

Sanger, Where the Rail Met the Trail

(Renamed: Sanger and the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway by THC)

I. Context

Sanger originated in 1886 as a water stop on the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad. Because of its proximity to North Denton county cattle ranches and to the Chisholm Trail, the railroad soon built a side track, cattle pens and a depot. The town of Sanger sprang up around the railroad stop.

Sanger's history is intertwined with the development of railroads in North Texas and on through Oklahoma and Kansas to Kansas City, replacing the old cattle trails. Sanger's fortunes have been tied to the advent, decline and revival of the railroad since that time. The railroad industry was not only essential to the birth of the city, but also its continued growth throughout its early history.

II. Overview

The Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway Company was chartered on May 28, 1873 to build a railroad from Galveston to the interior of Texas without passing through Houston. There were existing rail connections via Houston, but Galveston suffered periodic traffic embargoes as a result of yellow fever epidemics, and quarantines were enforced to minimize population infections. In 1878, cities and counties north of the Brazos River had pledged more than \$300,000 in funding to enable purchase of iron necessary to bridge the river and its floodplain with a 3-span structure. Unfortunately, the new bridge was entirely destroyed by a flood and the company became insolvent. In December 1878, George Sealy of Galveston assembled a syndicated loan from himself and friends in the amount of \$250,000

to purchase the entire company. On April 15, 1879 on the steps of the Galveston Courthouse the group purchased the entire company for \$200,000 at foreclosure proceedings. By the end of 1879 the line was open to Rosenberg and by December 1880 it had reached Cameron. Within the next year the tracks had built north through Temple and Cleburne and the line arrived in Fort Worth. For the next few years the railway company focused their building across the central one-third of the state, which profitably captured the Galveston export trade.¹

By the end of 1885 the GC&SF was operating nearly 700 miles of track, but it was not a financially strong railroad.² William B. Strong, president of Santa Fe reached an agreement with Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad that AT&SF would purchase the company (GC&SF) by exchanging three AT&SF shares for four Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe shares on condition that GC&SF deliver 1,000 miles of main line tracks within one year. The trade was agreed by instrument dated March 3, 1886.

GC&SF began construction of 300 miles of new track in April 1886, with chief engineer, Walter Justin Sherman, (born 1854 in Florence, Ohio and died April 1937³), from Dallas to Paris and Honey Grove, northwest from Cleburne to Weatherford and due north from Fort Worth to Purcell, Indian Territory, passing through the Sanger location.⁴

The railroad from Fort Worth to Gainesville, Texas, passing through what was to become the town of Sanger, was built in 1886 and extended north from Gainesville, Texas to what is now the Kansas-Oklahoma border in 1887.⁵

The connection of tracks by GC&SF and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe were made at Purcell, Indian Territory, on April 27, 1887.⁶ Although the GC&SF was a subsidiary of the Santa Fe, it continued to be operated as a separate organization. The

GC&SF constructed 355 miles of track before the state law was repealed which granted sixteen sections of land for each mile of track constructed. The company received certificates for 3,554,560 acres of vacant unappropriated state land. Records do not indicate that the tracks leading from Fort Worth to Purcell were a portion of this grant.⁷ The task of building 300 miles of rail track from Fort Worth to Purcell, Indian Territory required completion of almost one mile per day to meet the requirements set out from the original deadline. The company had no surveys, no right-of-way secured, and no engineers or contractors were under contract. It was hard work, and a huge commitment, but the task was met on time.⁸

There were originally fifty engineers and a few hundred men and a score of teams buckled down to the building project. The numbers increased until one hundred engineers, 5,000 men and 2,000 teams of stock were building tracks in Texas. The men were expected to build one mile of track in the morning before lunch, and one mile afterward before the day ended. Buckets of whiskey were ladled out with a dipper to the workers at quitting time each day.⁹ On April 26, 1887, Sherman reached Purcell and finished the job on April 27, 1887.¹⁰

