

Murder in Muskogee

Alexander Ridley Dean (1877–1953)



In 1953, five months before I was born, a man to whom I was distantly related died in an insane asylum in Wichita Falls,

Texas. Forty years earlier, he shot a grocer to death in Muskogee, Oklahoma and stood trial for his murder. He was a respectable young lawyer then, married to the stylish daughter of an important Panhandle cattleman. His name was Alexander Ridley Dean.

Ridley's story wasn't one I knew growing up. My mother never met the grandmother whose Dean ancestry reached back to Ridley; all she knew was that Granny Dean had run off with a man, leaving her young sons behind with their no-count father. That tantalizing tale gave birth to my fascination with the Deans who, more than other Tennessee kinfolk I've come to know, insistently reveal a restlessness that, in Ridley's case, fully expressed itself as recklessness...and perhaps even madness.

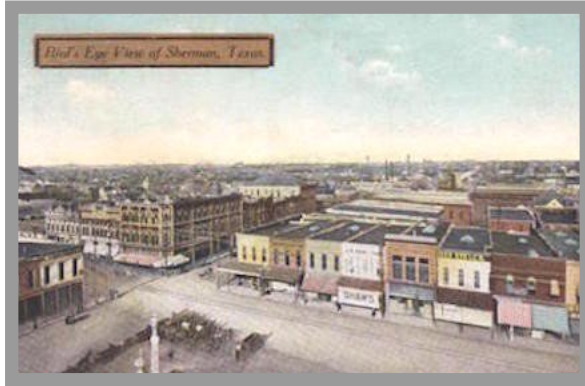
BEFORE

Ridley was born in Texas, thanks to his adventurous great-grandfather, Willis Dean, who left Tennessee in 1835 to stake a claim in the Republic of Texas. In 1852, Willis' son Thomas Dean followed his father's lead, planting his family within yards of a school and Baptist church in tiny Kentucky Town, Texas. His son, William Ridley Dean, served the Confederacy four years, attended law school and married a Tennessee girl before returning to his north Texas roots. He died at 39, leaving fatherless his only child, Alexander Ridley Dean, age 8.

Called Ridley like his father, the boy enjoyed the lifelong devotion of his musically gifted mother, Mary Hammack Dean, a widow at 34. She played piano, guitar, violin and mandolin and supported her son by offering music lessons in their home. Mary never remarried. Living alone with his mother, Ridley may have enjoyed the company of his uncles — among them were the county's tax assessor-collector, a railroad engineer, and a grocer — and more than a dozen cousins who resided in a small network of communities south of the Red River.

Mother and son remained in Sherman, the burgeoning mercantile center 65 miles north of Dallas that was nearly leveled in May 1896 when an historic cyclone (then the preferred term) struck the western side of town. At least 66

people died, 150 were injured, and a steel suspension bridge destroyed. In the unrestrained newspaper style of the time, on-scene reporters described finding mangled bodies of women and children, including a six-year-old girl found in a creek bed 100 yards from home, the top of her skull knocked off and her brains carried away by the water. "It was an awful sight," the reporter wrote.



Sherman, early 1900's

Mary Dean likely wrote to her son about the storm; then 19, Ridley was in Lebanon, Tennessee, studying law at his father's alma mater, Cumberland University. There, he distinguished himself by joining the Philomathean (literary) Society, the Texas Club (for displaced Texans), and Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity. Despite his social tendencies, he also "practiced" law by participating in the Caruthers Moot Court as an attorney his junior year.

By 1900, Ridley had returned to Sherman, and he almost immediately made news. While Mr. and Mrs. S.B. Cox were out riding in the family carriage near the Cotton Belt depot, an incoming train frightened their horses. Ridley witnessed the uncontrollable animals backing up the vehicle and went to the rescue, assisting Mrs. Cox from the carriage without injury, according to *The Sherman Democrat*.

