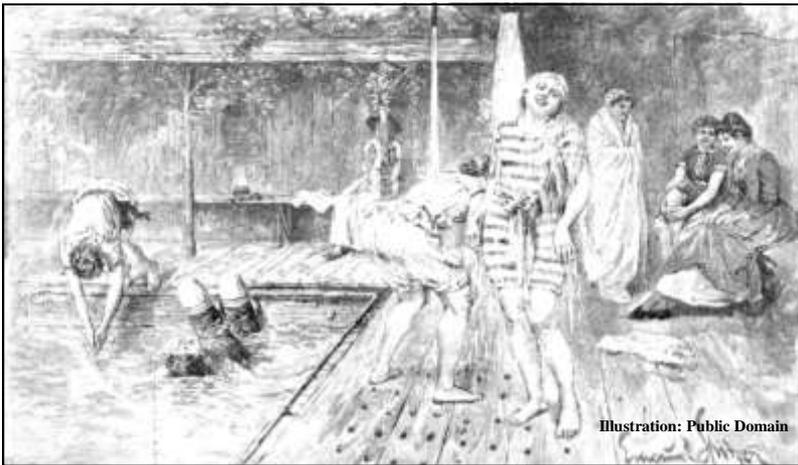


Terrell County Memorial August, 2013
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

"Oh what a tangled web we weave, When first we practise to deceive!"



Sporting Ladies

Throughout the history of Sanderson, the sacred institution of marriage was not always so sacred. In early days, before the turn of the 20th Century, prostitution was rampant on the streets of Sanderson. (And local "authorities" on the subject claim, with snickers and giggles, that it continued on into the 1970s and '80s.) Lonely men, who did not dare bring their wives and families to the wild and dangerous streets of Sanderson, were tempted on every hand to go astray. A trip to one of the six saloons to unwind after a hard day often brought solicitation from the friendly barkeeper, who pimped for his own stable of "dusky maidens."

And then there were the men and wo-

men who took the honorable track and tied the marriage knot before God and man. Sadly, these poor souls grew unhappy with their choices and used illegal means to split the blanket.

A case in point occurred in the 1930s when outsider Bessie Mae Rivers married Telefus Sharp, a local boy whose sterling character, winsome personality and quick wit had gained the love and admiration of the whole community.

Just teenagers when they married, they soon produced a cute bouncing baby boy and moved to a local ranch where young Telefus had landed a job.

Soon, young Bessie Mae began to be attracted to handsome young Willie Bureson, a dashing cowhand on the



Photo: crossinthewilderness.blogspot.com

sational, but that will be the subject of a forthcoming issue of the News.

A third example of marital irresponsibility, or more correctly, abuse of the contract, is bigamy. It is illegal to be married to two or more spouses at the same time in the US, but the practice was widespread in the early days

Some bigamists were criminals who preyed on weaker souls for profit; others remarried under false assumptions of legal divorces. But either way, if you got caught, you were in a world of danger, both from law enforcement and from outraged spouses and their kin.

One man in Ohio married twelve women and obtained a divorce from none of them. Imagine the court proceedings on the day nine angry, surviving wives turned up for their pound of flesh!

And, it even happened in Sanderson. A case that dragged on for months in the press in 1900 was that of GH & SA Assistant Station Agent R. B. "Dick" Isaac, a young man who had just transferred from El Paso to his new position.

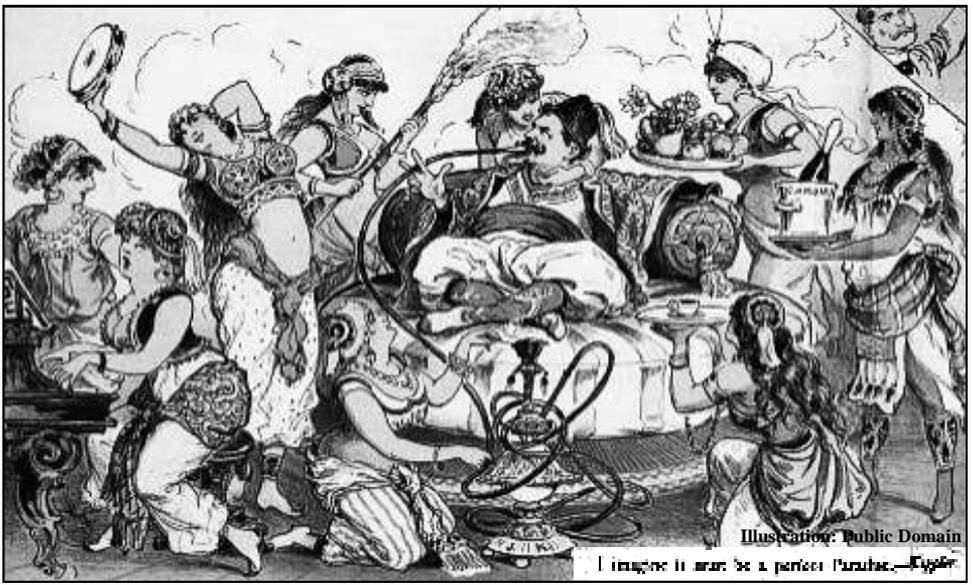
While living in El Paso, Isaac, who came from a prominent Oakland, CA, family, made the acquaintance of Miss Lucy Kneeland, a popular young debutante in El Paso social circles, who also

ranch, and flirtations soon blossomed into an illicit affair. Apparently an impatient person, Miss Bessie did not want to go through a long, messy divorce. Instead, she opted for the woman's weapon of choice and added two doses of strychnine to her hubby's stomach salts medicines.

