

# **NOTES ON THE G.A.R. CEMETERY**

By Velma Nieberding<sup>1</sup>

It began, not as a carefully groomed park-like memorial enhanced by trees and roads and special plantings and statues. At first, only the prairie wind with its ageless secrets swept it. Wild flowers starred the tall grass that covered it and deer and buffalo roamed over it. It was not a cemetery but Indian land.

On April 8, 1890, Peter Labedie, a member of the Confederated Peoria, Kaskaskia, Wea and Piankashaw tribes, received a patent from the United States Government for 200 acres of land. He reserved four acres of his allotment for "A Miami and Peoria Church". However due to a mistake in land description the patent was cancelled and not actually granted until September 8, 1890.

This land, as was all allotments to Indians of this area, could not be sold nor was it subject to levy, sale, taxation or forfeiture for a period of 25 years from the date of allotment.

However, the confederated Peoria tribe of which Peter Labedie was a member (he was of Wea descent) could have restrictions removed by special request.

The Miami Record of November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1899, carried a notice by R.M.J. Shriver, commander of the J.B. McPherson Post No. 11.<sup>2</sup> of the Grand Old Army of the Republic (GAR) that:

**"We have this year brought 36 acres of land and had it surveyed for our city and surrounding country. We have reserved a plot for the use of the members of our Post and their families and all ex-Union soldiers can secure a lot in the reserve."**

- 
1. Velma Nieberding is a historian for the Ottawa County Historical Society: a newspaper columnist for the Miami News-Record (The Moccasin Telegraph) and author of three books including "The Quapaws" (Dixon Publishing Co. 1975)
  2. After Statehood in 1907 the Post was known as No. 48.

**The wounds of the Civil War had not been forgotten. It is not surprising that Shriver, a former deputy marshal for the United States Courts in Miami, Indian Territory, and a staunch Yankee should add the following paragraph:**

**“And while we cannot take our late foes into the Post and thus give them a lot in the reserve, the Post has taken the necessary action to allow all ex-Confederates to purchase lots in the reserve so that when our beautiful and impressive memorial services are held on each 30<sup>th</sup> May, their graves may not be neglected and that this tie may have a tendency to bind their children and ours together and strengthen loyalty to our Government”.**

**The land had been purchased from Emily Ensworth, a daughter of Peter and Amelia Labedie. Peter Labedie had died in 1895, and apparently the original allotment had been divided among his heirs. Not included in this transaction were the four acres that had been set aside for a church.**

**On March 13, 1913, the United States of America granted to the trustees of the J.B. McPherson Post No. 11, four acres of land. It carries the same legal description as the land set apart by Labedie for “A Miami and Peoria Church site”.**

**Thus the Post’s holding by 1913 included 40 acres of land. Release of a mortgage made for \$400 on the four acres by the Post was released on June 14, 1917.**

**The four acres thus set aside went through several transactions. On October 10, 1917, the McPherson Post sold it to F. E. Millner and C. J. Fribley, for \$1,000. This firm had established a funeral home in Miami.**

**Two years later this firm sold it to the Mitchell-Fleming Undertaking Company, who had acquired the Millner-Fribley Funeral Home.**

**Apparently the Mitchell-Fleming Company did not remain long in business and in 1923 transferred the tract to Martin C. Fleming one of the partners.**

**A little later it was purchased by Virgil Cooper and given to the City of Miami to be added to the 36 acre plot the GAR had turned over to the City in 1910. The four acre plot is today known as the Cooper Addition.**

By 1910, the ranks of the soldiers were thinning and they were concerned for the future of the cemetery. Shriver appealed to the City of Miami to take over the ownership of the cemetery on the condition that it would pay \$250 each for the remaining thirteen GAR veterans' burials.

Trustees of the Post at this date were R.M.J. Shriver, W.L. McWilliams, S.B. Dobson, Charles Carmichael, Milton Drake and J.W. Bright.

In 1926 when the contract with the GAR veterans was reaffirmed by the City, only eleven were living.