He opened a law office on Travis Street, first offering legal advice and notary services. By 1904, he had been elected city

attorney. During his three-year term, he “made a splendid record,” according to one news account. On April 5, 1905, Ridley likely stepped away from his desk to join the largest audience (35,000) ever to gather in Grayson County to hear President Theodore Roosevelt speak on the courthouse square; it was the first time a chief executive had visited Sherman, Texas.



Roosevelt in Sherman

A single man from a respectable family, especially one with good prospects, “must be in want of a wife.” At 30, Ridley filled Jane Austen’s prescription by marrying Mae Orlena Harrell, 19, the oldest child of D. A. “Big Bub” Harrell and his wife, Carrie.



Mae Orlena

These West Texas aristocrats divided their time between their home near Sherman and their 25,600-acre ranch in the Panhandle, where Harrell ran several thousand head of cattle, grew more grain than anyone else, and reportedly ruled civic and ranch affairs “with a big auger.” His 1940 obituary in *The Amarillo Daily News* noted a softer side: “Many widows and orphaned children in Amarillo have felt the helping hand of this man who did good not for publicity but for the merit he found in the act itself.”



Harrell family in 1913. Mae, standing left



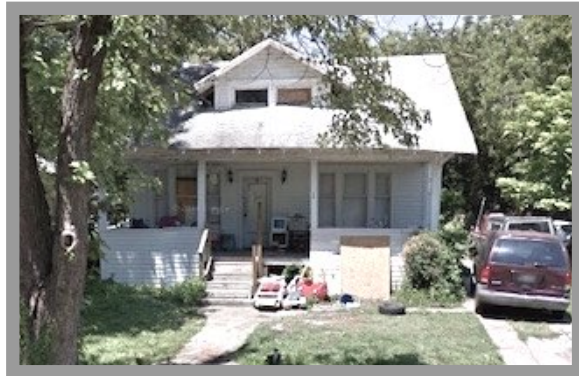
Big Bub

A young woman with such a father likely expected her husband to measure up, and apparently Ridley made a good impression. Grey-eyed and brown-haired, he was of medium height with a stout build. On the day of his arrest in 1913, a news reporter described him as a “quiet, unassuming man”...“calm and composed.” Reporters who later covered his murder trial said he had “stood well” in Sherman and was successful in his chosen profession. And after the verdict, a newspaper editor called him a “handsome, intelligent looking” man who “does not have the appearance of a bad person.”



Ridley, Mae and baby Lona

Within a year of their marriage, Ridley and Mae welcomed baby Lona to their home on Walnut Street in Sherman; Bill came along in 1910. By the time their third child, Lorayne, was born in 1912, the couple had moved 200 miles northeast to Muskogee, a town then twice the size of Sherman with a population of more than 25,000. Ridley delayed starting his law practice in Muskogee, waiting for approval of his Oklahoma license application. To stay busy, he oversaw the construction of his family's new home at 809 S. 21st Street.



809 E. 21st St. in 2018

The Deans' choice of real estate proved fateful. Three blocks north, at 1101 S. 21st Street, stood the grocery store owned and operated by Claude D. Smith, the man Ridley shot to death early on the morning of July 17, 1913.

THE CRIME

Ridley's victim had created a prosperous business for himself, for years selling groceries and notions on the west side of Muskogee, near the oil fields. His personal life, however, had taken some odd turns. When Claude Smith first moved to town, he married a widow, who died. He subsequently married her daughter, and they had a child together. After the couple's divorce, baby Orphia remained with her father. Smith called

himself a widower, but his ex-wife remained in Muskogee, remarried to a taxi driver. Whether she had contact with Orphia is unclear, but soon after Smith's death, she applied to be named the child's guardian.

That Smith was a devoted father is clear. Customers of his store said he refused to turn her care over to a woman. He bathed, fed, and made her clothes himself. He took her into the store when she was three, and by age four, she was his little partner. Smith drew a chalk mark on the floor and told her that anything she sold on her side of that mark was hers to keep. She learned to make change and keep a crude set of books, managing to save several hundred dollars. Smith gave Orphia all sorts of pet names and showed great pride in her intelligence, the *Muskogee Times-Democrat* reported. "He worshipped the child."

