

Hope Cemetery
by Carol Coley Taylor

On Memorial Day I made a visit to Hope Cemetery in the northeast part of the county. Hope Cemetery was located next to the Sweatbox School and the name of the school is often applied to the cemetery. Once you visit the area, you understand the significance of the name. It is on the east side of the Middle Sulphur River down in bottom lands. Huge oak trees surround the river bed and can be found in the cemetery. Located on a gravel road, Hope Cemetery is a very peaceful place, albeit hot and humid in the late spring.

I suspect that the cemetery was once a “swept” cemetery. Today the ground is covered with poison ivy and other vines along with large clumps of bearded iris and prickly pear cacti. I saw no grass. The community of Sweatbox was a cotton farming community. And cotton farming families tended to keep their cemeteries free of grass because the deceased had spent their entire lives hoeing weeds out of the cotton fields. A cemetery devoid of plant life was known as a “swept” cemetery.

The presence of bearded iris is indicative of an old Southern cemetery. Bearded irises, old rose bushes, and daffodils were planted around homes, churches and cemeteries a century or more ago. These plants needed little care, were perennials and withstood drought conditions. Farmers’ wives had little time to spend tending to flowers; but an iris or a rose in a snuff jar brought a bit of beauty to the drab life of tenant and sharecropper homes. The same held true for the cemetery.

At Hope Cemetery, all graves are on an east-west axis, typical of Southern cemeteries. When the dead arose from the grave they would face Jerusalem. There is no

fence surrounding the cemetery, although about five family plots are fenced. One fence is an old wrought iron fence, one is the old type ornate wire fence and three are made of iron pipes. Other graves are scattered throughout the cemetery. One of the most unusual of the Woodmen of the World stones can be found at Hope. There are still wooden crosses and bois d'arc stumps in the cemetery.

I suspect that the road on two sides of the cemetery has been widened over the years as some of the plots are near the roadbed. Some of the stones have toppled over, but I believe that is due to the lack of stability in our soil, not vandalism. Old tombstones were made of two or three parts. The base had a piece of half inch rebar about four to six inches high sticking up into the upright portion of the stone. The upright portion was often three to four feet high. Thus the support was not really substantial for the height of the upright. The vibration from traffic, heavy windstorms and perhaps cattle could have caused the stones to fall. But the majority of the stones at Hope Cemetery are in good condition.