

Last Resting Place of Denton's Pioneer Ancestry, Once Neglected, Now Beauty Spot of Grass, Flowers

By ANN COPE

In a little spot in East Denton, beneath the soft shadows of the huge oak trees they loved so well in life, lie the bodies of many of the heroes of pioneer days who contributed much to the development of Denton County.

In quiet solitude, once almost forgotten and now remembered by a comparatively few, these hardy men and women of another generation rest, many of them in unmarked graves and whose identity will never be known. What is now the City Cemetery, Denton's first burial ground, is situated on East Sycamore Street, once the main artery of traffic to Dallas but little used since the route of the highway was changed several years ago. This plot of ground, formerly little more than a weed patch, lately has been tenderly cared for in sharp contrast to the neglect of other years, and is now one of the best kept cemeteries in the county.

Origin Obscure

The origin of the old cemetery has not been definitely determined. It is believed by many pioneers now living here to have developed from the burial of a few persons in this beautiful grove of trees, as other cemeteries in the county have had their beginnings.

Just when the first burial took place is not known. The burning of

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The old court house with its records in 1875 has obscured most of the early land transfers in Denton County, and no record setting aside this plot for burial purposes has as yet been found. However, the legal record that is available indicates that it was deeded to the county either late in 1859 or early in 1860. The land is out of a tract of 320 acres patented to Hiram Cisco July 21, 1857. Several transfers of parts of this land are on record, but no reference to the cemetery is found until 1878. At that time, a deed transferring a tract from J. L. Lovejoy Jr. to Piner & Ruddell sets out that three acres of land which had been conveyed to Denton County by D. M. Street for cemetery purposes is excepted.

Street bought the land from Cisco Dec. 13, 1859 and sold it to J. L. Lovejoy Sr. Feb. 24, 1860, indicating that the cemetery was set aside in the winter of 1859-60. Originally of three acres, the burial ground has been added to several times and now contains about 10 or 12 acres.

First Burial known

Who was the first person buried therein and the date are moot questions. According to family history that has been handed down, Mrs. Elizabeth Cline, who died shortly after the family came to this country for the benefit of her health, was the first woman and the third person buried in the plot. The exact date of her death has not been ascertained, but it is believed to have been about the time Denton was established as the county seat which was in 1856 with the first settlement here in 1857.

At the time of Mrs. Cline's burial, it is said, there were two graves of unknown persons in the large oak grove. One was that of an adult, the other of a child, each of which was marked by a stone. One early legend was that these were the

graves of Indians, but so far as can be ascertained no one knows the identity of these two persons. These graves are yet to be seen, with their arched stone coverings, which contain no inscriptions.

Early Tragedy

A thousand memories of the tragedies and sorrows of pioneer days lie buried here. One particularly touching incident is recalled. In about 1860 J. L. Lovejoy Sr. and his wife built a home just north of the cemetery. With them lived their son, J. L. Lovejoy Jr., and the latter's wife. Their baby, a boy of one year old, fell into the fireplace at the Lovejoy home and was fatally burned. The heart-broken mother chose a spot in this grove of trees as the last resting place for her little son and this burial was among the early interments there. So great was the mother's grief over the tragic fate of her son that, although she lived to be 98 years of age, she never fully recovered from the shock.

The bodies of a number of heroes in gray who gave their lives to the Lost Cause were brought home to find their last resting place near their loved ones. Many of these graves are unmarked, however, and never will bear flower or flag when on memorial days tribute is paid to those who sacrificed their lives for their country.

No Burial Record

No record of burials in the City Cemetery has ever been kept. It was a public ground, no lots were sold, and a family, when death visited the home, selected a spot of its choice for burial. Later, in many instances near relatives died or moved away and all trace of the burial lots was lost. But today the crumbling sandstone markers reveal the names of many prominent families who came to Denton County in its early days. In many instances the name has been dimmed and blurred to become indistinguishable, and the dates of birth and death are lost forever.

