

# Museum News

## Cyrus M. "Uncle Charlie" Wilson Saint...or Sinner?



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

**“UNCLE CHARLIE” WILSON** - *Cyrus M. “Uncle Charlie” Wilson, as he was affectionately known by the citizens of Terrell County, was a man, larger than life. Breeding pug dogs was his hobby and he often gave them away as gifts.*

Cyrus M. "Uncle Charlie" Wilson was born in Fleming County, Kentucky, in June of 1847, but spent his childhood in Paris, Edgar County, Illinois, where his father was a blacksmith. Charlie's father, Andrew Wilson, was born in Fleming County, KY and his mother, May, in Faquier County,

Virginia. He had a brother and two sisters, and a half sister from his mother's first marriage. Paris was a sleepy farming community on the Illinois-Indiana border, and his father was a very busy man. Being raised in a blacksmith shop, Charlie learned skills that stood him well in later life.



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

At the start of the Civil War Charlie was far too young to enlist, but as soon as he looked old enough he enlisted as a Private in Company H of the 64th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, 1st Battalion, Yates' Sharp Shooters, on February 3, 1864, at the tender age of sixteen.

He fought in battles and skirmishes in Alabama and Tennessee, where his battalion joined with Sherman's army in its siege of Atlanta. Then, in Sherman's drive to the sea, his company destroyed railroads and engaged the enemy at every opportunity, participating in many famous battles. But his army service was not without its hazards. During the conflict he was wounded twice, once in the left hand and once in the throat, but the wounds were not serious and he continued to fight. His regiment marched across the south, finishing the fighting at Bentonville NC.

The 64th saw distinguished service in the war, and suffered a casualty count of 242 men, over half of whom died of illness. After hostilities ceased his regiment participated in the Grand Review of the Armies in Washington, DC, then returned to Illinois. He and his company mustered out on July 11, 1865. During his time of service he

attained the rank of Corporal. Here his military record ends.

After the war Charlie soon emigrated to West Texas to begin the life of a frontiersman. West Texas of the late 1860s and early 1870s was a wild and forbidding place. The Comanches and Apaches, among others, were delaying settlement of the area with marauding and attacks on the sparse settlements, stealing livestock and taking captives. And besides that, many outlaws and bad men used the Big Bend and West Texas as a place to 'hole up' and escape the long arm of the law. It was into this dangerous environment that Charlie wholeheartedly cast his lot.

Although some writers have stated that Charlie was a soldier at Fort Concho and Camp Peña Colorado south of Marathon, there is no record of his re-enlistment. The 1880 Census for Presidio County, Texas, however, shows that he was a bartender in Fort Davis. This was during the Buffalo Soldier years at the Fort so it is unlikely that he was soldier at that time, and he does not show up on the roster of officers of the period. At any rate, he lived in and was a well known character in West Texas from the earliest post-war days.

In the early 1880s, the Southern Pacific Railroad in the west and the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad in the east were building a new, all-weather southern transcontinental rail route, which was scheduled to meet at some location in southern Pecos County. In that period Pecos County was huge, encompassing present-day Terrell, Val Verde and Pecos Counties.

Through some means Charlie got wind of the surveyors' plans and was shrewd enough to figure out that a division point would be located somewhere in the area roughly halfway between San Antonio and El Paso. Studying the lay of the land along the proposed route, he decided that the natural bowl in the topography where present-day Sanderson, Texas, sits was a natural spot for a town. He hurried to purchase all the available land in the area. Had he waited, the railroad would have received 16 square miles of land for every linear mile on either side of the tracks when it got to the spot, as

was their agreement with the states through which the railroad passed.

The first thing Charlie built was a saloon to serve the thirsty rail crews when they got to town, some 3,000-strong. This won him the everlasting enmity of the Southern Pacific Railroad. For the next thirty years they waged an ongoing feud, in which he usually gained the upper hand. Much to the chagrin of the railroad hierarchy, he delighted in finding ways to 'skin' the corporation.

Tales of his exploits with the railroad were widely known and enjoyed in the small, growing community. When the railroad arrived they found that they had to purchase property from him on which to build the depot, roundhouse, crew bunkhouse and other company buildings. Everywhere else the company received over 16 million square miles of property from the states as they passed through, but here, they had to buy a few acres, and it was very irritating to them.

On top of that, he (and the whole town) often swiped wood, coal and water from the railroad's huge stockpile. It is theorized that most of the town located on the south side of the tracks, just for that very purpose. Soon the railroad banned building on the south side and forced people to relocate to the present position.

