

Old cemetery holds memories long forgotten

Long-time residents cannot recall burial ground's name

By TIM WESSELMAN
Courier staff

The thick brush of a wooded Airport Road lot hides a cemetery so old there are few around who know much about it and the generations of Conroe's history it conceals.

A Conroe resident who stumbled upon the hidden cemetery was shocked by what she found.

"I just thought it was a shame for anybody to live and die and their grave stones to be just totally forgotten. That is part of our history.

"Whenever I die I don't want my grave with weeds on it," said Susan Singleton.

Mrs. Singleton said first spotted the grave stones last winter when leaves had fallen from the brush. She is now curious about its history.

Long-time residents don't even remember the name of the cemetery and simply refer to it as an old black cemetery next to Conroe College.

Willie Mae Scott moved with her family to Conroe about 50 years ago.

"It filled before I came here as a child," she said of the cemetery.

"That was the old Negro ceme-

EDITOR'S NOTE - During its centennial anniversary year, the Courier will present each Sunday a feature story on something, someone or some event of interest from the colorful past of Conroe and Montgomery County. Readers' story suggestions for "A Page From History" are welcome.

tery that adjoined the Conroe College land," Scott recalled.

Over the years, surviving family members have moved away or lost interest in a cemetery that was used earlier in the century, she said.

"They have worked on it some, but so many of the people's families have moved away and nobody seems to want the responsibility," she said.

"I work with the Rosewood Cemetery," she said, referring to another nearby predominantly black cemetery.

When she was told of some of the family names found in the cemetery, she referred further questions to her friend Maudester Hicks.

Hicks moved to Conroe with her family as a child in 1915. But even she is too young to know much about the cemetery beyond one family that has a plot in the

cemetery.

She remembers when the cemetery was kept up better, and recalls a couple buried there behind a grave marker so huge it towers above much of the surrounding brush.

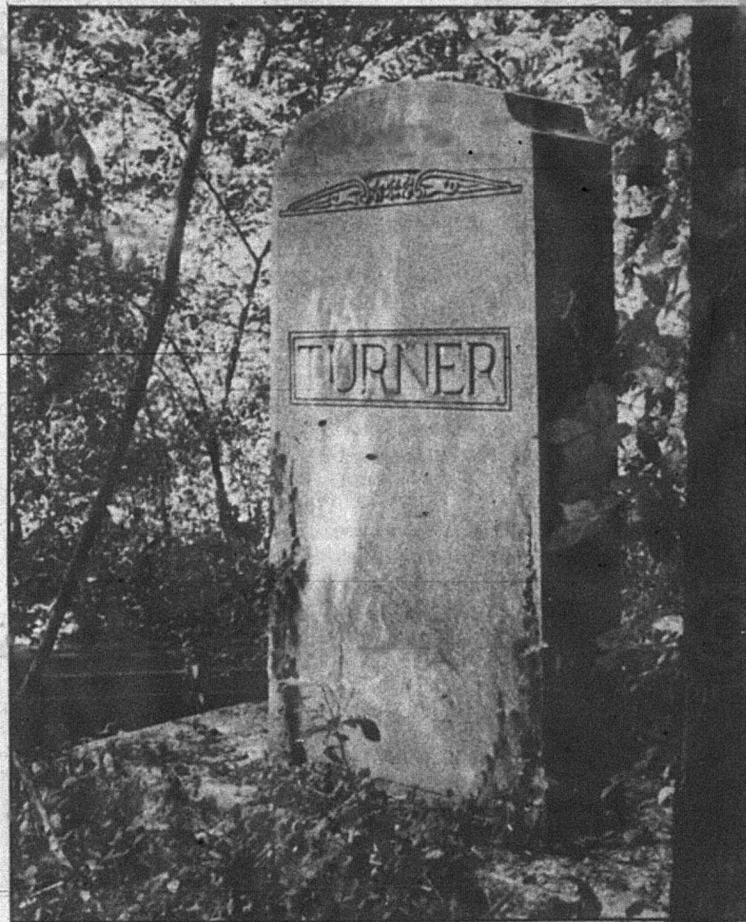
The Turner family monument is less than 100 feet from Airport Road and less than 50 feet from the adjoining Oakwood Cemetery. It stands close to six feet tall on a base that is almost as wide, but trees and brush hide it from view of anyone not willing to venture into the overgrown lot.

