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GONE AND PARTLY FORGOTTEN

By Karen Huddleston

There are many small country cemeteries scattered across Western Oklahoma. General characteristics of these cemeteries are that they are privately owned and generations of families are buried close together. These cemeteries rely on donations and families cooperating to maintain and keep them. Even so, there are some small cemeteries that have surely been forgotten. While driving through the country, a person might see a cemetery covered with tall weeds and grass. These cemeteries look as if they have been abandoned. Some of the people buried in them could have been settlers passing through Oklahoma Territory.

Zerita Kiesau of Kiesau-Kern-Schneider Funeral Home in Clinton stated, "Back in early days, people traveled and moved a lot. If someone died while traveling, he was buried wherever he died." This tendency could account for unkept graves and graves that are no longer marked. Perhaps the family put up a wooden cross to mark the grave. However, after decades of Oklahoma weather the wood has decayed and has left an unmarked grave. "Sometimes early settlers used stones or rocks to mark graves if they couldn't afford headstones," stated Mrs. Kiesau. If such is the case, we can imagine that there are many unmarked graves in Western Oklahoma.

North of Butler lies Osceola Cemetery. According to county records, this cemetery was donated by J. B. Story on April 21, 1898 at 4:30 p.m. Mr. Story donated 1½ acres of his land for cemetery purposes. The legal description reads: "12 rods by 20 rods to a stake, SW corner of NW quarter of Section 25-15-19." These measurements are equal to 198 feet x 330 feet. The deed was written in Arapaho, Custer County Seat, Oklahoma Territory.

The very old gate is still standing at the entrance to the cemetery. Some of the letters have fallen off so that the name can no longer be read. A red framed box stands at the gate, stating the last names of the people buried there. When this list was made isn't known—or if it has ever been updated. Nevertheless, it includes seventy names including Wrinkel, Aunt Pop, Adkison, Eddings, Hunnicutt, Hargues, Hutcherson, Igo, Loidsey, McDermott, Murreah, Parmeyer, Stallcup, Touchstone,

Vandervirt, and Weir. A wooden cross that used to stand on top of the box has fallen off. Written on the cross are the words "In God We Trust."

The caretakers of the cemetery are a group of people that have family members buried there—Ella Jean Clift, Doug Ray, Jim Ray, Minnie Ray, Paul Mowles; also, some of the members of the Edwards family combine labor and personal equipment to keep the cemetery looking good. There is an account at Custer County State Bank in Arapaho for families to make donations. These donations are to be used to buy equipment for the maintenance of the cemetery.

There are many granite tombstones standing in this cemetery. Some look as though they could fall over any minute. Jean Clift remembers when one of the stones fell on her young son, nearly breaking his leg. "And," she said, "that was over twenty years ago." The stones are tall rather than broad, and they are very heavy. Names and dates were carved on the stones years ago, and now it's almost impossible to read some of the lettering. In some cases, a person must rub his finger along the outline of the letters in order to read the inscriptions. Such stones were popular in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

After some time of studying these stones, I found that there is writing on two sides of some of them. One such stone read: "Daughters of E. A. and L. E. Barker. May V. died Feb. 1900, 1900. Age 3Y. 1M. 19D" on one side and "Murrean died Sep. 4, 1900. Age 1 Y. 2 M. 27D" on the other side. One side of another such stone are these words: "Joseph F. died Dec. 1894. Age 5M. 24D. Pearl M born and died July 23, 1900. Children of J. F. and B. A. Walker. A place is vacant in our home, which never can be filled." On the other side are these words: "Bertha Adell wife of J. F. Walker. Died Aug. 1, 1900. Age 30 Y. A precious one from us is gone."

There are also ordinary aluminum markers in the cemetery. Some of them are very interesting. One marker has simply "Aunt Pop." One marker that caught my attention twenty years ago was "Baby Unknown." I always wondered how a baby could be buried without anyone knowing who he was. In fact, I found three "Baby Unknown" markers, one "Woman Unknown"

marker, and an "Unknown" marker. Bobbie Ray of Butler presented a possible solution: "I wanted to know how a baby could be unknown, too, so I asked Bess (Bessie Ray, her mother-in-law) about it one time. She said that at one time there was a fever, an epidemic of some kind, that killed many people. When someone came down with a fever, he was taken to Osceola School to be cared for. Then if he died, the family wouldn't go to claim the body for fear of catching and spreading the infection. So the bodies were buried and the graves were marked "Unknown"

My confusion led me to inquire about a cemetery map. My search led me to Floyd Barten of Leedey, who directed me to Ed Covey and Jim Powers. I still didn't get the needed information. Jean Clift told me that Bobbie Ray had once been in charge of the cemetery bank account and that maybe she would know about the map. However, Bobbie said, "There's no map of the cemetery, and there's no Cemetery Board. Family members just say where they want the body to be buried, and that's where the grave is dug." She went on to inform me that there were several unmarked graves in the cemetery. She remembered when five unmarked graves were dug up before an empty plot was found. She stated, "After the unmarked graves were dug up, the cemetery was extended south of its original boundaries to prevent such an unfortunate thing from happening again."

Since there's a possibility of more unmarked graves in this cemetery, it's impossible to tell how old the cemetery actually is. Time and weather have worn away many of the carvings on the tombstones, and they can't be read. Some of the markers are in place but are impossible to read. Dates, names, and markers are gone from here, but are they forgotten?

SOURCES: personal interviews with Floyd Barten, Jean Clift, Zerita Kiesau, and Bobbie Ray; research in the Custer County Court Clerk Records.

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