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Texas State Cemetery: A Journey Through the Past and Lessons for the Future

Kids can come out here and in one day learn more about Texas history than in a whole semester

in class. –Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock¹

Introduction

“Hello, my name is Audrey Sirgo and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas. I am taking a class about historical museums and I am writing my final paper about the Texas State Cemetery. I am a former educator and I am going back to school to continue my education to become a historian and a librarian. Do you mind if I accompany a school tour today? I am willing to talk to the teacher of your next group to get their permission, as well.” I rehearsed my speech the whole way to the cemetery on a beautiful Friday afternoon. I worried that because of the nature of cemeteries and the current climate surrounding safety and security, that if I had not booked a tour for myself and the 9 others that it would take to create a full tour group, that I would be directed to take an audio tour or just walk around on my own. However, I was surprised and delighted to hear, in response to my little speech, “how does 1:30 sound?” So off I went, first on a self-guided audio tour and then, after a short lunch break, I returned to accompany a group of about 40 fourth graders, their teachers, and chaperones on a tour of the

¹ Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, foreword to *Texas State Cemetery*. (China, University of Texas Press, 2011), *ii*

twenty-one acre plot of land, which is the final resting place for many of Texas' "honored saints and honored sinners."²

In the foreword of the book *Texas State Cemetery*, by Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, members of the Texas State Cemetery Committee, Scott Sayers, Coley Cowden, Borah Van Dormolen and Harry Bradley state that the book has "tried to capture the essence of a very special hallowed place and the only fault in this effort, we fear, will be the wonderful stories not included."³ I believe that their lamentation is one that is shared, not only by the caretakers of the Texas State Cemetery (hereafter referred to in this essay as the TSC), but by people who contribute to museums all over the world. One hour, or 178 pages, is not enough time or space to scratch the surface of what the TSC, and those who rest there, have to say. Those who are charged with telling the stories, be they authors, historians, teachers or tour guides, must choose the stories that are the most impactful for the audience at the time. The focus of this essay will be to discuss how and which stories of the honored Texans, who rest at the TSC, are presented. In the context of the three tours I have taken at the TSC over the years, I will highlight some of the most commonly told stories and discuss the reasons that they are the stories chosen.

All true stories begin and end in a cemetery. – Carlos Ruiz Zafon, *The Shadow of the Wind*⁴

Understanding the Cemetery's Purpose

In order to understand the stories told at the TSC, one must first understand the purpose of the cemetery itself, why it was founded and who can be laid to rest there. The cemetery was

² Ibid. xi

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carlos Ruiz Zafon, *The Shadow of the Wind* (Penguin Books, 2005)

founded for the purpose of eulogizing Edward Burleson, a founding father of Texas who, after many accomplishments was still serving as the president pro tem of the Texas Senate, when he died in 1851.⁵ A motion was passed to create a “state burying ground” and the land was donated by future Texas governor Andrew Jackson Hamilton.⁶ Edward Burleson was the first person to be buried on the land. As the years went on, more and more statesmen and military personnel were interred at the TSC and many were moved from other gravesites to be reinterred there as well. Most notable among these, was Stephen F. Austin, the “father of Texas,” who was moved from his original resting place in 1910 to be reinterred and memorialized at the top of Republic Hill.⁷

Over the years, the cemetery has continued to be a place where statesmen and military members are buried and as the state prospered and more people desired to be interred there, regulations were put forth, detailing exactly who can be laid to rest there. The TSC’s website answers the Frequently Asked Question of who can be buried at the TSC with the rules from the Texas Government Code:

The Cemetery’s governing statute, Texas Government Code, Chapter 2165, Section 256, subsections d and e, states that persons eligible for burial in the Texas State Cemetery are:

1. a former member of the legislature or a member who dies in office;
2. a former elective state official or an elective state official who dies in office;

⁵ Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, *Texas State Cemetery*, (China, University of Texas Press, 2011), 18

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 21

3. a former state official or a state official who dies in office who has been appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate and who served at least 10 years in the office to which appointed;
4. a person specified by a governor's proclamation, subject to review and approval by the committee;
5. a person specified by a concurrent resolution adopted by the legislature, subject to review and approval by the committee; and
6. a person specified by order of the committee, only if the committee finds that the person made a significant contribution to Texas history and culture in the following fields: air and space, agriculture, art and design, business and labor, city building, education, governmental service, industry, justice, military affairs, law enforcement, oil and gas, performing arts, philanthropy, public administration, ranching, religion, science and medicine, sports, and writing.⁸

