

A BRIEF NOTE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF DIXIE CEMETERY AND THE HISTORIC TOWN OF DIXIE, OKLAHOMA

The early histories of the Dixie Cemetery and of the founding of the historic town of Dixie have not been formally recorded. But insights can be gleaned from records of the explorations of U. S. Army Capt. Randolph B. Marcy who marked pathways for travel between frontier forts and paths that were traveled by early migrants moving westward through Indian Territory, and memories handed down from original Dixie community settlers. The later history of the cemetery as well as the historic town of Dixie is directly related to:

- 1) rapid settlement of the area by small farmers stimulated by the development of railroads through Indian Territory in the 1880s,
- 2) construction of the state and county road system beginning in 1915,
- 3) collapse of the rural small farm culture following World War II.

Early exploration of the area began in 1851 when Capt. Randolph B. Marcy was ordered to establish a path for travel between Fort Arbuckle located where Wild Horse Creek empties into the Washita River near current Davis, Oklahoma, and Fort Belknap located on the Brazos River near current Newcastle, Texas. Capt. Marcy marked a route from Fort Arbuckle across the Pickens District of the Chickasaw Nation through the network of existing trails that were used by the Indian population. The route entered Texas at Red River Station southwest of Ryan. Historic documents record that this route, which became known as the Fort Arbuckle to Fort Belknap Trail, crossed the southeast corner of now Stephens County (Chronicles of Oklahoma, Volume 20, No 1, 1920). Early migrants moving westward to California traveled this trail to Fort Belknap where it connected with the Butterfield Overland Mail and Stage Coach route from St. Louis to San Francisco.

Memories of early settlers handed down by Grandpa Jim Byram proprietor of the last store in the historic town of Dixie, are that a migrant group passing through the area about 1865 buried a child on the hill across East Mud Creek west of the town. They marked the site by planting a pine tree at the head of the grave. This burial site is believed to be the now large pine tree located in the north central section of the Dixie Cemetery. Sand stone markers in this area of the cemetery identify graves showing that burials continued at this site for some time. The earliest grave in Dixie Cemetery with a readable marker is that of a child Joseph B. Frey, born September 15 1887, died January 8, 1889. Other readable headstones show that an additional 40 persons were buried in the Cemetery during the 1890s. During those years continuing until 1913 the Chickasaw Nation owned the land where the Dixie Cemetery is located and burial there was without formal organization or oversight.

Rapid change began in the 1880s. Construction of north-south railroad lines that passed about 25 miles west and about 30 miles east of Dixie, in the 1880s brought increasing numbers of settlers into the Chickasaw Nation. They settled on land

previously held in common by the Nation. Small towns came into existence as supply centers for the farmers.

According to accepted memories of early settlers the historic town of Dixie was founded during the time of rapid settlement in the 1880s. In 1886 Dixie was granted a post office. By the late 1890s the town had developed into a substantial community with a population of more than 200 and a subscription school that had about eighty students and three teachers.