Water stops were needed along the track for operation of the steam engines. One site chosen was at milepost 392.16, which was to eventually become the town of Sanger. Elizabeth Bullock Huling (1820- 1906), of Lampasas owned the adjacent property. Mrs. Huling, born April 12, 1820 in Bourbon County, Kentucky, was the widow of Thomas B. Huling. Thomas Huling purchased the land from Reuben Bebee for \$700.¹¹ In a request to Mrs. Huling, Sherman asked that the railroad be allowed to purchase property adjacent to the tracks for a water station for the steam engines. Mrs. Huling agreed to the sale of the

property to the railroad. According to the Denton County Real Property records, Elizabeth Huling sold acreage to GC&Santa Fe Railway on June 14, 1886, recorded by S. H. Hopkins, Deputy Clerk of Denton County, on July 7, 1886 at 10:00 a.m. in Volume 00031, Pages 331-333.¹²

Sherman had another reason for locating the watering station at milepost 392.16. This location was very near the Chisholm Trail. The Chisholm Trail was located just west of Bolivar and crossed the well-known ranches of Forester, known for his “Two I Jingle Bob” brand, Waide (former Chisum Ranch), and Fischer among others.¹³ and ¹⁴ Sherman ordered a side track to be built, as well as a loading chute and cattle pens. A one-room depot, built at the foot of Bolivar Street, was also constructed. Cattle loading began as soon as through-rail service was established to Kansas City in 1887.

Before the railroad came to Sanger, large cattle drives would begin between Denton and Sanger, heading to Kansas. In 1881, Noah Batis (1860-1950), who later owned a stock farm west of Sanger, was one of the many cowboys who drove cattle up the Chisholm Trail to Kansas. His first drive was at age 21; the cattle were those of Judge S. A. Venter. The drives would cover 11 to 12 miles a day.¹⁵

Getting cattle to the stock pens at the Santa Fe railway station in Sanger required the ranchers to drive cattle over open prairie, down the dusty wagon roads that led from Bolivar to Sanger. At the railroad the cattle were dipped in a disinfectant, watered and fed, and held in the pens until loaded on the boxcars to be shipped to market. The Santa Fe offered the cowboys a free round trip to Kansas City.

Idaleene Scheu Fuqua's (1923-) father, Fred H. Scheu, (1895-1974) was the station agent for the Santa Fe at Sanger from 1916-1917 and again from 1930-1946. As a child, she remembers seeing the herds of cattle being driven down Sanger's narrow, dusty streets even into the 1930s. "A cloud of dust and the noise of the cowboys warned the residents of the approaching thundering herd. Mothers would rush to get freshly hung laundry off the clotheslines and get the children indoors where they could watch from the windows." The cattle were herded eastward on Bolivar Road (now known as FM 455), onto Hwy 77 for a short distance and then would be turned east toward the railroad station. ¹⁶ and ¹⁷

Mrs. Huling hired two surveyors, her son in law J. C. Bartlett and Elijah Biggerstaff, County Surveyor, to lay out a township around the railroad stop. Mrs. Huling donated land for a wagon yard and well, a school, town square, cemetery, and a Methodist Church. Deed for the church is dated March 15, 1894 and indicates Block 21 of the Town of Sanger. Other lots were laid out for stores and homes. Lots were given to anyone who would build a house costing \$500. ¹⁸ and ¹⁹

In the spring of 1887 Francis M. Ready, a confederate veteran who was born in 1836, his wife, Melissa J, and daughter Mary M., called Molly, set out with all of their belongings from Gribble Springs. ²⁰ Where they intended to go is unknown. They were caught in a snowstorm and sought refuge in the depot at Milepost 392.16. The Ready's decided to stay and built a one-room log cabin. Mrs. Ready cooked for the cowboys who drove their cattle to the pens for shipment. Mr. Ready later built a hotel just west of the cattle pens. All historical information located indicates the name of the hotel was referred to as The Ready Hotel. ²¹ Others were also drawn to the area including Sam Sullivan who opened a saloon and Tom Campbell who opened a blacksmith shop. ²²

Sanger was incorporated in 1892. William E. Partlow, a native of Virginia and soldier who surrendered at Appomattox with General Robert E. Lee, was elected the first Mayor of Sanger at the time it was incorporated. He came to Texas after the Civil War and married Nancy Jane Sullivan, daughter of Denton County pioneers, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Sullivan.^{23, 24, 25} . (Prior to 1912 the city became unincorporated, but election was held and was reincorporated again in 1912.)

