

“The Empty Lot” on City Block Number 224

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

On August 06, 2009, the Grundy County Historical Society took a step toward solving a mystery surrounding “the empty lot” on city block number 224. The lot is the paved parking lot behind the Citizens Tri-County Bank and across Altamont Street from the Dutch Maid Bakery. There have only been two sections of land on the north or Laurel Street side of that block. Between the years 1890 and 1917, the Tracy City Cumberland Presbyterian Church, also called the Warren Memorial Cumberland Presbyterian Church, was actively occupying the section of land that faced the Dixie Theater. In later years a rock wall was built on three sides to surround that section of land, and it still remains today (2011) with the rock steps that went up to the entrance of the church building. That retaining wall is significant in that it defines a rise in the land or a knoll in the area behind Railroad Avenue. There was a fairly large church building on the lot until it was finally torn asunder in the mid 1950’s.

However, it was the other section of the block, the “empty or vacant lot” –the northeastern half of that side of the block that has brought this researcher out on a mission. The mystery stems from the belief that there was a cemetery in the area. The mission of the present owners of the “empty lot,” the Grundy County Historical Society, is to put forth every effort to draw a conclusion on the existence, or non-existence, of the cemetery. For the Society, recording local history as accurately as possible is of utmost importance. A new, ongoing project for the Society is to locate, record, and mark every cemetery in the county – no matter how large or small. This information is being compiled and plans are to publish a Grundy County cemetery book – thus, the need to solve this mystery.

On July 06, 1857, thirteen years after Grundy County came into existence, “old man” Benjamin Wooten sold most of his land to the Sewanee Mining Company for the sum total of \$3000.00. There is a good possibility that those making the deal were rubbing their hands together and “grinning like a ‘possum eating saw briars” when seventy-eight-year-old Ben signed those papers, and he didn’t sign with “his mark.” He was an educated man, a former attorney; he represented Warren County in the House of Representatives a couple of years and served as Chief Justice of the Warren County Court in 1817. So **whatever** was he thinking when he sold his valuable real estate? Did his family need a new cast iron cooking stove? Was he tired of standing over his sons and saying, “Boys, get in there and get that black stuff out of those hills?” Or was he a man who would not stand in the way of progress – if it could be called progress? My guess is that he was tired of paying the taxes on “unused” wilderness – but that’s just my opinion based on the fact that I am tired of paying taxes on “used” land!

The surveying of the land had started back in May **1855** before the name Tracy City was bestowed on old Ben's land. Benjamin had come to the mountain from Warren County around **1840** and literally settled in the wilderness. The closest neighbors he had were the Osborne and Moses Thompson families who lived at Thompson Knob at Monteagle Falls, a few miles down toward what is now known as Summerfield, and Ben Trussell who settled the area of Trussell Road in what was to become a suburb of the future town of Monteagle. Benjamin owned considerable acreage on the plateau, but after his business dealings with the mining company, he appeared to have kept only two hundred acres of land in Marion County, (*valued at \$500 in the 1862 Marion County IRS tax assessment*), that probably included the twenty-five acres, the Ben Wooten place, on what is now called Pigeon Springs Spur Road. He probably also kept the original home site in Tracy City in case his son Thomas Benton Wooten and his family wanted to come back and live in the new village. Thomas, no doubt, was ever so glad to have someone besides himself digging the coal at the Wooten mines. However, there just might be one more little, bitty piece of land – “the empty lot” – that stayed in the family by reason of death and burial even up to the present time, 2011. I'm speaking of “the empty lot” where no building has ever been built, the small piece of land that no one has ever fought over but everyone seems to have used, the small section of land that might well have been left to the ones who lie beneath it.

In **1850** the area was sort of like the way things were before God spoke everything into existence and said, “Let there be light, and there was light!” It was void of any semblance of a village, town or city and had no form about it. In this spot on the plateau, there was just “old man” Benjamin Wooten, his children, and a cabin they called home that may have also been used as a little store. “Ben Wooten had the fust store at Tracy City; thar warn't nothin' else thar,” according to Cinda Martin, a real character in the book John Gamp. The store and house were probably in the area of the Tracy City library parking lot. Then in **1857** Sewanee Mining Company said, “Let there be light,” but instead the whole area became dark – dark as coal. On Sunday, September 13, **1863**, Sergeant Charles Alley of the 5th Iowa Cavalry wrote, “Today we came to Tracy City 40 miles from McMinnville. One would never think of its being a city if it had not the name. It is on top of the mountain, and is composed of about a score of shanties and log cabins ...It is important only for its coal mines.” On March 04, **1870**, Dennis Curtis made his first visit to the area and called it, “the meanest and dirtiest little *place* on earth!” But help was on the way because in **1873**, the W. F. Foster engineering firm in Nashville, Tennessee drew up the city plans for the upcoming little city. The blocks for the most part were divided into sections that were to be sold by the mining company as the town began to grow.

