Good Cheer at the Harlingen Cemetery

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The title may read like an oxymoron, but knowledge of Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead will dispel that notion. On the evening of 11/1 the normally quiet Harlingen Cemetery will perhaps be experiencing its first major Day of the Dead celebration. It is a celebration because descendents of the deceased are honoring those gone but not forgotten.

The ceremonies of November 1, All Saints Day, and November 2, All Souls Day, have their antecedents in the Mayan and Aztec cultures, later overlaid by Catholicism. A tradition of Mexico holds that one dies three times. First is the physical expiration, second is when the body is interred, and third when the deceased is no longer remembered by the living. Indeed, it is the latter that the Day of the Dead rituals are meant to postpone.

The site of the festivities, the Harlingen Cemetery, originated in a strange manner. William Zachary Weems, Sr. had come to Mercedes in 1907 to build irrigation canals, but by the following year had planted about 200 acres of sugarcane near Harlingen. Weem's son Robert had come from Houston to Harlingen in a railroad freight car with the family's possessions. Weems, together with L.F. Hathaway and Allen Barbee, then constructed a syrup mill in which to process the cane. Barbee, who had come from the cane-growing area south of Houston and had experience with it there, was to run the factory.

Years later, Robert's older sister Lillian Weems Baldrige recounted to a newspaper reporter a story about Harlingen's first grave. Her brothers Will and Robert Kent worked in their father's syrup mill. Robert had cleaned out a large vat used for boiling syrup. To keep from walking through it with his boots on, he attempted to walk on the adjacent ledge, then slipped and fell into a full vat of scaldingly hot syrup. He died at age 17 on 12/10/09. There was no cemetery laid out for the new town of Harlingen. Elmer Willams (E.W.) Anglin, Hill's right hand man, wired Hill, who was in St. Louis. Upon learning the circumstances, Mr. Hill wired back instructions, and a hasty survey was made, a short wagon trail was cut through the brush and a place cleared for the grave. Naturally Hill did not want a cemetery too close to the planned townsite and the lots he intended to sell. Still its location had to be accessible. The area he selected was on Mexico Street (later South F Street). This was the major route to go to San Benito via the low water crossing in the Arroyo Colorado and was a little over a mile from the center of town. Robert's grave was and is close to the existing road. W.H. Wheaton assists in the funeral as does Mrs. Weller. Young Joseph Ogan of the hotel family is soon to become the second person buried in the cemetery. Others who died earlier in the area are reburied in the cemetery.
In February 1911, the Harlingen Civic Club through the Cemetery Association, which had been formed and spearheaded by Mrs. Augustus Weller, Mrs. Andrew Golderammer, and later Mr. Brunneman, requested that the town appoint a cemetery commission. It did so by naming C.W. Clift, E.W. Anglin, and B.F. Surface as cemetery trustees. Hill, as president of the Harlingen Land and Water Company, sold 7.6 acres, adjacent to and around the area where Robert was buried, to the cemetery trustees for $1.00. The deed was signed on 2/1/12.

Some notable individuals buried in the cemetery include James Dishman (1934), pioneer rancher; James Lockhart (1947), first postmaster; Osco Morris (1931), early town official and real estate developer; and David L. Hinojosa (1952), Texas Ranger.

Even in death there was a separation of those of various ethnic origins. Graves in one section were for Hispanics and in another for Anglos. Other divisions were for blacks and for babies. This segregation remained until the cemetery property was deeded to the city in early May 1947. In 1982 the Tip of Texas Genealogy Society updated and indexed a list of those buried in the cemetery. It is to be found in the genealogy section stacks at the Harlingen Library.

It was in 1984 that the Texas Historical Commission erected a detailed marker for and in the cemetery. This came about by the thorough research and follow-through efforts of Mrs. Menton (Betty) Murray.

Colorful adornments, decorated altar, flowers, papier maché figures, music, special foods, and candles – all are part of the festivities. The Day of the Dead activities at the cemetery will allow all in the community to recognize and pay tribute to those who contributed so much to our lives and to make our city the success it now enjoys. Starting at 5:30 pm graves may be decorated, and 6:00 will mark the start of planned events at the F Street cemetery.