Sanger was known as Huling, named after Elizabeth Huling, who had given land to the town, and then called New Bolivar, because of its close proximity to Bolivar, west of the town. In 1887, the Santa Fe Railroad officially named the town Sanger, in honor of the Sanger Brothers of Dallas, as Texas already had a town named Huling.^{26, 27}

On March 15, the Washington “Latest Postal Notes” (*Dallas Morning News*, March 16, 1887) announced that a post office had been established at New Bolivar, Denton County. The following month on April 11, 1887, in “Postal Notes” from Washington, an announcement was made that the post office name was changed from New Bolivar, Denton County, to Sanger.²⁸ Gus and Eli Sanger were prominent merchants who established a chain of stores in Southeast Texas. They began business in Houston and followed the railroad as it was expanded, using the railroads to deliver merchandise.²⁹

Francis M. Ready was commissioned Postmaster for New Bolivar, Denton County on March 15, 1887.³⁰ On April 11, 1887, the post office name was changed from New Bolivar to Sanger.³¹ Mr. Ready opened a post office in the lobby of his hotel, The Ready Hotel, on March 25, 1887.³²

In 1890, a fire destroyed much of Sanger including the depot.³³ The Railroad built a second siding on the east side of the tracks and a much larger depot with segregated waiting

rooms, a Western Union telegraph office and a Wells Fargo freight office. Between 1890 and World War I, Sanger experienced tremendous growth due in large part to the expanded railroad facilities. The depot operated 24 hours a day, six days a week to accommodate the new businesses in the area. These new businesses included the Wilson Lumber Yard, originally built by Charles George and later bought by Andy and John Wilson, and Sanger Mill and Elevator Company, founded in 1897 by A. D. Miller, promoter and miller, and two cotton gins.³⁴ and³⁵

The citizens of Sanger and the surrounding community held a mass meeting to take steps toward building a flouring mill. The Sanger Mill and Elevator Company had some 50 stockholders at the time it was organized in 1888.³⁶ Andrew Jackson (Squire) Nance was the first president of Sanger Mill and due to other business involvement, he hired John Thomas Chambers, a school teacher, to take over management of the mill and Mr. Chambers soon became a 51% owner of the operation. Mr. Chambers was a very astute businessman and built the business from 75 barrels of flour produced daily, to a daily 200-barrel production in addition to the cornmeal and mixed feeds processed. With the location of this mill and elevator operation, Sanger became a large farming community. The Sanger Mill was a self-contained industry in which it sold 80 percent of its flour, cornmeal and mixed feeds to the Texas wholesale grocery trade.³⁷ Silk Finish Flour was a major product of the Sanger Mill³⁸

The company paid dividends each year of operation and each employee received full monthly or weekly wages regardless of plant operations.³⁹

Mr. Chambers' son, W. B. (known as Willie Bush) Chambers eventually took over management of the mill operation and sold the business to Kimbell Milling of Forth Worth, Texas in 1941.⁴⁰

Cattle continued to be the main business driving the railroad and Sanger until two processing plants were built in North Fort Worth. By 1852 Forth Worth was shipping 350,000 head of cattle per year. The first railroad attracted others and by 1873 Fort Worth had become a major rail center.⁴¹ By 1886 four stockyards had been built near the railroads and businessmen chartered the Union Stock Yards on July 26, 1887, and opened in midsummer 1889. In 1902 Armour and Swift brought in two of the nation's largest meatpackers and constructed modern plants adjacent to the stockyards.⁴²

Local ranchers soon began trucking cattle to Fort Worth instead of shipping them to Kansas City. This development and the depression combined to reduce operations at the Sanger depot, but it remained open.

When the livestock markets closed in Kansas City and shifted to northern Fort Worth, this left a commercial shipping void for the Santa Fe Railroad. Dairy cream became a major source of revenue for the farmers. Most farmers had at least one cream can with their name and code number painted on the side. The dairy companies paid the round-trip rail charges in order to get the fresh cream shipped to them. The Santa Fe hauled the cream cans from Sanger to Fort Worth, and to Ardmore, Oklahoma. Cream checks were a financial stabilizer during the Great Depression.⁴³ and ⁴⁴

With the development of the railroad that connected Forth Worth and Oklahoma City came the development of numerous small Texas towns along its rails. From Fort Worth northward, Justin (named after Walter Justin Sherman), Ponder, Krum and Sanger formed a

line that “cut across the prairie and created the “wheat belt” of Denton County. By 1905, the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad brought access to markets to Sanger and to the other small towns and created a new industry.⁴⁵

