



# Museum News

## Let the Midnight Special shine a light on me



Photo courtesy of the Terrell County Memorial Museum

*Sells and Floto Circus takes a moment to exercise the pachyderms, sometime in the early 1920s...watch where you step!*

The railroad was a special blessing to the folks of Sanderson, not only because of the economic impact of having a division point with roundhouse and crew change facilities, but also for the special events that came by privilege of existing on a very busy trans-continental route.

Young and old alike got to see things that folks in the hinterland could only dream about, unless they made a special effort to come to the event.

An event that thrilled old and young alike, even today, was when the circus came to town.

Mary Alice Happle Townsend remembered that in those days the circus visited the town annually — and that the excitement for the children was almost too much to bear. She offered that the joyous anticipa-

tion of the circus is never outgrown, as adults were just as excited as the children.

Nell Sudduth, in writing in the Terrell County history book about the entertainments available to small town citizens in the early days, felt that Sanderson was too small for any but the smallest circuses to stop here. She noted, however, that school was dismissed when a large circus train stopped to water, exercise and feed the animals, giving the kids an opportunity to watch the proceedings and dream of the "Big Top."

Sometimes the circus had an unintended effect on the highly impressionable little ones. Margaret Farley reminisced that her husband, Ernest, as a pre-schooler, learned a catchy tune from a traveling circus and delighted in sitting on the fence across from

the old "Red Schoolhouse," singing it as loudly as he could so the children in school could hear him. Mrs. Farley recalled with a chuckle that, "The more the children laughed, the louder he would sing. The teacher would finally have to send an embarrassed Annie home to quieten her little brother."

Robert Ray wrote about his life in Sanderson as a railway postal clerk in 1904, and recalled that one outstanding memory of his time here was a performance of the Ringling Brothers Circus, replete with many fine horses and exotic animals.

Usually they only unloaded and exercised the animals, but that time they put on a full performance.

There had been a very heavy rain the night before, but they held a

traditional street parade and performance, just like the one they put on in El Paso the day before.

Visits by famous politicians was another thing that Sanderson citizens were privy to but not available to those who lived a distance from the railroad. Sanderson enjoyed at least three events through the years, and they always got a huge turnout at the depot.

President McKinley was the first president to visit Sanderson by the so-called "Whistle Stop Tour."

According to the New York Times, the whole train was the equivalent of an elegant palace on wheels, furnished with marble appointments, mahogany paneling, satin draperies and service fit for royalty.

Sanderson railroader Owen J. Vineyard said that a highlight of his fifty-plus years of railroading was the honor of being the fireman on President McKinley's special train as it passed through this division, and that he was even furnished a suit of white overalls for the occasion.

McKinley arrived on May 5, 1901, but,

unfortunately, passed through in the middle of the night and only stopped briefly to take on coal and water.

Knowing Sanderson folks, they probably gathered at the depot anyway, to witness the popular president's presence, even if he was snoring away in his stately pleasure conveyance. Tragically, in September of that same year McKinley was felled by an anarchist assassin's bullet and died a few days later.

Just eight years later Sanderson was graded by the presence of another famous leader of the republic.

William Howard Taft, at a gigantic 6'2"



*Taft addresses the crowd at Sanderson*  
Photo courtesy of the Ferguson Collection, TC Memorial Museum

tall and 330 pounds, the largest and only US president to get stuck in his own bathtub at the Whitehouse, made a whistle stop tour of the southwestern US in October of 1909.

Starting in Oregon and eventually ending up at St. Louis, he passed through Sanderson on the evening of October 6 after a momentous day in El Paso with President Diaz of Mexico. The Mexicans in the crowd had been impressed that Taft spoke fluent Spanish and did not need an interpreter for the Mexican President's speech.

Much to the delight of the local populace, there was a scheduled stop here, due to Sanderson's importance as a division point on the railroad. A large crowd was waiting for him at the depot and they gave him a rousing Terrell County welcome, and again, knowing Sanderson, probably with whistling, whooping and hollering.

Dr. C.H. Thorne of Brownsville happened to be present at El Paso and Sanderson and remarked, "A large crowd that was in waiting took advantage of (his presence) to persuade the president to appear on the

rear of the observation car and say a few words and smile a few smiles in the most approved Taft manner."

Regarding the bathtub incident, it is rumored that it took four men to extract the president, using a gallon of butter and several gallons of sweat!

Fast-forward forty years to the presidential election of 1948. That was the election where John Dewey was a shoo-in for president, but got a rude awakening the next morning

when newspapers claimed he had won, but in fact, Harry Truman had taken the prize. The victory was due in part to Truman's whistle stop tour of the US.

The Sanderson Times, reported that President Harry S. Truman, aboard the 17-car Presidential Special, arrived in Sanderson at 9:55 p.m. on Saturday, September 26, and left at 10:15. His speech, tailored especially for Terrell County, encouraged ranchers and spoke to local concerns.

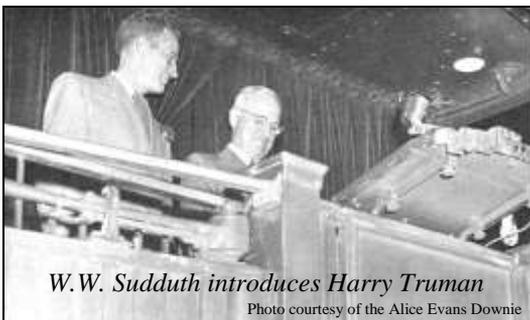
His private car was quite impressive also. Dubbed the "Ferdinand Magellan," it was an armor-plated Pullman "complete with galley, dining room, bedrooms, shower, overstuffed furniture, and intimates of the president."