Ridley did the Muskogee newspaper a great favor by shooting Smith at 6:45 a.m. It gave the staff plenty of time to publish a same-day, banner-headlined story that included a front-page sidebar about the grocer's precocious six-year-old. These stories were retold in dozens of newspapers around the country in subsequent days. The grocer's protracted demise also benefited law enforcement. Despite four bullet wounds, he lingered almost six hours and spent some of that time telling his side of the story.

"Your time has come. You are a dead man," Ridley was alleged to have shouted as he burst into Smith's store that July morning, firing a 32-caliber automatic revolver, hitting the grocer once in the shoulder and three times in the abdomen. Ridley then walked outside and told the first person he encountered, "Call a doctor. I have shot Smith." The man's response: "Call a doctor yourself. You did the shooting." Ridley reportedly asked a second man, who also refused to get involved.

Having heard what she thought was a toy pistol, Orphia raced from her bed and witnessed Ridley leaving the store. "I saw a revolver in his hand," the girl said. "And you bet he run when he saw me." She also heard her father shout, "I'll get my shotgun after you," which she said caused her to laugh because he had no such gun. Her father then fell down — "and my, his

pants were so dirty” — and after he made his way to bed, he asked her to remove his shoes. “They were so big that I could hardly do it.” At that point, she called a doctor, because his was a telephone number she knew.

“Did Mr. Dean shoot your papa?” the county attorney asked the child later that day. She replied, “He sure did shoot him, all right.”

As a news source, Ridley was no match for the garrulous Smiths. Having left the scene, the young lawyer returned home and, when police arrived to arrest him, they found him “preparing to come to town to surrender.” He refused to make a statement and, before being jailed, contacted three attorneys, one of whom said his client’s actions were justifiable, that Ridley would plead self defense.

Smith offered his explanation of Ridley’s actions from his hospital bed; he told investigators that the two had become friends and that he warned the young lawyer that his intimate involvement with a local nurse would get him in trouble.

“Dean told me that if I said anything about it, it would ruin his family,” the dying man said. “He told me if I said anything to anyone he would kill me. I told two men. I do not remember who they were.”



Headline mistakenly refers to “R.A.” instead of “A.R.”

Twenty-four hours after the shooting, Smith was dead, and Ridley was locked in the county jail. The July 18 *Times-Democrat* headline screamed, “BUTCHER KNIFE IS AN ISSUE.” Ridley’s defense attorney claimed Smith attacked the young lawyer with a knife, and he had to defend himself. Police found the knife in the rear of the store. The incident occurred

before little Orphia woke, making the defendant the only living witness.

The second-day story shed light on Smith's reference to "the other woman," the nurse with whom Ridley allegedly was intimate. Miss Nola Peterson, "a very pretty blonde of Swedish descent," called on Mae Dean at home the day after the shooting to tell her Smith's allegations were untrue. According to the *Times-Democrat* story, "She also declared that she was to be married in a few weeks, and her sweetheart was the only man she ever loved." A few days later, Miss Peterson and her sister, also a nurse, packed their bags and left town, though they did not resign their positions at the hospital. "NURSE IN THE DEAN CASE HAS SKIPPED," that day's headline read.

Ridley remained silent.

THE TRIAL

Two months after the shooting, the trial began with jury selection in a courtroom crowded with eager spectators. Thirty prospective jurors were dismissed, requiring the judge to take the unusual step of calling an additional 25 citizens to the courthouse. The dozen men seated in the jury box included five farmers, a contractor, a plumber, a government clerk, a carpenter, a traveling salesman, a cotton buyer, and a "capitalist."

On Friday, Sept. 19, the lawyers made their opening statements. As promised, Ridley's lawyer argued self defense, with the following embellishment: Smith had made improper advances to Mrs. Dean, and Ridley had called him to task for it. He also had threatened to break up the Dean home. When Ridley shot Smith he was "not only defending his own life, but he was protecting the honor of his wife and the sanctity of his home."

