The Harlingen Cemetery

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[The following is a transcript of a document submitted to the Texas Historical Commission in application to obtain an historical marker for the Harlingen Cemetery. Thanks to Mrs. Murray's research efforts and documentation, a marker was obtained in 1984 and erected in the middle of the cemetery.]

Turn off F Street into Harlingen's only cemetery and drive to the center of the cemetery, turn left at the E Street entrance. All along this newly paved road (the only road in the cemetery) are many gravestones which tell much of the history of Harlingen.

The first person to be buried here was a teenager, Robert Keen Weems, born April 18, 1893 and died December 10, 1909. Lillian Weems Baldridge wrote "My brother Robert had come down from Houston in a freight car with our household goods. Bob called it coming to the Valley in his side door Pullman. Robert's grave is the first in Harlingen. [He was scolded to death after accidentally falling into a boiling vat of sugarcane syrup in his father's factory.] The result of a tragic venture in sugar cane, like rice, was a crop unfitted for the soil. [This is a mistaken interpretation for the early 20th century demise of the sugarcane industry in the Valley.] My father, Mr. James Hathaway, and Mr. Barbee put in a syrup mill, but we were too far away from a market and that too failed. [Actually it failed 10 years before the last sugar mill closed.]" Mrs. Lillian Weems Baldridge came to the Valley in 1907 with her parents. Others who died earlier were moved to the Harlingen Cemetery. George Dorough, born October 12, 1868; died February 5, 1904, was one such grave. The Weems' lot and Dorough lot lie adjacent to one another. [along the F Street fence line] Weem's funeral cortege included a riderless horse with boots turned backwards in the stirrups. The horse was led by William H. Wheaton.

Having a need for a cemetery with Robert Weems' tragic death, the Harlingen Cemetery came into existence legally when Lon C. Hill, Harlingen's founder, as president of the Harlingen Land and Water Company, sold to B. F. Surface, C. W. Clift, and E. W. Anglin, Trustees for the Harlingen Cemetery for the sum of one dollar, seven point six acres to be used for a cemetery only. This deed was signed on February 1, 1912 and was duly recorded in the County Clerk's office in Brownsville, Texas on the tenth day of February, 1920.

The description in the deed is "a parcel of land lying and being in the County of Cameron, State of Texas, and being all Farm Block 164, containing 7.6 acres of land, Harlingen Land and Water Company Subdivision, as the same appears upon the official map of said subdivision of record in the Map Records of Cameron County, Texas to which map and its record reference is made for all purposes, said Block 164 described by metes and bounds as follows: Beginning at a stake the Southwest corner of Block 160 of said Subdivision; Thence South 0° 23' East along the West line of Block 164 and East line of main road 541.4' to a stake in north line of main canal right of way 764.3' to a stake. This stake being S.W. corner of Block 161. Thence N. 0° 23' W. along West line of Block 161, 284.7' to stake. This stake being the S.E. corner of Block 160. Thence S.
89° 37' W. along South line of Block No. 160 to point of beginning. Being Farm Block No. 164 containing 7.6 acre, as surveyed and subdivided by the Harlingen Land and Water Company."

The legal description does not do justice to the beauty of the area. Mesquite trees and other native trees abound. The grave markers in the different sections vary as to the ethnic background of those interred. There are many large stones, beautifully crafted and some small headstones, in sections one and two which are to the right and left of the road leading from F Street. According to the early map of the cemetery these two sections included the "American Section" to E Street. And the map indicated the land east of the E Street road to D Street included the "Mexican Section."(6) ("American" and "Mexican" are not the author's verbage.) This was the division until April 2, 1947 [the date that the 7.6 acres was deeded to the city.]. The two remaining Trustees, C. W. Clift and E. W. Anglin, deeded the cemetery property to the City of Harlingen. This document was recorded on May 9, 1947. (7)

The "Mexican" Section is also beautiful. The markers of this section are plain white crosses made out of cement, markers with the Blessed Mother on them, or possibly a crucifix, on some a rosary, on others a picture of the deceased affixed to the monument. Many of this section have a curbing around their family plots, setting them apart from others. Blacks are few in number, but here is a special section for them as well as a section for babies.

San Benito, Texas, about six miles from Harlingen, had a cemetery of its own which was located north of San Benito on the road to Rio Hondo. This "old" cemetery served a purpose until 1928, when Mont Meta came into existence. Mont Meta was located several miles north on the Rio Hondo Road. Then Mont Meta grew rapidly, and some who had lots in the earlier cemeteries bought lots in Mont Meta. Records both from St. Benedict's Catholic Church in San Benito and from Sacred Heart of Mary Catholic Church on C Street in Harlingen show a steadily increasing number of burials in Mont Meta and Restlawn Cemetery which came into existence in 1930 near La Feria.

