

Honoring All Who Served.  
**Museum News**

# Jack Allen

## Scholar, Soldier, Sheriff

The old Model T roadster flew down the dirt road, trying to make up for lost time.

At the wheel sat Bill Clift, of Crane City, Texas. To his right, riding shotgun, was Jack Allen, the high sheriff of Crane County. They had business in Wink, Texas, but they were late getting away from Crane City.

By the time they reached Pyote and turned north, the sun had already set and inky darkness had crept up on them.

The weak beams of the old headlights

barely cut a path through the darkness, and Bill was having a problem seeing the road. Jack urged him on because they were going to be very late getting home.

The road followed a fence line, and ahead was a sharp, right-angled turn, with mesquites and brush obscuring the corner. Looking down the road, however, Bill didn't see any lights from approaching cars, so he only slowed a little to make the turn.

Wheeling around the corner, he thought he saw something, looming up out of the darkness. But, before he could react, the



Photo courtesy of the Terrell County Memorial Museum

*Sheriff John Jefferson "Jack" Allen (1876-1929)  
Terrell County Sheriff, 1910-1915*

"T" slammed into the rear of a horse-drawn wagon, piled high with scrap lumber and old two-by-fours.

He and Jack lurched forward from the impact, but at the same moment, a stick of lumber about an inch-and a half square plunged through the windshield and hit Jack squarely in the chest.

Bill really didn't see anything, as he had closed his eyes when the windshield shattered. But when he looked up, he turned to ask Jack if he was okay.

And there, in the dim light of the one headlight that wasn't broken, he was horrified to see his friend, impaled on the splintery missile, killed instantly by the impact. There was nothing he could do...

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The Baptist church in Alpine was overflowing with family, friends and admirers of Jack Allen. The crowd murmured quietly, and from somewhere, the sound of one person overcome by emotion was heard, a soft sighing that underscored the tragedy of the situation.

The pianist quietly played the old hymns of faith that meant so much to Jack.

He had not always been a church-going man, for his life had been one of violence, of making war and keeping the peace, dealing with the undesirable elements of life.

He had fought in two wars, with all the expected mayhem and destruction, and he had dealt with scurrilous criminals, murderers, cutthroats and bandits as a professional lawman, not only in Crane County, but in Terrell and Brewster Counties as well.

But, in spite of his dealings with the criminal element and the actions he was forced to take in life-or-death situations, in spite of his involvement in trench warfare and the horrors of hand-to-hand combat, one day a few years before, while sitting under the preaching of Baptist evangelist George W. Truett at Bloys Camp Meeting, somehow he came to know God, made peace with his actions and made a commitment to his Lord. Always a man of his word, he had kept the faith admirably.

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The pianist finished the prelude and the song leader stepped up to the pulpit. Opening in a heartfelt prayer, he led the congregation in a song of faith and hope, a song that brought some to tears.

The church pastor, the Reverend Sparks, ascended the pulpit next and offered a short eulogy.

As he spoke, Jack's elderly mother thought wistfully of her life in Liberty Hill, Texas, so many years before. She thought of her husband's excitement when their first-born came in 1876, a son, and the pride and honor he felt when she insisted that they name the child after him, John Jefferson Allen. And she also remembered the promise they made to themselves and to that wee baby that their children would be well-educated and would rise above their simple but noble farming life.

And that, they did, with Jack, and with his three beautiful sisters, who were added to the family not long after. When he was of age, he attended the State Normal College in Huntsville and got his teacher's certificate. She and her husband had instilled in him a desire to help others, and this was something for which he had a talent.

But, before he could get his first teaching

assignment, the trumpets of war began to sound in the land. It was 1898, and the explosion aboard the battleship *Maine* in Havana's harbor took a heavy toll of American life, enflamed the ire of the American public and ignited the Spanish-American War.

She remembered that young Jack had come to them and asked their permission to join the fray, that her husband had consented, but that she had vigorously disagreed. She remembered the terrible toll the Civil War had taken on her own family and circle of friends, and she didn't want to chance that for her only son.

But, he defied her wishes and broke her heart by joining the National Guard, most assuredly heading for Cuba. He survived the ten-month war, but along the way he got a taste for blood and excitement. The realities of war hardened him and took away the tenderhearted boy she had cherished.

Then the aged mother remembered his joyful homecoming, his marriage to Myrtle Crawford of Alpine and the birth of their first little girl, Una Maurine.

Jack got a job as the principal of the one-room school in Sanderson and they made the move to the booming railroad and ranch town.

But, there was a problem with that move. Sanderson had a terrible reputation for lawlessness and lascivious behavior. Town leaders were trying to improve the image, and the first sheriffs, George Fenley and then, Joe Bean, had done a marvelous job of ridding the town of the worst elements, but there were still six saloons in operation, and murders and shootouts occurred frequently.

After two terms as schoolmaster, Jack felt he could do a better job than Joe Bean, so he ran for the sheriff's position in 1910. Leaning heavily on his military record, Jack won.

Jack's mother shuddered as she remembered her fears of his being sheriff of one of the wildest towns in West Texas. But, she shouldn't have worried. Jack was meaner and tougher than his constituents, and he performed his duties with the utmost care and efficiency.

She remembered him laughing one time about a situation as a school teacher at Sanderson, when he overheard his big boys

bragging on the street after they had played hookey, that they would give him a good whipping if he tried to punish them.

The next day at the start of school, he sent all the children out except the big boys, then blocked the windows so they couldn't escape and said, "Well, boys, I'm ready."

They were frozen with fear, afraid to move a muscle. Then, in their presence, he took each boy and gave him a sound strapping. There were no more idle threats made about Mr. Allen.

And that was his approach to law enforcement.