In 1939 two VIP’s passed through Sanger on the railroad. On November 1, 1939 Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States, dedicated the Little Chapel in The Woods at Texas Women’s University. She arrived in Sanger after the dedication to board the Santa Fe. The Dallas Morning News had announced on their front page that Mrs. Roosevelt would be in Denton and would depart from Sanger on the Santa Fe. People had gathered at the railroad to see Mrs. Roosevelt. It was around midnight and the streets were dark; Sanger did not have street lights. Martha Graves, Sanger High School Home Economics teacher, was at the station with several of her students. Mrs. Roosevelt spoke to the teacher asking what the girls were studying. The teacher said they were learning about home canning and Mrs. Roosevelt responded that she had just canned 32 quarts of green beans from the garden at Hyde Park. She boarded the train, and Fred Scheu, the station master, climbed the semaphore pole, removed the lantern, blew out the flame and announced “Sanger, all clear”. Mrs. Roosevelt thanked Mr. Scheu for his assistance the following day in her daily newspaper column “My Day”.⁴⁶ and ⁴⁷

On November 17, 1939 famous Austrian-born American concert violinist, Fritz (Friedrich) Kreisler performed a concert at CIA (College of Industrial Arts, now TWU) in Denton and arrived in Sanger to board the midnight Santa Fe passenger train to Chicago. He mentioned to the station master, Fred Scheu, he had not eaten as he normally waited until after his concert, but the station master advised there would be no dinner service on the midnight train until they arrived in Oklahoma City. Mr. Scheu took Mr. Kreisler to his home

for a late-night snack of fresh-baked bread, home-churned butter and fresh whole milk. Mr. Kreisler later sent a signed photograph to the family for his appreciation of their hospitality.

⁴⁸, ⁴⁹, and ⁵⁰

The depot was a social gathering place for the small town. Many boys would take their girlfriends to the depot on Sunday afternoon to watch the passenger trains arrive and depart. Many pictures were taken of the girls by their boyfriends with the train and depot in the background.

There is an intangible element about the Santa Fe that lives in memory...a lonesome whistle blowing across a trestle on a cold winter night; counting boxcars to 100, waving to the engineer and fireman

Beginning in the early 1900s, each December Santa Fe train engineer, Joe Gerard of Cleburne, began wearing a long white beard and a red Santa Claus suit on his run from Cleburne to Purcell, Oklahoma. The Santa suit was made by his wife. On schedule No. 6 from Cleburne to Purcell, also known as “Ranger,” the engine would pull his “sleigh” and on the return trip, schedule No. 5, called “Antelope,” would pull the “sleigh” so both sides of the track would have a Santa. He would load his “sleigh” with candy, toys, shoes, coats and clothes; all items paid for from his own pocket. As the train rumbled through the small towns, he would toss the gifts to the children along the tracks. Mr. Gerard could not call the names of the waving hands, but he knew them and gladdened the hearts of these children as well as his own. The late Charles Mizell, Jr., of Denton wrote that Mr. Gerard, after retiring in 1943 at the age of 76, was always depressed at Christmas as he was no longer able to make his Santa Claus “run.” ⁵¹and ⁵²

World War II brought railroad traffic and commerce back to Sanger. The depot and town attracted a lot of business as young men left their jobs to serve their country. World War II

also brought another change; female railroad employees were hired. Francis Flitten Hollingsworth was one those young women. The hours were not especially desirable, making it necessary to work seven days a week, eight hours a day. The women, who were allowed to wear slacks while at work, took train orders to be given to the train crews, most of the time without stopping the train. The order was placed in a hoop that was held up by the operator for the train engineer to hold his arm through the hoop. This was done without stopping the train as it passed through the town. Lighted signal lanterns filled with kerosene were placed behind either a red or green glass insert at the top of the pole. They would raise or lower the signal arms on top of the pole from heavy levers located inside the station used to signal the oncoming locomotive to stop or take a switch track or an “all clear”.

