

Terrell County Memorial September, 2013
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Heart of Gold The story of Monte Kate



Thousands of Southern Pacific section houses such as this one at Sanderson, Texas, were scattered throughout the system. This would have been similar to the ones at Lozier, Texas, though in Monte Kate's day, it more likely would have been a tent or boxcar.

Before we leave the realm of the lady of the night, one more story needs to be told.

Today, as ever, men and women have given a number of reasons for plying the world's oldest profession. Money is a huge factor, and a great temptation to those who don't have it.

In the world of Texas after the "war of northern aggression" had ceased and the frontier was awash with every kind of shipwrecked, bankrupt human soul, hordes of women moved west to survive. The tragedies of war left some totally be-

reft and they turned, supposedly, to the only thing left to them...the sporting life.

San Antonio was the jumping off point for frontiersmen and newcomers in Texas. Until 1870, all of West Texas was one huge county, annexed to Bexar County.

Until the Indians were eliminated as a threat in 1881, the land was a forbidding hell-hole, overrun with "savages," both white and red, and an extremely dangerous place to traverse, let alone set up a ranch or community.

The coming of the railroad in 1882 did much to bring the area under control, and soon small communities begin to spring



Illustration: wyomingtalesandtrails.com

up at some of the water stops.

One such stop was the section gang camp and water stop known as Lozier, Texas, some 50 miles east of Sanderson.

The railroad, as built, wandered through the countryside, taking the path of least resistance and acquiring a lazy, meandering appearance. That worked to the railroad's advantage, as they received free land wherever the tracks snaked.

But, by the 1940s, the railroad path had been straightened and many miles of looping track eliminated. Also eliminated were the small settlements that had grown up by the tracks. That was Lozier's fate, and today, nothing remains except some broken bottles, a few rusty rail spikes, and somewhere near the tiny settlement, a lonely grave, the final resting place of Monte Kate.

Monte Kate was a sporting lady who was considered by many the queen of the ladies of the night in San Antonio. She worked as a Three-card Monte dealer in some of the sleazier joints, and her beauty and innocence would have made her a favorite with the lusty frontiersman, but her sights were set high and some of the

most prominent citizens availed themselves of her charms.

Not much was known of Monte Kate's background. She did confide that early in life a lover had betrayed her and left her broken and destitute, and, overcome by a somewhat self-destructive pall, she headed to the frontier after civil war hostilities ceased. A reporter said of her, "She was brilliant, witty, young and beautiful, and many of the now virtuous merchants then paid court to her, laying at the feet of the fair, but frail Venus."

No matter what her occupation, she had the proverbial "heart of gold," a champion of the underdog.

She once showed up at the platform of the Sunset Station to pick up a friend. She found a small group of German emigrants, a father, a mother who was very ill, and three small children, one of whom was a baby wailing away with a most piteous cry. They had come all the way from Germany, trying to get to New Braunfels, only to run out of money on the last leg of the journey. The poor man was distraught, stammering in German, not able to communicate with the by-

standers on the platform.

Sensing a forlorn situation, Kate alit from her hack and approached the small crowd that had gathered. Seeing the big tears in the man's eyes, the hungry little wastrel children and the pale, thin face of the ailing mother, some distant pang of motherhood instinct arose in her breast and she took pity on them.

She pressed through the crowd and began speaking to the man in his own tongue. Surprised that someone spoke German, he dried his eyes and held a spirited conversation with her.

In a few moments Kate began to remove her rings, earrings and necklace and called her driver over. Taking a large diamond brooch from her bosom, she placed it all in the driver's hat and told him to go to the pawn shops and get as much as he could for it.

Presently, he returned with a large roll of bills, tied with a string. Without looking at the money, she placed it in the trembling hands of the emigrant, and pandemonium broke out on the platform. The father danced a little jig, the children hopped up and down and the sickly wife grabbed Kate's hand and would have kissed it. Kate withdrew it quickly, and with a blushing face, cried, "No, no, not that!"

