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# PARKERSBURG CEMETERY

*By Ida Vowell Robertson*

When a yen for adventure and a desire for land on a new frontier led my grandfather, John Woodward Parker, to leave his comfortable home in Wolcottville, Indiana, to make the run into Cheyenne-Arapaho Territory, it is not likely that he even imagined that within fewer than ten years a new town and a new cemetery would be established there and named in his honor. It was probably even less likely that he would have thought he would be the second man buried in that cemetery.

Wishing to spare his wife and three young daughters the rigors and deprivation of pioneer life, Mr. Parker took them by train to Rogers, Arkansas. There he established a home for them in order for the girls to continue their education and music lessons for three years.

John Parker then traveled on west and made the run by horseback, staking a claim in the NW  $\frac{1}{4}$ , Section 29, T. 12, R. 17 (abstract in Custer County Courthouse). This claim in the fertile Washita River Valley was located about three miles southwest of the present town of Clinton.

His neighbors in Section 29 were W.E. (Bud) Been and his wife and daughter in the NE  $\frac{1}{4}$  and Mrs. Been's bachelor brother, J. Granvil Barnes, in the SE  $\frac{1}{4}$ . Barnes later married Parker's daughter after she came out to live with her father. The SW  $\frac{1}{4}$  was claimed by another bachelor, George Ward. These families made half dugouts near one another and became lifelong friends as are their descendants today.

Within three years, John Parker had his land in cultivation and a good start of cattle and hogs. He was now ready for his family. So he and Bud Been went by ox wagon back to Rogers for them. They left Rogers in May, 1895 and didn't reach the claim until August. My mother told me many times that this long journey in her thirteenth year was a three-month picnic. They traveled through woods and hills, forded streams, and

much of the time they walked beside the wagon. Wild flowers were in bloom, and squirrels and rabbits scampered in the grass. Mother especially recalled the singing of the birds and the howls of the coyotes at night. They traded for food with the Indians and cooked it on campfires. Always they were excitedly moving toward "home."

Once at home, the two oldest girls were sent to the new Normal school at Arapaho. My mother, for lack of another choice, repeated the eighth grade in a dugout school—then in the first frame school, and the next year in Arapaho. She had a four-year eighth-grade education, but at least it was school.

The older girls soon married, and Mama came home to revel in the freedom of life on the prairie where she spend long days on horseback keeping Indian ponies off her father's unfenced crops. Soon her father was able to build a frame house "with a porch running round it" and a big hay barn. Times were really getting good!

Then tragedy struck when John Parker became a victim of the pioneer scourge—pneumonia. Home remedies were used, and even whiskey, which my mother brought on horseback from Arapaho. But Grandfather died on February 27, 1899, not living to experience the beginning of a new century on his new land. He was buried on a plot of land belonging to his good neighbor, George Ward. Another friend, whom Mama always called "Grandpa Reid," had been buried there shortly before.

Since that time, Grandpa's three daughters and their husbands as well as a number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren have been buried by his plot. My paternal grandparents lie buried directly in front of him. And last February, I buried my husband of fifty-five years there.

In October, 1900, because Grandmother Parker wanted to return to her native Indiana, she and the

girls sold the homestead to Solomon Forrester (Custer County Courthouse record). A few months later, Forrester sold it to Beeks Eric for the development of a townsite. Eric soon laid out an eighty-acre tract for a new townsite to be named Parkersburg—blocks one to forty-nine inclusive here on Parker land in the NW ¼ of Section 29, and Blocks “A” and “U” in the NE ¼ on Been land. The plot of the town was filed in the registry of deeds in Custer County Courthouse on April 1, 1901.

Parkersburg was formally dedicated on March 30, 1901, but it was already a growing town. On June 1, 1901, the Choctaw-Gulf Railroad came through, and the new town soon became a thriving metropolis on the prairie. But within three short years, two railroads formed a junction three miles to the west, and Clinton sprang into being there.

Almost overnight Parkersburg became a ghost town as all of the businesses simply “folded their tents like the Arabs and slipped away” to Clinton.

At the time of her demise, Parkersburg had a population of seven hundred and about twenty establishments, including a depot, hotel, two banks, and sundry other businesses. It also had thirteen saloons and a jail. I still remember whispers of that jail and its frequent occupant, a lady of the night called Red Wing. I really imagined that Red Wing was someone who flew about in the night. At night when I would hear Papa playing the old ballad “Red Wing” on the fiddle, I thought it was about that historic celebrity!

Anyway, I suppose Red Wing herself moved away with the other businesses on that fatal night and continued to be a bane to the pioneer wives.

Not long after John Parker was buried on his land, John Ward made a warranty deed of 1½ acres in NE ¼ Section 30, T. 12, R. 17 W 1 M, to a board of trustees composed of W.E. Been, J.G. Barnes, McClelan Been, H.V. Reid, and J.M. Ward and their successors as a burying place or cemetery to be known as Ward-Union Graveyard. (W deed recorded Custer County, Book B., page 86, August 14, 1989). After the founding of Parkersburg, the name was changed from Ward-Union to Parkersburg Cemetery.

I have heard from oldtimers that the cemetery grounds were laid out by using lariat ropes to measure off the lots. Cedar stakes were placed at the corner of each lot, and a two-foot strip was allowed for a path between the lots.

The cemetery was expanded January 10, 1939 when L.M. Jordan deeded one acre to Parkersburg Cemetery. (Book 65, page 331, Custer County Courthouse)

Later on, in May 1989, at the annual meeting of the cemetery association, the group voted to buy one acre adjoining on the south from Jesse Stratton for \$1,000.

