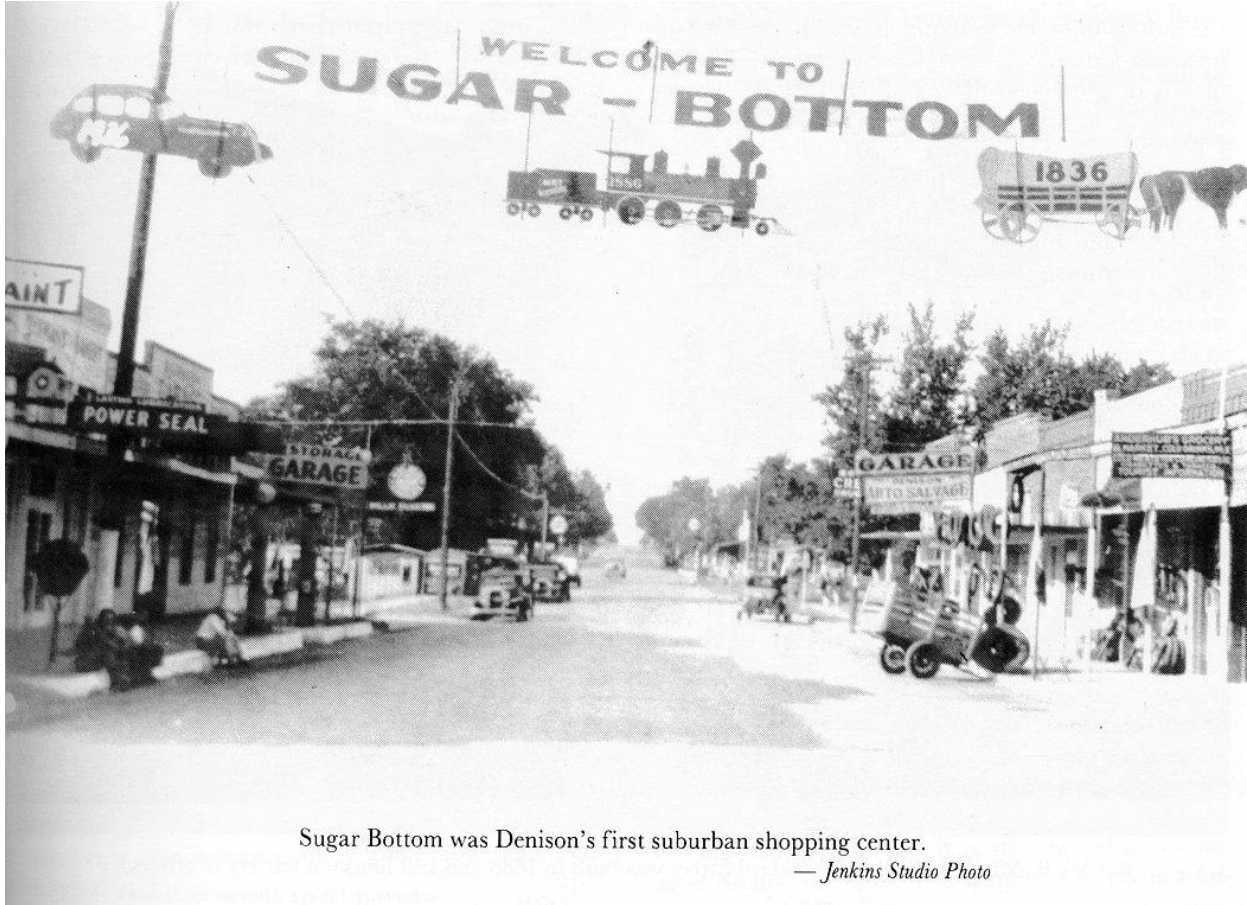


Getting to the Bottom of “Sugar Bottom”



Sugar Bottom was Denison's first suburban shopping center.
— Jenkins Studio Photo

Maguire, Jack. *Katy's Baby: The Story of Denison, Texas*. Austin, TX: Nortex Press, 1991, p. 41.