Another time Kate was at work in the Casino, the grand name for an adobe dance hall. The place was crowded with the usual flotsam and jetsam of the frontier...soldiers, gamblers, cowboys, scouts, Mexicans, rustlers, Indians and Negroes. The teaming crowd was elbow to elbow, and in the back room a wheezy orchestra was playing sets for a frontier ball, double-forte. The clink of the gamblers' ivory chips kept time with the music, and everybody, including Kate, was having a good time.

Having amassed quite a bag of winnings from her Monte table, Kate felt magnanimous, and when the dancers took a break to refuel, Kate yelled, "It's my



Photo: San Antonio Light

treat! Everybody drink at my expense!"

The crowd surged forward, all except for an old vaquero, sitting by the stove. Kate touched his shoulder and urged him to get his free drink, but she saw red, swollen eyes, a man in obvious distress. She pressed him and he told his story.

The man had a large family, and they all lived on a ranch some distance from the city. He didn't make much as a vaquero, but they survived. He said that earlier that day, his young son was thrown from a horse and had broken his leg, a very serious break. The child was in mind-bending pain, and the man rushed to

town to get a doctor, but the doctor said he wouldn't travel that far for less than a \$100. The man didn't have \$100, and he was grief-stricken that his young son was at home, lying in a bed of suffering, and he could do nothing else.

Incensed, Kate got the doctor's name and rushed out into the frigid winter night. She awakened the doctor, and, at gunpoint, forced him into the buggy, and the vaquero led them to the ranch. The doctor was furious, but Kate was holding the gun.

When they took the doctor back home, she paid him his \$100, and all the while he fumed and sputtered and threatened to go to the police. But, he never did, and the lore of good-hearted Monte Kate grew by another page.

But, as with all Cinderella stories, the clock has to strike "Twelve." Kate's beauty, wit and charm sustained her for years. She moved on to Corpus Christi to more fertile grounds for a time, and was caught there when a serious outbreak of yellow fever swept through the mosquito-infested streets of the city.

Rather than run away back to San Antonio, as many did, or even out to the dry, mosquito-free climes of Sanderson, which had become somewhat of a resort city and summer respite in those days, Kate chose instead to stay where she was needed. She worked as a nurse and ministered to the needs of the seriously ill, until she, too, was struck down by the disease, and almost died.

After her bouts with sickness, and with the natural progression of time, Kate's beauty and charm began to fade. No longer desirable, her outlook turned sour and she began to drown her misfortunes in alcohol.

She took to hopping the train to the outlying section camps, coming up into

the Sanderson area, not to set up her Monte table, but to pursue the more lurid profession. Her body, never robust at any time, began to show the excesses of alcohol and her trade-related illnesses, and she slowly sank into a drunken, diseased stupor.

Finally, at Lozier, when she didn't come to breakfast one morning, the section foreman went to her accommodations, only to find her stiff and cold, having passed quietly in the night. The section workers cleared a spot not far from the settlement and scratched a hole in the hard, caliche ground. Monte Kate was laid to rest in the barren desert, no marker, not even her last name remembered.

Soon, the telegraph wire hummed with the news, and all of San Antonio knew that Monte Kate was dead. The old-timers reminisced, the society matrons clucked their tongues in obvious pleasure that the old nemesis of their husbands' virtue was finally gone, but for the most part, Monte Kate had been forgotten.

As Shakespeare's Mark Antony said, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." In Monte Kate's case, a kind journalist celebrated her good deeds in an 1883 news item in the *San Antonio Light* and marked with respect and kind words the passing of a woman who truly had a heart of gold. He used it as a lesson for life, that no matter what good deeds you do, excessive alcohol and a destructive lifestyle will reap a reward of ignominious death and oblivion.

But, we can take this lesson: don't judge a book by its cover. To paraphrase the old radio serial, "Who knows what *good* lurks in the hearts of men" (and women!)



References

"Monte Kate," *The San Antonio Light*, Aug. 24, 1883, retrieved from <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph162639/?q=Monte%20kate,6-11-13>

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