



Museum News

"Baby born... name Terrell."

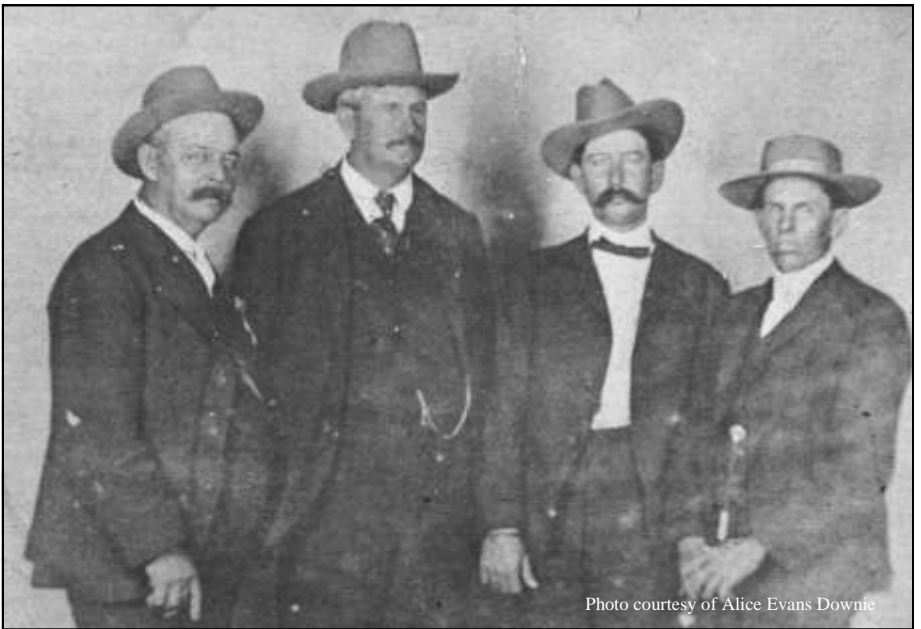


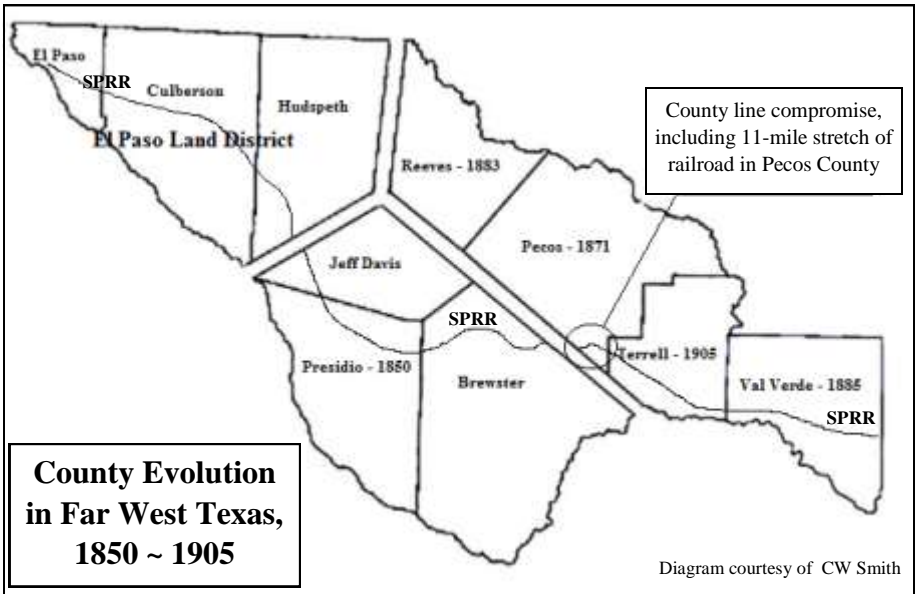
Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

FOUNDING FATHERS - *Cyrus M. "Charlie" Wilson, Alexander W. Terrell, Joe Kerr, Sr. and W.P. Watkins, Sanderson legislative delegation and their mentor, who promoted the cause for the formation of Terrell County.*

With these words, town father Charlie Wilson telegraphed home that Terrell County had become the newest county in the State of Texas, on April 8, 1905. It was a momentous day for the people of the newly authorized county, but a day of gloom for the people of Pecos County, many of whom considered the move as an attack on

their beloved county, effectually cutting them off at the feet.

Like all political movements, the drive to wean Terrell County from its mother was painful and controversial. And with cigar-chomping, wheeler-dealer Irishman Charlie Wilson involved, there was bound to be some shenanigans, too.



With the cessation of hostilities in the Mexican War of 1848, the U.S. Boundary Commission set the Rio Grande as the border between Texas and Mexico, and the U.S. gained a huge chunk of real estate.

