



Tolbert's Texas

Belle Starr street finally spelled right

By FRANK X. TOLBERT

DALLAS ISN'T on poor Tolbert's beat. I've got the rest of the state. However, I feel the urge to mention that the 1-block street in Pleasant Grove named in honor of Belle Starr (1848-1889), "The Queen of the Outlaws," no longer has those misspelled signs calling it Bell Star street.

Mrs. Tommie Patterson, who lives at 2939 Belle Starr, said: "We've finally got the city to take down the Bell Star signs and put up the correctly spelled ones."

Mrs. Patterson said that her house is on the site of Belle Starr's girlhood home. This was once in a settlement east of Dallas called Scyene. And the future Queen of the Outlaws lived there on a farm with her parents, Judge and Mrs. John Shirley.

BELLE STARR could be called an early day exponent of women's rights. Or at least the right of a girl handy with six-shooters to be the boss of a hard-riding gang of Indian and pale-face outlaws.

She was the girlfriend of a number of horse thieves and bank robbers, including Cole Younger.

And there is or was a statue of Belle in Ponca City, Okla.

BELLE STARR street is a dead end off the 9500 block of Scyene road. Mrs. Patterson said the the Belle Starr Baptist church operated in the neighborhood briefly in an old schoolhouse. The congregation moved away this year. Mrs. Patterson doesn't know the new location or whether the church is still named for the girl outlaw.

MRS. MARIE HUGHES is collecting material to put up a historical marker on Belle Starr street. The street is still misspelled in the Dallas phone book and in the 1976 edition of Cole's directory of Greater Dallas. An old barn which stood until fairly recent times was one of Belle's haunts — where she kept her "hot" horses.

Speaking of haunts, Fairfax Nisbet of the Dallas News once repeated the tale of oldtimers that the ghost of Belle Starr on a spook horse was seen long ago on moonlight nights by supposedly sober citizens near a cave off the Kaufman highway, another hideout for the outlaws.

Fairfax Nisbet told this ghost story when she was reviewing a movie on Belle Starr's life, or rather a sanitized account of her career.

The cave or dugout was on land once owned by Mrs. Hughes' father, A. H. Downey.

MRS. HUGHES said that some writers have portrayed Belle as mannish. "Actually she came from a good family and she had the manners and dress of lady, if not the deportment."

For one thing, Belle always rode side-saddle which must have been a hell of handicap when you were trying to out-gallop a sheriff's posse. And she always had lace fixings on her riding habits.

An ancient named Cyclone Denton, who claimed to have been an outlaw in his salad days, told me about approaching Belle at a dance in Indian Territory.

"This was at a street dance," said Cyclone Denton. "I was scared of Belle. Lots of men were. But I went up to her and asked if she'd like to dance."

Belle's answer: "Hell, yes."

FOR ALL her devilment Belle spent only one year in jail. She had a number of consorts, including an Indian named Sam Starr.

It is said that this strong-willed woman turned her husbands or boy friends into mere errand boys.

In her last years her headquarters were on what was called Younger's bend of the Canadian river in the eastern Oklahoma hills. There she was the "queen" of a committee of thieves and ruffians.

She was ambushed and slain near Younger's bend on Feb. 3, 1889.

BELLE SEEMS to have been an imaginative type. One of the Dalton boys claimed that his friend, Belle Starr, named the Dallas suburb of Pleasant Mound.

I don't know if she had asked for the sentiment which is on her gravestone. It reads:

"Shed not for me the bitter tear,
Nor give the heart to vain regret.
'Tis but the casket that lies here.
The gem that filled it sparkles yet."