By Jim Sears
March 6, 2021

The area of Denison, Texas, that lies in or near the 600 block of South Armstrong Avenue has been known as Sugar Bottom for longer than anyone can remember. How did it get its name?

The two most widely repeated versions of the origin of the name can be found, like the above photo, in *Katy's Baby: The Story of Denison, Texas*, a book written by a man named Jack Maguire and published thirty years ago.

A Sweet Place Called “Sugar Bottom”

In truth, Denison from early times had been one of the very few small towns that had a “suburban” business district. It was a stretch of a few blocks along south Armstrong Avenue and adjoining streets which the townspeople called “Sugar Bottom.” Exactly why this small commercial area developed some distance from downtown and how it got its name are facts lost to history. There are two versions, both probably apocryphal, as to how its unusual designation originated.

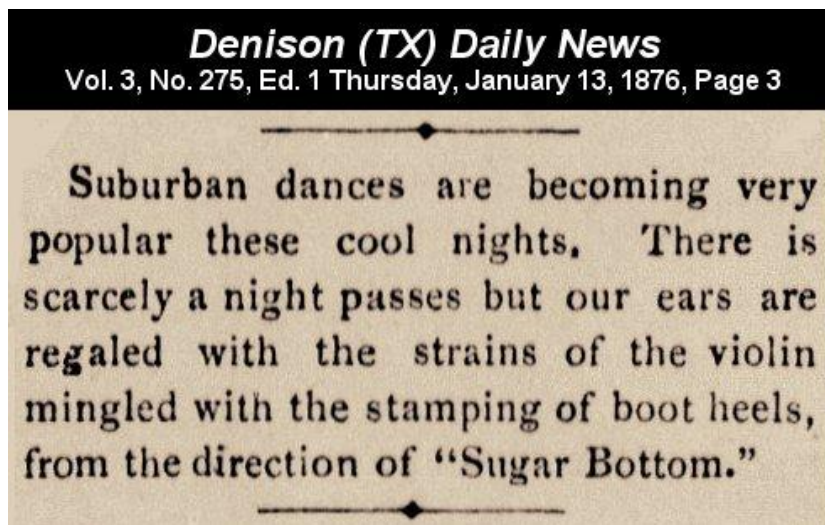
One story is that a gang of rowdy boys who called themselves the “Huckleberry Gang” became angry with Gideon Stephens, the cantankerous owner of the neighborhood grocery. One night they broke into his store, took a barrel of sugar and

dumped it along South Armstrong. From then on, the name “Sugar Bottom” stuck.

