

RESTORATION OF THE WORCESTER CEMETERY, OLD PARK HILL

By T. L. Ballenger

The Oklahoma Historical Society has promoted a number of notable projects, in recent years, for the preservation of history and of historical things in this state. A commendable work has been done in the statewide erection of historical markers. Much new material has been added to the Society's home collection: documents, letters, paintings, pictures, and relics. The Society has done much in recent years to awaken an interest in history and to make Oklahoma people history-minded. One of the Society's latest accomplishments is the acquisition and preservation of certain historic places that would otherwise go to wreck and ruin. The Worcester Mission cemetery at Park Hill is one of these places.

The Worcester Mission was established near Park Hill, in the Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, in December, 1836, by Dr. Samuel Austin Worcester. He was the missionary who was imprisoned in Georgia, along with Dr. Elizur Butler, for preaching to the Cherokees against the decree of the State of Georgia. After serving a portion of his sentence he was pardoned and immediately came to the newly created Cherokee Nation to teach and preach among the Old Settler Cherokees.

Dr. Worcester had been instrumental in assisting the Cherokees in setting up their printing press at New Echota, Georgia, in 1828, the first project of the kind ever to have been launched by an aboriginal tribe. When he came to the Cherokee Nation, in 1835, he brought with him a printing press with a full assortment of type, paper, and other necessary printing equipment. The boat upon which he came up the Arkansas sank, down near Fort Smith, and all of his printing supplies remained watersoaked for some time. Eventually the press and some other parts were salvaged and stored temporarily at Dwight Mission, while he waited for more paper and other supplies to replace those that had been ruined.

In the latter part of the year 1835 he set up his press at Union Mission and here was initiated the printing business in Oklahoma. He was published the first edition of the *Cherokee Almanac*; also some textbooks and a considerable number of religious tracts. But on account of the declining condition of this mission a new location was found desirable. Hence, in the fall of 1836, Worcester moved his press to the recently established community of Park Hill and organized a mission that became famous and had an uplifting influence among the Cherokees for many decades. Elias Boudinot

served as his able interpreter and assistant until his assassination in June, 1839. After Boudinot's death Edwin Archer, Samuel Newton, John F. Wheeler, John Candy, and the Reverend Stephen Foreman, worked here with Dr. Worcester as printers, teachers, interpreters, temperance workers, or preachers. Here were printed thousands of religious tracts. The New Testament and parts of the Old Testament were published in the Cherokee and in Cherokee and in the Creek language. The *Cherokee Almanac* was published here regularly for years. Thus the Worcester Mission, with its many educational and religious activities, with its farmers, horticulturists, and physicians, had perhaps a greater influence among the Indians than is commonly accorded to it. The late Miss Alice Robertson of Muskogee said of this mission burial ground: "There is no acre of earth in Oklahoma which means so much to the history of this state."¹

Worcester died and was buried here in 1859. His grave lies alongside that of his first wife, Ann Orr. His second wife, Erminia Nash, was buried at the foot of her husband's grave. Two of the daughters, Mrs. D. D. Hitchcock and Mrs. William S. Robertson, are buried near by. Years afterwards some of the relatives erected around this burial ground a woven wire fence inclosing a plot about one hundred feet square. Caleb Covell, a friend of Worcester's and the grandfather of Miss Ella Mae Covell of Tahlequah, who died at the early age of thirty-three, is buried here. Some five or six unmarked graves are in the group. Outside of this enclosure, scattered here and there at random, are a number of graves, some of them entirely unmarked, some marked only with rough stones, and a few containing inscriptions. The remains of the Reverend Hamilton Ballentine, long-time missionary to the Creeks and Cherokees, lie at rest here. His tombstone was broken into pieces and lay this way for twenty years or more.

This weird cemetery was perhaps started with the burial of the noted Elias Boudinot who was assassinated about three hundred yards south of the site in 1839. His grave lies beneath an immense rough slab though unenscribed. The factionalism, at the time of his death, was so tense and bitter that his friends probably thought it inadvisable to inscribe his tomb. Two other unknown graves lie alongside of his, originally marked with similar stones, though the covering slab of one has long since been carted away by some vandal, perhaps to serve as a hearthstone or for some other utilitarian purpose.

Berry Turner, the grandfather of Mrs. Homer Gilliland of Welling, is buried here in an unmarked grave. Charles M. De Lano, a charter member of the Masonic lodge of Fort Gibson and once superintendent of the Cherokee National Female Seminary at Park

¹ Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *Park Hill*, p. 177. Quoted from the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, October 18, 1928, p. 1, col. 4.

Hill, is buried here, though the stones have been removed from his original grave and set up in another place. About 1870 an epidemic of cholera swept through the mission community and a number of children died and were buried promiscuously over the plot, all the graves unmarked save by rough stones. Even some of these rough stone markers have been misplaced.