Over the years, the cemetery has turned into, not only a place for people to visit the burial sites for their beloved dead, but also a place to memorialize people who have made sacrifices and contributions to the history of the state and to the United States of America. The cemetery has monuments that pay tribute to many people who are not interred at the TSC but whose contributions and losses are still significant to the state such as the September 11th Memorial, the Medal of Honor Monument, the Gold Star Mothers Monument, the Purple Heart Monument and the World War II Monument. The cemetery also functions as a historical museum, although not

⁸ "Frequently Asked Questions," *Texas State Cemetery*, accessed on December 7, 2017, <http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/faq.asp>

in the traditional sense that people are used to. Although the cemetery does have a Visitor Center that serves a role as a bit more of a traditional museum with displays and even a few artifacts, the majority of the learning is done on the cemetery grounds, amongst the stone monuments and the people themselves that live now in the pages of history.

I must say as to what I have seen of Texas it is the garden spot of the world. The best land and the best prospects for health I ever saw, and I do believe it is a fortune to any man to come here.

There is a world of country here to settle. - Davy Crockett⁹

909 Navasota Street Austin, TX

The cemetery is a twenty-one-acre piece of land, situated in the heart of the rapidly-growing East Austin. It is a rectangular plot that spans from 7th St. to 11th St. in between Navasota and Comal Streets. Perhaps one of the most interesting parts of the cemetery is the state highway that runs through the middle. State Highway 165 runs from 7th to 11th St. and is open during the cemetery's hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The posted speed limit for highway 165 is 10 mph. The main entrance to the TSC and the Visitor Center is located on Navasota St. I would recommend the Visitor Center be the starting place for any new visitors to the TSC. In the Visitor Center, designed to look like one of the Alamo's barracks¹⁰, one can find maps of the cemetery for self-guided and audio tourists, audio tour wands, staff offices and a long room with a timeline exhibit which spans from the exploration and colonization of the area of Texas all the way through present day. In this room there is also a television which is intended to play an

⁹ R. McSpadden, "Texas Quotes," *Texas Bob*, 1998-2017, <http://www.texasbob.com/txdoc/txquotes.html>.

¹⁰ Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, *Texas State Cemetery*, (China, University of Texas Press, 2011), 3

informational video on a running loop. Presently, no video is being played because, as I was told by the office manager, Debbie Rothberger, a new video has just been produced and will be running in the Visitor Center soon.¹¹

The cemetery is laid out in sections. On the Northwestern most side of the TSC is Capital Pointe and the North entrance titled the Rose Gate. Along the north wall is the columbarium which houses the interred remains of those who are cremated. Across State Highway 165 from Capital Pointe is Monument Hill which is the Northeastern most corner of the TSC. Notable people interred on Monument Hill are the French Sailor and astronaut Eugene Cernan. Continuing South from Monument Hill, across the pond is a large, flat area of the Cemetery, called the Confederate Field. Upwards of 2,200 Confederate soldiers and widows are buried in the confederate field.¹² The Southwestern most corner of the Cemetery is home to Patriots Hill, which includes the main Plaza and the 7th street entrance to State Highway 165. Next to Patriots Hill is Republic Hill, the most occupied part of the cemetery, final resting place of notable Texans such as founding father Stephen F. Austin, legislator Barbara Jordan, governor Ann Richards, author James Frank Dobie, governors James and Miriam Ferguson (fondly remembered as Ma and Pa Ferguson) and governor John Connally. Directly north of Republic Hill is Statesman Meadow which is the burial place of famous football coach and WWII veteran Darrell K. Royal and former US Navy SEAL and author Christopher Kyle. The grounds of the cemetery are impeccably kept and there is a small pond which runs through the center and under State Highway 165.

¹¹ Deborah Rothberger (*office manager, Texas State Cemetery*) in discussion with the author, December 2017.

¹² *Texas Cemetery Tour-Mate Audio Tour*, Audio File, (Austin: State Preservation Board), MP3. <http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/audio/>

Texas history is as varied, tempestuous, and vast as the state itself. Texas yesterday is unbelievable, but no more incredible than Texas today. Today's Texas is exhilarating, exasperating, violent, charming, horrible, delightful, alive. - Edna Ferber, author¹³