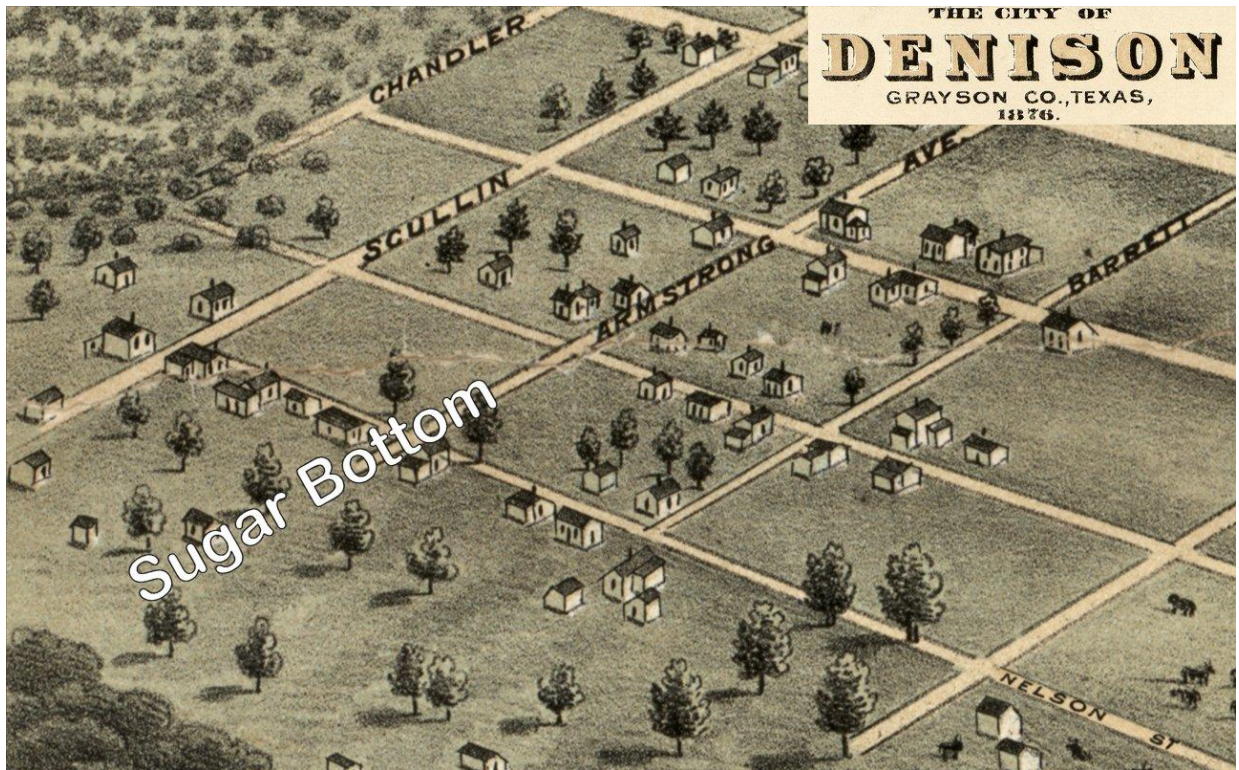
The other — and more likely — story is that a Katy crew was switching freight cars where the tracks still cross Armstrong Avenue. The main line had not been cleared when a passenger train rounded the curve and splintered a freight car loaded with sugar. The sweet cargo spilled into the street. At any rate, Sugar Bottom got its distinctive monicker and some little fame. Shanty Morrell, who grew up there and went on to become a well-known orchestra leader in Texas, wrote a ballad called the “Sugar Bottom Blues.” It was a mild hit in the state.

Maguire, Jack. *Katy's Baby: The Story of Denison, Texas*. Austin, TX: Nortex Press, 1991, p. 104.

The first step in gauging the authenticity of either of Maguire’s stories is to ask whether it could have happened prior to January 13, 1876, when the name “Sugar Bottom” first appeared in print.

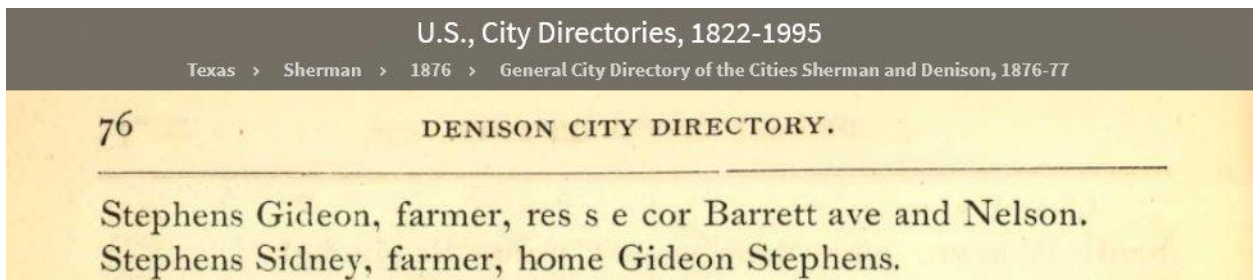


By that measure the second version, which Maguire considered the more likely of the two, is in fact less likely. Sugar spilled from a freight car requires a train, which in turn requires a track. The 1876 bird’s-eye [map](#) of Denison shows no railroad track in the area that we now know as Sugar Bottom. On the 1886 [map](#) a track is clearly visible crossing Armstrong Avenue just above Nelson Street, but at the start of 1876 the neighborhood had already acquired its name, and the track had yet to be laid.



