

The Blacksmith

By Bert C Morgan 06/17/2003

The new mural being painted on the building face on Oakes St. depicting a blacksmith is very intriguing to me. I have watched it sense inception as it begins to blossom into the beautiful masterpiece Crystal Goodman, the artist, always produces. What makes the mural so special to me is that it reminds me of my youth.

My father, C. C. Morgan, established a blacksmith shop on Oakes St. between Concho Ave. and Twohig Ave. in San Angelo, Texas directly across the street from where the mural is being painted. At the time I was six years old and twelve when we moved in 1929.

Dad worked for the Orient Railroad, as a boilermaker in the "roundhouse", a place where the locomotives were repaired. He went out in the big railroad strike of 1923 and established his own boiler and welding shop. He did not go back to the railroad when the strike was over because his business was doing well.

In that day most things was done with horses, such as Parcel Post delivery, ice and milk delivery, road grading and street and road building as well as pulling the plow and working cattle.

In the mid 1920s the city started a project to install underground sewer and water lines down Oakes St. extending along the front of Dad's business. Most all of the work was done with horsepower. I do not remember the street before the project started but think it was just a dirt surface. I do remember that there were a large number of horse teams powering the many dirt-moving implements. Dirt would be moved out with large scoops drawn by four-horse teams. The sewer and water line ditches were excavated mostly by horsepower. Large wagons pulled by four-horse teams hauled dirt and gravel in for a new road surface. The wagons were novel for that day. The floorboards were not fastened down but lay loose on the bottom cross members. The team would pull the wagon over the spot to receive the load and the workmen would turn the floorboards up vertically and remove them from the back letting the load fall through the bottom. The only implements not being pulled with horses or mules were the huge steam rollers that smoothed and leveled the road surface and the tar spreaders that laid down the final surface,

My Dad established a blacksmith shop and hired blacksmiths to shoe horses and sharpen plows etc. and wheelwrights to repair wagons. I remember one blacksmith who I knew as Mr. Denman.

The buildings now located where Dad's business was do not reflect the true frontier character of the original structure. It was a single two-story building constructed of solid stone walls much like those at old Fort Concho. It was divided into several units that extended from directly across from the mural south to the corner of Oakes and Concho. The corner unit was a bank and Dad leased the last unit north. There was a wide covered front sidewalk made of concrete between the front door to the street. I remember that walkway well. The concrete contained no steel rebar or steel mesh wire allowing the concrete to crack and rise up in some sections. This left ridges on one side of the cracks just right for a small barefooted boy to stump his big toe on. Most all children went barefoot in the summertime and my big toes were bloody most of the time. Some people never learn.

At the rear of Dad's shop was a huge oak tree sheltering all the blacksmith equipment. Dad's primary business machinery and equipment occupied the entire

interior. Most all the horseshoeing was done under that big oak tree. It also was the place for the family and friend's social gatherings on hot summer evenings. Our family lived in the second story over the shop. Dad would buy soda pop by the case from the Nehi Bottling Co. on Avenue K and cool the "knee high" bottles in an iced down no.1 wash tub. My sister, Ada Marie and brother Bill liked the varied flavors. I liked the red strawberry flavor in the big glass bottle.

There was a wagon yard at the corner of Magdalen St. and Concho Ave. by the Concho River just east of the present-day Western Mattress & Furniture Co. People left their horses and wagons there when they came into town from the area farms and ranches. They usually stayed several days to stock up on supplies and celebrate the many "establishments" along Concho Ave. Dad did lots of work for these people as they brought in broken farm implements for repairs, plow blades to be sharpened and horses to be shod. Their children and I would ride and care for their horses and mules, which ignited my great love for horses during my childhood. I would pester the ranchers when they came into the shop and persuaded them to lend me a horse that they didn't need and I would feed and board it in order to have a horse to ride. At that time, horses were almost a passion with me.

Ice was delivered to homes and businesses by ice wagons in those days and in San Angelo the wagons were pulled by Spanish Mules. Now a Spanish Mule was rather small and light colored and was used in teams of two to distribute ice in various sections of town. Despite their small size, most were as ornery as a Tasmanian Devil. Mr. Denman would have to tie a rope to each foot and run the rope through the harness collar to keep the mule from kicking him as he fitted each shoe. All the while he had to keep an eye on the mules head to keep him from reaching around and biting his backside. Some of the mules had to be tied by foot and put on the ground to be shod.

