



10-15-1989

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, Kate Jackson (1989) "Surrounded by Cedars," *Westview*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol9/iss1/16>

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SURROUNDED BY CEDARS

By Kate Jackson Lewis

Illustration by Shannon Bower



Jodean McGuffin Martin, retired teacher and Martha resident who did the research for this article, joins me in thinking that the Martha Cemetery is one of the prettiest in Oklahoma. Its beauty lies in its simplicity and tall, graceful native cedars provided by the Forestry Service, planted and groomed by the local men. J.D. Hamilton, Martha businessman, said, "The neighborhood men donated their services by setting out the trees. I volunteered to haul the water and keep them alive and growing." Since the cedars extend down both sides of a road a half mile long, beginning at the town's main thoroughfare and leading to the cemetery's burial sites, much labor and water were required.

Martin reports the trees as reaching a height of forty feet, then tending in opposite directions to form an arched canopy the entire length of the lane.

Once a resident of Martha myself, I often accompanied by husband for a brisk walk down this narrow passage. We had first tried walking over the bumpy surface of the railroad tracks running parallel to the cedars and beyond the cemetery. What a relief it was to walk in the protected lane. It's amazing that the pesky red ants and sweat bees so prevalent on the tracks never venture inside the cedar lane. Who ever heard of an insect seeking the shelter of a cedar-lined closet? Too, the fragrance that the insects detested, I

drought-struck area, resembled the hardy cedars—a tough lot. "The Cedars of Lebanon," according to PELOUBET'S BIBLE DICTIONARY, "represent a type of the Christian—being evergreen, beautiful—but very durable."

Where did these pioneers come from? Why had they come? Was it the providence of God? Who knows?

They came, a family or two at a time, not competitively, as would the "Eighty-niners," but quietly, prayerfully—ready to "roll up sleeves" and go to work. I have often referred to the community as "Salt of the Earth" people.

Records differ somewhat on dates and spelling of names, but the differences are trivial. If anyone is disconcerted with the choices I made where differences occur, I apologize.

About 1885, settlers began to filter into "Old Greer County," via Doan's Crossing south of Altus. Some were native Texans, but others came from Georgia, Mississippi, and other states to find homesteads and a better way of life. They built "soddies" or half-dugouts to live in, worship in, or use for schools.

Though most of the settlers came to till the soil, plant it, and eventually harvest their crops, three ministers came—T.F. Medlin to start a church and the other two (J.T. Hosmer and Rev. McAnally) to evangelize or do missionary work. But the dedicated

"men of the cloth" didn't wait for proper buildings to be erected; they met in homes to worship. Ms. Hosmer had brought her organ along in her "prairie schooner" so she started making music for Sunday school even before preaching services began. When summer came, schools were set up under brush-arbors. Often church services and community affairs took their followers to the arbor.

A cemetery bearing the name Fiarview was built on the "Cunningham place." Soon three small graves were added.

Jodean Martin related the account of the devastating flood and lightning storm of 1891 that struck the new community. She said, "The water rose so fast that the people were flooded out of their homes and the cemetery's graves flooded, making the residents afraid that the water might wash the bodies from the graves."

When the flood waters receded, the school and the cemetery were moved to their present sites. The community, school, and cemetery were re-christened "Martha" honoring Miss Martha Medlin, their first teacher and postmistress (a "fine Christian girl," as the record states).

The new cemetery, according to George Doughty, is located on land formerly owned by Joe Gee. From the start, the proud pioneers cooperated to keep the cemetery premises clean and well-cared-for. Whether or not the graves belonged to any of the working men, they cleaned and groomed them each workday. Donations were taken on Memorial Day. Still some

citizens thought there should be a more systematic way of handling the cemetery's business.

One man, Martha Bank President Horace Doughty, said, "I've had a dream of Martha Cemetery's paying its own way." The idea caught on. A fifty-acre farm was bought from Joe Gee.

Sometime during the late 1930's, the Martha Cemetery Association was organized with Doughty as its first president and Lawrence Edwards as its first secretary. A committee was soon appointed to sell pledges, collect rental charges, and set up an endowment fund for the Martha Cemetery. Transactions were made, a graphic of the cemetery drawn and posted so lots could be sold, and money added to the bank. The chart is still kept on the wall of City Hall. Christine Watson, retired teacher, marks the record of lots sold, lots occupied, and any other pertinent information needed.

Ronnie Evans, currently the Association's president, sends out letters once each year to all members requesting funds for the cemetery's operating expenses. Any money left over is invested toward getting the cemetery "financially endowed." Then, Doughty's dream will have become a reality, and Martha's cemetery will pay its own way. ●

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