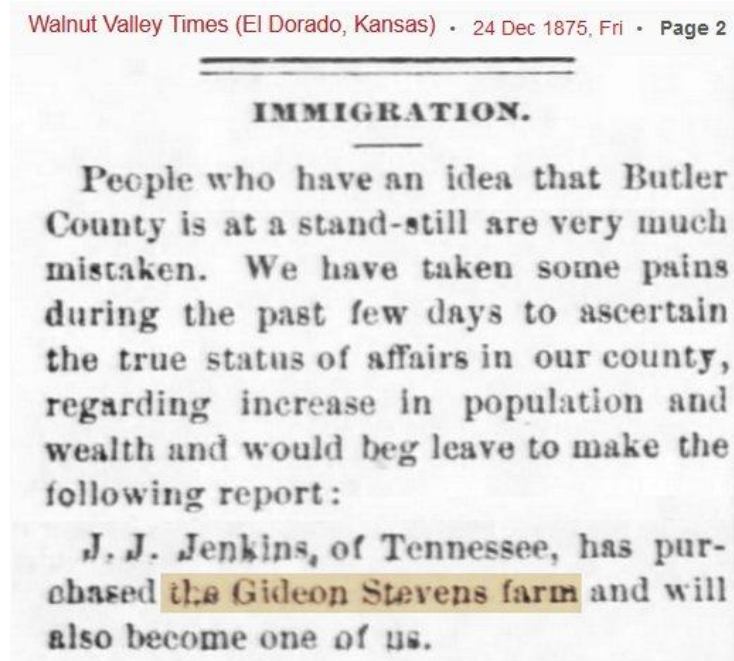
Morse, D. D. *The city of Denison, Grayson Co., Texas*. [Denison, TX.: D.D. Morse, 1876] Map (detail with overlays). <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013592212/>.

The first version is only slightly more likely than the second. Gideon Stephens came to Denison from Butler County, Kansas, in late 1875 or early 1876. His first appearance in a Denison City Directory is in the 1876 edition, compiled in the fall of that year. He and his son Sidney are both listed as farmers residing at the southeast corner of Barrett Avenue and Nelson Street. The directory does not list a Stephens-owned store. Gideon appears to have started life in Denison as just a farmer.



In any case, he would have needed to arrive and open his store prior to early January in order even to be considered for a role in the origin story of Sugar Bottom. The earliest known mention of him in print in Denison is on March 11, 1876, in a *Daily News* report of his being fined for disturbing the peace. That is two months too late to