The defense attorney said Dean approached the grocer on the morning of July 17 "to adjust the differences" between them and, when Smith became "quarrelsome" and pulled out a butcher knife, Ridley fired his revolver once. Smith then moved toward the rear of his store, threatening to get his shotgun, and Ridley fired again. He ran from the store to shield himself

behind a telephone pole and asked several “negroes” to call a doctor for Smith. As for why he brought a revolver with him, the defense argued that his client feared violence from the 6-foot-3, 225-pound Smith.

The prosecution offered a contradictory description of Ridley’s demeanor that morning. Smith had made remarks about having possession of a blood-stained shirt belonging to Dean and that, upon entering the store, Ridley had shouted, “You’re a dead man” before adding, “You told someone about having a bloody shirt of mine. You’re a dead man.”

In the next day’s proceedings, on Saturday, Sept. 20, Ridley’s defense focused on discrediting the victim: the attorney introduced 20 witnesses to besmirch Smith’s reputation, characterizing him as a “bad” citizen of Muskogee. Many of them testified that he was a liar.

The prosecutor enjoyed a bigger day in court. He returned to the blood-stained shirt, arguing that Dean had worn it during a “meeting” in the rear of Smith’s store with “the other woman,” Nola Peterson, and that he came to Smith “seeking the shirt to cover up illicit relations and prevent these facts from being known.” (Presumably, the shirt was stained during lovemaking, though the newspaper accounts never make that explicit).

The “someone” Smith told about the shirt was Nola Peterson. Discovered in Arkansas and kept under guard by detectives until her arrival in the courtroom, the nurse’s appearance created a buzz. She testified that she had indeed “met” Ridley at Smith’s store. She further testified that Smith told her he had “proof against Dean,” a threat she relayed to Ridley, who vowed to confront Smith. Most importantly, Peterson clarified the nature of her “meeting” with Dean, admitting she had illicit relations with the defendant, with whom she said she was in love. When asked if Dean was in love with her, Ridley’s attorney objected so strenuously that the objection was sustained.

Ridley testified briefly. The prosecutor insisted that Smith’s “proof against Dean” was the blood-stained shirt and that Ridley had killed him when he wouldn’t relinquish it. He then produced the shirt in court and asked the defendant, “Is this

your shirt?” Ridley looked it over carefully and responded, “No.”

The prosecutor then turned to witness Henry Kimball, who had been painting his back porch when, hearing shots fired from the grocery, stepped around to his front yard, shooed some chickens, then walked toward the store. He said he saw Dean inside and, when Kimball entered, he witnessed the defendant drop a butcher knife to the floor and kick it under a table.

Dean asked him, “Do you see that knife?” Kimball responded, “No, I don’t see anything and I don’t want to have anything to do with the case.”

Ridley asked him to call a physician, to which he replied, “Call one yourself.” He said Dean then walked outside and, while standing behind a telephone pole, examined his revolver. Despite some prompting on the prosecutor’s part, Kimball refused to say Ridley had run from the store.

On Monday, Sept. 22, the attorneys delivered their closing arguments. The prosecutor hammered away at the self-defense plea, insisting it “wasn’t compatible” with Kimball’s testimony that he saw Dean plant the butcher knife on the floor, something he did to support his allegation that Smith had threatened him.

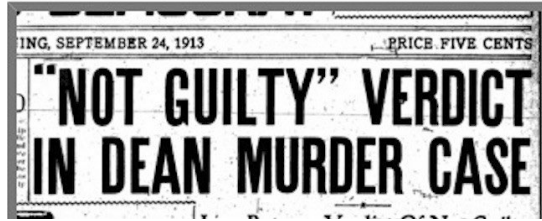
The defense kept up its attack on Smith’s character, painting him as a man determined to slander Dean with “salacious” stories in order to wreck his home and his reputation. He used Nola Peterson, a woman desperate to win Dean’s love, as a tool to help him “get Dean,” convincing her that, once Ridley was ruined, she would be there to pick up the pieces. And, it was suggested, he may have had fantasies of winning the heartbroken Mrs. Dean.