Sacred Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Harlingen was a mission church of St. Benedict's. The bridge across the Arroyo Colorado between the towns of San Benito and Harlingen was located a few blocks south of the Harlingen Cemetery. On the early cemetery map, F Street was shown as the "San Benito Highway." [Before becoming F Street it was also named Mexico Street.] Coming from San Benito approaching Harlingen was first the bridge, next the cemetery, and then about ten blocks closer to town was Harlingen's (first) Hospital, then the "Four Corners" which was an intersection [Harrison] with a filling station on each of its corners and a true crossroads. Then right several blocks east to the Missouri Pacific Railway tracks and the center of Harlingen not more than two blocks north. Sacred Heart of Mary Church was roughly twelve blocks away from the Harlingen Cemetery, and it was customary in those days to walk from the church following the wooden casket as it was carried to the cemetery for burial.

Located then just off a main thoroughfare between the two towns, the cemetery had an important location. It was never remote; however, there was a time when it was neglected. A sexton or caretaker took care of the cemetery for many years, however, when vandalism and wrecking of small white crosses took place, the city commission authorized, in 1974, the money for a barbed wire topped fence to be constructed around the cemetery with two entrance gates that could be locked at night. This took care of the
vandalism, but tall grass was allowed to grow and the cemetery looked at times uncared for.

Mrs. A. H. Weller is credited with organizing the Harlingen Cemetery Association. In an article written in 1960 in the Valley Morning Star the caption under the picture of Mrs. Weller and her daughters read "She organized the Harlingen Cemetery Association in 1906 and was (its) president and instrumental in its maintenance until her death in 1944."(8) During Mrs. Weller's years of service, Mr. A. Goldammer and Mr. Brunneman also served on the Cemetery Board of the Association. Mrs. Goldammer served as its secretary-treasurer for some years. The Harlingen Cemetery Association records reflect that E. H. Pinkerton was sexton, and as such, signed all burial permits from February 1, 1932 until July 1945. After that he dug graves only for a short while. His sexton's salary was twenty-five dollars a month. Mrs. Goldammer as treasurer received five dollars a month until July 1945 and the ten dollars. Then Mr. Pinkerton signed more records, on and off and on, until 1957. The last burial permit that Mr. Pinkerton signed was numbered 7917.(9) On July 5, 1917, the book begins with Louis Czar, buried in the "Mexican" Section with A. Goldammer as mortician.

Some familiar old family names on the first page were Mrs. John Morris – October 10, 1917, William Frank – December 10, 1917, and Thomas Verser – December 18, 1917, also a Denton and a Wilhite. (10) Martien Olivarez – February 16, 1918 and Luz Anna Rodriguez – February 23, 1918 were among those listed the next year. (11) The Tip of Texas Genealogical Society recorded in 1962 the graves in the Harlingen Cemetery, and these findings were indexed, corrected, and alphabetized in 1982. In the 1982 edition, of the total number recorded, there were forty persons buried in recognizable graves from the first grave through 1919, however these included those buried in Sections One and Two only. (12)

Apoplexy, old age, gunshot wound causing death, pneumonia, cancer, tuberculosis, and peritonitis were some of the causes of death listed in the church records, but the cause of death was not noted in the Association records. (13) Only those buried in the Harlingen Cemetery were considered in this history. Eufrasia Ibarra was listed as being 118 years of age when he died on March 11, 1938 and was buried the following day. Two of the blacks listed were Emile Sayon, sixty-seven years old, having died 9-29-35 and buried two days later, and Emile Sayon, an eighty-one year old diabetic who died 9-18-36. Both were born in Louisiana and were listed in the death register by two different priests' signatures. (14) The Sacred Heart of Mary Death Record from January 1927 to July 6, 1952 listed many old family names. There is no record of the total number of persons buried in the cemetery, but the author counted those listed in the year 1938 in the death records of the Sacred Heart Church. The total number for that one year was 771. It interested the author to see that the largest group age-wise to die that year were the infants to ten years, with 278 falling in that category. The next largest group was the other end of the spectrum of ages, 70-80 and more. There were 96 of those with three living past one hundred. Next was the 50 to 70 group with 85 total. The remaining four ten year groups were so close together that they hardly varied, with the last group being from 10-20 years. (15)

Two people who were buried in the Harlingen Cemetery whose names appeared in the Marker History for the first Harlingen Hospital were the nurse who thought of the idea for the hospital and was able to carry out her plans. Marie Yeager, who died
July 22, 1928, two years after the doors were closed on the little hospital. Her burial permit was #125, and she was buried in the family lot of Burt Dearing alongside Mrs. N. J. Dearing. The other was Atilano Sanchez who died in the summer of 1923. He died in the Harlingen Hospital of a gunshot wound inflicted by a peace officer.

