



Frontier Folklore & Pioneer Prose from Harvey County

by Darren McMannis

The Old Town Well

With A Hat Or Two Thrown In For Good Measure...

The cattle coming through Newton on the old Chisholm trail had plenty to drink out of Sand Creek as they crossed it. For human consumption, however, the creek left a lot to be desired quite apart from the thousands of horse and cattle feet that meandered through it.

After RWP Muse chose the townsite and pioneers began digging their first latrines along the banks of the old Sand Creek, they realized, apparently with some surprise, that there wasn't really any good drinking water for this new community to enjoy. Not really a problem at the first, however, as the drink of choice was readily obtainable at any number of saloons in town.

In 1872 the Newton town company contracted with Captain David L. Payne (a cousin of Davy Crocket) to dig the first water well. He hired help and the well was dug in the center of what is now the intersection of 5th & Main Streets. Later a second well was dug by Capt. Payne at the 6th & Main intersection.

It was told that cowboys sitting outside the Gold Room Saloon would with drunken aim take great sport in shooting at the metal pails being carried by citizens at the well - 1 point for hitting an empty pail, 2 points for one filled with water, 3 points for chasing the pail-holder away and an extra point if they dropped the bucket as they ran. Wooden pails counted also, but hits were harder to judge. Some shooters playing the game would even count hits to a person's hat for bonus points. Probably best to draw your water earlier in the day, rather than wait until evening....

Perhaps the water didn't taste too bad, but it would have been flavored with all manner of degradables which happened to fall in - not to mention a variety of things thrown in for fun by a few drunken cowboys passing by. Just one year

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after the wells were first dug, it became either prudent or necessary to give them a good cleaning. As reported in the newspaper in 1873:

Cleaned out -- the two old town wells received a good cleaning out last week, a thing they very much needed. Each are about 40 feet deep and had over 20 feet of water in them.

In the North one some six well buckets besides a few tin and wooden ones, and eight hats were taken out.

From the south one, 11 old slouch hats, one old bonnet, several buckets with a miscellaneous collection of rubbish, were taken out.

A quantity of lime and salt were placed in the bottom of each well making quite an improvement in the water.

The "miscellaneous collection of rubbish" might make quite an interesting list, had the full truth been disclosed by that early reporter. Today we can only imagine what all had actually been found, although hat, bonnet, and bucket flavored water would have been tasty enough.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that it was later stated, "Prior to 1897, Newton's city water supply was inadequate and of poor quality." At that time the Santa Fe Railroad division headquarters had been moved from Newton to Nickerson, but when word was received that they would be willing to move back to Newton if "an adequate water supply could be obtained," Newton's city officials began the search in earnest. They eventually accepted a report from Professor Erasmus Haworth, professor of Geology at the University of Kansas, and where he pointed the city dug a test well that did in fact hit good water at 130 feet.

Afterwards, the twin town wells on Main Street were abandoned and eventually paved over. A marker in the middle of the intersection to this day covers the old well at 5th & Main.

Today's twin poisons of chlorine and fluoride are added to our water, rather than lime and salt, but that is a story our descendents will one day tell. And to this day, it's best not to drink the water of old Sand Creek.