

Museum News

Grandma Savage Midwife, Healer, Nurse

Much has been written about the men who made Sanderson, but we often forget that women had a hand in building Sanderson and making it a civilized place.

In the earliest days Sanderson had only a few women, and not ones of the best character. Camp followers and sporting women, they were working

girls who plied their trade in one of the wildest places in the west.

But as time progressed, men began to move their families to the area. J.W. Savage came to Sanderson when the railroad pushed through in 1883, working as a "dirt" man, moving the earth with mule-drawn "fresnos," preparing the roadbed. He stayed on after the work was completed, working for the railroad as a section foreman in various places between here and Del Rio, fi-



Courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

Margaret Kloszner Savage

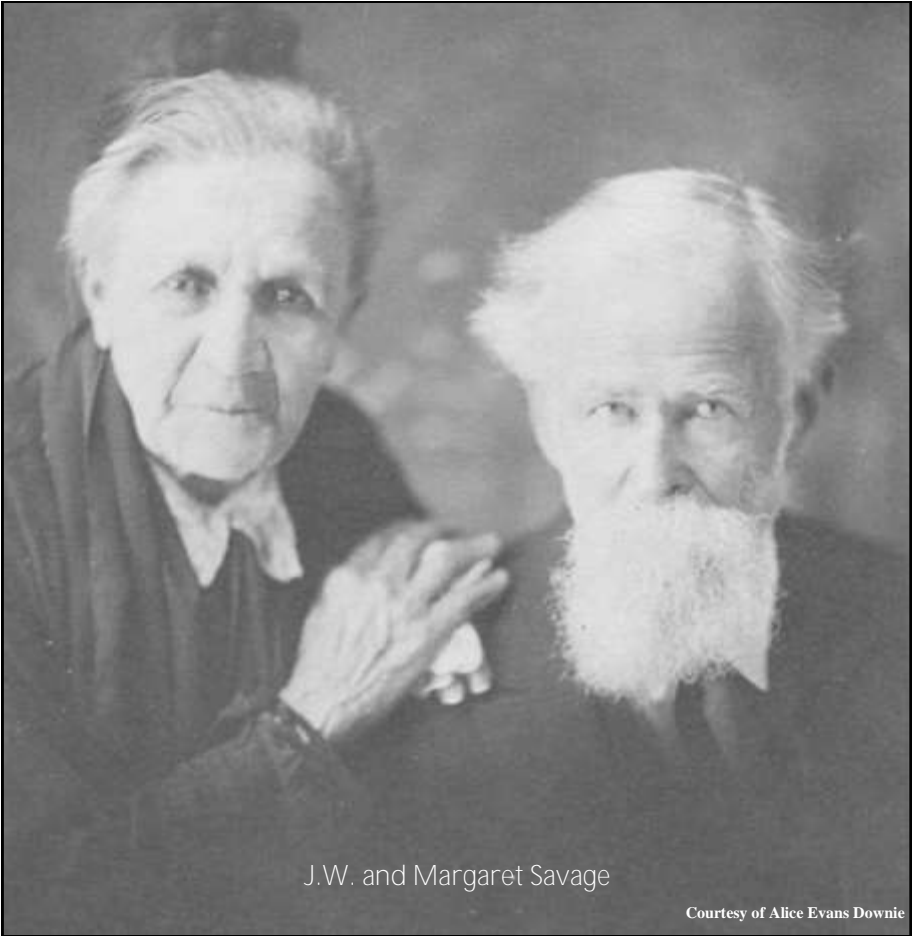
nally settling in Sanderson in 1899 as a water pumper.

He had made the acquaintance of a young lady in Seguin, Texas, Miss Margaret Kloszner, which resulted in marriage in 1875. To that marriage ten children were born.

Miss Margaret was a very special person. Born in 1855 to Swiss immi-

grant parents in Minnesota, her family moved several times, from Wisconsin to Iowa to Nebraska, and finally, to Luling, Texas. Margaret's mother passed away when she was eleven, and it might be that her superior abilities as a wife, mother and nurse grew from having to take care of her four brothers, at an early age.

J.W. must have recognized those qualities in her, but it didn't hurt that she was also a beautiful woman. They



J.W. and Margaret Savage

Courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

enjoyed a close relationship through the years as they raised their sometimes unruly brood.

Concerned that there were no educational opportunities in the small railroad settlements where they lived, she insisted that they hire a tutor to make sure her children were prepared for the future. One room of their home was always set aside as the “professor’s” bedroom, but it also doubled as the classroom. The arrangement worked very well, as the four oldest children attended college, the boys going to Texas A&M and the girls attending Sam Houston Normal Institute. When they moved to Sanderson in 1899, their oldest girl, Elizabeth, is thought to have

been one of the first teachers of Sanderson’s one-room school.

But in their first days working for the railroad, Mrs. Savage told of seeing Indian stragglers passing by, though hostiles had been removed from the area by 1881. Earlier depredations made all settlers and newcomers nervous, even though the threat was gone.

