

THE CEMETERY

by Annie Phinney

By 1909, the town of Coahoma was five years old and had no designated place to bury their dead. The Masonic lodge bought the first three acres and later three acres more. The county gave the city six acres if they could bury some who were on welfare there. Some cedar trees were set out on the west and north side and the city keeps the grass mowed. The city wanted to take over the whole cemetery but the title to the six acres purchased by the Masons said that it would belong to the Masons "forever and forever."

The old part of the cemetery began to fill up and there are a lot of stories to be told about the ones buried there. The first white woman was Zola Hern. Her tombstone says she died October 25, 1911. She and her husband came to Texas from Alabama to find land in New Mexico, as many were doing in those days. In Coahoma, Zola took ill and died. They had planned on homesteading land in New Mexico but their plans were short-lived. He had to bury her in the lonely cemetery and take this three children back to Alabama. He later remarried and his second daughter by that marriage told me her story.

My father died March 1919 during the flu epidemic which killed many people. There was no funeral home, so the neighbors came and prepared the body for burial. A man in Coahoma made a box of pine boards and covered it inside and out with green flannel cloth. The man who ran the grocery store came out in his Model T truck which he used to haul his groceries on. The homemade casket was placed on the truck and covered with a wagon sheet (tarpaulin). My uncle from Rotan came in his Model T to take mother and us kids to the cemetery. It was pouring down rain and the two Ford cars were the only ones in the procession. Everyone else came in buggies and wagons. There was no preacher, so someone read the Bible and said a few words. Everyone sang "Shall We Gather at the River" and offered a prayer. The casket was lowered in the grave by hand and the men filled the grave while we watched. Knowing this makes us thankful for the kind of funeral service we have today.

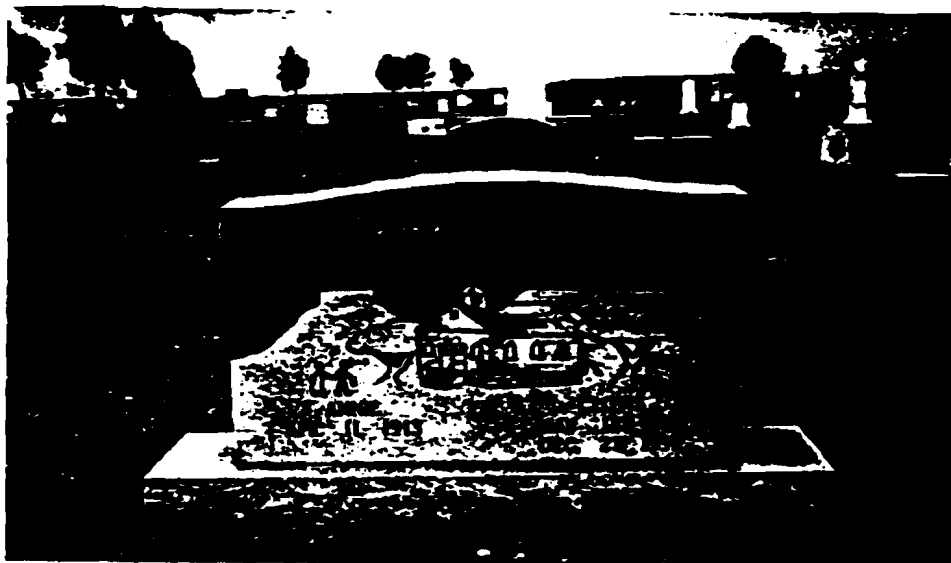
Then there was the early settler whose wife was very ill. Everyone knew she could not live long. All supplies had to be hauled from Colorado City in a wagon, a two day trip to Colorado City in the bitter cold of winter. The husband had to go for supplies, so while he was there he bought a casket. He carried it home and kept it in the barn until his wife died. Nothing like being practical.

The headstones tell us a lot about our forefathers. Some of them are marked with logos like "Asleep in Jesus" (a good Christian man). "In Loving Memory" (someone who was much loved) and "His word was his bond." I really liked that one. It tells me that when he gave his word, you did not have to have a lawyer with a notarized seal put on the note.



Neighbors were always ready to help in sorrow as well as any other kind of trouble. My sister and I were about 14 or 15 years old when our Sunday School teacher died. She was a beautiful, kindly old lady with white curly hair. She died rather suddenly. Mother thought it was about time that we assumed some responsibility and she told the family that Vera and I would sit with the corpse that night. We were willing and went to her house which was about two blocks from our home. The house was a big square house with a big wide hall down through the middle. The lady's body had earlier been placed on two pine boards supported by two cane-bottom chairs. A white sheet had completely covered her and there were two chairs for us to sit in. The windows were opened and a breeze blew the curtain back and forth. Everyone in the rest of the house went to bed and everything was too quiet. The old house creaked and a door slammed somewhere. A cat jumped up on the window sill. Vera and I moved our chairs closer together. As we got sleepier we began to think this was not so big a lark as we had first thought. We moved our chairs close together and about that time one of the lady's legs came up in an arch under the sheet. Vera whispered, "Are you afraid?" and I said "I'm frightened to death." No one had ever told us about post mortem rigors and we were scared to death. We ran down the hall, out the front door and all the way home to our mother. She had to spend the rest of the night with the body and neither of us slept that night.

These stories seem strange to us today but we have to remember that life in the early days of Texas was very hard. People did the best they could. We should be grateful for the heritage of such loving, loyal and dedicated people who left us Coahoma with its cemetery, churches, businesses, and schools.



Marker for Clovis and Annie Phinney in the Coahoma Cemetery. The artwork was done by Jay Phinney, grandson, and represents the treasures of their life together.

