

## First Burial Ground in City Now is Park

Plot Was at Sixth and Fon du Lac Streets; Graves Now at Greenhill

Memorial Park Newest

To the extreme east in that 40 old acres of land that is Greenhill cemetery, partly hidden by high, wavy grass and marked here and there by yellowing, weather beaten tombstones lie the first Muskogeeans in their second earthly resting places.

Old –fashioned markers, some dating as far back as 1876, stolid guardians of the graves of those long departed, they have remained there since the early 1900's when they were moved along with the bodies of those whose memories they perpetuate, from the old Muskogee burial grounds where Jackson park at Sixth and Fon du Lac streets, is now located.

Once Far From City

Jackson park, or the ground on which it stands, was far outside the activities of the day when the early Muskogeeans sought a suitable burial ground for their departed. The peak of a hill from where on three sides the land slopes away, the site chosen offered all the advantages for a cemetery. Here, the old timers found, was a location where the water danger would be minimized. Then, with the nearest house blocks away, there was little danger of the city moving out as to necessitate removal at a later date.

So in the old fashioned wooden coffins, wrapped and padded with black cloth, the early settlers whose days were done, were put to rest in the spots where their relatives were assured would be their final earthly homes. From the earliest of settlers to Muskogeeans who died as late as 1900, they were buried in that plot so far from town at first and so encroached upon by the city's advance later.

Old timers tell of the early methods of burial prior to the advent of metal vaults. Carpenters in those days did a profitable business making coffins, for in many cases two of the wooden affairs were necessary, one for the vault, and the other for the body itself. In case the person died suddenly, the carpenter had to work fast and construct the coffin in a short time. No burial records were kept as far as the city was concerned. In most cases the matter was left to the families, to be handed down verbally or registered in the family Bibles.

Markers Not Urgent

Then, too, the matter of markers was not so urgent. A tombstone had to be ordered, in most cases from St. Louis, and the time between death and receiving the marker was often a drawn out affair. As a result many of Muskogee's pioneers were laid to rest with a sturdy pine board with the name cut into it, driven in for a headstone.

Nevertheless many went to the trouble of importing perennial markers, as will bear witness by the array of tombstones with early dates in the old time plot at Greenhill cemetery. Dates of 1879-80 and those of the 90's are frequent. On some of the stones are given the cause of death, as on one is written "Killed

by cars" dated 1887. The earliest date at Greenhill is on the tomb of what is thought to be of two sisters. Reading "To our Allie and Minnie" the marker has no other information, not even the family name, except that they both died in the year 1876.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and about the time the first city council was organized, Muskogeeans became conscious that the Sixth and Fon du Lac cemetery was out of place and sought a plot further away from the growing town. The old cemetery was beginning to be hard pressed by residences in its vicinity. Then, too, it was ill kept. Grass grew high and the wooden slabs decayed.

In 1898 the first city council met under the city's first mayor, Patrick Byrne, and appointed F.B. Severs, A.W. Robb and P.N. Blackstone as a cemetery committee. Of all the councilmen that formed the first city government, W.S. Harsha remains. According to him the three forming the cemetery group, directed the new Greenhill plot which was being opened for burial purposes about that time. From then on the majority of city dead were taken to Greenhill inasmuch as at that early date there was some talk of moving the bodies from the old burial ground to the new.

#### Bodies to Greenhill

Early in the 1900's the old cemetery ceased to exist. As quietly as possible the city caused the bodies to be removed to Greenhill. In as many cases as possible the markers were kept intact and placed over the respective bodies, but at times workers were forced to take bodies from the ground with no identification and place them in the new plot at Greenhill, unknown. However in most cases relatives aided in identification and headstone or not, all bodies were moved, and most identified.

Conservative estimates place the number removed at 350 to 400. The line dividing the old settlers' graves from those who were buried in Greenhill proper, begins about 100 yards west of the extreme eastern boundary of Greenhill and is marked by about 30 headstones, all dated prior to 1900.

The bodies taken from the old grounds to Greenhill form only a small percentage of the number now in the city cemetery. There is no definite knowledge of the total graves at Greenhill as early records were burned. In 1927, however, E.C. Downs, sexton there for 18 years, estimated the number at 10,000 according to Howard Harrison, present sexton, and T.F. Hardin, the oldest worker. At that rate there would be between 12,000 and 13,000 graves now.

But Greenhill cemetery does not contain all Muskogee dead. A cemetery east of town and said to be years older than the local burial ground, keeps in their slumbers an unestimated number of both rural and city dead. That cemetery is Frozen Rock, that in summertime is overgrown with tall grass almost completely hiding the sparse tombstones. Stories are told that because of the age of this cemetery, many graves are unmarked and in digging fresh ones, diggers at times strike an old tomb which necessitates it being filled up and a new grave started. However, there are Muskogeeans still buried there for sentimental reasons, as in cases where they are buried side by side with relatives gone before.

Another cemetery, comparatively new, also provides last resting places for Muskogeeans. Memorial Park cemetery now is the burial ground for more than 100 persons. Located three miles west of the city,

the traveler's attention is attracted to it more by the brown stone tower than by any other evidence that a burial ground exists. No towering monuments arise from the ground over the graves for in Memorial Park the stones for the most part are flat, protruding no more than an inch above the surface.

Many at Fort Gibson

The National cemetery at Fort Gibson also lays claim to the bodies of Muskogeeans as many ex-soldiers from the city are buried there.

Cemeteries elsewhere in the county also harbor Muskogee dead but in such cases the bodies usually are placed in those respective spots to be near those of relatives. Many persons who have come to this city from nearby towns are taken to community cemeteries after death.

Southeast of town between Muskogee and Warner is Memorial cemetery while on beyond Warner about two miles is South Bethal cemetery. Another burial ground in that section is Mount Nebo, four miles southeast of the same town. Agnew cemetery lies east of Warner, South, the nearest cemetery of any size is that of Oktaha while southeast of the town of Oktaha and forming the burial grounds for both Oktahaans and Wainwright dead is Midland Chapel. To the west no cemetery of any size is met until Haskell is reached. North of Muskogee is the Three Rivers cemetery, located around 10 miles northeast of Okay. Near Keefeton are two burial grounds, Elm Grove and McClain. Seven miles east of Muskogee in another burial ground, Brush Mountain.

County towns having their own burial grounds nearby, beside those mentioned are Boynton, Fort Gibson, Gore and Webbers Falls, the latter two towns using for the most part the same grounds.

No county history is complete without its lost cemetery and Muskogee county is no exception. On Braggs mountain, 20 miles southwest of the city, far off the principal highways and reticent with its past, is an old cemetery in which the Bodies of Indian leaders of the Cherokee nation lie. For the most part the monuments are of native stone although there are several topped by marble. Peculiar are the form of the monuments for they seem to form a rock box above the ground over the body. Fifty graves can be seen at this forsaken spot the origin of which no one here knows.

Muskogee Phoenix. 4 Oct. 1931. Page unknown.