Stories

Much like the members of the TSC Committee, I too haven't enough space to describe each story and to give each honored Texan their due. Instead I will attempt to impart the stories that I heard on my tours and that I believe hold special significance to the audiences that I was a member of. As a lover of stories, I believe that all should start at the beginning so I will begin by describing my first tour at the cemetery as a student-teacher for a fourth-grade class in 2015. I should note that on this, my first tour, the guide was an employee of the TSC and I believe one of the authors of the book *Texas State Cemetery*, previously mentioned. He was not an employee of the State Preservation Board, which has since taken up the burden of helping the TSC employees with tours.¹⁴ From my memory, the tour began in the Visitor Center, where the students were shown the old video and encouraged to look at the timeline exhibits. The guide then took us on a walking tour of the cemetery, starting with Monument Hill and the memorials there, such as the 9/11 Memorial and the Veterans Memorial Section. Then the tour moved to the Confederate Field and the gravesite of Albert Sidney Johnston. Albert Sidney Johnston's story was told on this, and the audio tour but interestingly was abridged on the more recent live tour, which I took this December. Albert Sidney Johnston is noted as "perhaps the most famous of all Confederate

¹³ R. McSpadden, "Texas Quotes," *Texas Bob*, 1998-2017, <http://www.texasbob.com/txdoc/txquotes.html>.

¹⁴ Deborah Rothberger (*office manager, Texas State Cemetery*) in discussion with the author, December 2017.

Generals to be buried at the Cemetery.”¹⁵ He served in the Republic of Texas Army, where he was shot in a duel and as a colonel in the Mexican War. When later asked by President Abraham Lincoln to lead troops in the Union Army during the Civil War, he claimed that “he considered himself a Southerner and a Texan and volunteered his services to the Confederate States of America.”¹⁶ Albert Sidney Johnston’s burial site is one of the most impressive at the TSC. It was designed by the celebrated sculptor Elisabet Ney and features a sculpture of Albert Sidney Johnston and is surrounded by a gothic-style chapel of Ney’s design. The sculpture features a Texas and a Confederate flag laid at his sides. This sculpture was not the original monument however, and I think that it is interesting to note that in the audio tour at the TSC, the narrator explains that he was first laid to rest with a “suitable marker” but in 1903 the Daughters of the Republic of Texas decided that he needed a “more fitting” tribute, which led to the hiring of Ney.¹⁷

Next, the tour moved on to Republic Hill. So many honored Texans’ stories are told on Republic Hill, but as time steals from the bank of memory, I am left with remembering only the most shocking and touching stories from that day. Of course, the grave of Stephen F. Austin was visited and situated near him, are Barbara Jordan, Ann Richards and Bob Bullock as well as a cenotaph for Susannah Dickinson all of whose stories are unforgettable and are staples on not only the tours of the TSC but of the Capitol, the Bob Bullock Museum and many other museums in Texas. Those stories were featured on this tour, the audio tour and on my more recent live-tour.

¹⁵ Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, *Texas State Cemetery*, (China, University of Texas Press, 2011), 22

¹⁶ *Texas Cemetery Tour-Mate Audio Tour: Albert Sidney Johnston*, Audio File, (Austin: State Preservation Board), MP3. <http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/audio/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

Possibly the most memorable story, one that has stuck with me over the years due to its shock factor and more gruesome nature, is that of Josiah Wilbarger. The story of Josiah Wilbarger was also told on all three tours that I took, though different versions have been set out by historians through the years. Josiah Wilbarger is buried on Republic Hill near the cenotaph of Susanna Dickinson. Josiah was legendarily known as “the man who wouldn’t die.”¹⁸ He was an early Texas settler and was on a surveying mission when his group was overtaken by a Comanche or Kickapoo American Indian group. He was shot once in each leg and in the throat. Two of his friends were killed and two escaped. As they looked back they saw Josiah being scalped and left for dead. That night, as the survivors slept at the nearby farm of Reuben Hornsby, a friend, Hornsby’s wife dreamed that a lady in white came to her and told her that Josiah was still alive. Josiah, in fact, was alive and had been able to get himself to a watering hole. Surviving on spring water and snails, Josiah covered his, now scalp-less, head with a sock and fell asleep. He too dreamed, that a lady in white came to him. In his dream, the lady told him that help would be on the way. The next morning, spurred on by the dream of Mrs. Hornsby, Josiah’s friends went in search of Josiah and found him, near dead but still alive. Josiah was nursed back to health and went on to live another 11 years, until he was working in his barn one day, without a hat, and a neighbor came calling. Startled, Josiah sat up quickly and bumped his head on a beam, killing him instantly. It is important to note that this story has become somewhat of a Texas legend and has likely been exaggerated through the retelling of oral history and possibly even more so when famed Texas author and University of Texas professor James Frank

¹⁸ *Texas Cemetery Tour-Mate Audio Tour: Josiah Wilbarger*, Audio File, (Austin: State Preservation Board), MP3. <http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/audio/>

