

The Bandera PROPHEET

June 11, 2021

Frontier Tales

By Rebecca Norton
The Bandera Prophet

In a back corner of the Frontier Times Museum in Bandera sits a nondescript shadowbox that holds a notable piece of frontier history – the wooden mallet of the notorious Judge Roy Bean. The self-proclaimed “Law West of the Pecos” is one of those rugged characters that still captivates the imagination of those who are intrigued by the rowdy days of the Old West. While there have been much misrepresentations about old Roy Bean, the true tales of his life are even more mesmerizing as the fabrications.

Born in 1825 in Kentucky, Bean began life with a rather dainty name – Phantly Roy Bean, Jr. Growing up in extreme poverty, Bean left home at 16, riding a flatboat to New Orleans. He made his way to San Antonio, joining his brother, Sam. They hauled freight to New Mexico and Mexico, eventually opening a trading post in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. It was here, he shot and killed a Mexican desperado. To avoid capture, Bean fled to California, joining another brother, Joshua, in San Diego.

Bean sought and received the attention of several local women but his violent streak continued to be his undoing. After challenging a Scotsman to a duel, both men were charged with assault when they shot at each other. While in jail, Bean’s many lady friends made sure his incarceration was comfortable, bringing him wine, cigars and food, most notably tamales. Hidden in the tamales were knives that Bean used to dig through the cell wall to escape.

His romantic life soon took a turn for the worse when a young woman he was courting was kidnapped and forced to marry a Mexican officer.

Bean challenged him to a duel and killed him. To revenge the death, the officer's friends attempted to hang Bean but the rope stretched just enough to keep him alive. The young woman was able to cut the rope and save his life but Bean was to forever suffer from a permanent rope burn and stiff neck.

Bean returned to San Antonio during the Civil War. He married 18-year-old Virginia Chavez, but was arrested for threatening her life in their first year of marriage. This did not keep them from eventually having four children. The family lived in a ramshackle area around South Flores Street. One of his old dwellings, the Bean-Navarro House, still stands on East Glenn Street. The area became known as Beanville after Bean opened a saloon. By then, he had acquired a reputation as an unscrupulous businessman. Learning of the construction of a new transcontinental rail line near the Pecos River, he voiced his desire to go west to sell whiskey to the thirsty railroad workers laying the track. In her desire to see Bean leave the neighborhood, a store owner in Beanville bought all of his possessions for \$900 to give him the funds needed to leave San Antonio.

Next month, we'll follow Roy Bean to the Pecos to tell the story of how he became a judge and reveal the truth behind his saloon and courthouse, the Jersey Lily.