

# Museum News

## Fighting fire in the good old days



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

**FIREMAN, FIREMAN!** - *The Texas-Louisiana Power Plant, which stood on the present location of Javelina Hill Park at Wilson and Oak, caught fire and burned in 1929. Standing, watching the blaze are l-r, Wallace Henshaw, lineman; S.S. Daggett, roundhouse foreman; C.A. Moreland, power plant manager; and, walking toward the group, Bob Henshaw.*

Fire always poses a threat to any community, and especially in the old days when firefighting equipment and organized fire departments were not available.

Sanderson has always had a volunteer fire department and when the whistle sounded (or when the phone alert system goes into operation these days) men came running to help save people and property.

The early day firemen were not always properly trained. The Terrell

County history book tells of an early fire in which the volunteer fireman enthusiastically chopped a hole in a kitchen door, then calmly turned the knob and walked in!

But training aside, the fire department has been indispensable throughout Sanderson and Terrell County history. An early action of the Terrell County Commissioners Court was to issue \$500 to support the local fire department. Everyone realized that fire could wipe out the fledgling community.

## November visitors...

The Terrell County Memorial Museum was blessed with 12 visitors during the month of November.

Of note were father and daughter, Glen and Jan Wilson of Kerrville. The Wilsons are descendents of Mr. and Mrs. W.E. Stirman. Mr. Stirman was an early day County Commissioner, school board trustee, dairyman and undertaker. The Wilsons were seeking information about the Stirman family.

Another pair of visitors was Jesus Lozano and Alonzo Lopez of Sanderson Elementary School who stopped by after school for a quick visit and a promise to return.

We also had Ernie and Hilda Harman, missionaries from Del Rio who are in Sanderson frequently but had never seen the Museum.

Michael and Elizabeth Fairbanks of Sanderson stopped by. He is beginning

work on his Master's thesis and was interested in the Bohlman Building. The Fairbanks live east of Sanderson and were flooded out by the rains in June.

We were also happy to have Karen and Ron Stith of Las Cruces. The Stiths are volunteer docents at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum and they were quite interested to visit our Museum. Mrs. Stith spends her days at their museum in costume, operating a treadle sewing machine.

She was interested in our textiles, especially a handcrafted handkerchief bag created by the Lemons sisters. She offered some good advice on how to safely display our sewing machine. We always welcome expert advice.



Mary Alice Happle Townsend recalled that the early firemen had a fire engine wagon which they pulled to fires. They were supplied suitable fireman's clothing and equipment and were ready for whatever may come. A railroad steam whistle would signal the fire and men would come running from all parts of town. The fire wagon was kept in a small building at Persimmon and Oak, the present-day site of the old Dudley Texaco station. Her father, J. W. Happle, was the first fire chief.

Always needing funding, the fire department often staged public events to raise money for the cause. The Grand Masquerade Ball of February, 1911, was one such event. Admittance was sold at \$1.00 per ticket, a steep price in those days, even if it was for a good cause.

An early conflagration in Sanderson occurred in 1917 with the loss of Farley's General Store and a confectionary

and outdoor picture show belonging to the Bohlmans, which sat on the corner of Persimmon and Oak St. Barrels of gasoline were stored outside Farley's Store and when they ignited, they blasted off like rockets, creating quite a spectacular scene. It was feared that the whole town would burn, but the fire eventually was brought under control.

Though fire is a serious matter, the book mentions humorous moments as well. From a 1902 *Trans-Pecos News* article young Fred Savage was reported as having seen billows of smoke rising from the direction of Mrs. Upton's home. Fearing a large house fire, he began running down the street, excitedly yelling, "Fire! Fire!"

When he arrived at Mrs. Upton's yard, young Fred found a blazing inferno ... under the wash pots as Mrs. Upton prepared to do her laundry! In very sarcastic tones, the *News* wondered if Fred would be fined for creat-

## *Providing utilities in Sanderson*



**ORIGINAL WATERWORKS** — *The photo above shows the original waterworks before the addition of a power plant to the pump house. The windmill on the right was the first water source serving the town, drilled by Charlie Wilson. Ed McGinley bought the well in 1909 and added a public waterworks with steam engine pumps. The water was pumped to the storage tank on the hill and distributed to the town by wooden water mains. In 1911 he added a power and light system, all from the same building, which also housed an ice plant. (TCT,IP,IP, p.12)*

ing a false alarm!

Very serious occurrences of fire, then as well as now, were the prairie fires which broke out frequently. Loss of pasture and fences could spell doom for the sheep- and cattlemen, not to mention annihilation of hapless wildlife caught in the path of destruction.

Although it was common practice to fire the prairie to speed up the appearance of grass in the spring, fires in the country around Terrell County were not welcomed. The history book has an article by Judge O.W. Williams, early day rancher in Pecos County, which discusses the dangers and destructiveness of range fires in the area.

Often started by sparks from early GH & SA steam engines, fires would rage in the southern part of the county, sometimes running for 40 miles or

more before burning out. And it still happens today. Recently, sparks from a careless welder in the northern part of the county destroyed hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of oil field seismicograph cabling.

Today we have very fine firefighting equipment and volunteers who undergo training for the various types of fires they might encounter.

Especially dangerous are fires that might arise from railroad tank car leaks or wrecks. Hazardous materials shipped on the railroad may require special handling by professional hazmat crews, but initial containment is up to the local firefighters. And they are following a long line of tradition and service by the Sanderson VFD.



### References

*Terrell County, Its Past, Its People*, Alice Evans Downie, 1978. Terrell County Heritage Commission, PO Box 417, Sanderson, Texas 79848

# The Great Wind and Hail Storm of 1927

*Old Sanderson Wool Commission unroofed.  
Contents were not disturbed.*



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

*Ball park was totally wrecked.  
Spectators had to ride it out.*



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

*W.H. Farley store lost its front and structure weakened.  
Adjacent buildings were virtually untouched.*

Sanderson, then and now, has always been at the mercy of Mother Nature.

As reported in clippings from the Sanderson Times, on May 27, 1927 a sudden wind and hail storm blew through town, causing widespread destruction but, thankfully, no injuries.

At about 4:00 p.m. the town was enjoying a baseball game at the old ball park on the east side, located about on the site of the present American Legion building. A fast moving storm from the southeast struck so suddenly and violently that people literally ran for their lives.

The ball park, with its covered grandstand that sat about 200 spectators, was completely demolished by the estimated 75 mile per hour winds and resultant flying debris wrecked cars and sent ball fans scurrying for cover.

In other parts of town the damage was extensive. The old Sanderson Wool Commission building, which was

completely destroyed in the 1965 flood, had its roof blown away and the W.H. Farley Store, which sat about where the present day Post Office is located, lost the front of its building and winds weakened the structure.

Homes throughout town lost one or more windows and numerous out-houses, small buildings, and chimneys were demolished, as well as fences.

Livestock got out through downed fences and wandered over the town. Yards were stripped of foliage and many trees lost their limbs.

But, as a sign of the times, the clippings estimated that several thousands of dollars damage was done.

This author remembers that about '91 or '92, a 4" rain and freak straight line winds demolished the old Morrison's store on Oak St., ripped away the roofing on the Junior High School building and toppled a large tree on 1st St.

Some things will never change!