

Museum News

C.J. "Doc" Turk

The Spirit of Sanderson



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

The men who came to Terrell County in the early days were tough as nails. They had to be to survive and thrive in a desolate, inhospitable country. Physical hardships and injuries were common among those hardy men, especially those known as "brush poppers." A very well known cattleman and inveterate "brush popper" in early day Terrell County was C.J. "Doc" Turk.

Doc, son of Charlie H. Turk, prominent rancher of Zavala County, was born in Gonzales on February 7, 1874. He worked on the 7D and XS spreads in south Texas around Uvalde before com-

ing to Terrell County in 1909 in a wagon. His wife Effie and son Charlie stayed behind for a short while, then Effie joined him to spend the rest of her years on the ranch.

Among other things Doc was foreman of the T5 Ranch, under owner Col. Ike T. Pryor. About 1912 he decided he wanted a ranch so he began buying up property that would become the Turk Ranch in northeastern Terrell County.

Doc was an uncommon man. He was well respected as a cattleman and ran stock in many parts of West Texas. At the 1939 Ozona Rodeo his son, Charlie, took top money as a roper and Doc was introduced to the grandstand. The *Sanderson Times* reported he received much appreciative applause.

But Doc's ability as a cowboy was unrivaled. So well known was he that J. Frank Dobie included a section about him in "The Longhorns." (University of Texas Press (1980))

With Doc in mind Dobie writes, "In splitting a thicket open the brush hand is on horseback, but he is more under his horse, stretched out alongside on him, lying against his neck, leaning back into his flank, squirming down first one shoulder and then the other, than sitting upright in the saddle. He rides all over, along and under his horse. He must keep his eyes open, too, or have them gouged

out. He has to look to dodge, and he has to dodge as swiftly almost as the eye can glimpse in order to keep on looking. As a shield he uses his hands, arms, shoulders, legs and body more than his head. If he goes to dodging too much with his head, he will shut his eyes, and when he shuts his eyes, even for a second, he loses control...The horse he's riding is not going to pause or stop; if he is a well-trained horse hot after a cow, his rider can only



Photo courtesy of Alice EvansDownie

with great difficulty stop him at all...Many a time he comes out of a thicket carrying enough wood in the fork of his saddle to satisfy a prairie cook...The brush hand is a brute for punishment. Cool-headed in directing his own skill, at the same time, once he hits a hot trail, he becomes oblivious of all else."

That's the definition of a brush popper, and that last phrase..."once he hits a hot trail, he becomes oblivious of all else"...pretty well sums up Doc Turk. The job at hand was paramount to Turk, and he let nothing stop him from achieving his goal.

Dobie also tells of the time when Doc and other brush poppers took a break to go skinny dipping in a waterhole on a creek. They saw a stray crossing the creek above the waterhole, and without warning, Doc jumped out of the water, leapt on his horse and took after the stray, right through the brush and thicket. However, he didn't have a stitch of clothing on and totally ignored the pain. He let nothing stop him from his duty.

But he paid a price for that diligence. Dobie tells of the times when Doc was so sore and "stove up" that he had to be lifted into his saddle for the day's work.

Articles in the *Sanderson Times* in 1923 reported that he had been riding an "outlaw" on the Buchanan Ranch and it ran through a hackberry thicket, causing him to break both collar bones, a bone on the point of his shoulder and crack a rib. In addition he received numerous bruises and cuts about the head, neck and body. But he never went to see a doctor...instead two

doctors motored out to the ranch later to see how he was doing. The *Times* said they reported that, stoically, he was doing as well as could be expected.

A month later when he finally made it to town the *Times* rejoiced and reported him as saying, "I feel as young as ever and can dance and run a foot race with any young man in town."

And in 1927 when the Kerr Mercantile building was being inaugurated, quite a big deal for the time, the *Times* reported on all the celebration and pomp and circumstance. And as a final pronouncement on the affair and in tones befitting royalty, the *Times* stated, "Doc Turk arrived on a cot, a horse having fallen on him breaking some ribs, but he just had to be there, exemplifying the "Spirit of Sanderson."

But Doc Turk wasn't royalty, and as well respected as he was he never let popularity go to his head. He was always the unassuming gentleman, and in his daily diaries there is a tone of gentleness and concern for friends and relatives and even perfect strangers.

He commented on the passing of Joe



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

Coosie is stirring up something good at the Doc Turk chuck wagon about 1917-18. Some of the cowboys are catching 40 winks in the shade under the chuck box.

Doc Turk

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Kerr and Mrs. de Landes, wonderful and beloved citizens of Terrell County, in the most respectful terms, and even of news concerning two young people, unknown to him, who had died in an auto accident. And somehow he managed to keep up with and acknowledge the many birthdays and anniversaries of his multitude of friends and their children.

Doc was always ready to help his neighbor, whether with scarce cash or with back breaking effort. This diary entry taken from the Terrell County history book shows his humor and thought process. "Yesterday evening two ministers come looking for donations. We gave them \$10. I look like I need someone to donate something to me. My pants are all torn and I look pretty bad. If it don't rain, I will look worse."

