

## *Digging into the Past*

by  
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Old cemeteries are made up of more than just graves. They also contain much of the history and folklore of a locale. I have lived in the Peoria community all my life, and through three cemeteries in this area I have learned much about my Kansas heritage. Two of these cemeteries, Imes and Howare, are no longer in use, but the Peoria cemetery is.

The Imes cemetery is off the road about 150 yards, set in a cow pasture, and can be reached only by crawling through a barbed wire fence. Despite the fact that it is enclosed by a stone fence about three feet high, cattle can get into the 15 yard square enclosure, and they have broken off or knocked down most of the eight marked graves. These marked graves, along with a few unmarked ones, are now overgrown with bushes, weeds, and trees, and all but one mark the resting place of a member of the Davisson (also spelled Davison) family. The Davissons lived on low land near the river and chose this site on higher ground for their family plot.

The Howard cemetery was founded by Harold Howard, who operated a sawmill two miles east of Peoria Township in 1865. When one of his young hired hands died, Mr. Howard used a portion of his land on which to bury him. As others in the vicinity needed a burial plot, Howard continued to donate land. Access to the Howard cemetery is somewhat easier than to Imes, although both are located off the road in cattle pastures, for a gravel road, washed out in places, traverses the mile from the main road to the 50 by 70 yard, adequately fence enclosure. The cemetery has not been used for over 40 years, but it is still mowed several times each summer. Despite this care several of the stones have been broken off and are leaning against trees. Even more are so weathered that they are nearly impossible to read.

The most fascinating aspect of the Howard cemetery is actually outside the bounds of the graveyard. A hundred yards away next to a farm pond is a large boulder of native limestone marked (along with more recent graffiti) with a skull and crossbones and the words, "May he rest in Hell." This stone marks the grave of a horse thief, the victim of late nineteenth century frontier justice according to

Mrs. Cass Coe, who remembers hearing about the incident. "There was quite an awful talk about it. I was just a little kid," she recently told me. No one remembers who the victim was, but he was buried near where he was hanged--and outside of hallowed ground. Again Mrs. Coe, "The community got together and had a meeting and they decided to get rid of this horse stealing problem. There were lots of horse thieves in those days, and they decided to get rid of this one in a way that would frighten the rest, and that's what they did to that man." Also buried in the Howard cemetery area, according to local tradition, are a claim jumper, two men who ate stolen meat, and a man shot by the sheriff (who thus got away with murder, quite literally).

The Peoria cemetery is the largest of the three, approximately 100 by 150 yards, and the easiest to gain access to because it is located on the road entering Peoria. It was founded in the fall of 1857 when the Thomas Taylor, Sr., family moved to Kansas from Pennsylvania and camped across the river from the site of the present cemetery. Thomas Taylor, Jr., who had been in the Peoria area for three years before his parents arrived, swam his horse across the flooded Marais des Cygnes to greet them. Three days later he died of pneumonia. The Taylors decided to settle in the area to be near their son, so they bought the land across from their camp and buried their son.

After the Civil War many black settlers arrived in the Peoria area, and the north side of Peoria cemetery was designated as their burial area. Most of their graves are unmarked, as are many of the graves in all three cemeteries. One reason for this circumstance is that money was scarce in the early days, so many of the graves were marked with wooden crosses which have long since rotted away. Other graves were marked with native stone which is not so hard as marble, thus making the inscriptions difficult, if not impossible, to read.

In the nineteenth century many people died of small pox, diphtheria, typhoid, and scarlet fever, and these people found their way into Imes, Howard, and Peoria cemeteries. According to Mrs. Gladys Detwiler a girl, Goldie Blunk, attended school on a Friday, missed the next Monday, and died the next day of scarlet fever. Because the disease is very contagious there was no funeral. She is buried in the Peoria cemetery.

Other causes of death back then are rare today. Mrs. Mary Ann Bishop told me of two boys lighting firecrackers on Fourth of July. They were holding the matches in their mouths before igniting the

fuses, and these old-style matches contained a high percentage of sulfur. One of the boys died from the sulphur and the other was barely saved. Henery Mace, buried in the Howard cemetery, was only uineteen when his horse kicked him in the head and killed him.

Poisonous snakes were common in the Peoria area a hundred years ago. Mrs. Cass Coe, who has lived in Peoria nearly 90 years, recalled two stories dealing with snakebite. Her son Robert was just a baby when they lived in a log cabin near the river bottoms. One day she went in the cabin just in time to see a copperhead bite Robert on the heel. Cass squeezed all the poison out that she could, then she "run to the doctor with him, but I like to killed the horse running it hitched to a buggy, getting him down to the doctor." The doctor worked all night, but he saved the baby.

Several years later Mrs. Coe was cutting weeds in her yard with a scythe, standing spraddle-legged iu order to give good balance while swinging the sickle. Everytime she made a swing, she heard what she thought was a locust in the grass. Then, "Something jnst said to me, well look between your legs, and there was the biggest rattlesnake, timber rattler, and you know they get awful big. The mowing scythe went one way and I went the other." The rattler had eleven rattles and a button, a trophy collected after Cass had run to the honse for the shotgun and fired the blast that her husband heard all the way from the store down the road.

Gladys Detwiler remembers standing in an area called the "old corral" in March, 1909, and watehing a funeral procession eross the river and go up the hill to the Howard Cemetery. A team of white horses drew a white hearse bearing the body of two year old Arthur Adkins, and a team of blaeks drew a black hearse bearing the bodies of his parents, Ora and Hattie Adkins. The family had been on their way to Rantoul to eat dinner with friends, and they had to ford Middle Creek, swollen with recent rain. Mr. Adkins had driven the wagon down the one track road to the creek, discovering when he got there that there was no way to turn around and go back. The road, without gravel, was a muddy mess. So he decided to rush the horses across the creek, but he did not make it. The parents' bodies were found clinging together, drowned. The little boy was found floating further downstream. His starched dress had held him up for awhile, but he drowned anyway.

The most widely respected of the black settlers in the Peoria was Aunt Jane Robinson. Her first husband was killed by a falling tree while still a slave in Alabama. Soon after this fatal accident Jane and her infant son ran away and ended up in the Elmgrove

community of Kansas where they lived until they moved to Peoria. There she served as area midwife and nurse. If someone was sick, she stayed until they were well, scrubbing, baking bread, doing the wash, even giving the children their Saturday night baths. Aunt Jane was emotional about her religion. When the preaching got "strong" she would walk around the three rows of seats shouting and clapping. According to Mrs. Coe the minister would wait until Aunt Jane had quieted down, then say "It makes me happy to see her so happy." When she died in 1915, as nearly as people could calculate, she was 114 years old. She, along with her second husband, Bill Robinson, is buried in an unmarked grave in the Peoria Cemetery.

Bill was quite a contrast to Aunt Jane, and many people considered him a scamp. The community tolerated him mainly because of Aunt Jane. When she died, Bill went to live with an old man named Wash who lived on top of a steep hill near Imes. When Bill died, Wash bought the cheapest casket available, then dropped it several times coming down the hill with the body. When he finally made it to the Peoria cemetery, he buried Bill in the wrong place. Later the body and casket were reinterred, but the casket fell apart and Wash ended up just dumping everything into the new hole. On top of all these indignities, Bill was not even given a funeral.

These are just some of the interesting stories I learned about my home community when I researched the histories of these three cemeteries. Now when I pass a rural cemetery grown up with weeds, I think of it as more than just a place of burial. I know that it, like Imes, Howard, and Peoria, also serves as a repository of the folklore and history of that area.

Peoria, Kansas