

PORT O' CONNOR CEMETERY

I. CONTEXT

The Port O' Connor Cemetery is located in Calhoun County approximately twenty-five miles from the county seat in Port Lavaca.¹ It is located at the intersection of W. Monroe and Cemetery Road in the unincorporated town of Port O'Connor, Texas. Agnes Valigura, whose family moved there in 1912, was told the cemetery was designated when the town was laid out.² The cemetery still serves the Port O' Connor community today.

Late in the 19th century, a small settlement named Alligator Head (so named by early settlers due to its peculiar land shape) developed on the coast of Matagorda Bay in Calhoun County. On January 20, 1910, the Calhoun County Cattle Company filed a plat for a town site on this point and gave it the name Port O'Connor, in honor of Tom M. O'Connor of Victoria, from whom the land was purchased.³ A branch line of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway was built from Seadrift to the town in 1910. With a town site being established, individuals purchasing property, and excursion trains bringing tourists, a burial site was a necessity for the rapidly growing community.⁴

¹ Historic Texas Cemetery Application, Oct. 18, 2011, pg. 1.

² Agnes Valigura letter to Mary Meitzen, CCHC Cemetery Chair, Apr. 7, 2009, pg. 1.

³ Calhoun County Historical Commission, "Presentation", Mar. 16, 1988, pg. 1.

⁴ Calhoun County Museum, "City of Port O'Connor", no date, pg. 1.

II. OVERVIEW

Melissa Sterling with Gulf Coast Title Research in Port Lavaca conducted an extensive title search for a Port O'Connor Cemetery deed. She found in 1909, W. C. Johnson, president of the Calhoun County Cattle Company, laid out the plat for Port O'Connor which was sold to W. J. O'Connor. The plat does not show the cemetery. In 1909, W. J. O'Connor transferred the Port O'Connor town site to P.R. Austin, president of the Cattle Company from 1914 to 1927. This plat also does not show a cemetery. In 1919, lots were being sold and E.H. Everett brought all of the "out-lots" 1-12, 14-16. Nothing was recorded on Lot 13 as being sold. In 1920, Austin purchased the same property back under warranty deed and it went into his name individually as P.R. Austin. Lot 13 was omitted again in the sale. In 1940, P.R. Austin descendants sold the property to Sam Day. Lot 13 was also not included in the sale.⁵ On March 12, 2012, the deed for Lot 13 was recorded and preserved through the Historic Texas Cemetery Designation.⁶ Five acres were recorded for a cemetery.

The first known burial in the Port O'Connor Cemetery was Lola May McCarty in 1913. In 1980, Robert McCarty of Bristow, Oklahoma, wrote a letter to Postmaster Agnes Valigura and asked for help in locating Lola May's grave. Family lore said Lola May was visiting her grandfather who was foreman of the La Salle Ranch and became ill. Through telephone calls to McCarty, the

⁵ Melissa Sterling interview by Mary Meitzen, Port Lavaca, Tex., Feb. 22, 2010.

⁶ Texas Historical Commission, Historic Texas Cemetery Designation, Mar. 12, 2012.

approximate grave site was located and the family placed a current marker.⁷ The oldest marked grave in the cemetery is that of Juan Pena (1851-1919).⁸ Caretaker Bob Allen says, "It is quite likely there are others buried there with no enduring headstones."⁹

Burials of note are the last three family keepers of the Matagorda Island lighthouse. Arthur B. Barr, the last keeper was buried on January 30, 1999. Directly behind Barr's monument are the graves of the previous lighthouse keepers, William Herman Heinroth and his wife Ruth. To the left is a weather-worn stone with a carving of a lamb in memory of Mrs. M.E. Olsen ¹⁰ former lighthouse keeper and mother of Ruth Heinroth.