Hearty Telefus recovered from each bout, but a third dose did the trick. Needless to say, the attempts were crude and messy and red flags of suspicion went up all over town. The ensuing trial was sen-



Above and next page: Political cartoons satirizing polygamy in the mid-19th century.



came from a prominent family.

After a whirlwind romance, the couple married and news of the event was splashed across the local media, "hit the wire" and was published in Los Angeles papers. The couple moved to Sanderson the same night and made plans to set up housekeeping.

Meanwhile, back in Los Angeles, the news item of the surprise nuptials caught the eye of one C. W. McKenzie, erstwhile step-son of Isaac. McKenzie immediately contacted law enforcement officials in El Paso and swore out a warrant for Isaac's arrest, based on his personal knowledge of certain affairs in Isaac's life, and the firm belief that there was another Mrs. Isaac besides his mother, Lucy McKenzie, and the new Mrs. Isaac.

Once the warrant was sworn in El Paso, as fate would have it, Miss Lucy's own brother-in-law, Ben Jenkins, a United States inspector, was deputized and sent to Sanderson to retrieve the errant Mr. Isaac.

McKenzie told the newspapers that Isaac had married his mother in 1894, and when she wanted her son to take Isaac as a partner in their sporting goods business, he refused. He wanted to be sole partner

with his mother, and, he was very suspicious of Isaac. The mother dissolved their partnership and made Isaac her new partner in the business, throwing McKenzie out on the street. "Hell hath no fury like a (step-son) scorned!"

He then claimed that Isaac ruined the business and went about the country disposing of \$60,000 worth of his mother's property, frittering away the money. He also claimed that the Isaacs soon separated and that a divorce was granted in Albuquerque in 1898.

Shortly after the divorce was final, McKenzie claimed that Isaac married a Mrs. Virginia Bishop, and he was certain that no divorce had been obtained in that marriage, therefore making Isaac's marriage to Lucy Kneeland illegal. That was the basis for Isaac's arrest warrant for bigamy.

Meanwhile, back in Sanderson, Officer Jenkins arrived and set out to find the Isaac newlyweds.

On finding Isaac at the depot, Isaac bolted and ran home to Miss Lucy. Jenkins gave chase and when he arrived at their apartment, he confronted the couple with the charge and an arrest was made on the spot.

But, going beyond his orders, Jenkins began to question Isaac. Isaac was reluctant to answer in the presence of his stunned wife, who knew nothing of his cloudy past, and when he answered one question in an impudent way, Jenkins clouted him in the mouth and sent him to the floor. Isaac was more respectful after that.

The questioning finished, the next morning Isaac, in manacles, and Jenkins cautiously boarded the morning train to El Paso, expecting trouble at every turn.

Back in El Paso, all hell had broken loose! Miss Lucy's distraught friends were up in arms and a crowd waiting at the railroad depot for the bigamist's arrival was growing surly. Law officials in El Paso decided to head off trouble by sending two officers to Sierra Blanca to take the accused off the train and transport him the rest of the way by paddy wagon.

Meeting the train at the Sierra Blanca depot, the officers searched but could not find Jenkins and his prisoner in the day coaches. Finally, the pair was found hiding in the ladies bathroom, the safest place they could think of on the crowded train. They were going to wait there once the train got to the station until the angry mob had dispersed.

Soon, though, Isaac was safe behind bars in the El Paso City Jail, but, the wheels of justice were to grind exceedingly slow for him.

For his part, Isaac admitted the two previous marriages and that the divorce from Mrs. McKenzie was granted in Boston, not Albuquerque. The second marriage to Mrs. Bishop occurred in San Francisco and the divorce was granted in San Francisco. He claimed his paperwork was back home in Oakland and that his father was sending it to El Paso immedi-

ately.

However, it did not arrive soon enough and Isaac was indicted for bigamy. His first visitor at the jail after the indictment was returned was C. W. McKenzie, who gloated, "Well, Dick, we are evening up matters now." Isaac did not reply.

The paperwork was further delayed and Isaac languished in jail from February 10 until April 4, 1900, when his lawyers finally got a writ of habeas corpus and the judge set bond at \$500. But, his release was again delayed because no one would offer to give him the bail money, not even his own father. Finally, the money was raised and he was set free.

Meanwhile, the controversy swirled and article after article appeared, some condemning Isaac and some defending him. Unfortunately, it was all too much for Lucy Kneeland. She no longer trusted her husband and sued for and was granted an immediate divorce from Dick Isaac.

Eventually, though, it was discovered that Mrs. Bishop had died some months before the Isaac-Kneeland nuptials, and that he, indeed, was not a bigamist. All charges were dropped and he was exonerated, finally dropping out of the limelight.

The last we hear of Mr. Dick Isaac is six months later in the Link and Pin rail-roader's column in the November 15, 1900, issue of the *El Paso Daily Herald*.

A Mr. Ernest "Baron" von Frederick, late of the Mexican Central RR in Mexico City, was passing through El Paso. He admitted to the reporter that he had been a key figure in the recent Isaac elopement (!) to Mexico, and was happy to let friends and acquaintances know that Dick Isaac and his new bride were doing well in the capital city of Mexico. Apparently, Dick Isaac really liked being married!



References

This article was taken from accounts found in the *El Paso Daily Herald*, dating from Feb. 8, 1900 to Nov. 15, 1900, and retrieved from <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, June 4, 2013.

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