Oakwood, located at Texas 105 East and Airport Road, is the resting place of some of Conroe's oldest white families and is maintained by the Conroe Cemetery Association.

"They were a little better livers than a lot," Hicks said when asked how the Turners were able to afford such a grand memorial.

Hicks recalls the Turner family, including the Rev. J.J. Turner and his wife, Mittie J. Turner. Mrs. Turner was a school teacher here for so many years a school was named after her at one time, Hicks said.

Turner apparently spent most of his life serving the community. See CEMETERY, page 2-A



Staff photo by KIM RICHARDSON

The Turner family monument stands close to six feet tall.

•Cemetery

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as a minister, she recalled.

The couple's graves are marked by stones positioned behind the huge monument, which today has the tailgate of an old Ford pickup leaning against one side and the roots of a towering juniper tree prying up the other side.

Wednesday, a layer of leaves almost covering Turner's grave marker was pushed aside for reading of the stone. Turner was born in 1862 and died in 1912. His wife, whose marker was also covered with leaves, outlived him to marry again.

M.J. Turner Cambell was born in 1875 and died in 1933.

Mrs. Turner's daughter, Rowena Owens, is a good friend of Ms. Hicks. Although Ms. Owens has not lived in Texas for many years, she continued to maintain the Turner plot until illness in recent years has prevented her from doing much, Ms. Hicks said.

Ms. Hicks said she doesn't know much else about the old cemetery.

"A lady we buried Sunday could have really helped you a lot," she said.

She spoke of Anna Henderson. Her passing leaves very few people who know much about the era in which the cemetery was used.

"I was looking at that place the other day and said, 'Oh my goodness. I wish something could be done to get the place cleaned up. It's a shame those people have to be out there in woods,'" Ms. Hicks said.

Her words echoed those of Mrs. Singleton.

Mrs. Singleton discovered the cemetery as she gazed out the window of a vehicle traveling on Airport Road last winter.

There weren't many leaves out at the time she was able to see what looked a little like an old mattress leaning up against a tree.

Mrs. Singleton, who owns and operates Salty's Icehouse on Airport Road north of Conroe with her husband Michael Singleton, was curious but couldn't get a closer look because her leg was broken at the time.

She and her husband finally took a closer look recently and

were surprised to see grave stones peaking out from behind large trees.

"You're walking through the woods and you see these grave-stones. It's like something out of a horror movie," she said.

Head stones visible to those who venture into the spooky wooded lot have inscriptions like

• "Dtr. Eliza Evans ... Born November 20, 1870; Died March 28, 1912." This marker is little more than 50 feet from Airport Road and Oakwood Cemetery fence.

• "Ollie K. Pitts ... 1899 ... 1942, and J.C. Pitts Sr. December 14, 1876 ... September 1966" One of these markers has fallen from its pedestal, which is covered by an ant bed. Rubber tubing and car parts cover the Pitts family graves.

• "J ... Jones; Born 10-15 1874; Died 4-26 ... Age 67" This marker appeared to be a tall tablet fashioned from concrete, with the inscription made with a stick or finger while the cement was still wet.

Many inscriptions are almost illegible. Some graves are marked by small cement mounds that barely peek about the thick mat of leaves covering the woods' floor.

It would be impossible to do a thorough inventory of the cemetery without at least a machete, if not a considerable amount of brush clearing.

Oscar Johnson, who operates the Collins and Johnson Funeral Home, said he assembled a group of people who were ready to clear the brush several years ago. However, he stopped after deciding he needed to get permission from those responsible for the cemetery.

In the 30 years Johnson has worked at his predominantly black funeral home, he can not remember burying anyone at the old black cemetery.

Efforts this past week to contact management of the Clarence Lewis Jr. Funeral Home, which also serves Conroe's black community, were unsuccessful.

Johnson, meanwhile, to this day is not sure who is responsible for the old cemetery.