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Old cemetery falling into decay, disrepair

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CONROE — The last time Luzella Richards visited her grandfather's grave, it was slowly being buried by nature's own forces.

Throughout the cemetery, fallen trees, high grass and brush obscured most of the old markers that designated the final resting place for many of Conroe's earliest black settlers.

Tombstones were torn away from graves and litter defiled many of the plots.

The scene was not what Richard's grandfather, the late James Dorsey, had envisioned for the land when he purchased it as burial ground for his relatives and fellow blacks near the turn of the century.

Referred to as "the cemetery without a name" or the "community cemetery," the graveyard has existed in relative seclusion for decades, hidden among the woods behind the predominantly white Oakwood Cemetery at the intersection of Tenth Street and Highway 105 East.

It is said to be one of the oldest burial grounds in Montgomery County, serving as the final resting place for dozens of blacks who settled here during the post-Civil War era.

Years ago, members of Conroe's black community marched through town each Memorial Day with rakes and shovels to give the graveyard its annual cleaning.

It is now decades overdue.

The cemetery was maintained for awhile after the last burial in 1966, but the area is once again snake-infested and filled with debris and broken tombstones.

Richards said recent efforts to round up family members of the deceased for a group clean-up effort have failed because people "just aren't interested in preserving the old burial ground."

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"You just can't get them together," she said. "They just don't want to do it. People dump trash and everything else out there on tops of those graves, but you can't clean it if you don't have the help."

Richards said interest in keeping up the graveyard waned when the Rosewood Cemetery located just around the corner was established as the new burial ground for the community's blacks.

"It was as though the old one didn't matter anymore," she said.

Dorsey, a Civil War veteran, bought the land from the Conroe Cemetery Association in the early 1900s for \$17.50. The land is said to have been originally donated to the association by the Santa Fe Railroad.

In fact, legend has it that the railroad used the land as burial ground for some Indians who died while working for Santa Fe.

Sulla Witeside, another of Dorsey's surviving granddaughters, said Dorsey purchased the land because he wanted a "proper place" to bury his family.

"With all the segregation stuff going on after the war, we couldn't go with the white people," she said. "He had to have some place to bury them."

She said her grandfather, who was a carpenter and an undertaker, made most of his money building and selling caskets. He was so generous that he often built and gave caskets to families who couldn't afford to pay him, recalls Witeside.

"He was one of those big hearts. He just wanted to give all the time," she said.

Witeside's son, Clarence Lewis, said he tried to clean the graveyard one day last summer, but gave up because the ground was too wet from rain-fall.

He said he is still interested in a one-man clean-up effort if time allows and he can get the proper equipment to do the job. He would also like to construct a fence around the property and name the cemetery after his great-grandfather.

"After all, we've got a lot of relatives buried out there," he said. "A lot of Conroe folks do."

Conroe couple Horace and Oveta Wright, who spent much of 1978 cataloging graves from area cemeteries for the Montgomery County Historical Society, said the "cemetery without a name" is one of several abandoned graveyards in the county.

"They're scattered all over the place, mostly in the woods where you wouldn't expect them," she said. "We just peered over the fence and thought we saw some tombstones."

Mrs. Wright said they discovered trees growing through concrete-covered graves, which had buckled over the years. In some areas, dips in the ground served as the only indication of graves. Tombstones were either shattered from decay, or missing altogether.

But she and her husband cataloged what they could from the readable tombstones in an effort to "preserve history for future generations."

RUBBING A CRAYON over paper brings out tombstone inscriptions in the sadly neglected "cemetery without a name" on Conroe's east side. Horace and Oveta Wright have spent much of their time in recent years tracking down long-abandoned and forgotten graveyards here.

Photo by RICHARD CARSON



JAMES DORSEY