The *Times-Democrat* noted the attorneys’ “masterly efforts” in a “brilliant legal battle.”

THE VERDICT

It wasn’t a slam dunk: the jury deliberated for 38 hours. At hour 24, the jurors were evenly divided between guilty and not

guilty. But at 9:15 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 24, the verdict was returned.



Muskogee Times-Democrat front page

Ridley was said to have cried like a child, rushing the jury box to shake hands and thank each juror personally. Many of the jurors wiped away their own tears. Smith apparently had a single sympathizer in the jury box; one man refused to shake Dean's hand, the *Times-Democrat* reported.

Inaccuracies of testimony relative to what transpired in Smith's store, including contradictory statements in Smith's deathbed statement, are what tipped the scale toward acquittal, according to the newspaper account. In addition, the victim's reputation as a "dangerous, quarrelsome, untruthful man" contrasted with the law-abiding, truth-telling defendant's. In the end, the jurors determined that Ridley's explanation of the crime was more satisfactory.

The Dallas Morning News reported that news of the verdict in Sherman caused rejoicing among Ridley's friends.

It's hard to imagine anyone happier with the verdict than Ridley's mother, Mary Hammack Dean (r.), whose gift for public relations emerged during the trial. Early on, she recognized the prosecuting attorney as the young man working his way through college who, six years earlier, had come to her door in Sherman trying to sell her an encyclopedia. That anecdote appeared in the Muskogee paper. Later, that same man concluded his effort to send Ridley to the gallows with the words of Kipling's sentimental poem *Mother o' Mine* [If I were



damned of body and soul/I know whose prayers would make me whole/Mother o' mine...]. Ridley's "aged, white-haired mother" then rose as if to offer the jury a defense of her son, reported *The Houston Post*. The day after the acquittal, Mary called on the editor of *The Fort Gibson New Era* to thank him for some kindness bestowed two years earlier. The editor reported their meeting, calling her a "finely educated woman of excellent qualities and high social position, widely known... with hosts of friends."

In contrast, Ridley's wife of six years, the mother of his three children, maintained a low public profile. On the day of the murder, she accompanied her husband to the sheriff's office and, while he held baby Lorayne, Mae received instructions about Ridley's bond and contacting family in Sherman. The Muskogee paper noted her presence on one other occasion. When called to the witness stand soon after Nola Peterson's testimony, Mae took the oath and her seat, but she was released without being questioned.

AFTER

Having enjoyed what appeared to be an exemplary life until the morning of July 17, 1913, Ridley found his troubles mounting after the acquittal. While he was awaiting trial, his paternal uncles in Texas filed a civil suit against him. In 1912, Ridley had taken possession of land they owned in Titus County (land their grandfather Willis Dean had claimed in 1838), and they wanted it back. A few days after the trial, a Muskogee lumber company filed suit seeking to obtain a lien on property owned by Ridley over a bill he owed. Years later, the Muskogee newspaper showed Ridley delinquent in his taxes dating from 1914 to 1924, suggesting the trial cost him professionally.

The personal cost may have been greater. Found not guilty in the murder of Claude Smith, Ridley's guilt was certain on two counts — dallying with a blond nurse and subjecting his wife to unwelcome public scrutiny. Despite that, the Deans remained together in Muskogee until 1917, living in the house they built a few blocks from Smith's grocery, Ridley employed

as an attorney. In 1918, the couple returned to Sherman with their children, ages 10, 8 and 6. Ridley registered for World War I, as required, and on the form, he named Mae O. Dean as his nearest relative, their home at 219 Chapman Street, his mother's address.

