

**Terrell County Memorial** December, 2015  
**Museum News** Sanderson, Texas

# Museum News

## "There's a long, long trail a-winding"

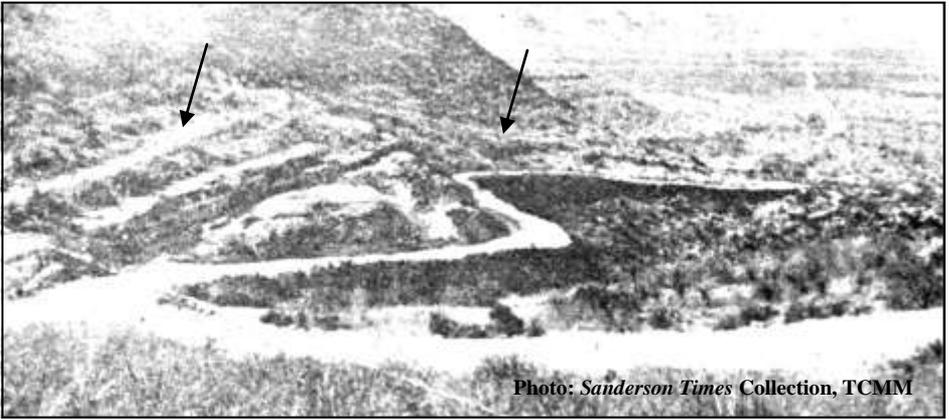


Photo: Sanderson Times Collection, TCMM

*Second route over Big Hill, ten miles north of Sanderson, constructed by Charles Downie and his Chinese and Piedmontese stonecutters and masons. Original, steeper route can be seen above it, at arrows. These retaining walls stand virtually unchanged, to this date.*

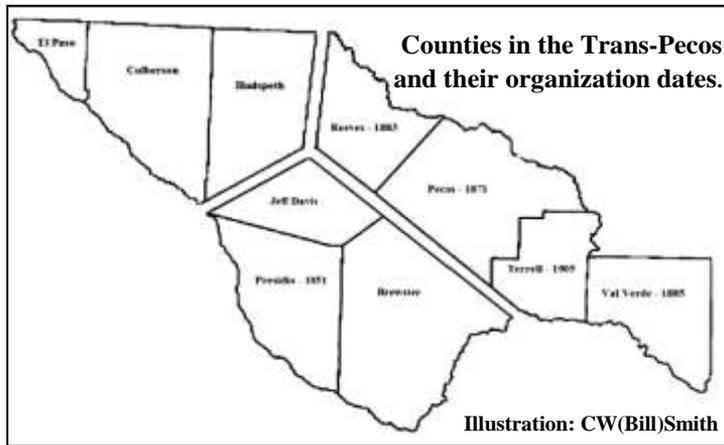
In our day-to-day lives we have become so accustomed to modern conveniences that we take them for granted. To pioneers who faced trackless prairies and impassable mountain ranges, our modern system of roads and highways would be astonishing to them. When Charlie Wilson arrived in this little valley in 1882 and had his "This is the place" moment, there was only an east-west scout trail to take folks from one place to the other.

Military roads had been built in the area, tying together Fort Davis, Fort Stockton, Fort Lancaster, Camp Pena and others, and aside from Indian trails such as the historic Comanche Trail, there was nothing else but

to launch out into the wilderness and forge your own trail if you wanted to go to spots off the main roads. Consequently, that, along with Indian unrest, enticed few settlers to the Trans-Pecos.

The railroad changed all of that, of course, and for the first time (along with removal of the native inhabitants,) settlement of the Trans-Pecos could begin in earnest.

The original Pecos County at its founding in 1871, and of which we were a part, stretched along the west bank of the Pecos from the New Mexico line to the Rio Grande near Del Rio. Fort Stockton and Del Rio were the cities of the county, both just tiny settlements. They were connected by



cutting off many miles of travel by establishing a route to include passage over Big Hill, ten miles north of Sanderson.

A rudimentary but unsatisfactory road had been carved into the steep face of the canyon slope to allow passage down into the valley beyond, but the road

the Military Road, but it skirted far to the north of the future Sanderson to include Fort Lancaster.

