

# Terrell County Memorial Museum News

October, 2013  
Sanderson, Texas

## "Ay, ay, ay, ay... Canta y no llores..."



Photo courtesy of Gloria Falcon

*The Lopez Orchestra, ca 1927, on their 4th of July parade "float." L. to r., Bella, Luzita, Simón and Francisco Lopez, Pilar Rodriguez and Gilberto Lopez.*

Musical entertainment and talent has always been in abundant supply in Terrell County.

Sanderson has been especially blessed with quality local musicians, bands and orchestras, not to mention the outside groups that were called in for special occasions.

The early period, 1882 to 1900, is somewhat shrouded in mystery. All that we know is gleaned from period newspapers, which were always happy to print Sanderson news. The *El Paso Herald* and *Daily Herald*, the *El Paso Morning Times*, as well as the *San Antonio Light*, published local events, since many Sanderson men working for the railroad lived part-time in those two cities.

Even reminiscences in the Terrell County history book are somewhat limited in that early time, and scarcely any social highlights were covered.

But coming up into the 20th Century, diaries and journals have survived that give us a good look into that time period.

The folks who wrote the articles in our history book were writing from memory and not just relating family tales passed down to them. They lived it, and their memories were vivid and enthusiastic.

The early period probably saw visits by groups of musicians in Chautauquas, or traveling vaudeville shows, which were common across the country. Military bands attached to cavalry troops also gave concerts and balls for the benefit of the local populace.

Three men, Mess'rs Jackson, Miles and

Espanoza played for a ball given to inaugurate Hancock's new store building, which opened in 1898.

And, there were probably other local groups that played for dances, maybe nothing more than guitars and a violin, maybe a brass or wind instrument or even a harmonica, but, one thing is certain, the town had/has plenty of musical talent and citizens who loved to make music and to dance the night away.

Jim Fenley, brother of the first Terrell County Sheriff, George Fenley, was considered a virtuoso on the fiddle, and often played for dances at the Wilson Hotel, down by the depot. You could stop by their ranch down on the Rio Grande to visit, and find the fiddle at his side and easily brought up for some old cowboy songs or the latest tune.

Sometimes cowboys would stage impromptu dances on the local ranches, and they didn't let the scarcity of women hamper their effort to have a good time. Short straws turned men into women, who wore a handkerchief tied around one leg to denote their changed gender. Then, with fiddle or harmonica music to accompany them, the boys would waltz away the night with their reluctant "ladies" in tow. A good time was had by all.

The *El Paso Herald* of July 30, 1910 reported, "The *Mexicans* (sic) of this town have formed a 12-piece brass band and have ordered their instruments. Juan Navarette is leader."

The "Serenaders," a string band operating on the streets of Sanderson in the 1910s, could be hired to play music at your residence. In the 1918 Pancho Villa scare, residents were convinced that Villa was coming at any moment to sack San-



***Crescencio Martínez, a member of the early day Matéo Martínez family, played in local groups. He was also a gifted baseball player.***

derson. Raids at Glenn Springs in the Big Bend and at the Brite Ranch at Marfa only underscored the real threat.

Isabel Hunter remembered in the history book that her father was called away one night, purportedly to defend the town from Villa. Her family, scared out of its wits, huddled in terror on the floor in fear of the imminent Villa attack. Hearing scuffling footsteps on the porch, Mrs. Hunter grabbed a loaded shotgun and

went to the door to blow away the perceived *banditos*. Fortunately, she asked questions first, and found the Serenaders standing at the door, having been hired earlier by Mr. Hunter to play for their evening's entertainment!

In Mary Alice Happle Townsend's remembrances in the history book, she recalled that fancy parties at the turn of the century always included a dance with an orchestra, and the order of the day was evening gowns and tuxedos! Dark suits could be substituted for tuxedos, but it was definitely a dress-up affair.

Dances were held in town homes, ranch homes and the roller skating rink, but also at the Wilson Hotel, later called the Terrell Hotel, and at the Woodmen of the World building, which sat on the spot occupied by the Masonic Lodge today. The WOW, however, was so rickety that the building would sway back and forth when everyone danced, and the ladies were always afraid it would fall down.

Later in the century, Simón Lopez and his family started a family orchestra, which by all accounts was quite professional. Made up of family members and friends, they played a variety of music, including waltzes, the Charleston, and Mexican *corridos*. They played for many

events in town and in the area during the '20s and '30s. When governor Pat Neff came to town in 1923 to harangue the voters, the Lopez Orchestra serenaded the governor and the crowd, to rave reviews.

Another talented musician of the period, who also played with the Lopez orchestra, was Pilar Rodriguez. He could play several instruments, and eventually traveled with bands across Texas. According to him, he even played with a top-notch "colored" band in San Angelo.

A *Sanderson Times* article from 1924 raved about the *Musical Five*, a local jazz band that rocked the house with its stellar performance. There was no mention of who the performers were.

When the Kerr Mercantile building was opened in 1927 with a huge celebration, the *Times* noted that a "famous" San Antonio band played for the group, but no name was mentioned.

The *Times* mentions several big cowboy reunions and rodeos held throughout the 1930s, with accompanying dances, using the services of a "red hot" orchestra. But, again, no mention of a name.

