



More than 3,000 dead, indigent inmates lie in the Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery, better known as Peckerwood Hill

Peckerwood Hill

Texas prison cemetery is a death-penalty artifact awaiting next change

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Beaumont Enterprise, 4/1/2008

HUNTSVILLE, Texas — A shroud of low, ashen mist swathes Peckerwood Hill on a corpse-cold day in Texas.

No matter. Rev. Carroll Pickett knows the spot he seeks. The ground is spongy with night rain, sunken in some places where cheap pine-box coffins have rotted and collapsed, so he walks respectfully among the dead. A plastic

grocery sack flutters in the highest branches of a yellow pine, a ghost guard keeping watch over nearly 3,000 dead, indigent criminals Texas has buried here for the past 160 years.

The history of the American death penalty is written across the handmade concrete headstones on Peckerwood Hill, Texas' biggest and oldest prison cemetery. It is as much an artifact of capital punishment as "Old Sparky," the

Texas electric chair, now a museum piece.

More condemned men – 180 – are buried here than 29 other states have executed in their entire history. Most share the ignominy of a nameless tombstone marked only with their inmate number, a death date and a simple “X” ... executed.



This spring, the U.S. Supreme Court will likely deliver its latest opinion about the constitutionality of lethal injection – an execution method first used in Texas in 1982. The justices’ ruling could affirm or adjust America’s preferred death-mechanism, or shake the institution of capital punishment to its core for the second time in the past 40 years.

The dead on Peckerwood Hill are past caring. This place smells and feels different from other graveyards. It’s dark and sour, as if bad men decay into bad earth. Not all were executed, but all were criminals doing time. The memories here aren’t happy, and few mourners leave flowers, much less celebrate wasted lives. And Peckerwood Hill is little more than a 22-acre potter’s field, since these dead prisoners had no money nor family willing to claim their corpses.

Rev. Pickett stops. As Texas’ death house chaplain between 1982 and 1997, he escorted 95 men the last eight paces to their executions. The mildewed cross at his muddy feet is stamped, simply and coldly, “3-14-84 X 670.”

Pickett stood on this spot 24 years ago and conducted a secret funeral for

Inmate #670 – J.D. Autry, a 29-year-old kid who shot a Port Arthur convenience store clerk for a six-pack of beer. Autry’s was only the second execution he’d attended.

“They called him Cowboy and he was my friend,” the white-haired, 78-year-old Pickett says, kneeling to brush dry leaves from a small plaque

someone later placed at Autry’s grave. “His time came and he was strapped in a little after 11. We were in that room together, just me and him, nobody else, for almost an hour. Then he got a stay just before midnight. He spent all that time strapped down, waiting to die. Then he didn’t.”

Back on Death Row, the resurrected Autry became a hero of mythic proportion. He’d gone where nobody else had ever gone, into the death chamber, and lived to tell about it. Five months later, he walked the last mile with Pickett for a second time and didn’t come back.

After Autry, Pickett buried 20 more executed men on Peckerwood Hill (which the now-retired Presbyterian minister prefers to call by its proper name, Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery, for the assistant warden who personally cleaned up the overgrown boneyard and located hundreds of unmarked graves in the 1960s. But “Peckerwood Hill” – a reference to poor Southern trash – is what prisoners have called it for the past 100 years.)

“To walk out here is to know these people had two or three deaths,” Pickett says. “Going to prison is like dying, but when their bodies finally die, they’re here all alone.”

Pickett remembers all of them. He can tell you something about each one. He carries a Bible and a log of their deaths. He can tell you what they ate, their last words and how they faced death at the end. As he walks down the line of gray stones, he pauses before the intermittent ones marked with the telltale “X.”

“Here’s Jay Kelly Pinkerton,” Pickett says. “I think he was about 17 when he raped and stabbed a 70-year-old nun. In those moments before he died [on May 15, 1986], I asked him why. He told me, ‘I just wanted to know what it was like.’”

A boneyard by accident

Peckerwood Hill was an unused patch of private land when the new Texas prison in Huntsville mistakenly began using it as a burial ground in 1853. A couple years later, the landowners deeded it to the State of Texas, reckoning a boneyard for scoundrels wasn’t much use for anything else.

No burial records were ever kept, but photos of Peckerwood Hill in 1899 show many graves, all marked with wooden crosses, according to Jim Willett, the former prison warden who now runs the Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville. When it comes to death and prison, Willett is an indisputable expert: In three years as warden between 1998 and 2001, he witnessed 89 executions, more than any warden in American history.

Over its first hundred years, Peckerwood Hill was little more than an



untended trash heap, spiritually and physically. Nobody cared much. Weeds and brush engulfed it, hiding graves while time and the elements rotted their wooden crosses. When Capt. Joe Byrd organized the massive cleanup in the 1960s, he located 922 graves, although nobody knows exactly who’s in 312 of them. Many more were lost forever.

