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Clinton Indian Cemetery

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CLINTON INDIAN CUSTOMS



Photos courtesy of Mary E. Smith

CLINTON INDIAN CEMETERY BY MARY E. SMITH

Just north of the Clinton Indian Hospital, 1½ miles east of Clinton, is a U.S. Government cemetery which was established in 1926 as a free burial spot for American Indians. This cemetery was set aside on U.S. Indian land before the Indian Hospital was built in 1933. It sits on a hill, high above valleys to the east and west. To the east are the old Rock Island Railroad (now Farmrail) and Turtle Creek. In the west valley at the time the cemetery was established were beautiful trees, a cow pond, wild flowers, and bounteous pasture land. There are no fences around the cemetery; it's on a high, open prairie.

On June 24, 1926, the first grave was prepared on this hill. It was dug by hand and was wide and very deep. The person buried that day was Cloud Chief, chief of the local Arapahoes. He wasn't an old man. The inscription on the tall tombstone that stands today indicates that he was born in 1862 and died in 1926 at age 64. This burial is one that will forever live in my memory, for I was a barefoot white child who observed the ceremony while keeping my distance down the hill to the west. I had a perfect view from my perch in a tree on the high side of the cow pond where several neighborhood children and I swam and played in the surrounding trees.

I watched with gaping mouth and strained eyes as the Indian wagons gathered. One wagon carried only one squaw sitting alone, wrapped in a beautiful multi-colored blanket, and led behind it a handsome paint pony, bridled and covered with a beautiful blanket. They, I believe, were the widow of Cloud Chief and his horse. I don't know who drove the team that pulled the flat-bed wagon, nor do I know if Cloud Chief had any children—or if the woman was his wife. There is no grave marker that I have been able to find in this cemetery for any other person named Cloud Chief. Of course, in those days the Indian women kept their own names. My parents had bought eighty acres of Indian land, getting what was known as "patent" from the U.S. Government. The name of the man on the patent was Undershirt, and his wife's name was Night Walker.

Indians came in wagons and on horseback. I don't remember how the body was carried. From our viewing tree tops, several of the neighborhood children and I watched spellbound, even though we were a little frightened. The reason for the grave being so wide and deep was made clear

as the ceremony progressed. The Indian men untied the horse, led him across the open grave, and shot him dead. Then they rolled him into the grave, covered him with his blanket, and partially filled the grave. Next, they put in Cloud Chief's body. I remember seeing many beautiful blankets and other articles that must have been his very personal belongings. The grave was then filled, and the sounds of tom-toms, wailing, and chanting filled the air. Soon all the wagons were gone, and no one was left at the cemetery except the lonely woman who sat on Cloud Chief's grave. When the sun sank in the west, we children had to come down from our tree tops and scatter for home, while the woman still sat on the grave.

It was a hot June that year, and the day Cloud Chief was buried was no exception. This night, we children took our plunge in the big cement water tank where the horses and cows drank, cooled our bodies, and tried to calm our excitement. I told Mama and Papa of all that I had seen and experienced that day. Papa explained that, according to his Indian friend, Yellow Bull, the horse was sent along so that Cloud Chief could ride him in the "Happy Hunting Ground," where his soul would go.

I was just about to calm down when we heard a long, loud wailing from the east. The crying and moaning were from the grave; the woman spent the night sitting atop Cloud Chief's grave. This too, we were told, was the custom of the Indians in their years before the white man came.

I am now 75 years old and still live near the cemetery. Over the years, I have known of the burials of other native Americans, including men who served our country in the world wars, Korea, and Viet Nam. On my early-morning walks, I sometimes wander through its tall grass and look at the falling markers on the graves of people I have known in my lifetime in Western Oklahoma—people who now rest upon this hill. I see the tombstone for Cloud Chief, chief of the Arapahoes, and my thoughts go back to that hot day in June when I saw the first burials in this cemetery. ●

MARY E. SMITH, who has lived on the same land east of Clinton all her life, is retired from the Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base where she was a Deputy Finance Officer. Several of her poems and one short story have been published in EXPANDING HORIZONS, a publication for writers over 65.