Other familiar names found in the Harlingen Cemetery were James Lockhart, the first postmaster of Harlingen, the infant son and daughter of Sam Botts, who was mayor of Harlingen when the cemetery was deeded to the City in 1947. (16) Perry Ray Liston, son of W. O. Liston, died November 21, 1923. He was brother to R. W. Liston. Cameron County Deputy Sheriff Horace Johnson, who was also with the Texas Corps III Engineers, died June 9, 1928 and was another person of note. Just last March 25, 1983, the obituary column in the *Valley Morning Star* carried the death of his widow, Ella Maude Johnson, who was to be buried that day beside her husband in the Harlingen City Cemetery. (17) She was survived by Maxine Harris, a niece, of San Benito and who lived in Harlingen as a young lady. Another important person was Lupe F. Rodriguez, who died June 17, 1968. He played professional baseball for the Cincinnati Reds. His tombstone is unique in that it has a baseball glove and a baseball incised upon its surface.

David L. Hinojosa, Texas Ranger, died on August 11, 1932 at the age of fifty four. His tombstone has set in the headstone a photograph of the deceased with a rifle held across his knees. J. A. Robbins, who died March 20, 1949, will be remembered by many as the janitor and custodian at Harlingen High School for many years. Sam P. Nicholson, a blacksmith in Harlingen, died on April 24, 1926.

The major American wars and conflicts had casualties or veterans of those wars buried in the little cemetery on F Street. Augustus O. Coleman, who died September 22, 1926 at the age of eighty nine years, was a Civil War veteran. Ralph M. McCraney, who died June 2, 1929, was a veteran of the Spanish American War.

World War I veterans included:

- Samuel Dickinson, Corporal in Cavalry, died 1916
- Wm. Horace Johnson, Texas Engineers died June 9, 1928
- Harry D. Yates, Private in Army, died March 26, 1959
- R. L. Philabaum, died December 19, 1939
- Lawrence McFarland, U. S. Army, Texas, died December 26, 1958
- John J. Ryan, Cpl, South Dakota, died September 14, 1943
- Lee Roy Johnson, Private, Texas, November 19, 1945 (negro) date of death
- Manuel Olivares, Jr., Texas Private, September 25, 1918 date of death
- Michael P. Sieger, Texas Private, February 17, 1959 date of death
- Leonard I. Smith, Sgt., Texas, July 15, 1935 date of death
- Wm. F. Teddle, Louisiana Sgt., 1891-1928
- Merle H. Brunem, Texas Private U. S. Army, February 14, 1942 date of death
- Blas Leal, Texas, Private, August 28, 1933
- Ralph Emerson Utley, Texas, 1st Lt. Medical Corps, December 19, 1946

Veterans of World War II interred in the Harlingen Cemetery include:

- Charles E. La Turno, U. S.A. Corps, Lt., died June 23, 1944
- Guadalupe Garcia, PFC, AAF, died May 1, 1949
- Gustavo Bustamente, Pvt., Texas, Cav. died March 22, 1944
- Carlos C. Cavio, Texas, Pvt., Inf., died September 12, 1944
- Filiberto C. Atkinson, Tex., PFC, Eng., Inf., died August 13, 1944
Marcos C. Burke, Tex., PFC Bomb Sq. AAF, died February 27, 1959 and is buried at the foot of the grave of Marcos Burke, born October 21, 1881, died Mary 24, 1938

Thomas M. Yelvington, Geo., Staff Sgt., Bomb Sq., died February 10, 1944

David Owen died June 10, 1944, Ensign Pilot USN Air Corp

Pvt. Ramiro Delgado, died in France, July 11, 1944

Sam Ed Simmons, Sgt., USAA Corps, died October 2, 1944

Joe Lionel Blakeney, Tex., Sgt. AAF, died July 2, 1957

John B. Richardson, Tex., PFC Pioneer Mar. Div., died April 30, 1950

Phillip Slayden, Tex., SRUS Navy, July 3, 1951

Arturo Bermea, Tex. Pvt., Inf., died November 14, 1944

Murry E. Eddings, Tex., S. Sgt. Cavalry, died June 1, 1949

Guadalupe Escobedo, Jr., Tex., PFC US Army died November 4, 1961

Emilio Avila, Tex., Pvt., AAF, GRO TNO, Inst'l, died February 12, 1951

Antonio Rodriguez Silva, Tex., Pvt., Inf., died April 26, 1945

Alfredo B. Nava, Tex., S. Sgt., Labor Supv., died December 3, 1947

Veterans of the Korean Conflict include:

Ralph Garcia, Tex., PFC Marines, died February 22, 1952


Florencio Gomez Flores, PFC, Tex, U. S. Marine Corps, November 21, 1951

Luis Pedraza Martinez, Tex., PFC ABN – no burial date given

An Emma Lena Dix, Illinois, Army Nurse Corps, with a death date of August 16, 1950, had no Information as to what conflict or war. Clarence Jackson, Louisiana, Pvt. lst Class, Pioneer Inf., died March 9, 1939, "negro" section, with no other information given as to what war or conflict. (18)

The Harlingen Cemetery is the only cemetery in modern times to have existed within the boundaries of Harlingen. It is referred to in the church records and the sexton's records as the Harlingen Cemetery and has been known by that name as long as Emmett Anglin (son of E. W. Anglin, an original Trustee) can remember. Emmett Anglin never remembers it being called by a Spanish name. (19) However, in an interview with Henry Thomae, Fred Elizondo, Jr. and Vicente Delgado, all morticians of the Thomae-Garza Funeral Home, Mr. Thomae remembers four or five old timers referring to the cemetery and calling it "El Campo de los Santos". In the same interview, Mr. Delgado recalled that his own grandfather, Francisco Martinez, who was killed on the Harding Ranch, was buried in the Harlingen Cemetery. (20) And so it goes, many people remember with nostalgia their own or other's loved ones who lie in the quiet little seven acres of ground along or not far from the little road that could tell so much. It is not just a place in history that is closed forever to memories. People who have lots can still have their loved ones buried there. It is true that the purchase of lots is impossible today, however, like Emmett Anglin who had a place for four, buried his two and a half year old daughter there and a sister-in-law and expects to use the two remaining lots for himself and his wife when that time comes. (21)

The Harlingen Cemetery was included in the Harlingen Register of Historic Places in a resolution of the Harlingen Museum Board on the first day of September, 1981. The City Commissioners in regular meeting approved this resolution at their next regular
meeting. The Community Development Advisory Board voted to approve funding for the renovation of Harlingen Cemetery in their eighth year project. The City Commission approved this project and the renovation work began. A grant from HUD up to $47,550 has been approved and the little road has been paved, two new beautiful gates, designed in keeping with the age of the cemetery, have been built. Dead trees have been removed and the grounds are being leveled at this time and work is being done by the son of the long time sexton, Mr. Pinkerton, to use his skill in resetting the headstones in need of restoration.

Some records have been lost but much interest has been generated in recent months by many people in this renovation project. It is proof that there are many who care. Soon the work will be complete; however, the jewel that is the cemetery will be polished and will shine in the hearts of many for many years to come. In applying for a state marker we hope to bring attention to the visitor and the passerby who drops in to browse, that even though it has a short life as cemeteries go, almost eighty years, that we have progressed in that time. No longer are the sections divided between the Anglo, the Hispanic, the Black and the babies, for in recent years there is a mingling just as God intended-- as we are all one, here and hereafter. In the stillness of the cemetery, it is beautiful to reflect on these things while at the same time we are telling the world that our cemetery is rich in heritage.

APPENDIX

TITLE RECORD

John Ireland, Governor of the State of Texas, issued Patent No. I5, Volume 90, to Richard King, Assignee on September 12, 1985; this covered 640 acres of land in Cameron County, Texas, including the site of Harlingen Cemetery.

The last Will and Testament of Richard King, probated January 2, 1886, recorded in Sup. "C", Page 313, Real Estate Records, Cameron County, Texas, left all of his property, including site of Harlingen Cemetery, to his wife, Henrietta M. King.

By Warranty Deed, dated March 11, 1904, recorded in Vol. "M", Page 557, Deed Records, Cameron County, Texas, Henrietta M. King (H.M.) King deeded the 640 acres patented to Richard King, above, to Lon C. Hill of Cameron County, Texas.

By Warranty Deed, dated September 20, 1907, recorded in Volume "V", Page 165, Deed Records, Cameron County, Texas, Lon C. Hill conveyed the land including the site of Harlingen Cemetery to the Harlingen Land and Water Company.

Footnotes


(3) Ibid, Star, Section D 2.

(4) Pinkerton, E. H., "Record of Lots and Blocks Sold in Harlingen Cemetery", unpublished.

(5) County Records, Cameron County Book of Deeds, Book 78, pages 410 and 411.

(6) Map of Cemetery – old but undated and unsigned. (Found in Memorabilia in city files).


(8) Ibid, Star, Section D 2.

(9) City Records as recorded by the Cemetery Association, an official book of recording burial permits from July 5, 1917.

(10) Ibid.

(11) St. Benedict's Records, San Benito, Texas, when Harlingen Sacred Heart Church was a mission church until 1927. The records were dated from 1914 to 1941.


(14) Ibid.

(15) Death Register, Sacred Heart of Mary Church, Harlingen, January 1927 to July 6, 1952.


(20) Interview with Henry Thomae, Fred Elizondo, Jr., and Vincente Delgado by Betty N. Murray on January 9, 1984.

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