A few stones remain to tell the spot of some early pioneer's resting place. Among the earliest interments to be found are J. M. McCormick, born 1836, died 1859; Sophia W. Blount, wife of J. M. Blount, buried 1869; P. P. Scruggs, 1861;

Mrs. Alice Miller, 1874; John G. McNeill, 1865; George McCormack, 1865 and his wife 1875; Mrs. E. D. Barb, 1872, and Stephen S. Hyatt, 1887. One square of ground contains a large marble slab in memory of the Lacy family. Nancy Lacy, with the inscription, "Gardma," was born in 1795 and lived until 1878. Other members of the family laid to rest here are S. C. Lacy, who died in 1870; Caroline B. Lacy, whose death is listed as occurring in 1856; Judith Lacy, 1864, and Susan Lacy, 1864.

Many Unmarked Graves

Today, the cemetery is largely an area of unidentified mounds and crumbling tombstones. Scores of the graves are unmarked and many others have only a small brown stone at head or foot, but no inscription. Here and there scattered about the grounds are to be seen faint mounds, presumed to hold the bodies of pioneers, but of which there is no certain knowledge. No means remain today to determine the number of persons buried here or of establishing the identity of many of them.

In contrast to the forgotten graves however are a number of beautiful monuments and carefully fenced lots, where rest the bodies of ancestors of families still living here who through the long years have tenderly cared for the last resting places of their loved ones.

Burials were common in the City Cemetery in the 60's and 70's but became more and more infrequent after the Odd Fellows Cemetery, established in 1868 by Denton Lodge No. 82, I. O. O. F., came into general use.

As time went on the old burial plot was neglected, except by the descendants of a few of the pioneer families who cared for their own lots. It finally became little more than a tract of dense underbrush and weeds. Sporadic efforts were made to have the grounds cared for, and the city at intervals appropriated a small amount of money for that purpose, but with little apparent result.

Grounds Now Cared For

A decade or so ago, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, chagrined at the lack of respect the community had shown the pioneers who had done so much in the development of this community, started a movement to interest authorities in providing for permanent care of the grounds.

About four years ago, Jack Christal, superintendent of the I. O. O. F. Cemetery, and himself a member of a pioneer family, in answer to requests offered his services in supervising the care of the grounds if the city would provide funds to pay for the necessary labor. Since that time more than \$3,000 has been appropriated by the city, including \$800 which was used in the purchase of an additional four or five acres to extend the grounds to the south. The remainder of the money has been spent for work on this area.

One who views the cemetery today that existed only a few years ago can scarcely visualize the condition that existed only a few years ago when it was little more than a thicket of weeds and brush. At the present time the grounds are well kept and a large grassy lawn and rose garden, lending an additional touch of beauty, have been developed.

As a result of the recent efforts, Denton people no longer have cause to feel ashamed of the spot where their pioneer ancestry rests. The minute care bestowed upon the cemetery now partly compensates for the neglect of other years.

Christal devotes much time to the personal supervision of the two cemeteries in Denton, for which he receives no remuneration other than the satisfaction that is his from the service he is rendering the families with loved ones buried there.

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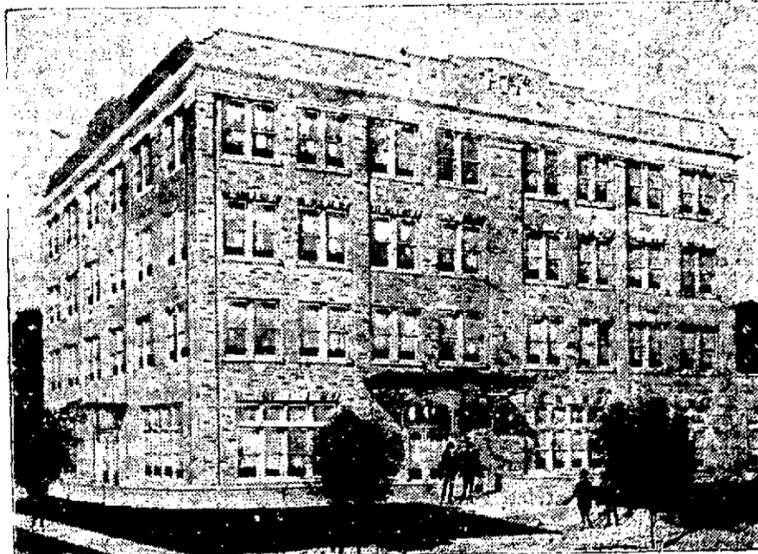
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