At that time the whole of West Texas was one vast, undeveloped wilderness with scattered settlements, included in the Bexar Land District. Presidio County was separated and established in 1850, including all but El Paso, Culberson and Hudspeth counties. Pecos County was taken from Presidio in 1871, reducing Presidio County by almost half. Then, Pecos County was subdivided again and again: Reeves, 1883; Val Verde, 1885; Terrell, 1905. It is no wonder the county felt cannibalized.

But the loss of Terrell County was especially troubling. Proposed county lines would have completely cut Pecos County off from its one, transcontinental rail route. And with that was the loss of special traveling privileges afforded county officials in those days. They, by virtue of their county offices, could travel free on the Southern

Pacific Railroad, to any destination, as a professional courtesy.

In hammering out final details, however, a compromise allowed redrawing of the proposed county line to include an 11-mile stretch of railroad in Pecos County to preserve county officials' travel privileges.

But for Sanderson, the reasons for declaring its own county were more practical.

In 1905, the road from Sanderson to the county seat in Fort Stockton was 90 miles in length and barely more than a trail in many spots. Today we breeze through that country in our vehicles, up and down the canyons and over the dry creek beds, in about an hour. In 1905 the trip took the better part of two days, with a guaranteed campout under the stars, going and coming. If the creeks came up, you had to wait. (Well, that still happens today, but at least we can wait it out in our warm or cool cars, as the case may be.)

Once you got to Fort Stockton, the hotels were usually full and you ended up camping on the banks of Comanche Creek, unless you knew someone you

could stay with. Jury duty, paying taxes and any dealings with the court was a major inconvenience for the citizens of Sanderson.

Another issue was proper law enforcement in Sanderson. For years there was no deputy or Texas Ranger in Sanderson and the town was wide open. Murders occurred regularly and all kinds of gamblers, bandits, cutthroats and other dark characters roamed the streets and frequented the many saloons with impunity. And then there was the problem with sporting ladies and the “bruised” flowers.

By 1905 the populace had complained loudly enough that a deputy was stationed in Sanderson, but, as today, good men were hard to keep.

And, as in the case of Deputy R.C. McMahan, who arranged and participated in the assassination of the town school superintendent in a shootout at the post office, the character of the “law” man could not always be trusted. However, the first election brought a tough sheriff, George Fenley, who set out to “clean up Dodge” and send all the bad guys packing. He was successful.

So, peeling Sanderson away from Pecos County was a good move for its citizens. If they ever wanted to become a safe place for families and businesses, they had to take matters into their own hands. Fort Stockton was too far away to care what happened in Sanderson, or so it seemed.

To begin the process, town meetings were held and a delegation was selected to go to Austin to plead their case. Joe Kerr, Sr., Charlie Wilson, H.C. Carmichael, W.J. Banner, and Judge Griner of Del Rio were named to the delegation, with each man paying his own expenses. It was felt that Judge Griner was needed to help with legal questions, and the people provided for his



Alexander W. Terrell

expenses, along with an honorarium for his services.

Upon arriving at Austin the group met with Alexander W. Terrell, an influential legislator who championed their cause.

Born in Virginia, Terrell had emigrated to Texas in 1852 and set up a law firm with a partner. He became a district judge in 1857 and entered the Confederate Army in 1863 as a Lt. Colonel. He had a very distinguished record commanding Terrell’s Texas Cavalry, where his orders were to keep open the lines of trade through Mexico in order to sell the South’s most valuable commodity, cotton, to finance the war and to keep food and materiel flowing to the South.

In the Red River campaign in 1864, he successfully prevented the Union Army from entering Texas. Wounded in the battle of Mansfield, Louisiana, he was promoted to Brigadier General in 1865 for superior performance and



leadership of his men.

A very proud man, he refused to surrender to Union troops and went into exile in Mexico at war's end. He served Emperor Maximilian as a battalion commander, but soon returned to Texas. He became a tremendously popular legislator, serving in the Senate and the House for sixteen years. His most important legislation was the primary election law still in effect today. His outstanding public service assured his appointment as Minister to Turkey (1893-97) in Cleveland's administration.

Indeed, the men from Sanderson chose an able mentor to shepherd their bill through the legislature.

But, it was not universally favorable. A disgruntled Fort Stockton group mounted their own delegation, who went to Austin to oppose the legislation. It promised to be a battle royal.

However, this is where it was good to have "Uncle Charlie" in the Sanderson group. All of the men in both groups

had served as Pecos County commissioners and officers at one time or another, and in fact, were good friends. Charlie invited the Fort Stockton group to come up to their hotel room and have a friendly nightcap the night before the vote. Of course, he fed them bottle after bottle, into the wee hours of the night.

The next day the Sanderson delegation was present bright and early at the capital and they successfully argued their case. The Fort Stockton delegation? They never showed up, presumably too hung over to get out of bed!

The baby was born, the five wise men returned to the west and the king of the legislature went on to greater things. The defeated tucked tail and went home. But the baby? He thrived and is still with us today.

It is said that history is written by the winners. In this case, the losers relegated the embarrassing facts to a dusty footnote in their history book.

References

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

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