

The History of Pecos, Texas

... In a nutshell

Pecos might have been called "Crossroads", as it has been a crossroad for over land transportation lines for many, many years. It's origins began because of the strategic location. Many of the old cattle and wagon trails such as the Butterfield Route, Chisholm Trail and Loving-Goodnight Trail crossed here. There were a number of less famous trails coming into Pecos, some never having been named.



The actual recorded beginning in Pecos was sometime around 1873, soon developing into a center for the various ranches in the area. It was considered nothing for a cowboy to ride 50 to 75 miles to spend his paycheck in the various saloons which comprised most of Pecos' business district. Because of it's strategic location, Pecos soon became the wholesale center for most of the small communities scattered throughout a 200 square mile radius. Wholesale and distribution, along with ranching were the mainstays of Pecos development until 1947.

During World War II, Pecos was selected as the site for one of the largest B1-13 Training Centers in the United States. Pecos was selected as the site for this base because of the flat terrain and weather conditions. According to the U.S. Air Force, Pecos has more flying days than any other location in the country, averaging 360 flying days per year. To this day, every other year, Pecos is the host of the Army Airfield Reunion, gathering people from all over the country.



Until 1947, most of Pecos' development had been along distribution lines, when a number of people realized that in the Pecos area there was a large supply of virgin land that would produce valuable crops in large quantities. There was a large quantity of underground water with which to irrigate the land. This water was available to anyone who would drill a well. The climate was very favorable to agriculture; the land was easily prepared for irrigation and there was a wonderful outlet by rail or highway for farm and ranch products. Farmers started buying up land and they were quickly followed, by others.

In the late 60's oil and gas exploration and production became very important to the Pecos economy. Many oil and gas companies had offices in Pecos and crews were based here. In the early 80's there was an oil bust that affected all oil and gas exploration throughout the United States and most of the exploration was halted.

Pecos Today

Pecos is the County Seat fore Reeves County and has a broad based economy. In the area of agriculture, Pecos has cotton, feed grains, cattle, onions, cantaloupes and milk production. In the vegetable category, the Pecos Cantaloupe is world renowned. Pecan and pistachio growing is also being developed. Other major industries are, a major food processing plant and a battery recycling center. Tourism is becoming a major industry, due in large to our world famous cantaloupe and our West of the Pecos Museum.

The Gentleman Gunfighter

Born in Tennessee around 1840, legend says Clay Allison served the Confederacy as a spy. When captured, he escaped by slipping his unusually small hands through the manacles. Small or not, Clay Allison's hands were adept enough with a six-shooter to outdraw and kill 20 men. It was said he earned the title of "Gentleman Gunfighter" because he never killed a man who didn't need killing.

The Clay Allison legend includes tales of gun fights and escapades that range from a Dodge City showdown with Bat Masterson, to an encounter with Wyatt Earp, to a Bowie Knife fight in a freshly dug grave, with the winner shoveling the dirt in over the loser.

Story-tellers agree that he was driving to his ranch from Pecos City in 1887 when he was pitched off his wagon and crushed under the wheels. They disagree whether or not he was sober. His grave is in the park area downtown near the West of the Pecos Museum.



Rodeo

"The History of the World's First Rodeo"

Just to think of rodeo time brings excitement to many people. Excitement was in the dusty air of Pecos in 1883 when a few cowboys met to find out who was the best at riding and roping. From the beginning of time, there has been competition among men. So, it was with those horsemen who made a living in the daily chores about the ranch headquarters or trailing a herd of cattle in the wind, dust and rain storms.

As these men crossed trails and met in places such as Pecos, there always came the question, "who is the best?" Trav Windham had become well known after driving cattle from Abilene to the Hashknife Ranch just north and west of Pecos. This ranch had been established as a place for cattle used to feed workers on the T & P Railroad: Which was moving west from Sweetwater. Deciding to quit the trail, Windham later became foreman for the Lazy Y outfit. Morg Livingston of the NA Ranch had earned a reputation as a roper. Both men had friends, but telling or bragging could not determine a winner. So it was decided that these two would meet in a contest. Word spread quickly and other cowboys also wanted to compete to prove their abilities.



A place was chosen on the flat land west of the river. History has it about where the present courthouse and law enforcement buildings are located. The time was chosen... July 4th. That was a holiday and most ranchers, cowboys and townspeople could attend. When that day came, there were horses, wagons and people walking... Coming from all directions to see what was going to happen and to find out how their favorite cowboy would fair.

Most stories about that day concerned the time it took Trav Windham to rope and tie his steer: 22 seconds, to win that event. Later Morg Livingston beat Windham in a matched roping. Before the day was over, cowboys from Hashknife, W, Lazy Y and the NA spreads were in the action. One story from that day named Pate Beard of the Hashknife and Jeff Chism as having walked away with honors.

Others named were Jim Mannin, John Chalk, George Brookshire, Howard Collier, Jim Livingston, Brawley Oates, Jim and Henry Slack, E.P. Struckler and Henry Miller.