And then there were the property line disputes. The railroad re-surveyed their property by the depot and found that Charlie's Cottage Bar Saloon was sitting partially on railroad property. Charlie didn't dispute the fact, but when they demanded he close his saloon, he got his own surveyors and found that the last two stalls of the roundhouse sat on his property. He proceeded to close the Cottage Bar and move his operations to the last two stalls of the roundhouse. He stood his ground until top officials with the railroad came to make a deal allowing him to retain his Cottage Bar Saloon in exchange for their roundhouse stalls.

Then there was the time that Roy Bean moved to town to open a competing saloon. In the night Charlie sent someone to spike Bean's whiskey barrel with kerosene. The next day, one taste sent Bean's customers

(and Bean) away. He and Charlie remained friends, but always at arm's length. They continually bested each other in a series of pranks and deals.

In a very early article entitled "A Very Deer Experience" from the *San Antonio Daily Light*, dated February 6, 1886, the writer reports on a visit Charlie made to the city. He is characterized as "having lived on the edge, and sometimes a bit over the edge of civilization for years," and that he had "met and vanquished the wild and wooly bear, the fierce catamount, voracious wolf, and times without end had settled scores with the treacherous and murderous Comanche and Apache Indians." He had come to town to "see the sights and get polished up a little so as to cut out hated rivals in affairs of the heart."

He and a friend went to see the newly improved San Pedro Park and chanced upon the deer pen with the gate open. He went inside to "while away a few moments fondling with those meek and timid creatures." Suddenly, a young buck took offense and jumped him, knocking him to the ground and severely pummeling him with his sharp hooves. Poor Charlie's brand new suit was reduced to "carpet rags, and the buck then began operations as a sausage factory." Charlie's friend managed to pull him to safety and they beat a hasty retreat. The paper reported, "This morning he is about, smiling, but limping, and said that it was the 'deerest' experience he had ever had and that the San-tone 'deers' are altogether too belligerent for him, and that he will return to Sanderson, where there is not a woman within a hundred miles. He has had enough coming to San-tone to mash the girls." Obviously Charlie had a great sense of humor.

About 1902 Charlie built the wood and adobe Terrell Hotel just north of the depot. Another long adobe building just north of the Terrell served as a hotel for some time, but he tied the two together into one big operation. For years Chinese gentlemen ran the hotel, and the building behind was used as their restaurant. The Terrell County history book abounds with humorous stories from that period about the Chinese and their cooking and management abilities. The

Chinese kept chickens for the eggs and meat at the restaurant, and one day, Charlie acquired a pet coyote for his saloon, just across the street. He began leaving a trail of corn kernels from the free range chickens to his bar, and when the chickens followed the trail it led to his chained coyote, who promptly snatched them up and had a feast. Charlie bragged about not having to buy feed for his pet, but one day the Chinese restaurant manager brought over a bill for the missing chickens. Charlie paid up and the bar patrons hooted that he had gotten caught.

Uncle Charlie, as the locals loved to call him, was a shrewd businessman and an inveterate gambler, but the big Irishman had a heart of gold and a soft spot in his heart for children, even though he was a confirmed, lifelong bachelor. As his town grew he built public buildings and donated property for the new county courthouse and several churches. When a child was born he sometimes gave the newborn a town lot for a birth gift. Generous and outgoing, nevertheless he always had a deal going, and not always with the law in mind.

In 1906 Charlie sold 90% of his holdings in Sanderson and the area, and in 1910 he moved to California. He had always planned to move on to Cuba, but unfortunately, old age caught up with him. While in California he became ill and had to enter the Old Soldiers' Home in Santa Monica. As his health problems grew worse he lost a foot to blood poisoning. Three weeks later he died, on August 25, 1912. Charlie was laid to rest with honor at the Old Soldiers' Home Cemetery, now the Los Angeles National Cemetery. He, who served his coun-



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

try with valor and went on to blaze trails in the west, had gone to his reward.

Charlie Wilson was a man who exemplified the frontier and entrepreneurial spirit of West Texas. Coming to the area during an extremely dangerous period, he carved out a niche for himself and a whole community. Saint or sinner? Charlie was probably a little of both. But considering the love and admiration which was universally bestowed upon him, it is no exaggeration to characterize him as the "Father of Sanderson and Terrell County, Texas." And, here it is, almost a hundred years later, and he is still the topic of conversation.



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

#### References

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*Terrell County, Its Past, Its People*, Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell County Heritage Commission, 1978

*The Terrell County Memorial Museum News* is published monthly from the Terrell County Memorial Museum, Sanderson, Texas, 79848. Please visit us online at [terrellmuseum.org](http://terrellmuseum.org). Phone us at 432-345-2936 or 432-770-9431 Our museum is open Monday through Friday, 10 am to 12 pm and 1 pm to 4 pm, and Saturdays by appointment, at 2nd and Mansfield in Sanderson, Texas.