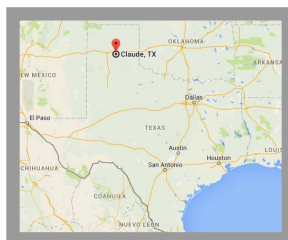
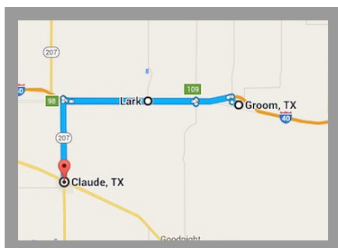
The split probably occurred in 1919, when Mae, then 30, moved into a large house owned by her cattleman father in Claude, 310 miles west of Sherman. There, she and the children resided with five boarders, four of them women in their 20's working as public schoolteachers, one with a child. They lived there free, in exchange for household help. In the 1920 census, Mae is identified as married, and in more than 40 years of subsequent mentions in the Society Clubs column of the *Claude News*, she is always "Mrs. Mae Dean." But sometime before the 1930 census was compiled, she and Ridley divorced.



Mae's likely residence in 1920

It may have happened in the summer of 1922, when Ridley made an ill-advised trip to the Texas Panhandle. At 9 a.m. July 27, Ridley was in the home of his father-in-law, D.A. Harrell, when the "well-to-do ranchman" shot him in his right calf muscle. Harrell immediately posted bond. Ridley returned to Sherman and, on July 30, the *Sherman Daily Democrat* reported his condition at Sherman Hospital was not "so good, infection having set in." The reporter acknowledged that the Deans were living apart, but the paragraph devoted to Ridley's background, in which he's described as "one of the best

known young men of the city,” includes no mention of the Muskogee murder trial.



In 1926, the Sherman city directory shows Ridley, 49, still living with his mother. Mae was in Claude, where she operated her boarding house for schoolteachers and tended her children, then 18, 16, and 14 years old. Her parents' home was in Lark, a community 13 miles northeast of Claude. In 1930, her children past school age, Mae gave up her boarding house and moved to Groom, eight miles east of Lark. Likely, these tiny West Texas communities marked the northern edge of D.A. Harrell's holdings.

In the 32 years she spent in Groom, Mae visited family and friends, hosted a niece's wedding, shopped in Amarillo and enjoyed countless "luncheons" with her Sunday school class, during which the ladies said their devotionals and hemmed tea towels. In 1962, she died of lymphatic leukemia;

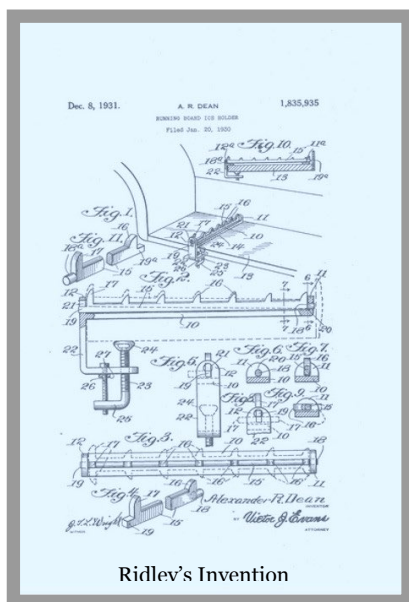


she was 73 and was buried in the Claude Cemetery. Her obituary ran on the front page of the *Claude News*. She was survived by her three children, seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Ridley also made a move in 1930, to Tulsa, Oklahoma. He lived in a boarding house with an oil company draftsman, a concession manager, and a retail clothing clerk married to a

bakery clerk. In January, he filed for a patent for a “running board ice holder.” Although he invented the removable carrier specifically to hold blocks of ice on the exterior of an automobile, it also could function as an excess baggage carrier, or a boot scrape to keep the car interior clean. He was granted the patent in December 1931.

