

Museum News

Guy Oliver Fenley

The boy with x-ray eyes



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

The Big Bend of Texas is a wide open space that harbors some very strange tales. Weird tales abound of the Lobo Girl and the ghostly Buffalo Soldier at the Marathon Post, the octopus-like creature that lives under the cliffs, also at the Post, to snatch the careless swimmer. Every community has some strange, local ghost story that exists as just that, an unsubstantiated tale.

And then there are the somewhat factual stories based on actual observation...the Marfa Lights, UFO stories (seems like everyone has their own personal UFO story...I have four!) St. Elmo's Fire and other eerie things witnessed by one or more persons.

The next level of weirdness is one I like to call the Big Bend Tale of the Third Kind, one that has physical evidence or seemingly irrefutable, documented 'proof' of actual incidents. And therein lies the tale of Guy Fenley.

Terrell County was impacted early on by the Fenley Brothers. George and Jim came to Terrell County to ranch in the early 1900s, down on an inhospitable section on the Rio Grande.

George was elected a Pecos County Commissioner, and when Terrell County was formed in 1905, he was elected sheriff, and by all accounts, a good one.

His brother Jim took over operation of

the ranch when George became sheriff but it was still a partnership. In earlier stories in the Museum News you learned about him and his famous horse, White Man.

A third brother, G.B., stayed at Uvalde where they were raised and eventually became county judge.

But the fourth brother, Guy Oliver Fenley, achieved world-wide notoriety with a special gift he claimed ... Guy was a water witch deluxe!

When Guy was fourteen and back at Uvalde on his family ranch, he discovered, quite by accident, that he could "see" water flowing under the ground! He claimed he could see glowing, shimmering rivers of water, streams and pools flowing near the surface, even down thousands of feet. And besides that, he could see all the strata of rocks, dirt and gravel...and identify them...all the way to the water.

Of course his family thought he was "tetched," until they set up a test and proved he was right.

Local doctors examined his eyes and could find no abnormality, nothing out of the ordinary. There seemed to be no medical reason for his ability, yet his success was undeniable. He was just a typical fourteen-year-old kid.

When word got out, his reputation began to spread. A rancher on an adjoining spread was having trouble finding water for his stock.

In West Texas we have plenty of stream and creek beds, just no water to go with them. It is an exceedingly dry place, to say the least. The history of drilling water wells in West Texas is a long, sad story punctuated with dry holes. But Guy seemed to have overcome that with his special gift.

Guy's ability worked especially well on a dark, moonless night. So, when the conditions were optimal, he arrived at the neighbor's ranch and went to work. With his brothers' help he began to track through the darkness until he spied a shimmering stream of water (under the ground.) He walked along the "bank" of the stream until he met an obstacle, where he appeared to jump the "stream" to the other bank and continued his journey, marking the spots where the water was closest to the surface.

The next day a well drilling crew began to drill the spots he said were the best and, lo and behold, each spot he indicated produced a bountiful supply of water. As they drilled, Guy would predict every strata of rock and soil they would encounter and he was correct every time. He was slightly off on his depth estimates, though. The first well he predicted they would make water at a depth of 200 feet, but they actually hit water at 187 feet. Close enough!

Now the notoriety began. He was swamped with requests to find water, from ranchers and entrepreneurs all over Texas, and soon, other states.

He came to his brothers' ranch in Terrell County and discovered enough water to take care of their needs. He dowsed for water in Uvalde County, Brewster County, Edwards County...in fact many places, but he wouldn't take a dime for his services! One rancher offered him \$500 (in 1900 dollars!) for



Museum Report

February saw attendance pick up at the Museum. We had 18 visitors, including local folks and travelers from Austin, Corpus Christi, Goliad, Nampa, Idaho, and Arbor Vitae, Wisconsin. Improvement in the weather seemed to be the key element.

We received a treasure trove when the Court House cleaned out its attic and brought documents and ledger books from 1905 and later. Especially helpful are the poll tax receipt books which give us a lot of information about early citizens.

