

Museum News

Mr. Joe Kerr

“Pelo Negro”



Caricature courtesy of The Houston Daily Post., July 11, 1901

Reminiscent of the old John Wayne movie “The Three Godfathers,” Sanderson also had three godfathers.

The first was Cyrus M. “Charlie” Wilson, who founded the town in 1882. The second was Ed McGinley, who bought Wilson’s holdings in 1906, making capital improvements to the water system and installing the first electric transmission system.

But the third godfather, Mr. Joe Kerr, probably did more than anyone in turning Sanderson into a thriving commercial cen-

ter. Had it not been for the uncommon financial genius and the whole-hearted efforts of this good-hearted man, Sanderson could not have achieved the prominence it attained through the years.

It is hard to list Mr. Kerr’s achievements, for there were many. He was a key organizer in the efforts to carve Terrell county from Pecos County, and was the first county judge. He (and others) started the first bank in Terrell County and served as its president until his death. He built the first wool



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

house, the first ice plant, a fine hotel, arguably one of the finest mercantile establishments in the Southwest, helped start the first commercial club promoting the town and county and the first Chamber of Commerce. He was a Rotarian, an Elk, a Knight of Columbus, chairman of the local Red Cross, a leader in the Boy Scouts, etc., etc., etc. To learn all of his accomplishments it is best to find a copy of the Terrell County history book and do some reading. His name is often mentioned in the period 1901-39.

But beyond the accomplishments of a tough, shrewd businessman, there was the kind, caring heart of a gentleman.

Mr. Kerr had a heart of gold. He bankrolled an army of businessmen and cowboys. When personal fortunes took a turn for the worst, one could go to Kerr's and order groceries and Mr. Kerr would hold the ticket until you could pay. When misfortune came, Mr. Kerr was first in line to help. Even when death came calling, Mr. Kerr would loan his wagon and driver to carry the deceased to the cemetery.

Mr. Kerr was friend to all, regardless of race, color or creed. When his Catholic community needed a church building, he and the other members organized men and materials and a beautiful edifice was built on Oak Street that served for years.

He was beloved by the Hispanic community because he showed no prejudice or superiority to them. They were the ones

who gave him the name "Pelo Negro," honoring his striking personal appearance ('coal black' hair and flashing black eyes.)

Mr. Kerr was an avid supporter of commerce in Sanderson. Before chambers of commerce were popular, he and other public-spirited men started the Terrell County Commercial Club in the early 'Teens. In 1920 they chartered the first Chamber of Commerce.

By 1920 Mr. Kerr was president of Kerr Mercantile Co., ex-County Judge, County Superintendent, president of Sanderson State Bank, secretary-treasurer/manager of the Sanderson Wool Commission, and owner of the Sanderson Water Works, along with possessing a large, working ranch.

Mr. Kerr's story was a true American success story.

Born on January 21, 1872 in Mt. Charles, Donegal, Ireland, Joseph Neal Kerr came to the United States as a small child with his family, settling in Atascosa County, Texas. His early years were spent in Campbelton, Texas, where he was in the mercantile business and served as a deputy sheriff. He attained early acclaim as one of the posse that took down famed outlaw Gregorio Cortez. According to the *Houston Daily Post*, July 11, 1901, Mr. Kerr was inducted into the Texas Sheriff's Association at its annual meeting and was given special commendation for courage and "nerve" in his heroic action. The caricature from page 1 comes from that article.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Kerr arrived in Sanderson on October 1, 1901, seeking his fortune. Setting out from San Antonio with no definite destination, he was taken with the town and the location and decided it was a good place to settle, with plenty of opportunities for success.

Less than a week after arriving he purchased one-half interest in the Hancock & Hancock store, which sat on the corner of 1st and Downie streets, just down from the GH&SA Railroad Depot. The store had a

small bank associated with it and the new Hancock & Kerr's became a success. By 1905 Joe Kerr was the sole owner and the name changed to "Joseph Kerr Store."

As Mr. Kerr's responsibilities began to grow with involvement in his many business and civic ventures, in 1907 he asked his brother, James, to step in and help him run the store. In 1913 James became a partner and the name changed to "Kerr Mercantile Company, Inc."