Another talented musician of the '30s was Manuel Coronado. Mr. Coronado was an excellent guitar player and sang with his friends in a local street serenade group. He also was a talented potter, and his wares were eagerly sought after by local town folks.

Outside groups also played for local dances in the '20s, '30s and '40s. One popular group was *Mable Moody's All-Girl Orchestra* from El Paso. The ladies put on quite a show, and, apparently, the



Photo courtesy of  
Alice Evans Downie

*Mrs. T. L. des Landes, ca 1907. Beloved by the community, Mrs. des Landes was a professional pianist who played for many church services, weddings and parties through the years.*

young men were quite pleased.

The museum has in its possession a dance poster, date unknown, advertising a dance sponsored by Kerr Mercantile, featuring the styling of *Lawrence Welk and his Orchestra*. Welk traveled extensively throughout the US during the '30s and '40s and could well have played here, but we have no date for the dance, nor anyone alive who can remember if it happened. If you have information, please let us know.

A "colored" band from San Angelo, the *Hack*

*Johnson Orchestra*, played for one of the rodeo dances in the '30s and was well received.

Another band that was very popular in the 1930s was a five-piece group led by Charlie Rogers, a local trucker and rancher. A multi-talented musician, Charlie could play any tune he could whistle, on multiple instruments.

In 1956 the *Cavaliers*, an early rock group from San Angelo, gave a concert at the Princess Theater, and even recorded some numbers there for a record.

There were several local groups in the 1950s-'60s, including the *Rhythm Rackers*, with Frankie Turner, Weldon Werneking, Dennis McQuade, and Charles Holt. Another was the talented Benny Rubio and the *Teen Kings*.

In the 21st Century, two principals at TCISD, Mike Popple, and Norman Woolsey, formed a duo that performed several "gigs" around Sanderson. In his inimitable style, Popple says they called themselves, "Two Old Men in Blue Shirts and Khaki Pants."

At present, the only fully functioning band in Sanderson is the *Terrell County*

Bs, (we can't use the name *they* go by!) lately with Eric Cooksey, Tim Baker, Marvin Davis, Jimmy Davis, Bobby Navarette and Condie Rogers.

Sanderson still uses outside bands to play for the Fourth of July celebration. And, the *Sanderson Arts and Education Alliance* brings musical groups to town for the annual *Toe-Tappin' Tuesdays*, which attracts the best of local West Texas soloists and groups, plus an occasional professional musician on tour.

But, without doubt, the most charming and sentimental memory of living in Sanderson from the turn of the century until the 1930s and '40s was of the young troubadours who wandered the streets, guitar and violin in hand, serenading their *amorcitos*, or, for a price, serenading someone else's sweetheart or wife.

Typically, a summer evening in Sanderson went like this:

With dinner and dishes done, the family gathers on the front porch, some sitting in wicker chairs and rockers, some on the steps, or in the old porch swing, to enjoy the cool evening breezes.

The vine-covered porch offered a refreshing retreat for quiet conversation, or just for savoring the delicious coolness of the desert night.

The rising of the full moon over the long canyon wall to the east is serenaded by the soft strings of guitar and violin, a wandering band of *cantantes* slowly walking, singing, playing down the street, a Sanderson tradition. A beautiful tenor voice calls out on the breeze,

*"De las sierras morenas,  
Cielito Lindo, vienen bajando  
Un par de ojitos negros,  
Cielito lindo, de contrabando."*

Then, four male voices join in intricate harmony to sing the refrain,

*"Ay, ay, ay, ay, Canta y no llores,  
Porque cantando se alegran,  
Cielito Lindo, los corazones."*

"Ay, ay, ay, ay, sing and do not weep, because singing, my lovely little heaven, cheers the hearts."

The minstrels pause for a moment at the front gate, but continue singing, pouring their hearts into the lovely folksong of their heritage.

Father steps off the porch and approaches the gate, pressing a few coins into the hand of the leader. The players nod their thanks, sing a few more verses, then continue their journey down the street.

The rarified desert air carries the harmonies for blocks, and porch-sitters up and down the street enjoy the refrains, until the tones finally fade away, leaving the noises of the night.

The soft whistle of the poor-will and the hoot of the barn owl calling to its mate blend with the insistent demand of the Jersey milch cow, calling to anyone who will come and ease her evening distress.

The twitter of the cricket and the fluttering of firefly wings, signaling as they search for their true-love, adds to the dreamy gentleness of the night.

Soon the conversation runs its course and, one by one, the porch-sitters adjourn for the evening, headed to their soft feather beds and pillows to sleep the sleep of the innocent, wrapped in sweet dreams.

But, Mother Night must continue her journey to the west, accompanied by Daughter Moon. Now, the stars serenade the Earth, spangled across the sky like glittering jewels, a symphony of light that lifts the soul and fills the heart with joy.



## References

- "Terrell County, Its Past, Its People", Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell Co. Heritage Commission, 1978.  
*The Sanderson Times Collection of the Terrell County Memorial Museum* .  
"Mexicans' organize brass band," *The El Paso Herald*, 7-30-1910, retr'd from <http://texashistory.unt.edu/>, 8-17-2013  
"Ball at Sanderson," *The El Paso Daily Herald*, 8-29-1898, retrieved from <http://texashistory.unt.edu/>, 5-7-2013  
*Email from Eric Cooksey, June 25, 2013.* | *Interview with Mike Popple, June 29, 2013.*