Reeves County broke away from Pecos County in 1883, followed by Val Verde County in 1885. The establishment of Sanderson as a division point on the Southern Pacific/GH&SA increased its importance to Pecos County, but the distance from the county seat to Sanderson and the lack of a good road caused difficulty for the residents.

The original trail/road to Fort Stockton had been created by Charles Downie, first Anglo rancher to come to the area in 1881, at the instigation of the Pecos County commissioners in 1895. They appropriated \$200 for the construction work and retained Downie to supervise the work and hire the men. The original road turned west at the Downie Headquarters and took a long, circuitous route to Fort Stockton, avoiding the massive cliffs of Big Canyon and numerous other smaller canyons, making a road 90 miles in length.

Poor roads and the great distance involved, along with lack of law enforcement, caused Sanderson to break away from Pecos County, forming Terrell County in 1905. Still, there were no decent roads leading to Sanderson.

That was soon to be remedied. Some of the first actions of the new county commission was to order improvement of streets and roads in Sanderson. Attention was also given to a new road to Fort Stockton, this time by

was treacherous and dangerous.

In March of 1906 the county commission authorized the judge to hire a crew to rebuild that portion of the road. He gave the task to Commissioner Charles Downie, who had built the original road.

At the time, there was still a sizeable population of Chinese in the area, brought in to work on the railroad as it pushed through. Downie hired them, along with Piedmontese masons he found wandering in the desert, to build rock retaining walls which still stand, hardly a stone out of place. These received backfill to build up a suitable road surface. The finished road was still steep and dangerous, but it was much more manageable.

In horse and buggy days, to traverse down a steep hill, one had to chain the wagon or buggy wheels together and literally skid it down to the bottom. There were brakes on wagons, but they were hardly adequate for such a steep incline.

If you were going uphill in a Model T or similar automobile, often the forward gear ratios were insufficient to pull the load. In that case, automobilists often turned the vehicle around and backed up the hill, using the reverse gear's much lower gear ratio and greater pulling power.

Accidents still occurred frequently, as poor Charles Downie, himself, found out. Going down Big Hill one day with a wagon pulled by his prized pair of mules, the wagon broke away and slammed into the mules' hindquar-

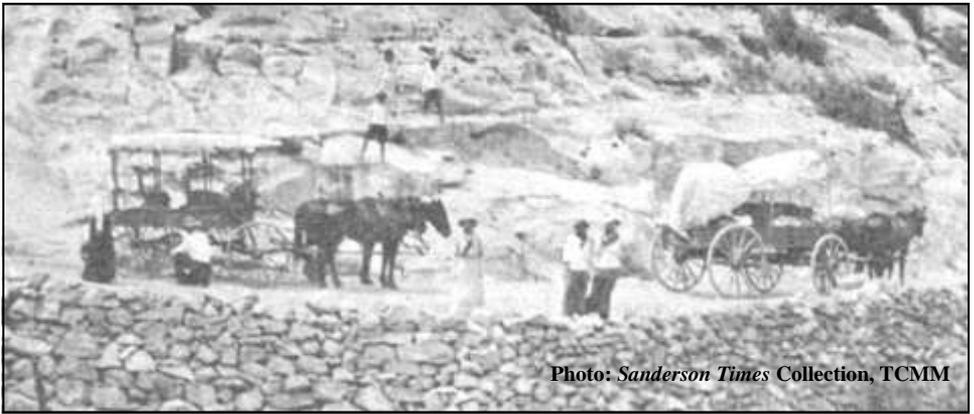


Photo: Sanderson Times Collection, TCMM

*R. N. Allen, his mother, Mrs. S. N. Allen, Bess Allen, Herman and J. Sam, with Nellie Allen and two of her friends standing above on the rocks, preparing to descend Big Hill, 1914. Mr. Allen is applying chains to the wheels of his surrey to lock them together. This allowed him to skid the vehicles down the steep incline, providing controlled descent and preventing them from running away, out of control.*

ters, breaking their legs. With great remorse, he had to put the animals down.

With the Fort Stockton road well on the way, there was nothing but the scout trail going east and west from Sanderson. Most people took the train if they wanted to travel in those directions, and it was convenient. With two passenger trains per day east and west for a good many years, folks could go to Marathon or Alpine in the morning for shopping, visiting or business and return the same day. Since everyone was mad about baseball, they could ride the train to Marfa, Alpine or Marathon and watch the local boys play ball. There really was no need for a road.

