



BOOT HILL INTRODUCTION

**BY
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When people establish a burial ground, they make an affirmation. They declare their respect for the one who has gone and remind themselves of the dignity of all life and they indicate that they and theirs belong to that place. However, this cemetery that at first had no name and later, half derisively, was called Boot Hill, for most of its brief usefulness was a burial ground for people who were often forgotten even during their lifetimes, who clung to life and sometimes to dignity by the frailest of threads and who belonged to this speck of a place on the vast Western prairie not at all or only in the most tentative way.

None the less, Boot Hill was a place of dignity and of setting roots because the history of the cemetery and those who were buried here tell much about the history of the West and about the pioneering spirit.

There is no certain record of when people first used this promontory overlooking the broad South Platte River valley as a final resting place. Surviving records do not indicate that any of the procession of Native Americans, mountain men, Oregon Trail migrants, freighters, Indian-fighting soldiers, Pony Express riders and telegraph

builders that one group after another used the valley as a highway were buried here though some may have been. It does seem likely that the three hapless tracklayers killed by Indians about a mile from here in 1867 may have been returned to the earth on this lonely hillside.

Nine years later, Robert Webster, the Yankee boy gone to Texas to become a cowboy and who got caught in a miniature refighting of the Civil War, was buried on the foot of the hill north of town. Before Boot Hill was abandoned in early 1885 when the Ogallala Cemetery west of town came into general use, at least 48 bodies were laid to rest here. It is probable that the death count was much higher. Ogallala, which during that time averaged a population of about 200 souls, was reputed to be the most violent town on the trail with an equivalently high death rate. At least fourteen murders occurred during the Texas Trail era and some pioneer memories counted as many as seventeen. The names of the other three victims are lost forever. Death came easier than life to Westerners. Record-keeping in those days was haphazard. Certainly not all those buried on Boot Hill were noted at the time. Others who died in or near Ogallala were buried about where they fell, not even granted the dubious grace of interment in a rough canvas shroud on unkempt Boot Hill.

Some of those who were buried here were remembered with a grave marker, usually a painted or carved piece of plank or a rough cross. After the cemetery was abandoned, some of the dead who had family nearby were removed to the new cemetery. The graves of the rest, even the marked ones were generally neglected. Ogallalans, for many years were ambivalent about the town's disreputable beginnings. Boot Hill, to some, was a painful reminder of a history that was not "nice."

For some years the cemetery was fenced and children of the turn of the century used it as a sledding hill. Steering around the scattered grave markers was part of the fun. By the 1930's wind

and wear had all but destroyed the few signs remaining of the old burial ground. The town built up around Boot Hill and would have built over it if the terrain had not been so difficult.

In the mid 1950's the City of Ogallala acquired this land more or less reluctantly and added it to its park inventory. However, it wasn't until the 1960's that local Jay Cee's organized an effort to treat Boot Hill with some appropriate honor. They cleaned up the hill, planted trees, recovered what was left of the early grave markers and deciphered them and backed research into early records that rediscovered other information.

And when five graves were accidentally found in 1978 and confirmed as Texas Trail era burials, the community's interest in the old cemetery was further enhanced. With the help of a grant from Union Pacific Railroad, more thorough research and additional upgrading of Boot Hill was possible. Through the efforts of Ogallala City Parks and Recreation Department, Ogallala Lions and many private citizens, Boot Hill has finally become a appropriate memorial for the dead, known and unknown, of an important era.

Craig Waxman along with four other unknown bodies were uncovered during construction excavations north of the Boot Hill city property. All remains were evaluated and reburied on Boot Hill under this stone marker.



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