Parcel Post delivery was made by large enclosed wagons pulled by a single Percheron Horse. The Percheron Horse originated in the area known as "Le Perche" in the north west of France. There in 732 A.D. Arabian Horses abandoned by Moors after their defeat in the Battle of Tours were crossed with the massive Flemish stock and from this cross came the Percheron type which has endured for centuries.

I enjoyed watching Mr. Denman shoe one of those gentle giants. They seemed so patient as he struggled to remove the huge old shoes and fit and attach the new ones. Their hoofs were so large that Mr. Denman would use his wooden toolbox to prop up the hoof as he preformed his tasks. Fitting the new shoes was quite an art. Horseshoes came in various sizes but had to be reshaped to fit each individual horse's hoof. Horseshoes were heated red-hot in the forge and hammered out on the anvil to the proper shape and size. After the hoof was trimmed out with a hoof knife and the outer edges trimmed back with hoof nippers, a rasp was used to assure a flat surface for the shoe. To fit the shoe to the hoof even more exact, Mr. Denman would pick up the hot shoe with his tongs and hold it against the hoof melting the surface of the hoof to seal with the shoe. I always cringed when I saw that but he explained that the hoof had no nerves therefore no feeling and that the hot horseshoe was not held there long enough to cause any pain to the horse.

Generally, horses were shod to protect the hoof from bruising or splitting under heavy loads however sometimes the shoe was shaped and fitted to compensate for problems the horse might have in walking, running or pulling. A blacksmith had to know a lot more than just shoeing horses. He must know a lot about horse anatomy and illnesses.

The blacksmith had another major function in helping the wheelwright build and repair wagon wheels. In the 1800's, most of the axles were made out of hickory with the

eighteen-inch deep wheel hub made out of Osage orange, a deep and wiry wood. The spokes and wheel rims were made out of a hardwood such as white oak and each spoke was made to flare out from the hub making the wheel look like a saucer. The tapered end of the axle fit into the hubs keeping the wheels parallel. The iron tire was six inches wide, at least an inch thick and was tightly secured over the wheel rims holding the entire assembly together. By the 1900's the wooden axle had a metal sleeve over the tapered end that acted as a bearing for the wheel hub thus reducing wear. The blacksmith's job was to make the iron tire from a piece of bar stock, bending it in a circle and forge welding the ends together. This was precession work in that the tire had to be a perfect circle and of a diameter that could be calculated to be large enough to slip over the wheel rims when heated and to shrink tightly holding the entire wheel firmly together when cooled.

Although shoeing horses was the major work of the blacksmith, he was also an artist at crafting iron and steel into beautiful and functional objects used by the cowboys and ranchers. Taking a piece of steel (an old automobile rear axel perhaps) he would cut it into proper lengths, split the ends and hammer out a bridle bit or a spur doing all the shaping with the forge, hammer and anvil. He finished it by filing, polishing and engraving intricate designs over the surfaces before plating. It is hard to believe how beautiful some of these works were knowing that they were made with just a forge, hammer and anvil. When not busy in the shop the blacksmith often would visit local ranches shoeing horses and peddling his spurs and bridle bits to the cowboys.

The blacksmiths were much more than the local "smithy". He was an honored citizen in the community. Like the barber he came in contact with most all the people in the surrounding area making him a greeter, messenger, advisor, healer, listener, councilor, and trusted friend to most.

Back to the mural. Yesterday, I went to check the progress on the painting and to my great surprise there stood a small blond boy and his dog in the painting watching the blacksmith as he worked. I was a towheaded kid in my youth and blond until I lost most of my hair. As I gazed at the painting a strange feeling came over me. I had a compelling urge to walk through the old weather-beaten door in the blacksmith shop and like Alice through the looking glass, step 80 years back in time to my youth. I could not do that physically but through the power of the mind, I did and revisited a wonderful period of my life for which I am truly grateful. Thank you Historic Murals of San Angelo and thank you Crystal Goodman.