But business was not all that was on his mind. In 1916 he married Miss Josephine Robinson and they eventually set up housekeeping in the former Ed McGinley home, which he purchased along with all of McGinley's Sanderson holdings in 1917. That deal made him the virtual owner of Sanderson and its utilities. He became the biggest landlord in town and soon began improving his properties.

He built one of the first ice plants in the surrounding area and made improvements to the water and light system.

He built a new hotel on the site of the old Terrell Hotel and it was the finest between San Antonio and El Paso.

In 1927 he opened his flagship store on the corner of 1st and Oak St, the most modern and luxurious in all of rural West Texas. There was no finer or more well stocked store anywhere.

Through out his whole life, Joe Kerr was devoted to his community and its well being. At every turn he was planning and brainstorming ways to make Sanderson and Terrell County a better place. Through the efforts of his good heart, he made Sanderson a booming center of capitalism in a harsh, unforgiving wilderness. It can right-



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

Charlie Wilson, namesake A.W. Terrell, Joe Kerr and W.P. Watkins, leaders of the group for creation of Terrell County, in Austin on the day the county was born, April 8, 1905.

fully be said that Sanderson and Terrell County reached their zenith during his years of leadership and promotion.

Sadly, Mr. Kerr's health began to decline, and on June 29, 1939, he passed away. The community was shocked at the news. He was universally mourned, and the regard with which people held him is exemplified by an entry from Doc Turk's diary:

"Mr. Joe Kerr is very low. It don't seem possible that he might not come back. His place will be hard to fill. I for one will miss him for he has been a friend to me. He has helped me in many ways. I don't see how I could have carried on without him."

Many in Sanderson, Terrell County and West Texas could say the same thing.

Mr. Kerr was laid to rest in Campbelton, Texas.



References

Terrell County, Its Past, Its People, Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell County Heritage Commission, 1978
Various articles from the *El Paso Herald*, 1898-1914
"Men of Nerve and Courage" *The Houston Daily Post*, July 11, 1901 retrieved from <http://texashistory.unt.edu/>

VETERAN'S DAY 11-11-11

Another Veteran's Day has come and gone, another chance to honor those who served in the defense of our country, and especially those who gave their most precious gift to keep it safe.

Though some in our community gave their lives in World War II, most of them were brought home for interment. One young man, Theo McDonald, was not to come home. His ship, the *Astoria*, was lost at sea in a great battle and his body was lost to the deep.

His family was left with nothing...no body to prepare, no young face on which his mother could gaze one last time, just an empty chair at their table and an empty spot in their hearts.

As at all times such as this the community rallied to the family. This bitter blow had to be dealt with, and honor must be made for his sacrifice.

On the appointed day the community gathered on Oak Street, and a solemn parade commemorated his passing, not once but twice up and down the street. The procession then turned up First Street and ended at the high school auditorium.

Inside, the service began in silence with the advance of the colors. The chaplain gave the invocation and the service officer led a moment of silent prayer as the audience turned to face the west in honor of the sacrifice of their World War I comrades.

The service officer then read the hated telegram that crushed their lives: "The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that ..."

The Legion commander presented Theo's mother with a flag, upon which had been embroidered his name...an honorable gesture but a poor substitute for her beloved son. A single poppy of valor was laid upon the Legion wreath of remembrance, while in the distance three sharp volleys from the firing squad brought everyone to attention. From somewhere in the crowded auditorium the lonely sounds of *Taps* drifted across the air, mingled with muffled sobs of grief.

The chaplain gave the benediction...the high school band played a patriotic march...the colors were retired...the service was over.

The family placed a marker at the cemetery honoring Theo's life, but even that was lost to another torrent of water.

Today, we honor Theo Charley McDonald and the ultimate sacrifice that he and hundreds of thousands of other men and women have made in all conflicts, to protect our lives, our property and our American way of life. And now, whoever sees or hears these words can keep his memory alive, as we honor him and those who gave "the last full measure of devotion."