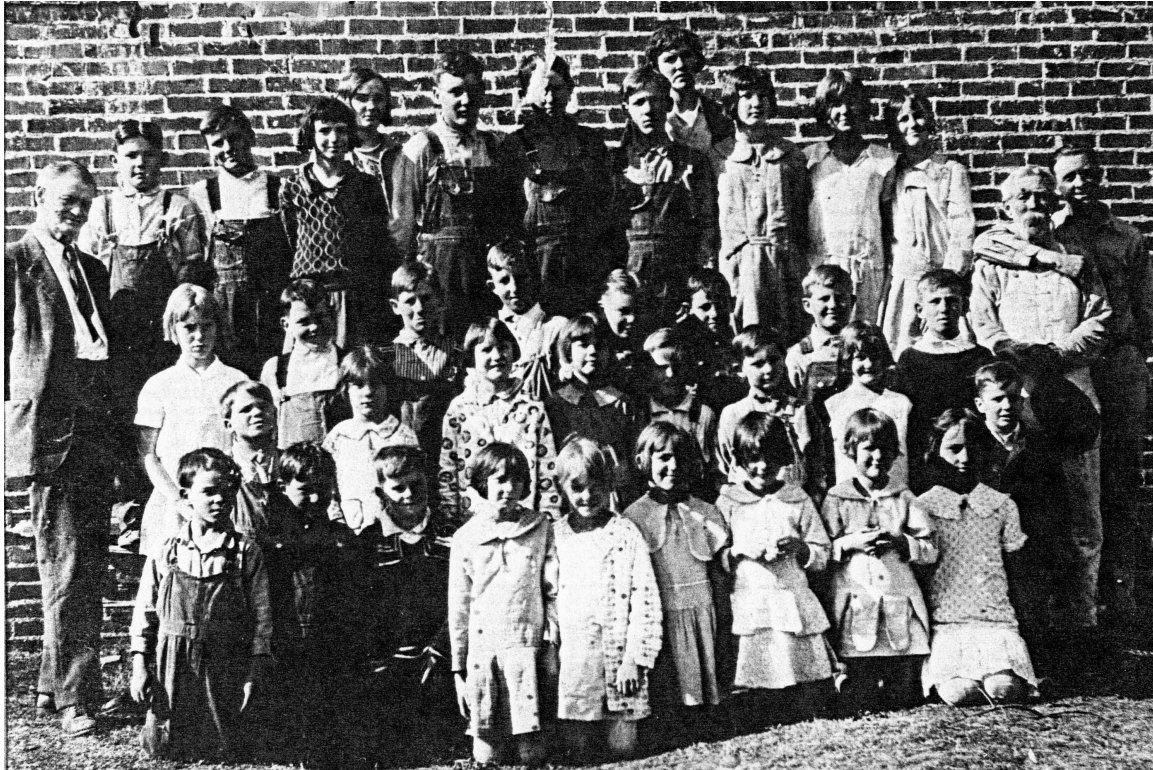


Dixie School students and teachers, 1897 – courtesy of Stephens County Historical Museum

By 1907 when Oklahoma was granted statehood, the former Indian Territory had become densely settled with 160-acre farms. Road development lagged settlement forcing the settlers to travel over the network of existing trails that had been developed and used by the Indian population. County school districts were defined so that children could walk to schools. Supply centers sprung up separated by distances of 10 to 15 miles, which allowed farmers to travel to a supply center and return home in one day. The town of Dixie was one such supply center. It was identified on a map of the Chickasaw Nation published late in the 1890s and appeared on Oklahoma State maps 1907 to 1924. The 1918 edition of the R. L. Polk & Company Oklahoma State Gazetteer and Business Directory recorded that Dixie had a post office, a blacksmith, a physician, a drug store, a grocery store, two general stores, and a cotton gin serving a town population of 125 and a larger community of small farms. The 1920 Census recorded a local community population of more than 300.

Between 1915 and 1918 the state of Oklahoma began construction of a system of north-south and east-west state highways and the counties began construction of section line roads. The resulting improved transportation together with increasing numbers of motorized vehicles, caused the town of Dixie to lose business to Loco located six and one-half miles to the northwest on state Hwy 53, and to the rapidly growing town of Ringling located eight and one-half miles south on state Hwy 89. By 1924 Dixie together with other rural supply towns in the region (Chagris located five miles southeast of Dixie and Woolsey located twelve miles northwest) no longer appeared on Oklahoma state maps. The Dixie post office was closed in 1931, the last remaining store at Dixie was closed about 1940 and the Dixie School was closed in

1941 when the students were consolidated with Fox School and Mt. Home School. Now, after the passing of more than seventy-five years the land along state highway 89 that was once occupied by town of Dixie has been fully reclaimed by nature. No sign of the once vital farm supply town exists, not even an historical marker.



Dixie School students and teachers 1930-31 – courtesy of Stephens County Historical Museum

Row 1 - unidentified, Alford Byram, Chester Dunn, Easter Dunn, R. J. McCann, Myrtle Riley, Gladys Griffith, Dorothy Griffith, Juanita Bull

Row 2 - unidentified, Nellie Bull, Eloise Jones, Juanita Web, Leroy Spurgin, unidentified, Elena Jones, Elton Jones

Row 3 - Odessa Johnson, James Johnson, Dale Griffith, Rayburn Ritter, Paul Brock, Ray Byram, Buck Riley, A. J. Hall

Row 4: - Mr. Smith (Teacher). Vernon Dun, Chock Johnson, Ruth Russell, Clifton Bull, Buddy Dunn, David Bull, Eva Johnson, Audrey Riley, Nadean Griffith, Grandpa Jim Byram, Zeb Jones.

Back – Mildred Jeter, Frances Burton



Dixie School students and teachers 1938-39 – courtesy of Stephens County Historical Museum

Row 1 – Hollis Weatherford, Alton Riley, Jim Byram, J. D. Magee, Cleburne Riley, Thomas Riley, L. D. Weatherford

Row 2 – Gerald Gentry, Mildred Griffith, Betty Fore, Wynell Hurst, Lavada Weatherford, Lavern Griffith, Jerry Rose, Bobby Scifers, Gerald Huffman, Billy Alexander, Calvin Weatherford, Rudolph Hastings, Perry Scifers

Row 3 – Frank Scifers, Quennie Bell, Lavern Dunn, Violet Magee, Laura Southerland (Teacher), Ina Jean Johnson, Mary Jones, Doyle Thompson, Tom Caldwell (Teacher), Jimmie Weatherford

Row 4 – Jimmie Hitt, Billy Griffith, Dorothy McCann, Mary Ruth Sawyer, Patsy Rose, Kathryn Brock, Vernon Brock

Until February 1913 the Dixie Cemetery existed without formal management or oversight on unallotted Land of the Chickasaw Nation. On February 18, 1913 Benjamin T. Weatherford purchased a 47.15-acre tract of land that included the Dixie Cemetery from the Chickasaw Nation. Dixie area citizens recognizing the need for a structure for ownership management and maintenance of the cemetery, chartered the Dixie Cemetery Association. C. W. Newman, J. B. Collier, and Alex Johnson were elected trustees. And on March 25, 1913 the Association purchased the Dixie Cemetery land (13.13 acres) from Mr. Weatherford.