Apparently, that wasn’t Ridley’s sole invention; in the will he signed in September, 1930, he leaves any proceeds that



might result from his inventions to his mother. He further alludes to his “literary productions, novels, short stories, and poems,” whose royalties he also assigned to Mary Dean. Ridley’s literary aspirations may have resulted from his friendship with H.L. Piner, a witness to his will. A Vanderbilt graduate about Ridley’s age, Piner was among the Sherman area’s best-known teachers and writers. He launched Grayson College in Whitewright in 1885, a private coed institution that

remained open 25 years. He also wrote poetry, articles, and at least one book, the inspirational *Builders of the Beautiful* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1903). In it, he argues that “your visible appearance is but an outward actualization of your inner life,” giving hope to the plain everywhere.

By 1935, Ridley was back home on Carter Street with his mother, in Sherman. The 1940 census shows Mary Dean as “head of household” in their two-person home and, two years later, when Ridley completed the required registration for

World War II, he named his mother as his nearest relative. He was 64 years old.

Ridley's address remained his mother's Sherman home, as it so often had throughout his life, until Oct. 27, 1944. That's when he was hospitalized in what was originally called the Northwest Texas Insane Asylum in Wichita Falls. Less than three months later, Mary Dean died at 93 of pneumonia, complicated by senility. The proximity of her death and Ridley's move into an institution for the mentally ill raises the question of how they managed those last years together on Carter Street.



Undated photo of Wichita Falls State Hospital

By the time Ridley arrived at the last home he would know, the asylum had been open 22 years and had undergone a name change. Wichita Falls State Hospital housed 1,072 men and 1,280 women in Ridley's first year there. According to the Texas State Historical Association website, the grounds included a chicken ranch, hog ranch, ice plant, dairy, laundry, mattress factory, power plant, and florist building. A chapel was the center of patients' recreational and religious activities; an occupational therapy building provided an opportunity for meaningful activity.

Before the Texas state legislature recognized a need to provide for its "insane" citizens, care of the mentally ill fell to family or law enforcement; many freely wandered the streets until their actions got them locked up. Lawmakers passed a bill in 1856 to establish the Texas State Lunatic Asylum in Austin. That first asylum led to half a dozen more, including the

hospital that opened in Wichita Falls the same year Ridley's father-in-law shot him.

Texas fell in line with the national trend toward housing and treating the mentally ill, according to Sarah C. Sitton's book* about Texas' first asylum. Optimism initially characterized the national asylum movement, based on the belief that lovely surroundings, fresh air, healthy food, exercise, social contact, and a precise routine away from the stresses of ordinary life could effect a cure. But, as the mental-health providers encountered failure, the "cult of curability" gave way to institutional custodial care.

Sitton points out that nearly half of patients in the state's asylums became well enough within a year to leave the institution. Those who didn't moved to the second tier, where patients with something seriously wrong, something permanent, might gain enough skills eventually to cope on the outside. And then, there were the "incurables," including those degenerating with age who, once admitted, spent the rest of their lives in the "back" wards of mental institutions. Their tendency to commit violence or attempt escape condemned them to live behind locked doors. Most of the patients who remained two years or more fell into this category, Sitton writes.

Ridley spent nine years at the state hospital in Wichita Falls. A call to the records department of what is now called the North Texas State Hospital (Wichita Falls campus) resulted in no information about Ridley's diagnosis or treatment; the hospital destroys all patient records every seven years, the clerk told me.

I was seven decades too late to learn what brought this distant ancestor — the descendant of Texas pioneers, the beloved son of a doting mother, a boy who lost his father, an educated man who married into the Wild West version of landed gentry, a man of law who killed and got away with it, a father so estranged from his own three children that he bequeathed them \$1 each — to such a sad end.

Was he a drinker? A depressive? A sociopath? Was the murder of Claude Smith a manifestation of incipient madness,

or did the events of 1913 presage his end? Or, did he simply get old and develop dementia?

Alexander Ridley Dean died Aug. 2, 1953. The official cause of death was pneumonia. He was 75 years, 11 months, and seven days old. He was buried next to his mother.



West Hill Cemetery, Sherman, Texas

**Life at the Texas State Lunatic Asylum 1857-1997* by Sarah C. Sitton, published by Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1999.