Located on the Texas Coast, the hurricanes of 1919, 1942, and 1945 swept the town of Port O'Connor and damaged the cemetery.¹¹ Hurricane Carla hit Port O'Connor on September 8, 1961 with winds estimated at 175 miles per hour and completely leveled the town and cemetery.¹²

Families had to start over locating their loved one's grave sites. Before 2007, caretaker Bob Allen began to mow friend Roy Fairchild's grave site. Occasionally, a current burial would uncover a previous grave. Bob interviewed

⁷ Dolphin Talk, "A Little History of POC's Oldest Known Grave," Mar. 26, 2012, pg.8.

⁸ Dolphin Talk, "Preserve Our History,"

⁹ Bob Allen, "Port O Connor Cemetery Record," Aug. 2007, pg.1.

¹⁰ Dolphin Talk, "Preserve Our History,"

¹¹ <http://www.texasscapes.com/TexasGulfCoastTowns/PortOConnorTexas>, pg.2, Ju. 15, 2012.

¹² Dallas Morning News, Texas Almanac 2002-2003, "Extreme Weather Records in Texas", pg.91.

Port O'Connor citizens and located 195 gravesites. White PVC crosses mark these identified sites. The graves are at surface level or several feet below depending on the water table since the cemetery is only seven feet above sea level. Bob then completed a Port O'Connor Cemetery Record which he placed in the Port O'Connor Library, Calhoun County Main Library, and Calhoun County Historical Commission.¹³

The individuals buried in the cemetery reflect the community and its spirit to live and survive. Their tombstones, both professional and home made, are decorated with ships, anchors, shells, and driftwood. They are items that reflect the saltwater heritage of this town. Graves are oriented east-west and the public has easy access from a road through the middle of the cemetery. The road leads to a covered area available as a chapel for burial services which the members of the Service Club have provided along with a sign marking the entrance. The cemetery is almost level and it is easy to walk between grave sites which are covered with natural grass. A few planted trees grow in the area and the cemetery is surrounded by a hedgerow. The grave stones are marble, wood, granite, plastic, and concrete.¹⁴

Traditionally, the only requirement for burial in the cemetery is that the deceased had been a resident of Port O'Connor. However, there are some graves which

¹³ Bob Allen, "Port O'Connor Cemetery Record," self-published, Aug. 2007, pg.1

¹⁴ Texas Historical Commission, Historic Texas Cemetery Designation, pg.3.

have been moved from the town of Saluria on Matagorda Island due to erosion. Each family is allowed to pick out their own spot and mark it as their burial plot.¹⁵

III SIGNIFICANCE

The Port O'Connor Cemetery significantly emphasizes the survival spirit of the community. Caretaker Bob Allen said, "Each individual buried there, in marked and unmarked graves, contributed to the community and affected someone's life in one way or another."¹⁶ The cemetery does not have an association. Due to speeches and newspaper articles, community interest is growing. The Service Club voted to contribute money towards mowing costs and the caretaker has a regular group of individuals who volunteer to mow. The Calhoun County Historical Commission is continuing to assist organizing an association.

A Texas Historical Marker for the Port O' Connor Cemetery would highlight its unique local history and emphasize the "Rebuild" attitude that individuals exhibited to overcome natural disasters. Both visitors and citizens of the community, young and old, will read the Port O' Connor Cemetery marker story and remember brave individuals who contributed to their community.

¹⁵ Bob Allen, pg. 1.

¹⁶ Dolphin Talk, "Preserve Our History,"

IV ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Calhoun County, Texas, Inventory of the County Archives of Texas, Calhoun County No. 29, Texas Historical Records Survey, Jan. 1941, pgs. 15, 41, 42.

Dolphin Talk, "More Gravesites Identified in Port O'Connor Cemetery", March 12, 2010, pg. 2.

Dolphin Talk, "Port O Connor Cemetery Soon to Be Designated Historic Texas Cemetery", March 25, 2011, Vol. XVI, No.4, pg.1.

Dolphin Talk, "Port O Connor Service Club News," May 11, 2012, pg. 10

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/Calhoun> County, pg.1, July 15, 2012.

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/PortO'Connor,Tx.>, pg.1, July 15, 2012.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port> O' Connor, Texas, July 15, 2012.

Port Lavaca Wave, "POC has changed as years passed," Wednesday, September 16, 2009, pg. A2