Dobie wrote it down for popular consumption.¹⁹ Due to the gruesome nature of this story, I questioned whether or not it should be told on tours. It was explained to me by the tour guide, Leslie Covington, from the State Preservation Board, that the story is included on most tours, not only because most children love to hear the fascinating story, but also because stories like these really show how “tough” the early settlers of Texas had to be. She explained that it gives students an idea of the hardships that the pioneers had to go through and shows how much perseverance and grit one needed during the time of the founding of the state.²⁰

Another interesting and graphic tale told on all three tours is that of Thomas “Peg-Leg” Ward. Ward is also sometimes known as “either the luckiest or unluckiest man in Texas, depending on how you look at it.”²¹ Ward, who lost a leg during the Siege of Bexar due to cannon fire, survived and helped build the State Capitol building and became commissioner of the General Land Office as well as other accomplishments. On the fifth anniversary of Texas Independence Day, Ward, accidentally discharging a cannon, destroyed his right arm and severely damaged his right eye.²² Ward was also notably among the contingent of Texas Rangers who were charged to remove the state archives from Austin to Houston in 1842. This would have almost certainly resulted in the end of Austin’s run as the capital of Texas. Famous innkeeper Angelina Eberly fired the town cannon to alert the citizens and the archives were surrendered to the city of Austin, cementing its place as the capital city.²³ His story is included because he is a

¹⁹ Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, *Texas State Cemetery*, (China, University of Texas Press, 2011), 56

²⁰ Leslie Covington (*Tour Guide, State Preservation Board*) in discussion with the author, December 2017.

²¹ *Texas Cemetery Tour-Mate Audio Tour: Peg Leg Ward*, Audio File, (Austin: State Preservation Board), MP3. <http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/audio/>

²² Jason Walker and Will Erwin with Helen Thompson, *Texas State Cemetery*, (China, University of Texas Press, 2011), 52

²³ Ibid.

particularly interesting and influential person in not only Texas' history but in the history of the city of Austin as well.

Almost three years after my first visit to the TSC, I returned on the gorgeous autumn day that is detailed to some extent in the previous pages of this essay. When writing about what I learned in 2015, it is easier to choose some of the stories to detail because those are the ones I could remember. However, choosing from stories learned recently is much more difficult, but I will tell the ones that I believe stood out to the tour group as well as to myself. The live tour that I took on December 1st was with a student group from the Dallas area. This group, called Echo, busses school groups in from Dallas almost every weekday, to visit the State Capitol, the TSC and the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum. The Echo group sometimes makes requests for what areas are and are not visited during their tour of the TSC. We began our tour at Monument Hill, much like the audio tour and the tour I took in 2015. The very first thing that was presented on this tour was the grave of the unnamed French Sailor. The French Sailor is the oldest person to be buried at the TSC but was not buried there until the late 1990's. He was discovered on an archaeological dig to raise the ship *La Belle*, from its watery doom in Matagorda Bay. *La Belle* was part of the failed expedition sent by La Salle to discover the mouth of the Colorado River. The ship is now on display in the Bob Bullock Museum which I believe is why the grave of the French Sailor is highlighted for these children.

We next went on to one of my personal favorite monuments, the memorial for the Texans who were killed in the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. The 9/11 Memorial is a curved structure with two beams, salvaged from the World Trade Center, in the middle, it is designed so that people can walk around it and read a timeline of that day's events. This monument was approached with solemnity by the Leslie and by the chaperones, some of whom I noticed, started

quietly asking one another what they were doing and where they were when the tragedy occurred, and softly sharing their own stories. The students in turn, walked around the memorial, some rubbing their hands over the beams and some noticeably trying to keep to themselves. It was the quietest the children were the entire time. I was humbled to see this occurrence of a memorial serving its purpose of inciting conversation and respect from the people who look upon it and teaching those who do not know about such a terrible part of our shared history in a way that is respectful and meaningful, all at once.

We then moved on to the Veterans Memorial Section which is home to the Medal of Honor Monument, the Gold Star Mothers Monument, the Purple Heart Monument, the Praha Monument and the World War II Monument. Leslie quickly went over the monuments but took a bit more time to talk about the Nine Men of Praha. All nine men listed on the monument were from the Texas town of Praha, all were killed during WWII. Normally nine men doesn't sound like many, but in the tiny town of Praha, the death of nine of the town's young men devastated the community and almost wiped out an entire generation of community members.²⁴ The men are memorialized with a pink granite monument with each man's name, military affiliation and the circumstances around their death.²⁵ I believe that Leslie included the Nine Men of Praha monument on this tour for the same reason that I included it in this essay. The town of Praha, like many other Texas towns, represents a small but nonetheless important part of our state. The loss that this community felt, when their sons, husbands, brothers and friends did not return is no

²⁴ Leslie Covington (*Tour Guide, State Preservation Board*) in discussion with the author, December 2017.