Henry Slack, grandfather of R. C. Slack of Pecos, was probably the youngest rider there. He did not remain a cowboy, becoming a business man. He never lost his love for the cowboy life. He was a famous figure from that cowboy event. He was able for many years to lead or ride in the rodeo parades when they began in the early 30's. Many people came to know and respect "Uncle Henry". The late Evelyn Slack Mahoney often recalled stories her father, Henry Slack, and about being there on July 4, 1883.

Through the years, many stories were told of the Pecos event and other towns began to claim the first rodeo. Barney Hubbs of Pecos, a longtime newsman and historian, began to gather information to verify the facts handed down from generation to generation. He obtained signed affidavits from various people, some whom attended that first rodeo. The Encyclopedia Britannica publishers picked up on Mr. Hubb's newspaper account of the first rodeo and wanted his proof. He was successful, after much controversy, in getting Pecos named as having "...The first public cowboy contest wherein prizes were awarded to the winners of bronco riding and steer roping. No admission was charged to the spectators." In getting this recognition for Pecos, he lost his affidavits, as they were never returned.

Pecos Bill

Verses about the mythical cowboy were fabricated by old time cowhands in their bunkhouse and beside the range campfires. Passed from ranch to ranch with new verses, the deeds of Pecos Bill were part of the range cowboy's homemade entertainment. Versions vary, but most agreed that he was the youngest of 18 children and that he was separated from his family at a crossing of the Pecos River.

Pecos Bill was raised by coyotes until a cowboy convinced him of his real identity. Then, according to his cowhand storytellers, Pecos Bill taught gophers to dig holes for fence-posts, rode everything from mountain lions to cyclones and roped huge herds with one loop of his lariat. Range-hardened old timers said Bill died from laughing... At dudes who called themselves "cowboys".

History of Col. George R. Reeves

Reeves County was named after George R. Reeves. Limited information is at hand on this man from Grayson County. Mr. Reeves was born in the state of Tennessee in 1826. He lived in Arkansas for a while, but after his marriage to Jane Moore in 1844. He moved to Grayson County, Texas where he was a farmer and a rancher.

Two years after his arrival in Grayson County, he began to serve the county in different ways. His first job was as a tax collector for the county. We can assume from his service in that position he gained the respect of the people: For in 1848, he was elected Sheriff and soon after, sent to the capital to serve as Grayson County's House Representative. He remained in Austin until the call to arms went out for Texans to join the war effort of the South. In 1861, George Reeves helped organize the 11th Texas Cavalry. He began at the rank of Captain, but with his leadership abilities was soon promoted to Colonel and assigned to Wheeler's Cavalry.

Col. Reeves lead his men in such famous battles as the 100 Day Siege of Atlanta. He also maintained his forces as they waged guerilla warfare on the armies of General Sherman as they made their infamous march to the sea.

In 1874, Col. Reeves returned home where he was sent again to Austin. In 1881, he was elected Speaker of the House and continued in that role until his death in 1882. Shortly after his death, a petition from Toyah reached the legislature. In honor of the late Speaker of the House, a new county taken from Pecos County, would hold the name of Reeves. Named for a man who served the people in war and in peace.

West of the Pecos Museum

The city of Pecos, located near the Pecos River, is on the high prairie at the northern border of the Chihuahuan Desert. It is 210 miles east of El Paso, 3292 miles west of Fort Worth on I-20, about 168 miles north of Big Bend National Park and 85 miles south of Carlsbad Caverns.

Pecos history begins with the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century, through the periods of the Indian migration, cavalry exploration, pioneer westward movement and the era of cattle trails.

In 1881, the arrival of the Texas & Pacific Railroad ensured the future of Pecos as a commercial and agricultural center on the Fort Worth to El Paso route. The area developed a ranching industry and with the advent of modern irrigation methods, substantial farming interests. The T & P railroad's dining cars served sweet Pecos Cantaloupe, bringing this delicacy its nationwide fame.



The West of the Pecos Museum, the restored 19th century Orient Hotel with its adjoining saloon, was the scene in 1896 as Barney Riggs, a local man, killed outlaws Bill Earhart and John Denson after they threatened him. Bronze markers have been placed on the floor showing where the two fell. Today the Museum displays on three floors, a collection of pioneer artifacts and displays of railroad, rodeo and ranching memorabilia.

Adjoining the Museum is a park including the grave of Clay Allison, the famous Pecos "Gentleman Gunfighter". The Museum underwent a half million dollar restoration for the first time since being built in the late 80's and is truly a treasure. Pecos is blessed with a solid, close-knit community and prides itself on the finest in true West Texas hospitality.

Pecos, Texas
 County Seat: Reeves County, Texas
 Population: 9,501
 Area: 2642 square miles
 Elevation: 2617 feet

Location in Miles to...
 Odessa, TX 76 miles
 Carlsbad, NM 82 miles
 El paso, TX 210 Miles
 San Angelo, TX 210 Miles

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