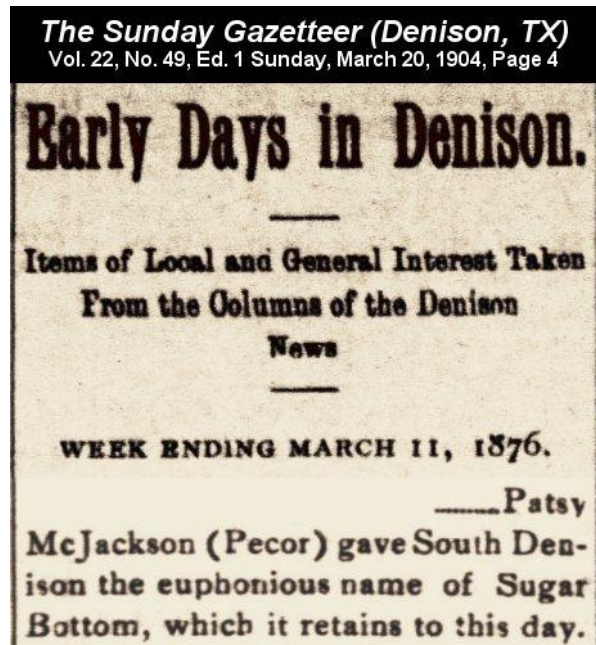
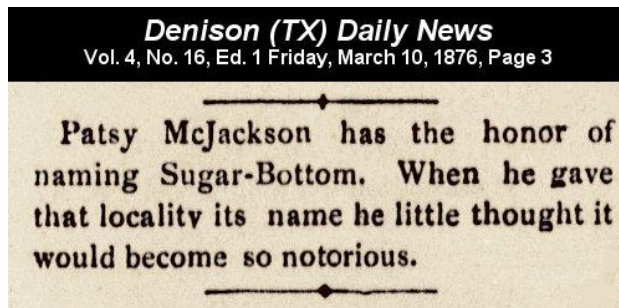
have been early enough. What, then, is the earliest date that he could have been in Denison? Before he left Kansas he sold his farm there to a man from Tennessee.



The date of the newspaper is December 24, 1875, which is only 20 days earlier than the first appearance of Sugar Bottom in the *Denison Daily News*. What is the likelihood that Stephens could have moved his family to Denison, opened a store, got on the wrong side of the Huckleberry Gang, and had his store burgled, all in less than a month's time? The break-in may well have happened at a later date. The story may be accurate in most of its other particulars. If so, it is more likely that a barrel of sugar was selected to be dumped precisely because Stephens' store was in Sugar Bottom than that the neighborhood derived its name from the contents of the barrel.

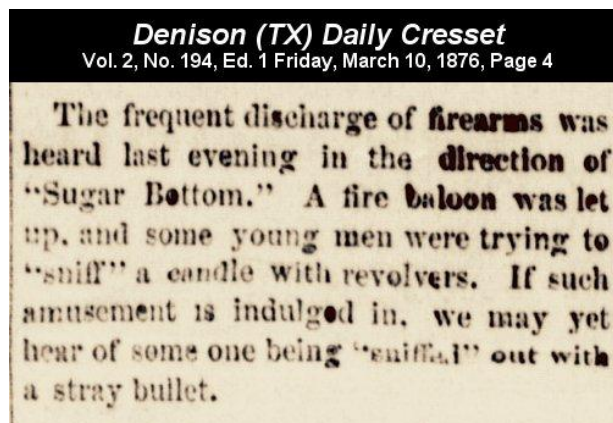
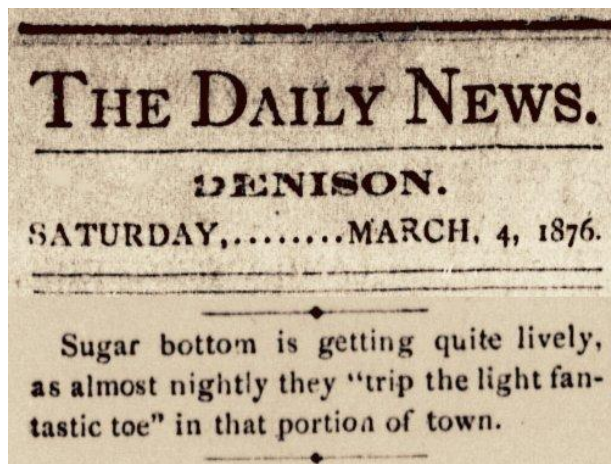
Maguire admits in his book that both stories are "probably apocryphal." Keep in mind that when the book was published he had been reading and writing about Denison and Texas history for more than 50 years. In all that time he was unable to gather any tangible evidence to corroborate either story, both of which he probably heard as a boy growing up in Denison in the 1920s and '30s.