It had armor plating 5/8-inch thick on top, sides, and floor and was the heaviest railway car in the world, weighing 285,000 pounds. The bulletproof windows were three inches thick and the doors could only be opened by combination.

He was introduced to the local crowd by W. W. Sudduth, longtime Terrell County Democratic Chairman, and greeted by a delegation of prominent local Democrats. Little Barbara Sudduth presented a lovely orchid to Mrs. Truman and Mrs. Jolly Harkins presented one to daughter Margaret, along with a basket of golden chrysanthemums from Mrs. Horton.

It is reported that, in true politician fashion, baby Dan Springfield was handed up to him at Marathon, over the platform railing, to get a presidential smooch.

Sanderson folks also got to see a parade of changing technology as the railroad made improvements to its equipment. From the tiny "teapots" of the early years, fired with wood and steaming and clanking down the winding ribbons of steel, to modern oil-fired



*W.W. Sudduth introduces Harry Truman*

Photo courtesy of the Alice Evans Downie

behemoths that could out-pull and out-run the best of the old guard. And even those were replaced by a completely different technology in the diesel-electric engines of today. People stood in awe as Yankee ingenuity led the world of the railroad.

In 1922, the Southern Pacific Railroad bought 50 large steam locomotives from the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Eddystone, PA. Designated 2-10-2s, they had two small lead wheels, ten huge driving wheels and two small trailing wheels on each engine. The cost of the project was \$3,750,000, in 1922 pre-inflation dollars.

Twenty of the gleaming workhorses were destined to go to California to work on the railroad in that area. The locomotives were coupled together to form a complete train with the three lead units being operated under their own power to pull the equipment. Railroad publicists dubbed it the "Prosperity Special," in what were obviously pre-Depression times.

Local engineer Clay T. Garner was a member of the train crew that handled the locomotives from Del Rio to Sanderson, and he recalled that, due to the excessive weight of the combined locomotives, there were problems moving the equipment over the Pecos River high bridge. But, the deed was accomplished and the caravan of modern technology rolled into Sanderson on June 22, 1922. It paused long enough to take on water and fuel and to be inspected by the roundhouse train crews, and for young Mary Ferguson to have her photo taken as she posed on the "cowcatcher." It had stopped all along its 2,000-plus mile journey for photo-ops, taking advantage of a tremendous opportunity for the railroad to boast of its prowess as a leader in the industry, and people turned out by the hundreds of thou-



*Miss Mary Ferguson on the pilot of the Prosperity Special.*

Photo courtesy of the Ferguson Collection, TC Memorial Museum

bled and the new Kerr Hotel would not be ready for another two years.

When it was time for the arrival, the folks adjourned to the depot, only to learn that the train was late. So, back they trudged to the dance.

Two more times the crowd trekked to the depot, discovering that the train was delayed once again.

sands to see the "Wonder Train of the World."

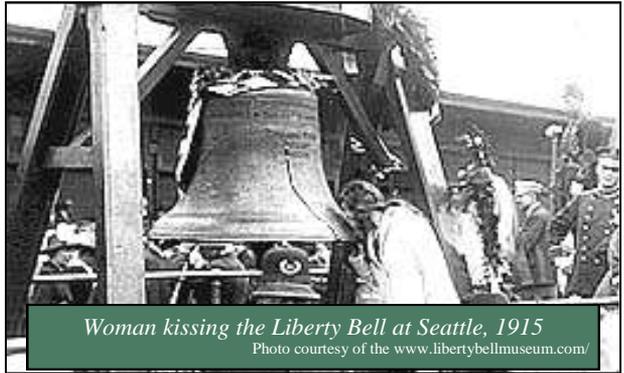
The rest of the locomotives were sent to different parts of the road, which stretched from the east coast to the west. From the looks of the pictures taken locally, not many Sanderson folks turned out to see it.

Besides famous personalities, Sanderson folks got to see a venerable American icon as it toured the country by rail.

During the Great War in 1918, the Liberty Bell was graciously sent out by the people of Philadelphia on a War Bond tour to give common folks a chance to see an uncommon piece of American history, and as a vehicle to raise money for the war effort in Europe.

When the itinerary was released, the patriotic folks of Sanderson were overjoyed to see that it was scheduled to make a stop at the Sanderson depot. However, due to its late, 11 p.m. arrival, the folks decided to hold a Liberty Bell Dance at the brand new St. Francis Hotel just up the street from the depot, to generate support for War Bonds and pass the time until it arrived.

The Wilson Hotel had just been disman-



*Woman kissing the Liberty Bell at Seattle, 1915*

Photo courtesy of the [www.libertybellmuseum.com/](http://www.libertybellmuseum.com/)

By this time the small children present had grown tired and sleepy and were bedded down all around the dance floor.

The fourth and final call came at 3 a.m. as the train with the special Liberty Bell flat car chugged up to the Sanderson Depot.

A mother woke her young tike, an outspoken boy with a reputation for having quite a salty vocabulary for one of his tender age.

"Come on, Son, let's go see the Liberty Bell," she said, as quoted by Walter G. Downie in the Terrell County history book.

"To Hell with the Liberty Bell!" the disgruntled 4 year-old lad exclaimed, as he turned over and went back to sleep.



## References

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