

Terrell County Memorial May, 2015  
Sanderson, Texas

# Museum News

## Judge John B. "Jack" Ross

### Unsung Hero of Terrell County



Photo: Connie & Jerry Springfield, Marathon, TX

***Judge John Benjamin "Jack" Ross***

Terrell County, Texas, has had more than its share of great men and women, the ones who shaped it in its beginning and sustained it through the years. Each generation had its shining stars...friends to all, filled with community spirit and possessing talent and a certain eagerness to see our county and its towns grow and strive to be the best.

Unfortunately, the last few generations don't know much about these people, and that's a shame. They need to know that, even if we are a small place in the middle of a wilderness, strong leaders can rise and move to the forefront. They need to know that all things are possible if we persevere, put our faith in our talents and the Almighty and have the courage of our convictions. And like the comic slave-maid Prissy in "Gone With the Wind" and her line, "Miss Scarlett, I don't know nuffin' 'bout birfin' no babies!" they didn't



Photo: Connie & Jerry Springfield, Marathon, TX

*John Benjamin and Jennie Lind Downs Ross*



Photo: Connie & Jerry Springfield, Marathon, TX

*The John Benjamin Ross Family with Jennie Lind's mother, Amelda Bates Downs*

know anything about birthing a county, but they stepped up to the task and played it like a pro.

That certainly was true for our second county judge, J. B. Ross. He came to that

position because Judge Joe Kerr, our first county judge and arguably one of the best friends this town ever had, decided to spend more time on his business and family and gave up the judge's bench. He

probably could have been re-elected until his death in 1939, he was so well loved by the community, but he stepped aside and Jack Ross was elected in November, 1910.

Ross was no stranger to the operation of a county. He served as the first county and district clerk of Zavala county at its organization in 1884 and remained in that position for the next seventeen years. He excelled as a county official, and that experience prepared him for his successful stint as county judge in Terrell county.

John Benjamin "Jack" Ross was born Oct. 1, 1849, in Franklin County, Alabama, the son of John and Mattie Burns Ross, Alabama farmers. He followed the family trade until moving to Texas in 1874. He was married in November, 1875, to Jennie Lind Downs, born in Colbert County Alabama, daughter of Isaac M. and Amelda Bates Downs. Her father was a lawyer and eventually became the county judge of Uvalde County.

The marriage produced five daughters and three sons, including J. L., Daisie Martin, Sallie Blanche Martin, Jacque Lou Burling and Tina East, the children who survived to adulthood.

They first lived in Uvalde county where he worked as a school teacher. From there they moved to Frio county where he operated a mercantile business for a few years.

Then he spent four years as a cattleman in newly-organized Zavala county. Being a popular and well respected citizen of Zavala, he easily won election to the clerk position in the fledgling county. During those years as clerk he also studied law and passed his bar examination, practicing as a lawyer after leaving office in 1901 until his removal to Terrell County in 1904 to help with its organization.

Amiable and outgoing, Judge Ross gained many friends and associates, both as a lawyer and as a practicing real estate agent selling many properties in Terrell County. He and fellow lawyer G. J. Henshaw organized the Henshaw and Ross

Abstract Company to aid property sales.

Ross was an avid baseball aficionado, as well as following sports in general and enjoying hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. He was a member of the Woodmen of the World order and a member of the Sanderson Commercial Club, forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, of which he also was an organizer.

A man of faith, Jack Ross and his family were members of the Church of Christ, by action in word and deed. His many talents and abilities made him a Renaissance Man, as were many of the first multi-talented entrepreneurs of Terrell County.

Tragedy, however, strikes both good and bad. An outbreak of typhoid in 1908 claimed their 25 year-old son J. L., who was in Sanderson at the time. Better times were to come, however.

With Judge Kerr's decision to stand down in the election of 1910, Ross was the obvious choice of the electorate to take his place. Transition of the government to the new regime was without incident and the public enjoyed a feeling of confidence that the torch had passed to capable hands.

Under Judge Ross's tenure a major rebuild of Big Hill on the road to Fort Stockton was accomplished and electric lights were installed in the town of Sanderson. It was also in this time that a public health officer, Dr. F. V. Reeve, was added to the county administration, in time for the latest outbreak of small pox and creation of a quarantine camp outside the town on today's Cargile Street. Hoping to improve the quality of life in the town, multiple contractors petitioned to put in water lines.

Another first was construction of the graded road up to the west county line, the precursor to U. S. Highway 90 which would eventually connect with Marathon and Alpine.

In 1914, a Home Guard was organized under Sheriff Jack Allen to protect against possible raids by Pancho Villa and war-



widespread damage to homes, outbuildings and livestock pasturage.

Under Ross's leadership plans were executed to throw up a spreader dam to minimize the effects of future flooding.

At the height of Jack Ross's popularity and enduring governance of the county, another tragedy struck the small community, one that was not easily remedied.

On December 30, 1917, Judge Jack Ross died unexpectedly of pneumonia. He had been rushed to Sabinal, Texas, where old family friend and former Sanderson resident Dr. S. B. Hudson had retired. His condition was too far advanced to save him. He was 69 years of age.

Sanderson reeled in shock and grief at the news of Judge Ross's death. He would not be easily replaced. Scrambling to find a successor, T. R. Kuykendall, brother-in-law of Joe Kerr and bookkeeper of the Kerr enterprises, was appointed judge until the fall election. He agreed to take the position, as long as it was not a permanent appointment.

Subsequently, G. J. Henshaw was elected the fourth county judge in November, 1918, and his administration lasted until 1939. He was an able successor to carry on in the broad footsteps of the universally beloved Judge John B. "Jack" Ross.

To her credit and displaying her love for Sanderson, Mrs. Ross continued to live in her home here until her death in 1932. For part of that time her daughter Tina East and her three small children made their home with her.

Today, Jack and Jenny Lind Ross rest in peace at Cedar Grove Cemetery, unsung heroes and shining examples of a group of respected and capable early pioneers who helped make this town we call home a better place.

ring factions in the violent Mexican Revolution, which sometimes spilled over onto American soil. Also under Judge Ross's administration the first River Riders were engaged, with the county paying part of the expenses for patrolling the border to reduce thievery by Mexican insurrectos and stop the movement of tick-infected livestock from Mexico.

With the outbreak of World War I an outpouring of patriotism saw the enlistment of many fine young men and women in the armed services and nursing corps. At home and under Judge Ross and others the Liberty Bond programs, the Red Cross organization and associated fund drives raised money for the war effort.

But along with the good came the bad. Outbreaks of epidemic disease and a disastrous fire in downtown Sanderson threatened to squelch the enthusiasm of the burgeoning town. A whole section of public buildings burned to the ground in June, 1917. But the able leadership of Ross and other county leaders encouraged the populace and kept panic to a minimum. The replacement buildings were a beautiful asset to the community and brought a modern, urban look to the area.

In another incident, a freak flash flood came roaring down the short canyon to the northwest of Sanderson, where the present Eagle Stadium sits today, causing

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#### References

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