Telegrams were received with the use of the Morse codes and the rail girls learned to use the machines. Some telegrams were sadly received as they told of the death of a soldier. As American soldiers returned from the war, the women willingly left the jobs they had held with pride, so that the men could resume their jobs as a reward for their service to the country. ⁵³ and ⁵⁴

Post World War II saw a rapid decline of the railroad nationwide. Sanger Mill and Elevator Company was sold to Kimbell Milling in 1941, the mill was closed, and the railroad lost its best customer in Sanger. Eventually rail passenger service ended as well. Fortunately by that time Sanger was a well-established and viable community. Interstate 35 replaced the railroad as the conduit to bring visitors and business to Sanger. Santa Fe notified the city of Sanger effective July 14, 1983 they were donating the rail station (depot) to the city and requested the station be relocated from the Santa Fe land. Although it is not confirmed, it is

believed the station was moved in 1985. It was temporarily located behind the Wilson Lumber yard to be later moved to a site in Tioga, Texas on August 11, 1999.⁵⁵ and⁵⁶

Today, the railroad is making a resurgence. Passenger rail service is available in Gainesville and the Heartland Flyer passes through Sanger twice a day on its run from Fort Worth to Oklahoma City along the same path laid down in 1887. Several trains daily pass through town, shipping goods all over the country. Meanwhile Sanger continues to grow and prosper thanks to a helping hand at the start from the railroad.

III. Significance

Sanger, a railroad town, came into existence in 1886 at milepost 392.16 on the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad for the water available for the steam engines and the close proximity to the Chisholm Trail and the cattle ranches. This railroad played a significant role in the early development of North Texas as well as the prosperity of Sanger. Its early history is rich in memories where cattle and cowboys romanticized the West and where the railroad became the central focus of the town, not only for the town's commerce but as a part of the social and daily life of the people who lived there.

Today Sanger, located on I-35, north of Denton and Dallas, has become part of the northward movement of the "ribbon of growth" along I-35 in Texas that runs from the southern border of Texas, starting at the Mexico border, passing through Sanger, and ending at the Oklahoma state line. This growth is bringing a different kind of change to this small town.

Fortunately, the history of Sanger and the surrounding area has been preserved by town historians down through the years. As early as 1936, the John Simpson Chisum Homesite in

the Bolivar area was recognized with a Texas State Centennial Marker. The Sanger Presbyterian Church received a RTHL marker in 1972. In 1976, THC markers honored William E. Partlow, First Mayor of Sanger and Jacob Fredrick Elsasser. A THC Sesquicentennial Marker was erected at the Noah C. Batis home in 1986. Just recently in 2009, a marker was placed at the Galilee Missionary Baptist Church honoring the 100 years of service of this African American congregation.

These markers have preserved the history of Sanger and its leaders. However, none tell the story of the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway Company and the development of Sanger. Indication of the importance of Sanger to the railroad was shown as it was the hub for passenger service in the area as identified by Mrs. Roosevelt and Mr. Kreisler boarding the train for their journeys after appearances in Denton. The GC&SF did not run through Denton. The citizens of Sanger were important to the livelihood of the growth of the town, and the railroad was paramount in its growth. An example of the town's leadership was the "citizens of Sanger holding a mass meeting to develop plans for a flouring mill operation" which became an important industry to not only the Sanger area, but to the state of Texas, and the railway was instrumental in the growth of this industry for the town.

Sanger's early settlers and their families continued in the success of building this community, and many descendents of the early settlers are still prominent in the city today. It is vital that the histories belonging to this community be recognized and documented while there remain descendents of these early settlers that have ties with the past and who remember the historical significances of the history of the railroad and its importance to the formation of Sanger.

“Sanger, Where the Rail Met the Trail,” is a story about cattle, commerce, the railroad, and the people of Sanger and the community who experienced and affected change as the times changed. It is worthy of a historical marker that can be shared with all Denton County and Sanger residents.

IV Documentation

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¹⁹ “A New Town”, Dallas Morning News Historical Archives, *Dallas Morning News*, June 7, 1887.

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²³ Alma Chambers, “*Sanger – History of Sanger and Bolivar from Which It Originated*”, Historical Section, Sanger Public Library, Sanger, Texas. p.88

²⁴ Texas Historical Commission Historical Marker, #1738, 1976.

²⁵ City of Sanger Map indicating 1892 as City incorporation date, provided by City Manager, Mike Brice, Sanger, Texas

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- ²⁸ “Latest Postal Notes”, *Dallas Morning News*, April 12, 1887.
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