

**THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE WINCHESTER CEME-
TERY ASSOCIATION**

(Extracts from the article by R. S. Drake in the La Grange Journal, of the event April 9, 1931)

The Winchester Cemetery Association which meets here today had its origin fifty years ago. On March 17, 1881, a group of the early residents of Winchester met and perfected an organization to prepare and maintain this plot of ground for the purpose of burying their dead, and, as much as is possible, of keeping afresh the memory of their departed loved ones.

Records that have come down to us from that time are bare of detail. We find in them little beyond meager facts of membership and incumbencies; names, many of which are unfamiliar to all but the oldest members of the present day. Nevertheless in those records we have evidence of duty and obligations well fulfilled. Change in this world is inevitable as the passage of time; the business of living passes down from generation to generation; foundations laid by the fathers are builded upon by the sons, and their sons in turn build on. It has been so with the Cemetery Association. Of the forty-four charter members only three remain, and it may be said that the work begun by those first members has devolved upon a later generation. That the organization has continued through those fifty years, that the chain has not been broken, is a tribute to the successive memberships not to be augmented by the most flowery praise.

This plot of ground was used for burial purposes several years before an organization was formed to care for it as a community cemetery. Colonel Nathan Thomas donated the land enclosed by the present fencing at some time prior to 1871, and it is said that the first funeral here was that of Elijah Sims, born 1812, died 1871. His grave, marked by a simple, broken, head-stone, is on the east side of the cemetery, and is probably the oldest here.

In 1880 the first step toward establishing a cemetery organization for the town of Winchester was taken. In that year Dr. and Mrs. R. A. Christian made plans to establish an organization to care for the cemetery plot given by Colonel Thomas, and they formed a temporary organization with Miss Pallie Young, now Mrs. Dale of Georgetown, as president; Mrs. M. E. Wilkes as treasurer, and Miss Jennie Verdery as secretary. Miss Verdery, better known at the present time as Mrs. C. S. Gates, is now the only resident charter member of the Association. Mrs. S. A. McCollum, nee Young, of Mason, Texas, and Mrs. Pallie Young Dale of Georgetown, are the only other living charter members.

On March 17, 1881, the earlier plans of Dr. and Mrs. Christian came to fruition in the forming of a permanent organization with a constitution and by-laws, a definite program, and fixed policies. The first meeting in 1880 had been principally to devise ways and means of cleaning and decorating the graves already in the cemetery plot and little thought was given to a permanent organization. But the organization in 1881 determined to have an annual decoration day, to perpetuate itself through annual election of officers, to assess dues, and in other ways to raise money for the purpose of beautifying and maintaining the cemetery.

Mrs. Clint Thomas, the first president of the Winchester Cemetery Association, and Miss Bessie Posey, the first treasurer, secured copies of the LaGrange Ladies' Cemetery Association constitution and by-laws, and the Winchester

Association adopted them for its own. This constitution is said to have originated in Bowling Green, Kentucky. From another Southern state came the plans of the lots and drives. From her former home, Florence, Alabama, Miss Bessie Posey secured them.

The surveying was done by Captain Alexander McDow and Mr. Jones Bishop. Some twenty years ago the Association received from the estate of Mr. Clint Thomas, son of Colonel Nathan Thomas, an additional tract extending from the present South fence to the public road.

The Association as originally planned was wholly a women's organization, but throughout its existence men of the community have taken a whole-hearted interest in the affairs, holding membership and paying dues, and at all times being willing and ready to assist in every way. For a long time Mr. Clint Thomas served as treasurer, and succeeding him at his death, Mr. Sam F. Drake has served in the same capacity.

In the beginning it was customary for the members to do the actual work of cleaning the graves and drives, with the occasional assistance of hired laborers. The account book of the first treasurer, Miss Bessie Posey, is still in possession of the Association, and in it is recorded in fine old-fashioned handwriting the records of monies spent in hiring laborers, in purchasing and planting trees, and of entertainments given to raise money. In later years the Association has employed a sexton. A servitor of long standing as sexton, for thirty-six years, is Mr. Henry Staacke. Mr. Staacke has been true to the trust of the Association, and advancing age has not decreased his efficiency. He was in complete charge of preparations for this Decoration Day, and as on all others, his work is without a blemish. The appearance of the cemetery each Decoration Day bears witness to his diligence and industry, and for those whose dead lie buried here, it is a constant source of consolation to know that Mr. Staacke is here in charge.

Since its origin the history of the Association has been uneventful. Throughout the fifty years it has functioned quietly and perfectly.

There has been a considerable increase in membership. In 1881 there were forty-four members, in 1882 only thirty-one. At the present time there are seventy-two, but it is a strange fact that forty-two of these are non-resident. The number of graves has steadily increased, perhaps the number of dead has outstripped the number of living. There are three-hundred and nine marked graves, forty-seven of which are in the potters' field along the West side. On a great many of these graves the markers are faded and illegible. The identities of those who lie beneath have been long forgotten, but on Decoration Day there is no grave in the cemetery but what is cleaned and freshened, and on each will be found a token, if only a sprig of wild flower, indicating that the living have still a thought for the most humble and obscure who have gone before.

While many of the great lie in elaborate mausoleums, its great as have ever lived lie in simple graves beside the most humble. Perhaps this is because of the Christian tenet that from earth we come and to earth we must return. If there ever was a truly Christian burial place, it is around us. No one is denied admittance. The rich, the poor, the humble, the proud, the godly, and the wicked, are received alike; judgment of the dead is left to a greater power and a future day. The presence of the dead more than any hollow-made ceremony, has consecrated this ground, and no person can deny its sacredness.

Perhaps this little cemetery like countless other cemeteries throughout this land, perhaps to the impartial observer there are others of greater beauty. But to the native of Winchester, even to the sons and daughters of natives, though long since removed to other towns and cities, there is no other burial place which possesses its quiet, and peaceful, and peaceful, and natural loveliness. Though some of us may seek our fortunes in distant places, it is still true that we wish to come back here for our last sleep. It seems that there is ingrained in man a desire that his burial place shall be in that locality which he regards as home, and that assured of burial there, death has less terror for him.

The Association has continued fifty years. Let us hope that it will continue another fifty years; and another and another; that the time will never come when the graves are levelled, when grass fills the drives and walks, and when a day shall not be set aside for honoring the dead.