

Terrell County Memorial Museum News

June, 2014 Sanderson, Texas

Desert Taxi Service



Photo: Alice Evans Downie

Store-keeper Walter Raysor, shown with one of the little burros that ran wild on the streets of Sanderson and the hills of Terrell County, ca. 1908.

If you should find yourself in a modern city and in need of cheap or free transportation, never fear, Bikeshare© (or another of dozens of programs) is there. Portland, OR; Tucson, AZ; Madison, WI; Boston, Brookline, Cambridge and Somerville,

MA; Denver, CO; Minneapolis/St. Paul Area; District of Columbia; Arlington and Alexandria VA; Ft. Worth, TX; New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area, to name a few, offer systems whereby citizens can pick up a bicycle for free (or for very inexpensive rental) and ride to any other station in that city and drop off their vehicle. It is a system that began about 1994 in Portland and has spread around the world, of late.

This is not a modern concept. People living in the small towns of West Texas in the "good old days" knew all about free transportation. Roaming the streets of Sanderson and other locales were denizens of the desert, little burros, that wandered freely, munching on the local vegetation until a child (or adult) pressed them into "taxi" service.

My mother, Marjorie Oatman Smith, spent her childhood (1910s-1930s) in Balmorhea, and she always said a treasured memory of growing up in that small town was the presence of the tame, free-range donkeys and burros that wandered the streets. If she and her siblings needed a ride "uptown," they caught a donkey and rode in style. The only complaint was that no saddles were used. Her aunt Goldie Odell Edgell, who was also raised in Balmorhea, complained in her family remembrances that as the youngest, she always got stuck with "Old Knife Back," apparently a burro with a very thin

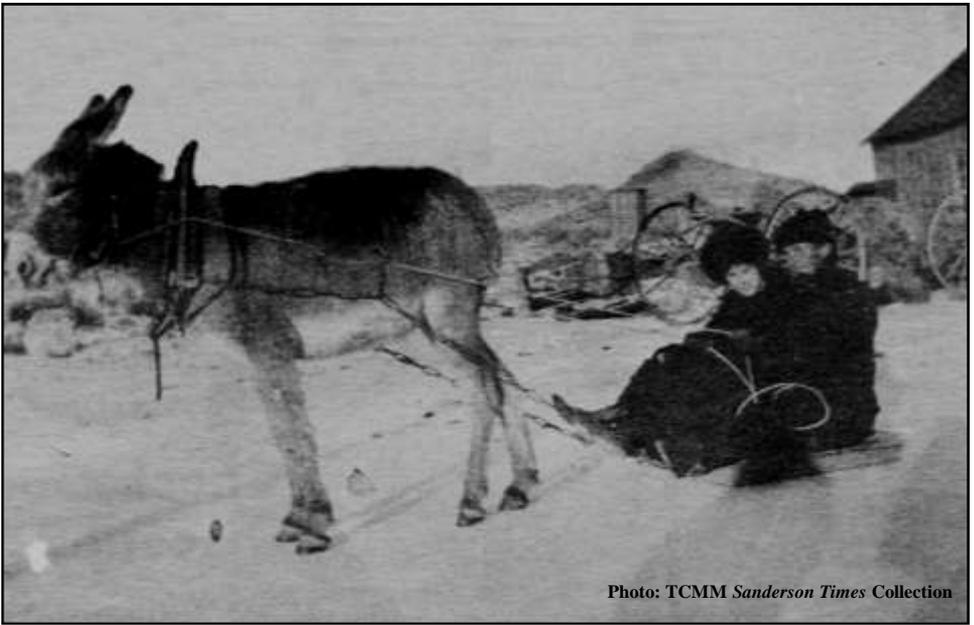


Photo: TCMM Sanderson Times Collection

Dashing through the snow! - The burros that wandered the streets of Sanderson in the early part of the last century could often be put to creative use. Here we see visitor Lois Jackson of Austin, joy-riding with the most eligible bachelor in town, County Judge G. J. Henshaw, who has put the little animal to good use drawing his sled past the blacksmith shop that sat at the corner of Wilson and Oak, across from Javelina Hill.

frame and very sharp backbone!

Other town histories also mention the presence of the little animals. Old-timers in Marathon, Alpine, Marfa and Ft. Davis

often mentioned their "desert taxi service." But, where did they come from?