Soon after the mission was established, the Cherokee Nation set aside a certain acre of ground to be used for burial purposes. But this acre was never fenced. During the past century the plot was overgrown by a thicket of blackjack, hickory, red oak, and sassafras saplings and trees, all intertwined with wild grape vines, while the ground underneath was cluttered up with dead limbs and an undergrowth of stunted buckberry bushes. The acre lies in the middle of cultivated fields and pasture lands. For many years cattle and hogs roamed over it at will. Many people who have lived here for half a century or more do not know that there is such a cemetery.

Several years ago when Miss Eula E. Fullerton of Oklahoma City was teaching Oklahoma history at Northeastern State College, she and Dr. Ballenger took a group of history students out there, with hoes and axes, and cleaned off the small fenced enclosure, but it is surprising how fast wild vegetation grows when left alone.

Finally the Oklahoma Historical Society, always on the alert for the restoration and maintenance of historical sites, found an opportunity to have this site restored and made available to students of history. Through the assistance of Dr. T. L. Ballenger of Tahlequah the legal records were traced on the property. Set aside by the Cherokee Nation as a burial plot, at the end of the Cherokee government before the statehood, the site was deeded by Cherokee Chief, William C. Rogers, to the county commissioners of Cherokee County. Justice N. B. Johnson, member of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society, secured the deed to this acre of land for the Historical Society in 1952. Through the generosity of a private donor of Enid money sufficient for this work was placed at the disposal of the Society. On January 25, 1953, a committee consisting of Mr. H. B. Bass of Enid, Colonel George H. Shirk of Oklahoma City, and Miss Muriel H. Wright of the Historical Society, came to Park Hill, made an inspection of the property, decided what would be necessary to put it in satisfactory condition, and let a contract for the work of restoration. The work was to be done by Mr. Jesse Downing, a man of Cherokee lineage, under the supervision and direction of Dr. Ballenger.

The weatherman being propitious, most of the months of February and March was spent on this task. First the county surveyor ran the lines and determined the exact boundaries. The underbrush and small timber were removed from the entire area, all dead timber, limbs, and leaves were burned, trees were trimmed, the grave

mounds and grave stones were repaired and reset, the fence around the small enclosure was repaired and painted, and the entire acre was enclosed by a strong wire fence.

Mr. Shorey Ross, who attended school in the old Stephen Foreman church of this vicinity in 1884 and 1885 and who is well informed on early local history, gave helpful information and suggestions about the cemetery. The owner of the surrounding land, Mr. Von Carter of Muskogee, generously contributed to the Historical Society a strip off of his land wide enough for a road. The county commissioners of Cherokee County² then built a road leading from the County Highway to the cemetery, approximately an eighth of a mile, together with a circular drive by which cars and busses may conveniently drive through the cemetery and turn around. Parking space has been arranged. The entire road from the highway to the cemetery is also fenced, with a substantial metal and wire gate at the entrance. Signs have been painted and posted for the edification and direction of visitors to the area. A plaque has been posted on the cemetery grounds giving the names of all graves that can in any way be identified, along with other data that might enlighten the interested visitor. The task of restoration has been greater than the stranger might imagine but the promoters of it feel that it has been well worth while.

ROSTER OF PERSONS BURIED IN THIS CEMETERY

Dr. Samuel Austin Worcester.

Ann Orr Worcester, his first wife. Buried alongside Worcester.

Erminia Nash Worcester, his second wife. Buried at the foot of Worcester's grave.

Caleb Covell, friend of Dr. Worcester's and grandfather of Miss Ella Mae Covell of Tahlequah.

Sarah W. Hitchcock and Infant, daughter of Worcester and first wife of Dr. Daniel Dwight Hitchcock.

Nancy Brown Hitchcock, wife of Reverend Jacob Hitchcock. Grave not marked.

R. B. B. (?)

John Orr and William Henry Robertson, Twins.

William S. Robertson. Grave not marked.

Mrs. A. E. Robertson. Stone not inscribed. These are the parents of the late Miss Alice Robertson.

Dora Platt Robertson.

J. M. Helton.

L. C. Cannon. Buried about 1885. Grave not marked.

Ham Martin. Buried 1885. Grave not marked.

..... Henson, 1891. Grave not marked.

Austin W. Foreman, 1885, son of Reverend Stephen Foreman. Grave not marked.

²The members of the Board of County Commissioners are: Jack Ballew, chairman, Buck Thorne, Berry Littlefield. These officials by their interest and help have rendered great assistance to the project.

Erminia Nash Foreman, 1858, daughter of Reverend Stephen Foreman.
Grave not marked.

Ballard child. Grave not marked.

Nancy Thompson, teacher at the Mission. Grave not marked.

Charles M. De Lano.

Reverend Hamilton Ballentine.

S. S. Boynton.

Berry Turner, grandfather of Mrs. Homer Gilliland of Welling. Grave not marked.

Elias C. Boudinot, assassinated here in 1839.

Seventeen or more other unidentified persons. The last burial here was about 1898.