Not that she couldn’t take care of herself and her family when her husband was at work. Adept with a rifle and pistol, she often dispatched snakes and hawks with one shot.

And she was fearless in the face of danger. Once a lone wolf got into her chickens. She set her two dogs on the wolf and while they held him at bay,



Courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

The five youngest Savage children, Willie, Roxanah, Dollie, Fred and Ella in 1900. Baby Roxanah died of red measles in 1901.

she used a fireplace poker to beat him to death!

The move to Sanderson, however, put them in a safer environment, even though their initial years here were beset by lawlessness and shootouts. Once here, the children had a more formal schooling experience, even if it was a one-room school.

Mrs. Savage also found a niche that needed to be filled. There was no doctor at first, so she began to offer her services as a midwife and nurse. When a doctor finally arrived, she became his “right hand,” as he put it.

Her natural compassion and “mothering” spirit put her on call at all hours of the day and night. And she went one step beyond, or many steps, as the situation required.

Once when she got a call that there was a sick woman up on Hominy Hill, near where the present Church of Christ stands, she found that the woman was

living in a wagon with her children and was sick and very pregnant. Seeing their desperate circumstances, she got together with other women and men of the town and arranged for food for the family and moved them into a barn, where they could stay warm. The woman gave birth, safely, in the manger of the barn, and her little boys tried to trade the baby for Mrs. Savage’s dog! Of course, as often happened, Mrs. Savage did not receive compensation for her work. She just gave her services freely from the goodness of her heart.

Her knowledge of native plants and their curative properties was astounding, and she often made use of them. Her children often teased that she was going to be arrested for practicing medicine without a license, but she never worried about that.

Mrs. Savage’s bravery not only included fighting the local wildlife, she also faced mortal danger by exposing herself to serious epidemics, serving as nurse to the afflicted.

Sanderson was hit by at least three small pox epidemics, not to mention typhoid and scarlet fever. Quarantine camps were set up to the west of town, complete with hired guards to enforce the quarantine, and the sick were moved there to prevent the spread of disease. Mrs. Savage voluntarily quarantined herself to care of the invalids. In a 1903 letter to his brother, Fred, John Savage was thankful that his mother was home, safe from the quarantine camp, without being infected. He bemoaned the fact that she did not refuse anyone, no matter how serious the disease or the danger to her well being.

And beyond her medical abilities, she was a good-hearted person who was always ready to lend a hand or give a word of encouragement or cheer.

She and Mr. Savage were charter members of the Methodist Church in

Sanderson, and were ever-faithful and ever-present in attendance. Visiting ministers often had meals or spent the night at their residence.

But, she and her husband also treated strangers the same as friends, always willing to help or extend the hand of friendship to old or young. Her cookie jar was always brimming with home-made cookies, and her kitchen brimming with neighborhood children.

Because she loved everybody and always treated others as her own family, she soon acquired the name "Grandma" Savage. She wore the moniker with pride, for she truly was grandmother to all.

She was spiritual adviser and mentor to many young mothers in town, and quite a few remarked that they could not have reared their families without Grandma Savage's help.

But Grandma Savage was one of five ladies of the town who could be called as nurse or doctor, using patent medicines and "curandera" techniques to heal the sick or injured. "Granny" (Mrs. Joe) Nance, Mrs. Antonia Maldonado, Mrs. Bartolo (Pancha) Villegas, and Mrs. Joe Wolff could also be called upon to help in time of need. They knew of bandage and tool sterilization techniques to keep down infection, but they also used folk remedies in their treatments.

They used sulfur and molasses, paregoric and patent medicines, along with the boiled meat and broth of roadrunner birds, and creosote bush tea. Turpentine and "coal oil," along with milk and garlic boiled together, were also potent folk cures. Other native herbs and plants were used in poultices and rubs

to alleviate pain or affect cures. Their knowledge of the native pharmacopeia was voluminous.

They all carried their little doctor bags, and according to the Terrell County history book, the children of one family firmly believed that Granny Nance brought newborn babies to the house in her little black bag.

All of these ladies selflessly served and put their lives in danger for the sake of their community, but Grandma Savage is probably the most celebrated of all. Her love for others and devotion to duty not only served as a shining example to her own children, but to all who lived in this community and benefited from her care.

Grandma Savage passed away at 83 on March 26, 1938, after a short illness. To quote, in part, her obituary in the *Sanderson Times*: "The death last Saturday of Mrs. J.W. "Grandma" Savage, marked the passing of one of the real pioneers of Texas and this section. She was a resident of Sanderson for more than 37 years, a familiar character, very kind and thoughtful, and beloved by all. Her passing leaves a vacancy, that will be hard to fill for, even at her advanced age, she was neighborly, and always ready to help those in need.

"With her passed a great store of lore about the early days, the trials of those who fought to advance the western frontier farther westward."



References

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

Sanderson Times Collection, The Terrell County Memorial Museum, www.terrellmuseum.info