There is, however, persuasive evidence pointing to an altogether different origin story. Denison pioneer B. C. Murray, editor and publisher of the *Denison Daily News*, and later of the *Sunday Gazetteer*, left us a valuable clue when he identified the man who gave Sugar Bottom its name. He was John W. Pecor, alias Patsey McJackson.



These two items appeared in Murray's newspapers 28 years apart. In the second one the "Pecor" in parentheses confirms that Patsy (usually spelled "Patsey") McJackson's real name was John W. Pecor. Why he chose to call himself Patsey McJackson is unknown, but it suggests that he had an affinity for nicknames. A native of Richmond, Virginia, he was in Denison by June of 1875. At that time he was about 23 years old. Not long after his arrival he was hired by Murray to deliver copies and solicit subscriptions for the *Denison Daily News*. Their business relationship developed into a friendship that lasted until Pecor's death 12 years later.

The map shows that in 1876 South Armstrong Avenue was near Denison's southern and western city limits. Around the time that Patsey McJackson arrived in town, it had either acquired or was rapidly acquiring a reputation for rowdy revelry.



THE DAILY NEWS.
DENISON.
TUESDAY,.....MARCH, 7, 1876.

The closing up of the Skiddy street establishments was the signal for a riotous carnival in "Sugar Bottom." Saturday night there was a big dance in that sweet-scented portion of the city, and the whole neighborhood was kept in alarm by the cursing and yelling, which was kept up into the Sabbath. Several parties got into a fight, and one man was severely cut.

The police made a descent on the proprietors of the dance house Monday morning, and made a good haul. There is a determination to break up the nest and we hope the authorities may be successful.

Denison (TX) Daily Cresset
Vol. 2, No. 198, Ed. 1 Wednesday, March 15, 1876, Page 4

Mrs. McGee, who has been giving dances over in the locality known as "Sugar bottom," was arrested and brought before Mayor Winn Tuesday morning, charged with disturbing the peace. Several persons, neighbors of McGee, swore that the dances were frequented by lewd women, and that profane language was indulged in to a great extent. Mrs. McGee was found guilty, and a fine of ten dollars and costs imposed, the cost part of the trial amounting to the round sum of between thirty and forty dollars. We understand that Stevens is next on the list, and that when he returns to the city he will have to face the music.

Sugar Bottom retained its unsavory reputation through at least the end of the decade.

Denison (TX) Daily News
Vol. 6, No. 294, Ed. 1 Wednesday, February 5, 1879, Page 4

A shake-down in "Sugar Bottom" Monday night closed rather abruptly with a fight. We understand that the police came a little too late to make any arrests.

Although the word "shakedown" connotes a type of extortion today, in early Denison newspaper reports it referred to an evening of boisterous dancing.

The name "Sugar Bottom" almost certainly came, like J. W. Pecor himself, from the city of Richmond, Virginia. Around the time of the Civil War the Confederate capital included several seedy neighborhoods. They persisted throughout the war and for at least a decade beyond. Pecor, who was 18 years old in the 1870 Census, would have been familiar with their colorful names, even if not with the neighborhoods themselves.

Richmond Dispatch (Richmond, Virginia) • 23 Aug 1859, Tue • Page 1

Dangerous Neighborhoods.—A friend connected with the Night Police, has furnished us the locations of the following places, where many of the most abandoned courtizans of the city reside. In each of these neighborhoods respectable families are to be found, and many of them are very much annoyed by the disturbances that occur, from time to time, amongst the dissolute denizens and their intoxicated visitors. Not only the Mayor, but the Grand Jury, will have to be called upon, at no distant day, to renovate these foul places, or respectable residents will be compelled to remove their quarters. "Sugar Bottom" is the title of the nest at the southern extremity of 9th street, near Trent's old bridge. "Solitude," at the corner of 7th and Cary streets, derives its name from the frequent rows that occur there at night. "Ram Cat Alley" runs in a northwest direction from Brooke Avenue, near Kelly's shop, and is the resort of blacks and whites of low degree. "Ruinsville" is a most appropriate name for a neighborhood on Baker and St. James streets. "Five Points" is located at the extreme end of 2d street, at its intersection with St. Stephen. And "Buz-zard Roost" stands at the head of the basin.—Each of these districts occupy much of the time of the police to look after them; but as nearly all of them are in out-of-the-way places, the public hear very little of the characters who make up those peculiar communities.