In his four years as sheriff, he solved murders, tracked down train robbers, caught sheep and cattle rustlers, chased Mexican insurgents who were raiding on the American side of the river, and took time to organize and lead a Home Guard of 60 local men to protect the town from Pancho Villa.

Though neither the state nor the county had money for arms or ammunition, still, he had the Home Guard prepare by marching through the streets of Sanderson, hoisting broomsticks and sotol stalks to their shoulders as mock guns.

And as sheriff, he advised governors, generals, Texas Rangers, secret servicemen and other law enforcement agents about the special nature of ongoing problems in the Trans Pecos. His advice was respected and much sought after. Under his administration, thousands of pounds of guns and ammunition, armaments and materials of war were confiscated before they could reach Mexico, not to mention the scores of men he arrested in their attempts to deliver that material. He proved to the public that he was an excellent sheriff.

But, Jack's mother remembered with a sigh of relief, that he had grown tired of bureaucracy, red tape and a federal government that wouldn't cooperate, and chose not to run for a third term. Besides, they had added a second daughter, Johnnie Ruth, to their family and he wanted to spend more time with his wife and kids.

They had liked living in Sanderson, but they decided to move to Alpine in 1915, to be closer to Myrtle's parents. As soon as they got there, he bought a ranch down south and ended up spending too much time away from home managing the ranch. With

the state of the times, he was not going to take his wife and kids to live on the ranch, so, he got a good man to help out on the ranch and soon landed a job in Alpine as city marshal. His mother shuddered; law enforcement...again.

In 1917, however, the war drums began beating again, this time in Europe. Jack was 41 years-old, but he looked and acted like a man half that age. His conscience began to bother him, as more and more young men in Alpine were conscripted into the service. The recruiters weren't looking for old men, but Jack felt he had a lot to offer with his previous war and law experience. But, there was an urgent matter needing his attention.

Jack made a trip home to see his mother, who by now was a widow. This time he would abide by her wishes, but he needed to ask permission to go to war. He wasn't about to break her heart again.

Of course she had argued against it, with much weeping and tears. "You've done enough," she sobbed.

But, Jack said, "America is no place for men, not now, not when they are needed 'over there.'" Her heart swelling with pride for the noble man that she had molded from birth, she gave her tearful consent.



Photo: Terrell County Memorial Museum

**Sgt. J.J. Allen**

In July of 1917, Jack went to Camp Logan, Texas, to train with the 33rd Texas Division, Company C, 123rd Field Artillery. He quickly attained the rank of Pvt. 1st Class and was assigned to operate the big 155mm Howitzers. In France, he fought in several battles: the Somme Offensive, the battle at Saint-Mihiel, the battles at Picardy and Lorraine, and finally, the huge engagement at Meuse-Argonne. Although the latter offensive ended as a stalemate, it proved to the Germans that the war was hopeless, and they soon sued for peace.

Jack came home in May of 1919, and mustered out the following month.

Jack's mother remembered her joy at his return, and especially that he was appointed postmaster of Alpine in 1920, a much more sedate and safe job than law enforcement.

For the next seven years, Jack's family, and especially his mother, were happy with their new and uneventful life. And in that same year, 1920, Jack got the son he had hoped for, little James.

But, as one might expect, Jack was a man of action. His life had become a little too sedate...boring, in fact.

In 1927, when a delegation from Crane City came to see him, they explained that their little community, like all the other oil boomtowns, was beset with gambling, prostitution, corruption and crime. They wanted to clean up the place and make it safe for women and children, and they had heard of Jack's reputation as a problem solver, and the excellent job he had done in Terrell County.

Mr. O.C. Kinnison, leader of the group, had recently tried to get the governor to send in Rangers, but when the gambling element heard about it, they pistol-whipped him on main street, within an inch of his life. That sealed the deal for Jack.

So, to his wife's dismay and the consternation of his poor mother, he agreed to run for sheriff, the first sheriff, of Crane County. He was a shoo-in.

Almost upon taking the oath, he began to "knock heads together." In no uncertain terms, he let the wild element know that there was no place for them in Crane City or County. In short order, Crane County became the poster child for law enforcement among the boom-

towns, the envy of citizens all over the Permian Basin.

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As Jack's mother remembered all of this, she was called back to reality by the preacher's words.

"There were three distinct and outstanding characteristics in the life of Jack Allen," the pastor said, "namely, patriotism, enthusiasm and sense of duty."

"Of patriotism," the pastor said, "Mr. Allen served his country in the Spanish-American War, but, not satisfied with this, when the World War broke out, Mr. Allen journeyed back to the old home at Liberty Hill in Williamson County and got the consent of his aged mother for her son to again offer his life in the cause of his country.

"Of enthusiasm," the Rev. Sparks went on, "no matter what undertaking Mr. Allen engaged in he threw his whole soul, heart and energy into the transaction.

"Of duty," the pastor commented, "Jack Allen never hunted for soft places to fill, on the contrary, he was always hunting for the difficult places and believed it his duty to fill these places, no matter what the result might be to him personally."

Ah, yes, she thought to herself, my Jack had an excellent sense of duty. He truly was a man of his word, and he certainly went above and beyond the call of duty.

As the pastor offered the closing prayer, the sound of muffled sobs was heard throughout the building, and hardly a man or woman was left unmoved by the pathos and love of the sermon. Tears streamed unashamedly from the eyes of men and women, alike.

The good lady looked around the room and saw the faces of friends and loved ones, and realized the impact this one man had on a generation of people. He was a real man, a man of honor, bravery and great heart. A man who was fearless in the face of danger, and who truly did "hunt for the difficult places to fill," a real hero.

And, as she had done so many times before, she thanked God for that good life.



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