



Vicky Rose
ms_vcky@yahoo.com



Appearing in The Texas Folklore Society 2009 100th Anniversary Edition

McDade and Me

The first time I attended a meeting of the Texas Folklore Society, it brought back vivid memories of my hometown. As I sat listening to others talk about different folklore from around the state, I remembered the coolness of Aunt Stell's grape arbor, the sound of gravel crunching under my feet as my sisters and I walked along neglected railroad tracks, and I smelled once again the musty odor of a general store time forgot.

McDade, while I was growing up there, had a population of about 350 people. Situated in Central Texas, 33 miles east of Austin, outsiders deemed McDade on the far side of the moon from modern civilization. Most of the people who lived there could be described as either "Dutchmen," meaning those of German extraction, or "Americans," which meant a mongrel race who could be made up of anything, but was mostly Scotch-Irish. Because of their hard work and determination, the Germans were usually wealthier than their American neighbors, owning their own land, building solid houses and having tidier farms. However, because they were isolated and clannish, they had tended to inbreed, and it caused much more physical and mental defects among them than the healthier Americans. Although many German Americans fought with valor in both World Wars, there were a few holdouts who still pledged alliance to the fatherland, and this caused friction. Family legend has it that my grandfather, after hearing one man brag about what "the Kaiser's boys" would do to the Americans soldiers, went into the general store and

bought an axe handle that he proceeded to take outside and use upon the heretic. By the time I came along, World War II was long gone; the younger generation of “Dutchmen” became sensitive to the problems of marrying family members, and “Americans,” like my father, worked hard to escape the poverty of the sharecropper. While relationships in and around the community improved, the rest of the world still looked at us eschew.

Neighbors farming on rich black gumbo 15 miles up the road laughed at the deep, infertile sand around McDade. The McDade School only went to eight grades, and we had to ride the bus to nearby Elgin to go to high school. Phone calls between the two towns meant long distance rates, putting a deterrent on making friends. McDade had been too small for a band program, so we could not participate in that activity in high school, but because our boys had a reputation as rough hillbillies, the coaches loved them for sports. In McDade, two families of Mexicans lived, and later, two young black students joined our little school when they came to live with their grandparents, the only Negroes in McDade. Although we had our prejudices, we got along fairly well, and all of us were dismayed when we began a high school where racial tensions ran high. While most people were kind, we were always aware that we were the outsiders, ultrasensitive at being thought of as poor trash, or as inbred.

The thing that saved our dignity was the folklore that surrounded us. Once known as Tie Town because of the railroad ties cut from local lumber, McDade had been a thriving city with saloons, blacksmith stables, and a millinery shop among other businesses. Indians had stopped for generations at nearby Paint Creek to obtain red dirt they used for body painting, camping by the water and burying their dead on a rising hill flanking the creek. For years, men searched for gold supposedly buried by Spaniards just before being attacked by Indians near that creek. Close to McDade, another stream, the Yegua, ran on heavily wooded land from small hills known as

“the Knobs.” Sam Houston, along with his family, would visit sympathetic friends in the Knobs, often staying days at a time. After the Civil War, the Knobs became a hideout for bad men. Gangs like the Notch Cutters robbed and plundered. A deputy sheriff was sent in to investigate, but he was killed and no more dared to come. Men went everywhere armed. As good men continued to be murdered and robbed, a few of them began to take justice into their own hands. After a series of rustlings, hangings, retaliations, and more killings, violence peaked at what became known as the “Christmas Hangings.” On Christmas Eve in 1883, men belonging to The League for Law and Order apprehended one outlaw on the streets of McDade, swept through the old rock saloon and gathered two more. They took them dragging and kicking to a nearby tree and hanged them. Such vigilante justice, although perhaps necessary at the time, caused the other citizens of Bastrop County to further look with distain at wild and wooly McDade. An ancient gnarled post oak stands across the street from the old rock saloon, and in McDade, it became affectionately known as the hanging tree, although old timers insisted that the actual hangings took place a mile out of town on a hickory tree.

We were poor; we were backward, but we knew we were special. We had tales of Indians and Spaniards with fabled gold. We had stories of Sam Houston stomping around our hills, visiting with our people. We had fierce outlaws and gangs of men so bad, they ran off real lawmen and could only be dealt with by the iron-willed men who lived within our community. When old men laugh and tell me my uncles were so rowdy that they had “blood on their hats” from all the fights they got into, I shake my head and grin. The folklore of my town and the folklore of my family have provided me with a rock to cling to when the opinions and abuses of the rest of the world sometimes threatens to overwhelm me.

In the early days, no one came to McDade, or to Texas, because they wanted to. There are better places to live—lands with higher fertility and more moderate climates. They came because trouble and poverty drove them to it. The folklore they surrounded themselves with made what had been forced upon them by circumstances not only bearable, it gave them pride and self-respect.

The Texas Folklore Society continues to do this, providing a rock to stand upon when tribulations try to pull us down. By promoting and preserving a unique part of our heritage, The Texas Folklore Society defines and uplifts all Texans of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Being a part of it is like coming home.