Richmond Dispatch (Richmond, Virginia) • 29 May 1875, Sat • Page 1

Byrd Island has a wide but unsavory reputation. The neighborhood, as popularly known, lies between the river and the canal, bounded on its eastern side by the Haxall Mills and its western by the Tredegar Works. It includes within its limits such disreputable places as Sugar Bottom, Rummersville, Horse Alley, and Glory Hole. There are a few respectable people living within its limits, and there are many honest workmen who are employed over there in the day-time, but the great majority of its denizens belong to the lowest dregs of our population. Here vice raises its hideous front and is not abashed. Here lewd women and worthless men congrega'e to spend the night in drunken orgies. Here squalid poverty and hopeless misery confront the passer-by. Many of the houses are dilapidated. Those backing on the canal between Tenth and Twelfth streets are notorious in the annals of crime. At this row Mary Holmes was murdered, and soon afterwards her friend Mary Melton, weary of the world, without a friend to point her to a new and better path, rashly resigned her life and went forth to meet her Maker with all her sins upon her head. Her companions survive and follow in the old, old way. Byrd Island has few redeeming features. Its streets are begrimed with coal-dust; its pavements are ragged; and altogether it is little favored by the City Fathers. A more unpromising yet a richer field for Christian labor is nowhere to be found in Richmond.

Newspapers in both Denison and Richmond used the phrase "lewd women" in stories about their respective Sugar Bottoms. Pecor, noting that and other similarities, probably began using the borrowed nickname as a joke. Murray apparently liked it well enough to use it in print, and the name stuck. After his competitor paper, the *Cresset*, picked it up, he was quick to give credit for the sobriquet to his own employee.

Although Sugar Bottom in Denison could claim a consensus on respectability by the end of the 19th century, its sister suburb in Richmond has struggled until relatively recently. Within the last five or six years increased demand for new housing has finally led real estate developers there to begin improving that long-benighted neighborhood.

And what became of "Patsey" Pecor? He had the misfortune to contract pulmonary tuberculosis in his early thirties, and he died in Denison at the age of 35. He lies in an unmarked grave somewhere in Fairview Cemetery.

The Sunday Gazetteer (Denison, TX)
Vol. 23, No. 34, Ed. 1 Sunday, December 4, 1904, Page 4

Patsey Pecor, the Blue Bird of Texas, and one of the best known newspaper men that was ever on the Denison press, lies in a forgotten grave at Fairview. No stone marks his last resting place, no one knows exactly where he was buried. Pecor was the most natural wit that has ever been on the Denison press. It was perfectly natural for him to say smart things. Everybody knew Patsey, now no one knows him. He has passed out of memory as completely as though he never lived. Hard lines fell to Patsey, he lingered with consumption for some time, but the old timers saw that he wanted nothing. A. R. Collins, the richest and most influential man in Denison, took Patsey to his home and provided him with a comfortable room. One morning Patsey was found dead in his bed. He was carried to his last resting place by the fire department. The coffin rested on the trucks draped in black. That is about eighteen years ago and every trace of the grave has been obliterated, and the young man who could stir all Denison into laughter and was a Bohemian of the true type has passed into oblivion. To die is to be forgotten, and it is better that death invites forgetfulness.

Having now read this explanation, the next time you hear that spilled or dumped sugar was responsible for naming the neighborhood around the 600 block of South Armstrong Avenue in Denison, it will be your civic duty to speak up and give proper credit to the "worthless" male and "lewd" female inhabitants of the place a century and a half ago. Try to remember to mention Patsey McJackson, too.