Another benefit was the large ledger

books which can be repurposed for newspaper pressing and storage for our *Sanderson Times* collection.

Finally, I got a call from Daune Reinier, great granddaughter of Jim Fenley of White Man fame. She found us on the internet while researching the Fenley name and needed assistance downloading the newsletters concerning her family. She was thrilled to learn more about her ancestors and shared a few family stories about this month's subject, Guy Fenley. I was happy to send the three Fenley articles and extra pictures by email. Now that's the way a museum should work!

X-ray eyes

continued from page 2

finding water on his ranch, but the good looking, blue-eyed blond fourteen-year-old refused all rewards.

However, all the physical exertion and midnight forays took a toll on him. If he pushed on too long he became exhausted and sleepy and would fall into a deep, almost trance-like sleep.

Soon the newspapers got the story and articles of his amazing ability hit newsstands all over the world. He gained ardent supporters, such as Judge Wigfall van Sicle, state legislator from Alpine, who saw the proof of Guy's ability on his Brewster County ranch.

Guy even attracted the interest of scientific researchers who wished to ascertain the origin of his gift. In 1926 Sir William Barrett and Theodore Besterman investigated the evidence in the case, including the psychic implications. The body of evidence was over-

whelming and they had to draw the conclusion that it was a bona fide ability on Guy's part, but, as expected, could offer no reasonable theory as to how it came about or even operated. But Guy never claimed to be a psychic, he just "saw" the water and reported the best place to drill, simple as that.

Eventually Guy tired of the fame and incessant clamoring for his services. When the oil companies began to pester him (and he could see oil as well as water,) Guy withdrew from the public eye. There is no evidence that he stopped dowsing, but he greatly curtailed his publicized activities. He married and moved to Zavala County south of Uvalde where he served as county clerk for many years. He spent a long and happy life there after his early notoriety, and passed away in 1968, just short of his 80th birthday.

References

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All newsletters can be found at <http://terrellmuseum.info/newsletters/>

Margaret Kinkler Farley

The Terrell County Historical Commission and Memorial Museum, as well as the citizens of Terrell County and Sanderson, have lost a great treasure with the passing of Margaret Farley. No organization could have had a greater patron, contributor and roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-to-work member than this fine lady.

As I work at the museum every day I see her contributions and influence at every turn. The hundreds of accession cards so neatly typed, the voluminous files of correspondence addressed to and by her in the interest of the museum and the many exhibits that are here, chiefly because she actively pursued them and convinced local citizens by her honesty and sterling record that passing them on to the museum was the right thing to do.

And I miss her. She was not only a dear friend, she was my answer person, my walking Terrell County history book. I could ask her any question about Terrell County and its history, and if she didn't know the answer (and 99% of the time she did) she could point me in the right direction to find the answer.

She would get a wry little smile on her face that told me she knew something juicy about the subject, something not included in the official history book. Then she would cup her hand to her mouth and state the information in a rasping stage whisper, as though it were a dirty little bit of gossip. It wasn't, of course, but that little factoid would set me off in a successful hunt for new information about the subject. Now my living, firsthand resource is gone and there are not many left.

As always, I kick myself and say "I should have asked more questions," just as I did when my grandparents



Photo courtesy of Jim Street

passed, just as I did when my parents passed. But, sadly, I didn't.

We avoid the possibility that our sources will someday be gone, with that natural reluctance we all have towards imminent loss of a loved one. But as Laura Ingalls Wilder stated often in her wonderful books, we need to "make hay while the sun shines." We need to honor and venerate our elders, instead of warehousing them and ignoring them. We need to help our children see that these hardworking folks pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps during the Great Depression and won wars with a fierce determination. They still have much to contribute, and we have much to learn from them.

But Margaret Farley would probably giggle at all of this verbiage. She did her part with no urging from others. It was her duty and responsibility to do her best, to give 100%, to plot and plan how best to serve her family, her church, her museum, her school, her community. She leaves this plane of existence for the next with a great record, a knowledge that it was a job well done.

Now it is up to us to carry on her work and attempt to reach her level of devotion.

Bill Smith ~ Curator