“It’s hard to believe they kept no records of who was buried here until 1974,” Willett said recently. “They were burying people here for 120 years before anybody thought to write it down. I think there are about 260 people that we don’t even know who they are.”

Peckerwood Hill’s most famous “resident” busted out long ago. Kiowa chief Satanta, who was imprisoned in 1874 for leading insurgent raids on Texas settlers and inspired the character Blue Duck in Larry McMurry’s “Lonesome Dove,” committed suicide by leaping from a prison window and was buried on Peckerwood Hill in 1878. In 1963, his grandson claimed his bones and reburied them in Fort Sill, Okla., but a monument to Satanta remains.

Until 1923, executions were carried out by county sheriffs in Texas, usually by hanging. Then the State of Texas assumed the morbid duty and the electric



chair became the official death mechanism.

Texas executed its first inmate by electrocution on Feb. 8, 1924 — followed quickly by four more within a few hours. Today, three of those five men are buried side-by-side on Peckerwood Hill, and Texas has executed a total of 911 inmates since 1923. Some 405 of those were executed by lethal injection before the U.S. Supreme Court decided to reconsider its constitutionality last month.

Now as then, a grave is hand-dug by inmates, sometimes before there's a dead man to fill it. Funerals always begin at 8:30 a.m., and there might be two or three in short order. The dead convict is buried in his release clothes, a work shirt and khaki pants. He is transported by a proper hearse, not a state pickup. Four inmates act as pallbearers, then bury the casket after the death house chaplain says a few words. Sometimes, mourners come, sometimes they don't.

Another chapter of death-penalty history can be seen only by reading between the barely tidy lines of headstones. In 1964, Texas executions stopped while America wrestled with the humanity of death penalty, and they

weren't resumed for nearly 20 years. So visitors will find no X'd markers from the 1960s and '70s.

At midnight on Dec. 7, 1982, killer Charlie Brooks became the first American to die by lethal injection. That night, America got a new kind of death.

And that night, Rev. Carroll Pickett said an earnest prayer and helped Brooks die a good death.

A good man, a hard history

Rev. Pickett has buried hundreds of men here. Not just a handful of executed killers, but small-time hoods with bad hearts, gangsters with AIDS, bed-sheet and razor-blade suicides, victims of shanks, cancer and old age.

Rev. Pickett looks down at the ground, or perhaps the flawed souls concealed there. The heavy air is colder now.

"Yes, I suppose they were bad," he says, "or at least did bad things. But I knew a man who stuffed a sausage down his son's throat and killed him. Later, he was active in the church and very generous. He changed. Some of them ... well, sometimes I've thought we might have been friends in a different situation at another time."

Pickett pauses at another grave. Here lies Donald Franklin, who viciously raped and murdered a San Antonio nurse. Just before he was executed 13 years later, he told Pickett he reckoned he'd be reincarnated as a tree in Tyler, Texas. Then he died.

And a little further is the only condemned man who never talked to Pickett about his crimes, even at the end. In 1976, James Demouchette and his

brother executed two Houston Pizza Hut workers so they could steal a bag of change and a stereo. Almost 16 years later, he had nothing to say in his last day on earth, no final words – except that he didn't want squash or okra with his final meal.

But some tell everything, secrets that they won't take to their grave. Other murders, rapes or inhumanities. Pickett carries those secrets with him now because a clergyman he cannot betray their confidence, even though the weight of knowing he might be able to salve a family's anguish is sometimes too heavy to bear.

His last stop before dark is Clifton Russell, one of two inmates executed on the same night in 1995. Pickett watched both of them die. Russell was first, simply because his inmate number was lower. The stultifying burden of ushering a man to his death, times two.

"I don't know if I can ever get over that," Pickett says, pulling his collar up against the wet wind.

A distant whistle blows at The Walls, the unit housing Texas' death chamber, named for its fortress-like parapets. A dog howls in response from the trailer park on the cemetery's southern edge.

"As I walk through these acres and acres of thousands and thousands of convicts, I am bothered emotionally, spiritually, and morally," Pickett says on the way back to his car. "Many times, I have struggled with my feelings about this place."

That's not all Pickett has struggled with. The death house chaplain who escorted 95 men to whatever lay beyond for them, who walked the last eight paces

with them, and who listened to whatever they wanted to say before their last midnight, is now an outspoken opponent of the death penalty. His 2002 book, "Within These Walls," sketches his extraordinary path from a South Texas kid who believed in an eye for an eye, to a gentle pastor who witnessed the reality of it, and came to abhor it.

But Peckerwood Hill is an eternity from Austin and Washington. There are no politics in a graveyard. The criminal dead here don't care anymore, even if their X'd headstones reflect America's conflict – or lack of it – about capital punishment over the past 100 years or so. And most of those who care, well, they don't end up on Peckerwood Hill.

"We all die somehow," Rev. Pickett says as leaves. "A lot of these men were relieved to finally be done with it. If they believed in an afterlife, had any faith at all, this was freedom."