

# 300 volunteers clean up Oakwood Cemetery

By JIM MAGILL  
Courier staff

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An estimated 300 volunteers turned out on a beautiful fall Saturday to give something back to their community and preserve an important part of Conroe's past.

The volunteers took part in an effort to clean out two sections of Oakwood Cemetery, at the intersection of State Highway 105 and 10th Street. The cemetery is the oldest one in the city that has separate sections for white and black people.

"This is the roots of the town," said David Metcalf, owner of Metcalf Funeral Directors, one of the organizers of Saturday's cleanup.

Metcalf said the Friends of Conroe helped organize the effort, which brought civic organizations together with local businesses to take part in a project to build community pride.

In the southern section of the cemetery,

historically reserved for white residents, volunteers sawed limbs, cleared brush, raked leaves, removed broken concrete benches, planted flowers and did whatever else they could to improve the area's appearance.

To the north, in the section where many of the area's earliest black residents are buried, and which was much more heavily overgrown than the other section, tractors and chainsaws were used to clear the site of large trees and brush.

Clarence Lewis, owner of Clarence Lewis & Sons Mortuary, who is spearheading the cleanup of that portion of the cemetery, said he plans to come out to the site every day until the entire area is cleared.

Metcalf said all of the labor and equipment for the cleanup were donated.

"No money has been paid to anybody," he said.

First-, second- and third-grade girls, members of Brownie Troop 8096 of Mont-

gomery, and their moms and dads turned out to perform a service to the community.

"I wanted to help make the graves nice," said Lorin Kellan, 7.

Betty Skinner of Conroe, said she, her husband, children and grandchildren – 11 people in all – came out to clean up the family plot.

"This is wonderful," she said of the volunteer effort. "I wish we could do it once a year. They used to do that and have a picnic lunch."

She said the cemetery association, which is responsible for maintaining the site, comprises mostly elderly people and has not been very active in recent years.

"It's time for younger people to take over the association," she said.

Paula McClain, the mother of one of the Peet DAR Club students, said the club is

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See **CEMETERY**, Page 8A

# Cemetery/From 1A

taking on the cleanup as a community service project. In addition to helping to restore an old burial site, the students are taking rubbings of headstones and interviewing community leaders about the historic importance of the cemetery.

The club plans to submit the results of their project to a national competition.

"I think it's good the community gets together. We've uncovered things I didn't know were here," said Ryan Grayless, 13, a member of the club.

Buster Cavel, a member of the Conroe Friendly City Kiwanis Club, said he hoped the volunteer effort would spur renewed interest in the city's cultural heritage.

"That's the only way we're going to have a better community. Projects like this are very good for individuals to come together and get to know each other," he said.

Cavel, a 66-year-old African-American, said he recalled when the segregated portion of the burial ground was still in use.

"They used to bury them here when I was quite young," he said.

Lewis said, although the historic black cemetery is full, one would hardly know it, because most of the graves are unmarked. He said the cemetery was started in the mid-19th century when the railroad was being built through Montgomery County.

Many workers who died bringing the railroad to the area were laid to rest in Oakwood, he said.

Civic groups that organized cleanup teams included the Lake Conroe Rotary Club, Conroe Noon Lions Club, Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Club of Peet Junior High School, Girl Scout Cadet and Senior Troops 8319 and 8747, Brownie Troop 896, the Key Club of Covenant Christian School and the Conroe

Friendly City Kiwanis Club.

Metcalf fielded a team of volunteers, as did Furrow Building Materials, which also donated work gloves for the effort. Other local businesses that contributed equipment and/or labor were H & H Tree Service, Maxie's Professional Tree Service and British Tree Surgeons, which removed large, dead limbs from trees and cleared out brush; and Wakefield Landscape Services and Lawns by Louie, which provided landscaping work and lawnmowers.

Western Waste donated use of a Dumpster and BFI lent portable toilet facilities to the effort. Pepsi donated drinks for the volunteer workers.



Staff photo by JERRY BAKER

Fronec Reece, president of Conroe Friendly City Kiwanis, uses an ax to clear underbrush from a tombstone in Oakwood Cemetery. More than 300 volunteers joined a cleanup effort there Saturday.