At first Stephens County did not consider the Dixie Cemetery property to be tax-exempt. And in 1922 the County took legal possession of the property for nonpayment of taxes. During the following twelve years Stephens County offered

the property for sale. Then on April 5, 1934 Stephens County deeded the property back to the Dixie Cemetery Association by means of a Quit Claim Deed, stating: ***"The above property sold to the County for taxes when same was not taxable and this is made for the purpose of Quit Claiming any and all interest acquired by Stephens County at this sale."***

Early on, the Dixie Cemetery Association established a community maintenance model and a schedule for maintenance of the cemetery. The cemetery would be maintained entirely by donated labor. The first Saturday in May and the second Saturday in August were established as "cemetery workdays". Annually on these days essentially all families of the Dixie Community gathered at the cemetery and devoted the day to maintenance of the cemetery and community fellowship. Women of the community brought food baskets. Pit BBQ for the dinner was prepared in an overnight activity that involved digging a pit, building a large fire in the pit, letting the fire burn down to embers, covering the embers with a layer of sand, laying the meat wrapped in butcher paper and placed in gunny sacks on the layer of sand, covering the meat with a layer of sand, building a large fire on top of the sand and letting it burn down overnight. Maintenance work took place from early morning until noon when following a devotional by a local minister, dinner was served. People spent the remainder of the day visiting. For a time, preparation of the BBQ was under the direction of Will Ritter; others whose names have not been recorded followed. A few us still alive today have special memories of spending a Friday afternoon and evening carrying wood for the pit fire and spending the night listening to stories being told by the men who were overseeing preparation of the BBQ.

The "cemetery work day" method of maintaining the cemetery proved to be both popular, effective and sufficient for about 50 years. But following World War II the Dixie community experienced rapid and profound change. The small farm economy collapsed and people migrated to urban centers to find employment. As a result, area population declined by more than two-thirds between the 1945 and 1960. While Dixie Cemetery work day continued to be held in succeeding years, participation declined along with declining community population. And critically, the community spirit that fueled the "cemetery work day" model was soon lost, making it impossible to maintain the cemetery by donated labor alone. Continuing efforts to maintain the cemetery were described by Dixie Cemetery Association Governing Committee when it made the decision to establish the Dixie Cemetery Trust and apply for 501(c)(13) tax exempt status in 1985.

"Dixie Cemetery community is a proud community for the fact that is a community effort. It has a beautiful and peaceful grounds with easy access and community efforts of free labors to keep it that way."

For a number of years Floyd Phillips was overseer of Dixie Cemetery as well as a number of other country cemeteries and did a fabulous and fantastic job of them all. He worked long hard hours in all kinds of weather to see that the grounds have attention when needed. Annual work days were 1st Saturday of May and 2nd Saturday of August. People came from near and far to these gatherings bringing their mowers, rakes, hoes, shovels and worked until noon. Time was then set aside for group singing and a devotional by a local minister and business matters concerning the cemetery. Then a basket lunch was spread and everyone had a great time of fellowship.

At the May 1979 meeting Floyd suggested electing a committee to help with the projects of the cemetery, like mowing and general up-keep, and this was done. Committeemen were: Floyd Phillips, Treasurer, Esther Dixon, Secretary, Fred Wilson, committeeman, Ray Reynolds, committeeman. In December of 1982 Floyd passed away and Linda Jo Goins was elected treasurer at the May work day in 1983.

During 1984 several people of the community became concerned for the future up-keep of the cemetery and desired to set up a trust fund for cemetery up-keep and to help ease some of the financial burden of future generations. After careful consideration the committee decided to seek guidelines of legality. Mr. Ted Creel and daughter Mrs. Patsy Buck started the wheels turning by conferring with an attorney. The attorney drew up the document for trust guidelines. Mr. Creel and Mrs. Buck had the grounds surveyed, bearing all the legal expenses themselves.

At a special meeting in September 1984 the community came together to discuss the trust fund, and agreement was made to go that route, thus kicking off the contribution drive that would make up this trust fund. Only the interest from this trust fund is to be used for cemetery up-keep. The principle is never to be used. At the annual May work day 1985 Dixie Cemetery Trust was established.

This in no way does away with the pride of individuals coming and working their plats and grounds."

Present committee members are as follows:

<i>Linda Jo Goins, Treasurer</i>	<i>Mr. Esther Dixon, secretary</i>
<i>Ezell Stepp, committeeman</i>	<i>Fred Wilson, committeeman</i>
<i>Dan Ellis, committeeman</i>	<i>Ray Reynolds, committeeman</i>

The Dixie Cemetery continues to be effectively managed and maintained through the dedicated efforts of successive directors of the Dixie Cemetery Trust. The traditional "cemetery work days" continue to be held on the first Saturday in May and second Saturday in August. The annual meeting of the Trust is held together with the annual work day on the first Saturday in May. But now, the Dixie Cemetery

community is widely dispersed and sadly, few descendants of people interned in the cemetery attend the work days.

Carl Stepp

June 22, 2020