Mrs. Anna Lee Adams Babb, resident of Sanderson and early-day school teacher

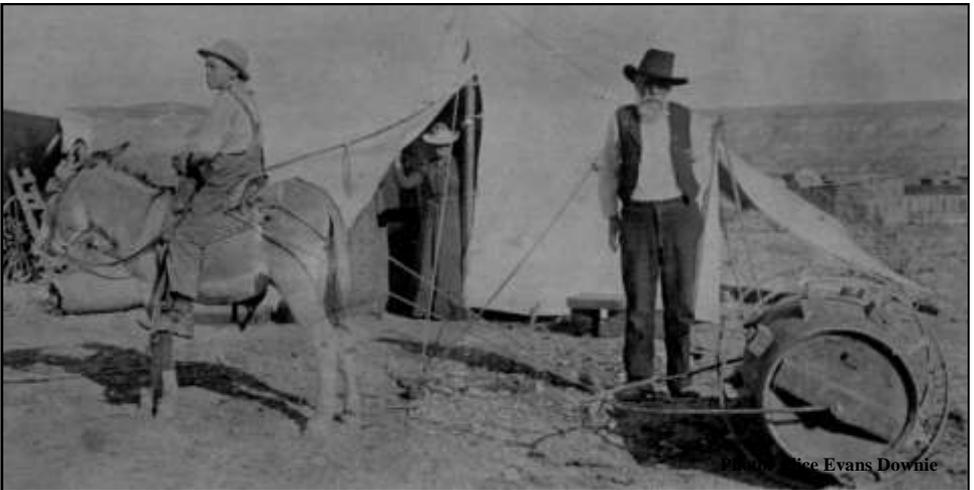


Photo: Alice Evans Downie

Young Fred Savage delivers water at 25¢ a barrel to the tent home of the Y. M. Slovers of Sanderson, ca 1900.



Sonny Wolfram and Helen Gregory, nephew and niece of the Ed McGinleys, are shown riding one of the wild burros that roamed Sanderson streets in the early 1900s.

and resident of Terlingua, said that donkeys were used to carry mercury from Terlingua to Marathon for rail shipment. She claimed that two mercury flasks, at 76 pounds each, were loaded in special saddle bags and the animals were turned loose to walk the nearly 100 miles, unguided, to the railhead at Marathon. She said the animals were unloaded, then sent back to Terlingua, again, unguided. Apparently, they knew the routine so well they didn't need a driver/herder.

Later, mules pulled wagonloads of mercury flasks to Marathon for shipment. She said that when trucks began to be used the animals were turned loose in the desert to forage for themselves. Whether she actually witnessed this or only heard

it from others is not known.

In some cases her scenario might have been true, but wild donkeys and burros were present long before trucks came on the scene.

Although burros and donkeys are, in fact, the same animal, burros generally are smaller in stature. They stand an average of 43 inches tall at the withers (shoulder blades) and weigh an average of 270 pounds for jacks (males) and about 250 pounds for jennies (females.)

Burros have been used as beasts of burden since Biblical times, but they were also valued for their milk and even kept for companionship as pets. In certain areas of the world (Italy, Eastern Europe, Egypt) they were used for meat. (And,

still are used in certain Italian delicacies!)

Donkeys came to the New World on Columbus's Second Voyage in 1495, and made their first appearance within the present boundaries of the U. S. when Juan Oñate, so-called "Last Spanish Conquistador," made his expedition of 1598, as well as subsequent expeditions and colonization attempts by others. Donkeys and burros that escaped or were released into the wild had 300 years to spread across the Southwest. Apparently, they did just that.

A fascinating feature of donkeys is their use in producing mules. When a male donkey is crossed with a female horse, a mule is produced. When a male horse is crossed with a female donkey, the product is called a "hinny." Mules and hinnies are generally sterile, although there was a fertile female mule at Texas A&M for years.

Zebras and donkeys can also interbreed. The cross of a male zebra and female donkey is called a zedonkey, zonkey, zebroid or zebra-brass. The cross of a male donkey and a female zebra is called a zebra hinny, zebret or zebhinny. For years a zebra-donkey hybrid lived on the Bruce Ranch west of Sanderson; it may still be there.

Today, there are an estimated 41 million donkeys in the world, with approximately 3 million living in Mexico. China accounts for the largest population, with 11 million animals.

The ubiquitous burro was once a central and charming feature of life in Sanderson. Serving as entertainment, creating cher-



Johnny Burris, manager of the D. Hart Ranch, sits astride his trusty burro, ca 1905. The gentleman behind him in the cap and striped suspenders is Lee Quong, proprietor of the restaurant associated with the Wilson Hotel.

ished memories for children and as useful members of desert society, the little creatures gradually began to disappear from town at some time in the 1930s-40s. Their demise was so gradual that most folks didn't notice until suddenly, it seemed, they were nowhere to be found.

Whether they died off or were rounded up as a public nuisance is not really known at present. Some knowledgeable reader who was there at the time could probably answer that question for us.

References

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Conversation with Anna Lee Adams Babb, ca 1992
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