I remember that families when I was a small child took care of their own graves and there wasn't even a fence for a long time. Our family would make a

seven-mile trip to the cemetery on “Decoration Day” in the wagon or buggy and later on in a Model T. Mama robbed the yellow rosebushes, and often Papa stopped at the roadside to pick his favorite flower, the purple wild larkspur, to place on his father's grave.

These days weren't particularly sad occasions. Neighbors and relatives would be there, and all of us would work together cutting weeds and cleaning graves. It was a time for visiting and reminiscing and remembering our loved ones. I don't know when a barbed-wire fence was put around the cemetery or when the first gate was erected. On top of the gate was a board with PARKERSBURG CEMETERY painted on it. The painting was done by Minnie Armstrong, a pioneer daughter. When the sign board was replaced, Walker Moore, another oldtimer who was always active in looking after the cemetery, took it home with him and still cherishes it as a shelf in his garage.

About thirty-five years ago, Frank Russell, who has lived at Parkersburg and in Clinton since a year after statehood, and his wife, Irene, began spending much time at the cemetery tending family graves. Soon they became almost fulltime caretakers. Their loving efforts were tireless. Many people thanked them and patted them on the back, but it was years before the trustees salaried them. Irene tried to make a record of families with interests in the cemetery. She finally spearheaded a successful drive to raise money to establish a \$10,000 perenniel-care fund. The interest from the fund has been sufficient to pay for the cemetery care and upkeep.

Irene died in 1978, and Frank carried on alone until five years ago when his health declined. When he retired, he was presented with a plaque of recognition. It was given in love and appreciation, but there really was no adequate way to express the homage due him.

On July 2, 1966, Kenneth Moore, grandson of a Parkersburg pioneer, was killed in a car-train accident. The next day, his fellow workers at Oklahoma Natural Gas Company in Clinton made and erected a steel gate, topped with a tall archway, at the cemetery as a memorial to him. It has PARKERSBURG lettered in steel across the top and 1899 beneath. Kenneth's name, also in steel letters, hangs at the corner underneath the archway. These friends paid for the materials for the sign and did all the work. Then, working two days on company time and many more hours on their own, they put in steel posts after the association had removed the old wooden ones. They also strung new wire around the cemetery. Later, they installed a new steel gate at the rear of the driveway to complete the job.

There are varying opinions as to who provided the new posts and wire. The consensus of four O.N.G. employees who helped with the project—Archie Goucher, Clarence Muno, Raymond Littke, and Buddy Young—is that O.N.G. furnished the posts and possibly the wire. Kathleen Wilson, Kenneth's widow, who is still at O.N.G., said that she definitely

knows that Kenneth's friends at O.N.G. provided the funds and labor for the gate and sign.

There has always been a board of trustees, but no minutes of association meetings were recorded until 1958. Since then, an annual meeting attended by twenty-five or thirty descendants of old settlers has been held. Records are now being carefully kept by longtime leader Nellie Marie Campbell. She is also in the process of making an accurate index file of lot holders, which will insure a businesslike administration of the cemetery.

The 1980 oil boom was a great blessing as money received from leasing added enough to our perennial-care fund to provide more than adequate maintenance for all time to come. This money was put in trusts in the First National Bank of Clinton.

Most of the association membership is made up of grandchildren of the first Parkersburg families. The same feeling of neighborliness and the respect for tradition that characterized our grandparents now bonds us together. It is our goal to get the younger generation to experience this feeling in order to preserve the spirit of those pioneers of 1892.

The Parkersburg Cemetery is now thickly marked with stones bearing the names of many well-known pioneers. Some of them are Barnes, Been, Culwell, Haggard, Heiligman, McAtee, Moad, Meacham, Moore, Parker, Strong, Thompson, and Vowell.

The northwest corner of the cemetery is known as "Tennessee Corner" because buried there are T.G. Moore, his two brothers, four sons, and their families, all of whom came from Tennessee and settled in Parkersburg community. The Alfred and Marvin Haggard families, also of Tennessee, are in this section.

American flags fly in great numbers in the cemetery on Memorial Day at graves of veterans of five wars. Tennessee Corner alone is represented by T.J. Moore, a Civil War veteran, Richard Moore of World War I, and Tom Moore of World War II.

My Grandfather Vowell was a Civil War veteran, and his great-grandson, Corporal Denver Joe Smith, who is buried near him, was a Korean war casualty.

Today Parkersburg Cemetery on its high hill looks across the valley to the old townsite and down onto busy I-40 where lumber wagons have been replaced by roaring semis, Greyhound busses, Cadillacs, and mini vans that whiz by in constant procession. The seasons change, wars are fought and lost, people are born, live, love, and die, and the pulse of life beats fast. Parkersburg Cemetery remains!

Again it is "Decoration Day." I make my annual pilgrimage to the cemetery. This time, I come in a shiny, air-conditioned automobile.

I remove an arrangement of red and white silk carnations from its tissue wrappings and place it at the base of a ninety-year-old gray granite tombstone.

I read the inscription:

J.W. Parker

Sept. 26, 1846 — Feb. 8, 1899

"He took thee from a world of care  
an everlasting bliss to share."

But today, I can't honor Grandpa Vowell with his beloved wild larkspurs. They no longer grow by the roadside. Neither do the riotously colored gallardia, buttercups, hollyhocks, and pink nettle roses. However, in memory, I frolic among the flowers, picking sticky handfuls, and I seem to hear a long silent voice — "Let's pick some larkspur for Pa's grave." ●

*IDA VOWELL ROBERTSON of Clinton graduated from SOSU in 1933 and taught in Custer and Washita counties for eighteen years. After retiring from teaching, she worked several years until 1975 for DHS in the area of child welfare. As revealed here, she is a history enthusiast.*



*John Woodward Parker's granite tombstone.*

*Photo courtesy of Ida Robertson*