²⁵ "Monuments" *Texas State Cemetery* accessed on December 10th, 2017
<http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/monuments.asp>

less important than the losses felt by those in the larger cities, whose losses were more well-known. The town of Praha's story deserves to be told.

Notably, the Confederate Field was completely skipped over, by request of the Echo group, so we next moved on to Albert Sidney Johnston. They had also asked that Albert Sidney Johnston be skipped, but Leslie felt that the students at least needed to see the sculpture by Ney, since they had previously seen two sculptures by Ney at the State Capitol so she quickly went over him but skimmed over mention of his Confederate affiliation. I thought that this was very interesting that the group chose to completely ignore an entire section of the cemetery. When I asked, Leslie explained that most tour groups do not choose to skip the Confederate Field, but due to the current political climate, the Echo group had received several complaints from parents about its inclusion and have since chosen not to discuss it unless specifically asked about it.²⁶

After Johnston, we moved to Republic Hill where the story of Ma and Pa Ferguson, husband and wife governors of Texas was told, followed by a lengthy discussion of Stephen F. Austin and his life as an impresario, his death at the age of 43, his subsequent burial in Houston, exhumation and reinternment at the TSC. Also pointed out was James Frank Dobie, mentioned previously in this paper as the author of a story concerning Josiah Wilbarger, Barbara Jordan, Bob Bullock, Edward Burleson, and a Texas Ranger named Robert Williamson, known fondly as "Three-Legged Willie." Williamson earned this unusual moniker because of the wooden "stump" that he had attached to his leg in order to walk, after what is believed to be tuberculosis, paralyzed one of his legs and left it drawn up at the knee. He still became a Texas Ranger and Leslie mentioned him as another example of the "early-Texas toughness" needed to survive the

²⁶ Leslie Covington (*Tour Guide, State Preservation Board*) in discussion with the author, December 2017.

Texas frontier.²⁷ Next was the story of Josiah Wilbarger, which drew much fascination, curiosity and some screams from the students, especially when the teacher pulled out her phone and found a picture of Josiah, post-scalping, and passed it around to all of the students. As I pondered this scene later I wondered to myself whether this was proper graveside behavior and remembered that in 2015 we at least waited until we got back to the school to show the students poor Josiah's scalp-less photograph.

After Josiah, we walked back toward the Visitor Center and made our final stop at the memorial of Christopher Kyle, former Navy SEAL and author of his autobiography, *American Sniper*. Since this group was from the Dallas area, many of the chaperones showed special interest in this story, since Kyle's memorial service was held at Cowboy's Stadium in Arlington, TX, before his funeral procession from Arlington to Austin. Christopher Kyle is buried adjacent to Darrell K. Royal, famed Texas Football Coach and WWII veteran. Since Kyle was buried at the TSC relatively recently, he is not included in the audio tour but each tour group I witnessed on December 1st stopped at his burial site to pay their respects (in 2015 when I first toured the TSC, Kyle was interred but his monument had not yet been set). I met Kyle in 2012, months before his death in February 2013, at a fund-raiser for the Wounded Warrior Campaign. He remains, to this day, the only person I have met personally who is memorialized at the Texas State Cemetery. For me, this is immensely humanizing, and always disrupts the notion in my mind that the cemetery is reserved for those long-gone people from the pages of history text-books.

²⁷ Ibid.

Who lives, who dies, who tells your story? – Lin Manuel Miranda, Hamilton²⁸

Educators

In studying the TSC and how it functions as a working museum, I have finally decided on my favorite part, which is that the TSC is a truly museum of people. Through its stories, visitors are able to weave together pieces of history for themselves. By hearing about the lives of the people who rest in the green pastures and on the grassy knolls, visitors are transported to times and places that exist only in the past but teach lessons that are useful for the future. There are no graphics, there are no plaques, there are no photos or texts, only the people and the monuments built to mark their bodies and memorialize their actions. My favorite monument in the TSC is that of Barbara Jordan. When visiting the TSC, I witnessed a young man walk up and place a single flower on her grave. I was almost overcome by emotion as I walked slowly to her grave to read the epitaph, on the front in bold letters the stone reads: Patriot, on the back it reads: Teacher. Through their stories, I believe that the women and men who rest at the Texas State Cemetery are all teachers. We learn the lessons of history from those who came before us because they imbued their knowledge, strength, wisdom and experience to us through the stories of their lives, to them I will be eternally grateful.

²⁸ Lin Manuel Miranda, *Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells, Your Story*, 2015, Avatar Studios, Track 46 on *Hamilton*, 2015, MP3.

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