Larger forces, however, were at work. As car and truck traffic began to increase, there also began a clamor for more and better roads throughout the state.

In 1917, the state legislature okayed a plan to create 26 state roads connecting the major towns and cities of the state. A route was proposed to go from Orange to San Antonio to El Paso, passing through Del Rio and Sanderson, and to be called Highway No. 3. This route would pass through Marathon and Alpine, then north to Fort Davis, eventually connecting with another route that ran west to Van horn, almost what we have today as US Highway 90.

Another grand route from El Paso east was

to be Highway No. 12, which would have followed today's Interstate 10 route to the small village of Esperanza, 21 miles east of Sierra Blanca, but continue south following the Rio Grande to Presidio. From there it would hug the river through present-day Big Bend National Park, at that time still private ranch land, and continue on down the river to connect with No. 3 at Langtry. Anyone familiar with that country knows that it would have been a tremendous undertaking with the rugged topography of the area. Of course, it was never built, but Highway No. 3 was built.

Along with the mandate for the new highway system came federal and state moneys to build it. Previously, counties built their own roads at their own expense. State statute decreed that every able-bodied man from age 17 to age 60 was to donate a certain number of days every year to road and street construction and maintenance in their respective counties. Although no men were conscripted in Terrell County to do roadwork, the commissioners did hire local men to do the work, and a supervisor to see that it was done. They also instructed the sheriff to use prisoners at the county jail to perform such duties, a chain gang, in effect. The commissioners, themselves, supervised at first, but shortly turned the work over to a hired road man.

Construction of the proposed highways of



*In 1931, the state erected a highway barn and yard at Oak and Avenue D, north of today's Uncle's Convenience Store in Sanderson. Highway maintenance was done from this location until a new office and barns were built on Highway 285. The original barn still stands.*

1917 was done section by section. Highway No. 3 progressed from El Paso and San Antonio, concurrently, much the same as in 1880 when the railroads were built. The finished roads were drained and graded, but not paved.

In 1925, the State Highway Commission was formed and took control of all design, building and maintenance of highways in the state and the disbursement of federal and state highway moneys. Counties no longer could designate roads within their boundaries, but they still had to ante up 25% of the cost.

In 1932 the state and feds accepted all responsibility for the costs of building and maintaining the highways, releasing the counties from their 25% share.

The last section of No. 3 was not finished until 1929. Ironically, that section was the 11 miles of highway that runs through Pecos County, eleven miles west of Sanderson.

All but eight miles of No. 3 in Terrell County was paved by 1933, after Franklin Roosevelt came into office. His public works projects provided the manpower for the paving crews.

As for Highway No. 3, its name was superseded in 1925 by the US government in an attempt to make all highway names through the US consistent. No. 3 became US Highway 90 and it terminated in Van Horn.

Not all of the roads in Terrell County are paved, to this date. The county maintains major dirt roads to ranch areas, but most ranch roads in the county are the responsibility of their owners.

The Fort Stockton road was paved in 1935. When it was taken over by the state in 1939, it was designated US Highway 285. A branch from US 285 to Sheffield was paved in sections, completed in 1961 and designated RM (Ranch to Market) 2400, terminating at SH (State Highway) 349. A branch from RM 2400 to Bakersfield in Pecos County, RM 2886, was paved in sections, beginning in 1963 and completed in 1993. A dirt road paved in sections from Dryden, north to Sheffield, was completed as FM (Farm to Market) 1749 in 1954, and re-designated as SH 349 in 1990. There are two very short sections of paved road, RM 1865, 0.6 miles branching off of US 90 and RM 3166, 3.0 miles branching off of SH 349.

Today we see our US Highways in Terrell County being destroyed by heavy truck traffic up from the Rio Grande Valley and Mexico. An informal survey done over several years by this writer shows an average of 50 trucks per hour, 24/7, heading north over US 90 and US 285. That is approximately 1200 trucks per day, one way, making the whimperings of Brewster and Presidio County residents about their possible 300 trucks per day over the proposed "La Entrada al Pacifico," pale by comparison.

Lord, help us!



#### References

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