

The Cave Creek “Boot Hill” Cemetery

*By Kraig Nelson, DFLT Docent
Photos by Linda Covey, DFLT Docent*

The issue had arisen at a Cave Creek town meeting that a cemetery was needed. The date was November 17, 1954. One of the residents, Mr. Elmer “Grandpa” Gillespie, suggested two possible locations. One location was on Federal “Forest” Land east of Cave Creek, and the other idea was to revitalize the old “Boot Hill” Cemetery. Boot Hill Cemetery...Cave Creek? Isn't that cemetery in Tombstone, Arizona?

In any event, at the suggestion of Ted Loring (Rancho Manana Dude Ranch co-founder with Romaine Lowdermilk in 1943), a committee was formed to explore the cemetery issue. Dr. Harold Budd was committee chair; and members included Trilby Gillespie (Elmer's son and builder of Rancho Manana Dude Ranch with Romaine Lowdermilk), Frank Wright (known as “Mr. Cave Creek” and responsible for bringing street lights to Cave Creek), and finally, Tom Roberts (early Cave Creek real-estate developer).

In 1955, the committee's decision created a “new” two-and-a-half-acre cemetery, located on the east side of Pima Road just south of Cave Creek Road. Mr. Elmer Gillespie, born in 1887, was the first inhumation in 1956. His son Trilby, born in 1919, joined him in 1994. The Cave Creek Cemetery was deeded to the town of Carefree in 2000. The only requirement for burial is one must have resided in the Cave Creek School District #93, for one year. Cost remains at \$100 per plot.

So what about Cave Creek's Boot Hill Cemetery? First the name. “Boot Hill” became a generic term for men (usually) who died with their boots on, usually violently and quickly--gunplay and hanging for example. And quickly enough so they couldn't remove their boots prior to meeting their maker!



There are at least forty “Boot Hill” cemeteries in America. The first Boot Hill was probably the infamous cemetery in Dodge City, Kansas. Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp, and Doc Holliday spent time there. Wyatt and Doc eventually moved on to Tombstone and maintained the deadly, Boot Hill concept. I know Billy Clanton, Frank and Tom McLaury would have agreed; however, I doubt if they were “OK” with the idea.

At least one “Boot Hill” Cemetery has been lost to history--Cave Creek's. The Pioneers' Cemetery Association (PAC) which is “dedicated to preserving historic cemeteries in Arizona,” doesn't mention the old Cave Creek cemetery in their archives.

The historic, pioneer-cemetery is located on the east bank of Cave Creek (the stream), about a half-mile south of today's Rancho Manana Golf Resort. It was just south of the first Cave Creek Anglo settlement (1877) of Jeriah and Amanda Wood. In the 1880s it was called Cave Creek Station, accommodating some of the first local miners and ranchers. Additionally, Cave Creek's first post office, called Overton, was established at Cave Creek Station, albeit short-lived.

By 1900, Cave Creek Station was the town-center and owned by the "Sheep King of Cave Creek," James D. Houck. Mr. Houck's wife, Beatrice, and daughters, would bury ranch-hands and destitute tubercular patients ("lungers") in the creek-side cemetery along with local denizens. Frances C. Carlson, in her book *Cave Creek and Carefree, Arizona- A History of the Desert Foothills*, states "the little cemetery beside the creek...was forgotten when the town-center shifted eastward."



Over the years vandals have desecrated the sacred site...headstones stolen. In June, 1964 one headstone remained (now gone), and was photographed with the following inscription: "In memory of David Wesley Vaughn...born July 28, 1891...died September 25, 1893...aged 2 years and 2 months and 7 days...A blest one from us is gone...The one we loved is still...A place is vacant in our home...which never can be filled."

David Wesley Vaughn suffered from scarlet fever and became deathly ill. A physician was frantically summoned by neighbor Frank Linville who gallantly rode to Phoenix through a vicious, pelting hailstorm. Young Doctor Bresee saddled his steed for the grueling six-hour trip to Cave Creek... unfortunately, he didn't make it in time.

Cave Creek's Boot Hill Cemetery is now protected by the accredited Desert Foothills Land Trust, located in Carefree; and, is part of the P.A. Seitts Preserve at Go John Canyon. This solemn and historic cemetery is worth visiting, revering, and remembering.



Visit www.dflt.org for more information, including directions to P.A. Seitts Preserve or information about tours to this and other properties.