The *Times* reporter was right, Doc

Turk did exemplify the "Spirit of Sanderson." He not only took care of his own business, he also found the time to support his community. He was a stockholder in Kerr Mercantile and was a charter member of the first Sanderson Chamber of Commerce in 1920, as well as serving on many committees and public groups. He also "grubstaked" many a cowboy, giving them their start in this country. He truly was one of a kind.

Doc's earthly journey ended on Christmas Day, 1944, after a long illness. Effie lived on the ranch for the rest of her days, passing in 1972.

As the old ways and values disappear and we move on into the future, folks like Doc and Effie Turk become rarities. And, unfortunately, we are not likely to see their kind again.



References

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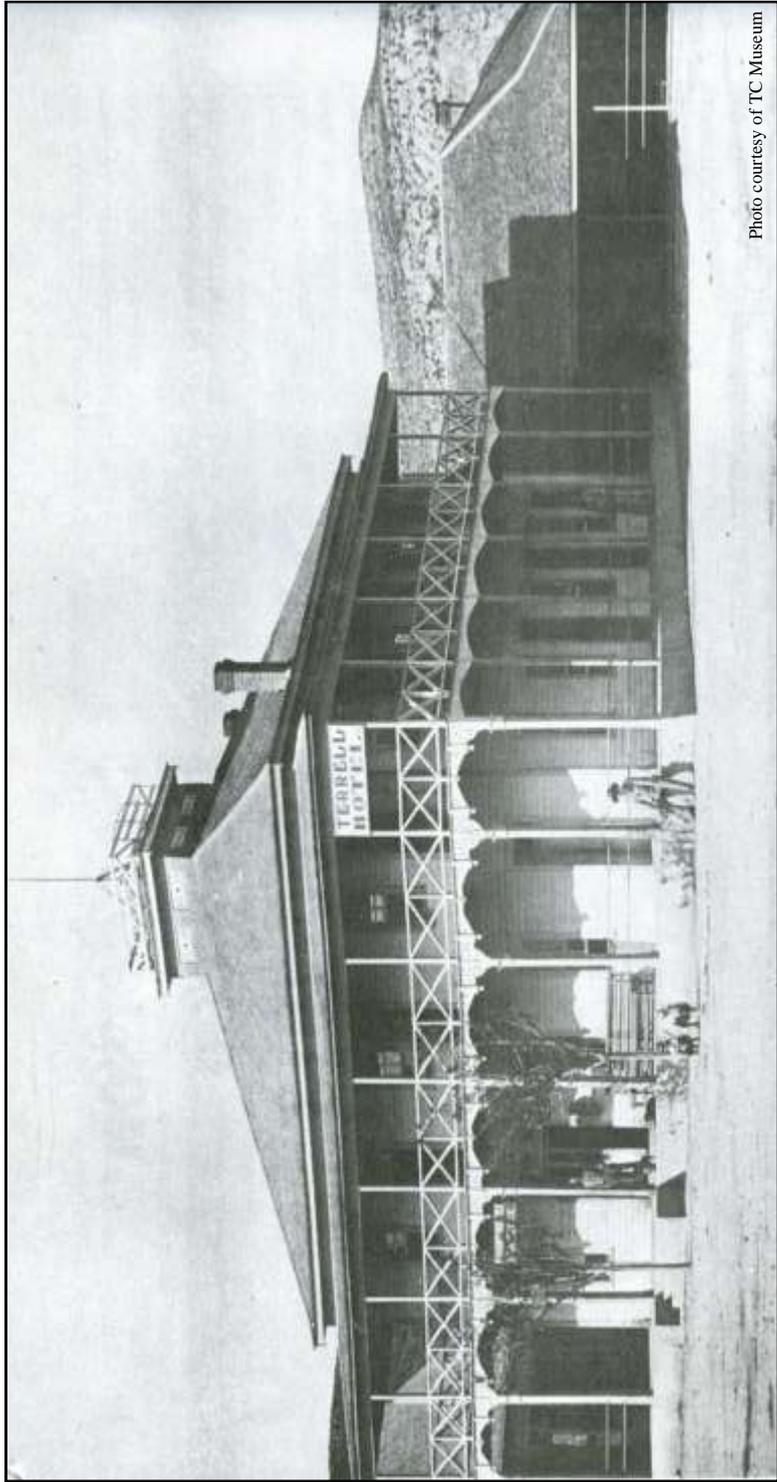


Photo courtesy of TC Museum

TERRELL HOTEL - Located across the street and northwest of the depot, this frame and adobe structure was erected in 1902 by Charlie Wilson, “father” of Sanderson. It served as the first court house in the new Terrell County, with court held in the “ballroom” upstairs and various offices occupying some of the rooms. The adobe building to the rear was a restaurant and boarding house owned by Sam Sung and operated by Lee Ouong. The Terrell County history book has many humorous anecdotes about the Chinese who ran this establishment. This photo dates from about 1910. In 1917 these buildings were dismantled and the Kerr Hotel erected to the rear. A railroad park was created on this site, remnants of which can still be seen. Photo from the TCM collection and caption data from *Terrell County, It's Past, It's People*, Alice Evans Downie, Sanderson, Texas: Terrell County Heritage Commission, 1978.