

Langtry, TX and Judge Roy Bean

The town of Langtry is steeped in the exciting history of the Old West, and includes one of the most colorful characters in all of West Texas lore, Judge Roy Bean.

Seen off in the distance from the train, Langtry owes its humble beginnings to the Torres family, who established the town and gave land to the railroad company for a right-of-way and construction of a depot. Originally a construction camp known as Eagles Nest, it was soon renamed Langtry after railroad boss George Langtry.

Like many small West Texas communities in the 1800's, Langtry had its share of rowdy inhabitants. Gun fighting, heavy drinking, and gambling were common activities in the area, and such lawlessness was a matter of serious concern, as the nearest courtroom was nearly a week away on horseback. There had to be some type of system for law and order, and one man would soon assume that role.

Judge Roy Bean is possibly the most famous subject attributed to Langtry. While his exact birth date is unknown, at the age of 15 he left his Kentucky home for the opportunities and adventure of the new western frontier. He first made his trade in some dishonest practices, and then around the time he turned 40, he set up a temporary saloon near a railroad camp called Vinegaroon. Many locals noticed his way with words and his daring personality, and he was soon appointed Justice of the Peace by the Pecos County Commissioners.

Nicknamed the "Law West of the Pecos", Bean's "courtroom" also doubled as a saloon. He would soon name it the "Jersey Lilly" in honor of British actress Lillie Langtry for whom he had a deep affection. He often wrote her and sent numerous requests for her to visit Langtry, even proclaiming that he had named the town after her. This is just one example of the

eccentricities that the Judge would display; justice was often swift and sentences peculiar with Bean. Cursing was not allowed in his courtroom, and fines were often the amount he owed for his bar tab. One tale claims that Bean charged a dead man who had forty dollars and a revolver on his person, the same forty dollars for carrying a concealed weapon! Imagine how it might feel if you were a cowboy in the Old West charged with a crime and had to face Judge Bean. The raucous spectacle that was his "courtroom" and the punishments he doled out would surely confuse you!

The stories about Bean only grew larger, such that he became the subject of movies and songs. While he may have been a bit of an eccentric, Bean was nevertheless a vital part of the law and order of West Texas. The town's population has dwindled since Bean's day, but the myths and legends of Langtry still live on in those who relish that great era in American history, the Old West.

Source(s):

Watson, Bruce. June 1998. „Hang „em first, try „em later.“ *Smithsonian*, 29(3).

Author(s):

Written by Joel Novosad, Undergraduate Student in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2009.