Terrell County Memorial

April, 2011
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Ridin' the River

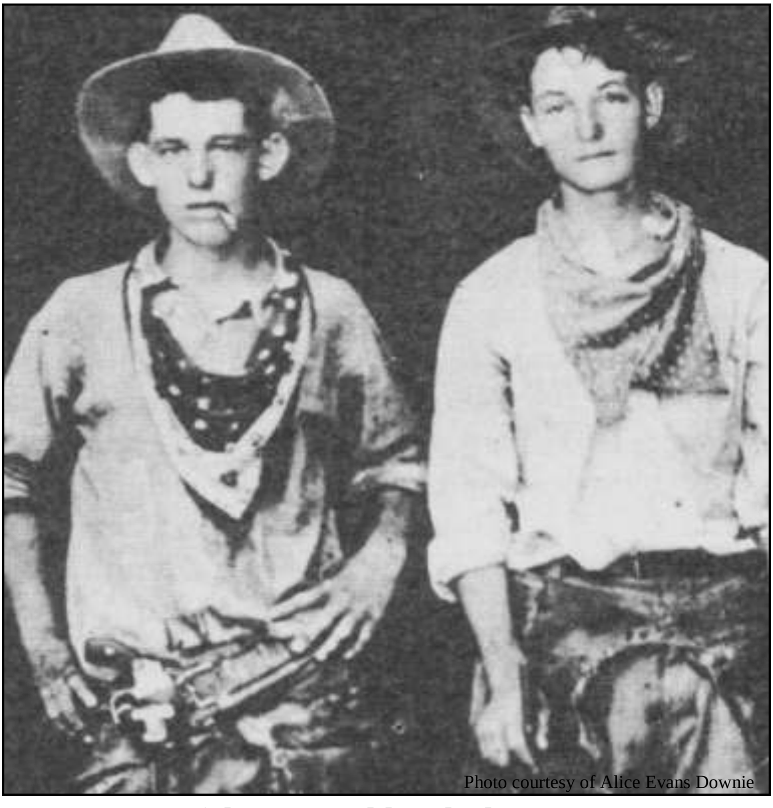
Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

Dick McDonald and Clem Stout

T.H.(Dick) McDonald and Clem Stout started riding the river when they were just kids, in 1915. River riders were needed because roaming bands of cattle rustlers were no small problem for ranchers in the Trans Pecos. Even though George Fenley, first sheriff of Terrell County, began to clean up the town of Sanderson in 1905 and send the bandits, cut-throats and grifters "out of Dodge," the problem was only transferred to the immediate area west of the Pecos.

But an even greater problem arose with the coming of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-20, when small raiding parties of Mexicans were sent across the border by the warring generals to scavenge whatever food and material they could find to help the war effort. They didn't

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want to steal from their own people, in order to gain favor with the locals, so the land north of the Rio became a prime supply area.

Border ranchers were hit hard, especially losing cattle to the hungry Mexican armies, and couldn't afford the losses. The US government couldn't (or wouldn't, according to some) protect the vast area and there weren't enough Texas Rangers to do the job either. It was up to the ranchers to send out their own patrols. The counties agreed to pay for horse feed but the ranchers supplied men, horses, pistols, rifles and everything else.

Dick was a rancher's boy, and when he had time to spare from his ranch duties, he rode the river. His friend Clem Stout came to Sanderson as a boy and in later years was a welder and worked on area ranches. He, too, rode the river for a time, as did many other local men throughout the years.

River riding was a dangerous pastime in those days, as Dick soon found out.

Photo courtesy of TC Museum

Once he rode up on two Mexican riders, dressed in vaquero outfits, with crossed bandolero ammunition belts and huge floppy sombreros. Dick noticed as they talked that the men were eyeing his gear, and that aroused his suspicion. When they asked where he was going, he lied, then took a different trail. Later he came up behind them and found them on a high ridge above the trail he told them he was taking. Obviously he literally "dodged the bullet."

Bandidos in the area were hated by Mexicans and Americans alike. Dick came up on a bandit camp that had recently been raided by Villistas. Men and women alike were massacred and the carnage was total. Spanish dagger plants around the camp were festooned with the impaled bodies of the victims, many with obvious signs of torture. That horrific scene haunted his memory for the rest of his life.

After the Revolution was over the need for river riders waned and Dick went back to work as a cowhand.

Then, in the 1930s, the smuggling of contraband and livestock became a big problem on the river. But an even greater threat was a raging bovine epidemic swarming up out of Mexico.

Smuggled cattle and strays from Mexico began to infect the largely clean cattle herds in the US with the dreaded hoof-and-mouth disease. Once again the river rider program intervened to control that problem, this time under the direction of the US Department of Agriculture. Dick McDonald and many other men went back to river riding, and the program lasted until about 1954 when the epidemic was thought to be over.

Typically, the river riders worked in pairs, each rider patrolling an 11-mile section of river every day. One went upstream and one went downstream, switching territory the next day.

Some riders took their families with them to camp out on the river's edge. In an article for the *Big Bend Sentinel,* columnist Lonn Taylor quoted Mojella Moore of Marfa, wife of river rider Eddie Moore, talking about their living conditions.

