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Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Tom and Mamie Kuykendall People of Strong Faith and Goodwill



T. R. "Tom" and Mamie Kerr Kuykendall

The first people to live in Sanderson were hearty souls, both men and women. It took a great deal of fortitude and courage to carve a homestead or a life from this unforgiving wilderness.

Even at the turn of the 20th century, when there were a few more souls within the city limits, life was still tough. The town was a wild, lawless place, with murders and larceny occurring on a weekly, sometimes daily basis.

Into this wicked environment good folks came to try to make a difference.

They saw potential in the young community, seeing not what was, but what could be.

One such young couple was Tom and Mamie Kuykendall, coming to the community from Tilden in McMullen County at the urging of family members who had arrived a few years earlier.

Tom's ancestors hailed from Holland, arriving on the shores of New Netherland (present-day New York state) around 1640.

The Dutch family name has an inter-

Tom Kuykendall photo courtesy of Bill Smith; all others courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

esting origin. Kuykendall (which he pronounced as "ker-kin-dall,") is actually the name of a high area of land with a beautiful view overlooking the Rhine Valley in Land van Kuyk, a county of the Netherlands. "Kuyk" in the Dutch is correctly pronounced "kike," but some of Tom's ancestors anglicized and corrupted the pronunciation to "kirk."

In later life, William Kuykendall became the county judge of McMullen County, holding the office for many years. Writing to genealogist George Benson Kuykendall in the early 1910s, he related these facts about his family's history in Texas:

"My grandfather, Captain Abner Kuykendall, and family came to Texas from Arkansas in October, 1821, and settled at or near San Felipe in Austin County...It is probable that my grandfather was born in Virginia and migrated to Kentucky...He commanded the militia of Austin's Colony and later served as county commissioner."

The Arkansas ancestors reportedly included a Kuykendall involved in the "Runaway Scrape," the mass exodus of civilians evacuating ahead of Santa Anna's push into Texas. As this kinsmen sought to ford a rain-swollen stream, he was attacked and killed by an alligator.

The genealogist summed up Judge William Kuykendall's letter by saying, "The judge comes of a family that has given Texas many prominent and useful citizens, who have fought Indians, Mexicans and bandits, and have helped to organize courts, make laws and who have been legislators, educators, editors, writers, farmers and business men."



Mamie Kerr Kuykendall, Jim Kerr, John Kerr, Joe Kerr and wife Josephine Robinson Kerr, pictured in front of the old Kerr Mercantile store on Downie Street.

We deduce from this that the Kuykendalls had a fine pedigree, indicating the willingness of their ancestors to serve the public good.

As for Tom, he was born on a ranch near Haynes Bay, Refugio County, Texas, on December 20, 1871, the first-born of eight children to William and Katherine Byrne Kuykendall. His father not only ranched but also operated a small mercantile.

In December, 1877, the Kuykendalls pulled up stakes and moved to land purchased from Samuel A. Maverick, notorious landholder, wheeler-dealer and originator of the term "maverick," which came to mean "independently minded (Ed. note: bull-headed.)" The property sat on the banks of the Frio, just across the river from Tilden in McMullen County, Texas.

Using materials salvaged from his home on Haynes Bay he built a new house for his young family. Somewhat of a maverick himself, he was one of the first in McMullen County to fence his ranch, but this was long before wire fencing was available. He used the mesquite that grew prolifically on his property, fashioning the fence from rails and forked pieces, more a barrier

to keep the larger animals on his property from drifting.

Young Tom started public school at eight years of age. When he had exceeded the abilities of his schoolmasters at age 18, he began to study law and surveying on his own, with books he borrowed and others he was able to purchase. Four long years later he passed his bar exam and opened a law office in Tilden.

After he had established his practice, he married Mamie Kerr in 1898. She was born in County Donegal, Ireland, to James and Rose Campbell Kerr on Oct. 14, 1875, and immigrated to the US in 1881 to Atascosa County, TX. Not so coincidentally, she was a sister of Joe and Jim Kerr.

Looking for better opportunities, they moved to Del Rio, Texas in 1901. In an effort to keep food on the table and the wolf from the door, he accepted a job liquidating two grocery stores in Gonzales and Beeville.