In the development of the cemetery the City has acquired new land, established perpetual care and become a constantly improving memorial.

It is generally believed that a son of Peter and Amelia Labedie was the first burial in the cemetery but memories of those early days have passed to the same vale of obscurity as many who now rest in unmarked graves. The Ottawa County Historical Society received information recently that the first grave opened in the cemetery was for the child of Jesse and Laura Drago. The baby shown in family photograph in 1895 "died at the age of six weeks".

In the thirties a fire destroyed many of the early records of burials. However, the oldest marked grave is that of Atha Josephine Cardin, born in 1872 and died in 1892. She thus would have been buried soon after the McPherson Post acquired the Labedie land.

Another marker that has survived change and time is that of a one-year child, Irene Isabel Thaxton, who died in 1897. Her father once operated a ferry across the Neosho River.

Other events in the history of the cemetery include the observance of Memorial Day each year. In 1901, the Miami Record carried a special news story. Decoration of the graves at the cemetery was to be done by children of the town. There was to be a band and everybody was to meet at the GAR Hall and go in procession to the cemetery. The children were to report to Mrs. W. C. Lykins, Mrs. H. L. Doty, or Mrs. G. W. Bigham.

Miami was invited to make it a day they could look back to "remembering that on May 30, 1901, no grave in our cemetery was forgotten or neglected."

**Mindful that a few old Rebels might be in town and hesitate to participate in GAR ceremonies, the paper said graciously, “and especially are our friends who fought on the other side during the dark days of the Rebellion invited to come and participate with us in the festival of the dead.”**

**The observance of Memorial Day has never faltered and the cemetery staff today actually works from one Memorial Day to the next to keep the grounds in good condition for the hundreds of persons who visit it to pay respect to their loved ones buried there.**

**The formal ceremonies are always centered around the beautiful memorial to the soldier dead which was erected by the GAR veterans.**

**It has not always been easy to maintain the cemetery. In 1923, the Miami city council asked the State Supreme Court if it had any rights to the cemetery, terming it “in deplorable condition.”**

**This may have been caused by the many burials. In 1963, George Francis, Superintendent of the cemetery said in a typical year 220 burials would be conducted at GAR. The deceased in 154 instances or 70 per cent of the time would be from outside Miami. It is estimated this year (1978) that there are 18,000 burials in the cemetery.**

**In 1963, only 36 grave spaces remained unfilled in the charity (pauper) section which covered approximately eight acres, or one-tenth of all GAR property. Burials are now made at a cemetery at the former Ottawa County Poor Farm.**

**A perpetual care fund was established in 1942 with a donation of \$5000. The interest from this fund helps to maintain the cemetery.**

**In 1948, Sunday Funerals were discontinued except in cases of disease or epidemic because of labor costs and the additional burden of Ministers.**

**In 1966, an \$8,000 ornamental fence was installed on the half mile cemetery front plus a quarter mile at the south end. Previously the cemetery had been surrounded by a stone and hedge fence.**

**Fifteen British Flyers are buried in the cemetery. They died while in training at the Spartan School during World War II.**

**In 1956, the city officially combined the cemetery and park boards. George Francis has directed park-cemetery operations since that date.**

**That same year a regulation requiring concrete or steel burial vaults instead of wooden crypts was approved thus lessening much repair to the cemetery since graves with wooden crypts were estimated to sink several inches after a rain and to sink twelve times during the first seven years of burial. At that time cemetery crews were kept busy repairing some 250 graves after a rain.**

**In 1945, to add a touch of beauty to the Babyland section that was developed, a beautiful Italian white marble baby statue, forty inches high was obtained through members of the cemetery board. These included Mrs. L.M. Torbert, Mrs. Olaf Baker and Mrs. John F. Robinson. The superintendent that year was V.L. Krucker.**

**The prairie winds still sing over the cemetery reminding visitors that they hold answers to the many questions that concert its history. The beautiful plantings and the trees are a haven for birds and sometimes on a moonlight night a mocking bird sings for those whose graves are unmarked.**