him to re-open his old saloon in exchange for a swap of deeds to the affected properties. Let's just say not many men got the best of Charlie Wilson!

Along with a depot and roundhouse, crew quarters were constructed for permanent employees and train crews who were stopping over for the night. A "bunkhouse" was built down the street from the depot as other construction was completed. In 1912 another bunkhouse was built and a few years later a third was constructed. Just west of the depot a yardmaster's residence was constructed, along with many employee family quarters, called section houses. A large freight warehouse and other company structures were completed as needed.

In 1913 the railroad began to build larger, more powerful engines. The diminutive 8-wheel "American"-style engines with large balloon stacks could not pull the heavier, longer trains that increasing traffic demanded.

The tiny Americans were iconic and ubiquitous, and had served well. In the beginning they were wood-fired, but wood is a scarce commodity in West Texas and the engines were soon retrofitted to burn coal. The balloon stacks were

spark arrestors that were only moderately successful at preventing fires. The Americans continued to be built, and were relegated to lesser duties such as yard switching and local runs.

Locomotive designers built longer engines with more wheels for increased tractive effort and larger boilers to generate more power. The new engines were giants compared to the old "tea kettles." With eight large driving wheels and powered by oil, train lengths and weights increased dramatically, much to the pleasure of harried freight operations managers.

This also meant a change for the roundhouse. The roundhouse was designed for the short wheelbase American engines. The new engines protruded out the door of the roundhouse by over ten feet. And, the 80-foot turntable barely accommodated the longer engines. About 1913 the railroad replaced the old manually-operated turntable with a new, 100-foot diameter, steam operated turntable. In addition, they removed the stonework and doors from the front of the roundhouse and built a shed roof to cover the exposed, larger engines.

A gigantic oil storage tank was built on a hill to the southwest of the roundhouse complex to feed the hungry iron horses. In addition, the railroad extended the depot by 30 feet on the west end because of increased local commerce. The railroad was a beehive of activity in those days, with over 200 employees, whose higher railroad pay increased the standard of



Photo courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum

living and the quality of life in Sanderson.

Along with freight and passenger operations, the depot boasted a restaurant that was popular with locals and railroaders alike. Designated a "dinner" station from the beginning, it served a vital role for railroad passenger operations. The depot restaurant, known locally as "The Beanery," continued to operate until the late 1950s. It was a popular place with railroaders, being so close to rail operations, but the townsfolk also ate there. One couple even had their wedding reception there because the local hotel was just too fancy.

By the 1950s the railroad began to scale back roundhouse operations at Sanderson. The turntable was removed and all but four stalls had been demolished. The switch-over to diesel operations removed the need for roundhouse repair services. The huge oil tank was removed and the few steamers that were serviced locally were refueled by tank cars at trackside. When steam operations ceased by 1956, there was no need for a roundhouse. It was demolished in 1963 and the materials salvaged for a motel under construction in Van Horn, Texas.

Since there was no need for water stops, section houses and stations up and down the line were sold, moved or demolished. The diesel engine had a tremendous impact on staffing, operations and railroad real estate.

The depot, however, was a thriving place until 1970 when the Southern Pacific turned passenger operations over to the newly-formed Amtrak.

Then, in 1994, a head-on collision of two freight trains west of Sanderson claimed the lives of four local men, a terrible tragedy, the beginning of the end. A corporate decision was made in 1995 by new owner Union Pacific to close operations at Sanderson. Many families had to transfer east and west to follow their jobs, and the town suffered.

But Sanderson citizens are a hearty bunch. They dug in their heels and decided they wouldn't go without a fight. The town has survived, shifting the economy to hunting and tourism. Carving a home from the most rugged and inhospitable environment in Texas has never been easy

Today, signs of our railroading past are evident everywhere. Section houses and old boxcars are located throughout the town. The town is full of railroad retirees.

Had it not been for the railroad and the hard work of entrepreneurs and capitalists, Sanderson could not have grown into a modern town with the amenities of a much larger place. And so we owe a great deal to the Southern Pacific and its subsidiaries. But, that chapter of our lives is closed, and we look to the future with a renewed hope for prosperity.



#### References

*Terrell County, Its Past, Its People*, Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell County Heritage Commission, 1978

Photo collection of The Terrell County Memorial Museum, [www.terrellmuseum.info](http://www.terrellmuseum.info)