"It was a government tent," Moore said, "but it was better than the adobe house the other rider lived in."

Among other locals who were river riders were Son Turner, Herbert Winston, Henry Skelton, Ira Cox,

Museum Report

The museum saw 24 visitors in March. With Spring Break in full swing, we had visitors from Canada, Tennessee, Wink, Del Rio and Alpine, Texas, and lots of Sanderson folks .

The museum received monetary donations in memory of Margaret Farley, and materials from Henry Beth Hogg, Lee Brandon and Lea Hawn.

I preserved and stored five years of loose copies of the *Sanderson Times*, storing them in the large ledger books saved from the court house attic. Ranging from 1970 to 1974, those particular editions also had historic photos on the front page, which I scanned into the museum photo archive. Many are one-of-a-kind photos not in the collection.

I was contacted by Daune Reinier, great granddaughter of Jim Fenley, who found us on the internet and passed along more family anecdotes about the early day Terrell County ranchers. Jim's brother, George, was our first sheriff.

Finally, Jerry Brotherton is still doing a general inventory, and we both are trying to decide how best to preserve and organize the mountain of materials rescued from the court house attic.

Ridin' the River

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Blackie Woods, Joe Graham and many other Terrell, Val Verde, Brewster and Presidio County men.

Photo courtesy of USDA

USDA "tick riders"

After his river riding days Dick had a long illustrious career in the ranching business and finished his years managing the Strauss Ranch in Brewster County.

And the river rider program is still with us. In 1906 the USDA began the National Cattle Fever Tick Eradication Program. Texas Fever ticks were decimating Texas cattle herds and many ranch outfits were on the verge of going under. In time ticks were eliminated from most of Texas, except from land bordering the Rio Grande.

In Mexico the Texas Fever tick is endemic, with practically no program in place to stop its spread. To stop it from coming back into Texas the USDA hired 60 "tick" riders, who serve much as the old river riders, watching for smugglers and controlling strays.

The tick problem continues to grow worse as ticks become immune to the only 'tickicide' allowed in the US. That means that river riders, or the modern "tick" riders, will probably always be with us. And with immigration issues today they may have new duties.

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

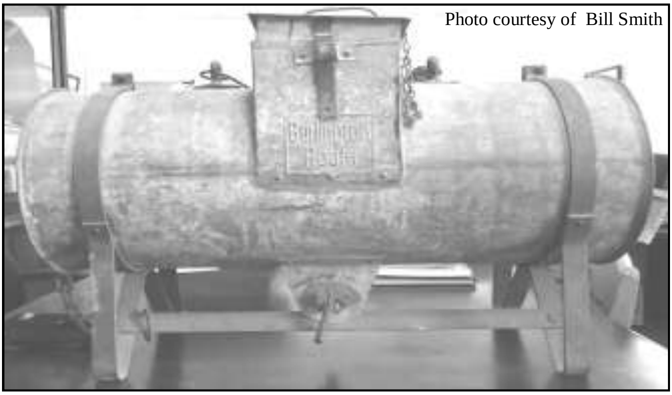

Photo courtesy of Bill Smith

So...what the heck is a "keeley?"

While rummaging through Kenn Norris's Schoolmaster Antiques store in Sanderson I ran across an odd metal tank, sitting on the floor by some railroad items. As pictured above, it had a square lid at the top for filling the object with…? And a spigot with a large handle and a graduated markings for dispensing…? On the end was a small box with a lid made to hold…? The whole thing sat on a frame of bent metal, with chains at the top to attach it to…? What the heck was this thing?

Kenn told me that Ike Robbins, a veteran Sanderson railroader, had called it a "keeley" and that it was used to cool down "hotboxes." I knew from that term he was referring to a journal box on a rail car, the place where the end of the axle of a train wheel protrudes through and which in the old days was lubricated by oil soaked rags packed into the area around the wheel bearing. If it was not lubricated regularly the bearing would heat up, ultimately melting, causing a fire or wheel failure and a derailment.

According to the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen, Glenn Holmes Sr. Local Lodge #72 web site (http://www.brs72.org/BRS-RRTALK.html#K), a keeley was a "heated journal water can with valve and hose, which could be attached to the side of rolling stock, above an overheated journal box. The valve would allow a trickle of water to be played into the journal box onto the hot journal brass and the car could then be advanced at reduced speed (max. 5 mph) to the next available siding or terminal to be set out from train."

Keeleys were used for emergency repairs to enable an ailing car to get to a siding for permanent repairs. It was part and parcel of the caboose tool box and served until the "car knocker" could make repairs. It was only a temporary solution to the larger job of oiling or replacing the packing, or a full-blown bearing job. Every employee was charged to be on the lookout for hotboxes, because to ignore it could cost the company a lot of money ... or some poor guy his life.

And why the name "keeley?" The "keeley cure" was a popular remedy well known by early 1900s alcoholics. The railroader's affinity for alcohol is legendary, and some recovering railroader "on the wagon" probably made the connection.

Okay. So...what the heck is a "car knocker?"