Grave of executed Civil War deserters in Vermilion was first in Old Abshire Cemetery

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The massive grave in what has been named “The Old Abshire Cemetery” in the fifth ward of Vermilion is kept clean and orderly today by residents of that area as a reminder of the Civil War of 1863.

The grave serves as a reminder of the Civil War because all area residents know that the 11 persons buried in it were deserters during the conflict, men who were sought out of their hiding places by Confederate soldiers and executed as punishment for their desertion.

Residents today do not feel proud of the fact that the men, some of them are direct descendants, were direct deserters. But they do feel a certain respect for the dead. For that reason, they clean and maintain that grave along with the others that have dotted the cemetery throughout the years. Actually, the cemetery grew around the massive single grave where the deserters are buried. In later years, as members of their families died, they were laid to rest in the plot of ground which eventually grew to be a recognized cemetery.

It was in the month of April in 1863 that a dozen men of the area refused to join the Confederate army, according to some of the area residents who have had the story told to them over and over again. The men hid out, stayed behind when the other men left with the Confederacy, pillaged for existence and took advantage of the setbacks of the war for personal gain and momentary pleasures.

As some of the area soldiers returned and learned about the deserters, they set out to find them, determined to give them their due punishment. The deserters were found and dragged into a nearby woods and shot.

Oscar Thibodeaux, was the custodian of the old cemetery, related the story in French with almost motion picture effectiveness. He told how the deserters’ families were notified by the Confederate soldiers who had killed them, that their men lay dead in the woods. He described how the wives and children hitched oxen to carts and went to the woods to bring back their dead.

Because of the war, burial facilities were almost unavailable. Eleven of the executed deserters were taken to the burial plot in the oxen drawn carts and were laid into grave without coffins, placed one on top of the other, alternating head and feet in two rows. Only one of the deserters was taken home by his widow and buried at a conventional funeral.

For years, the burial place was nothing more than a hill with weeds growing over it. However, descendants of the dead men felt it their duty to beautify the place, so they raised funds among themselves to have the grave squared off, a concrete cross constructed across the center and fencing around its borders. The names of the 11 men appear on the cross today, but are withheld in difference to living relatives.

The names of the 11 men can be seen on the base of the cross.

Rene Richard built the cross on the deserters graves and printed their names on it on June 22, 1945. The eleven men were killed on April 30, 1863. They included Easton Abshire, Elear Abshire, Jack Abshire, Joseph Abshire, Martin Abshire, Alean Hanks, Pierre Istre, Theodule Simon, Will Abshire, Theodule Monceaux and Euclide Richard.