With a family history of merchandising and the recent experience of the store liquidations, they moved to Sanderson in 1902 at the urging of Joe Kerr, who had become a partner in a store. As Tom put it, Sanderson "was a place at that time with about 150 inhabitants, another border town and a "rough and wooly" one, too. Many killings occurred during my early years here and things did not change or get better until the year 1905 when many of the former "would-be desperados" left here for points west and the town began to progress and become civilized."

Joe Kerr had purchased an interest in Hancock and Hancock Store and hired Kuykendall as bookkeeper and office man. From 1901 to 1905 Kerr's

business increased ten-fold.

Kuykendall did not practice criminal law so he did not work as a lawyer during those first years, since that was the only lawyer work available in the crime-ridden town.

In 1907 the Sanderson State Bank was organized and in 1908 Kuykendall was selected as the second head cashier, a position he held until 1922. But he had additional work and public service experience during those years.

Around 1909 he was elected to the first school board in Terrell County, and he served with distinction for years.

In 1913 he was appointed as special District Judge in the absence of the regular judge who had gone on sabbatical. In that capacity he presided over the hearings concerning the Baxter Curve train robbery in March, 1913.

When County Judge Jack Ross died unexpectedly in December of 1917, Kuykendall agreed to serve the remainder of his term. He did not want to give up his cashier's position at the bank because that would have put him in conflict of interest when the bank was due to renew its position as depositor of public funds for the county. He served only until the November election and was succeeded by G. J. Henshaw.

In that period he also served as the registrar for the local selective service.

Ever the supporter and booster of Terrell County and all things Sanderson, in 1920 he and four other town leaders met in the Sanderson State Bank boardroom and decided to organize the county's first Chamber of Commerce. He was selected as its first treasurer and served for two years.

In 1921 he was appointed as a board member of the Sanderson Ice, Water

and Light Company.

He also served for a term as Terrell County attorney.

Although they had no children, Kuykendall was devoted to his wife, Mamie Kerr Kuykendall, throughout her life and after.

As devout and active Roman Catholics, they were faithful supporters of the local congregation. When they moved to Sanderson there was no real Catholic Church. A small one-room adobe with dirt floor, no windows, and only one door was used by the fledgling congregation. In addition, visits by priests were few and that greatly upset Mamie. She wrote Bishop Forest of San Antonio and asked that he send a priest. At her faithful prodding and insistence the bishop sent an Oblate, Father Magrim, who began to come out semi-annually. But still she was not satisfied.

In May of that same year the Bishop came for a visit and was given a splendid, royal reception by the congregation. This marked the beginning of frequent visits by bishops, clergy and noted missionary priests who came to give missions.

Soon it was decided that the tiny, one-room adobe was not a proper meeting place, nor was it large enough for the swelling congregation. The faithful stepped forward and pledged to build a small church, to be a joint effort by the Anglos and Hispanics. Tom Kuykendall raised the money to purchase a lot on Oak Street, mid-block between Second and Third Streets. Everyone, young and old, able-bodied and frail, assisted in the construction of the new adobe building.

Some donated the adobes, others gave

building materials. All gave their labor or hired workers to take their place. The Hispanics made and donated the adobe blocks while others raised money to have pews and altar furniture constructed in Del Rio. Christened the Church of the Immaculate Conception at its inauguration in 1906, it was continually upgraded through the years until the congregation simply outgrew the building.

In his memoirs, written in the waning years of his life, Kuykendall commented about the little church: "This was certainly one church that was built through the joint efforts of all of the parishioners, and while we now have a fine new church, yet I cannot but retain a warm spot for our old adobe building which was built under many handicaps, with much labor and effort." And, no doubt, with much brotherly love.

In 1922 Kuykendall resigned at the bank and they moved to El Paso where he practiced law. Shortly after Mamie's death in 1937 he moved back to Sanderson to spend his remaining days. He contracted tuberculosis and died at Santa Rosa Hospital in San Antonio on November 28, 1947, a month short of his 78th birthday. He was buried by Mamie's side in the Kerr family plot at Campbellton.

People of strong faith and good will, Tom and Mamie Kuykendall were well respected and well loved by the people of Sanderson. With their quiet demeanor and gracious concern they succeeded in promoting faith and harmony in a community where segregation and discrimination was an accepted norm, and, certainly, that is something for which we all should be proud.

References

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