In **1860**, the older Ben Wooten was living on Pigeon Springs Road (*probably called Battle Creek Road in 1860*) with two of his sons, Benjamin H. Wooten and Thomas Benton

Wooten, one daughter-in-law, Susannah (Vaughn) Wooten and a granddaughter, Mary Wooten. Between 1862 and 1870, Ben died and was buried. Where was Ben buried? Where would Ben have wanted to be buried? Usually, when a family lived alone in a wilderness, a close knoll was chosen for the family burial plot. On the 1873 map of the plans for Tracy City on block #224, there is a little rectangle in the upper northeast corner of the block that “bugs” me a lot, a whole lot. Looking over the map, I can find no other block on it that has a corner sectioned off for no obvious reason. I believe the little rectangle on block #224 might represent the Benjamin Wooten burial plot. Hughie “Tooter” Wooten, Jr. remembers that his father Hughie Wooten, great-grandson of the elder Benjamin Wooten, said to him that the land in question on block #224 was never to have a building on it, but he doesn’t recall why. Tooter’s sister Martha Alice (Wooten) Elliott remembers that her father told her that they were walking on his great-grandfather’s grave when they left their parked vehicle and climbed the steps to the Dixie Theater in Tracy City.

A Guyer family descendant handed me a note a couple years back. The note follows:

“According to my mother, Susan Catherine (Guyer) Thorpe (called Susie), Marion Guyer and Margaret B. Guyer died in the smallpox epidemic of the 1880’s and are buried in the graveyard under the old Company Store in Tracy City, Tennessee, just below the Baggenstoss Bakery and on the opposite side of the street from the bakery.”

It is my understanding that Marion Guyer was the father of Margaret “Maggie” B. Guyer. Maggie Guyer actually died July 1896. Mrs. Thorpe’s memory of the cemetery being under the Company Store would place the burials somewhat south of “the empty lot.” It’s a little difficult to think of a burial on that flat land where the Company Store stood, but the land rose into a knoll (*as mentioned above*) at one end of the Company Store. Now individual memories may fade or falter, but there is usually some good truth in most stories. My research is circling the “empty lot.”

Johnny Hunziker recalls his father, E. J. Hunziker, sending him out to “the empty lot” to fill up the sinking graves. When Glenn Mayes worked as the city recorder, Mr. Hunziker asked him on several occasions to put more gravel in the sinking graves. Glenn pointed out basically the area where three large graves needed to be filled; they were in the same area that Johnny had told me they were. He also spoke of three other graves nearby, and laughingly said, “Ninety-eight percent of the older folks in this town will tell you that there was a cemetery here (*we were standing in the center of the paved parking lot*), but not one of us ever saw anyone being buried here.” One of his older brothers remembers that there were low stones to define the graves. Glenn explained that on the Altamont Street side of “the empty lot” there used to be a very high ridge of dirt with a small road coming off Altamont Street over into the area where he filled the three graves. The little road was so high to climb

it took great effort to do so. He doesn't remember when it was done, but all that earth and about eighteen inches of the soil on the area that was later paved had been moved away. That may have been where some of the graves went or why scanning could not pick up any burial sites. Of course, if old man Ben Wooten was buried there, we would be speaking of nearly 150 years ago.

When Barbara (Mooney) Myers was a child, her mother and she took shortcuts across that "empty lot," and her mother always warned her not to step on or over the graves—sometimes out of respect, sometimes out of superstition. Carl "Squat" Crisp told me that when he was a young boy, his father told him the names of those buried on "the empty lot," but as most young folks would do, he didn't pay that much attention to what was being said to him. When Jeff Meeks' young daughter, June, went to town with him each weekend, she recalled seeing one large stone that in her mind marked a grave. It was not granite or a manufactured stone, but it was sandstone; she thinks she remembers that something was etched on it. Maybe it was the largest one of all, and when the others were moved away to give space for parking, it got left behind because of its size. When Polly Baggenstoss was asked about "the empty lot," (*there having been no mention of a cemetery*), she immediately stated that it was a cemetery. She said there were not many graves and the markers were more like "stobs" with names on them. Homer Kunz stated emphatically that there were graves on "the empty lot." As we talked on the phone, he went on to say that the Baggenstoss "boys" carried the ashes from the big ovens at the bakery and filled in the graves when they sank into the earth.

The old Company Store sat in the area where the statue of a coal miner now stands. It was parallel to Altamont Street and had an entrance on the end next to "the empty lot." Because of easy access to both levels of the store, and available space for parking the buggy or automobile (*whatever was popular*), hitching the horse or just taking shortcuts across "the empty lot," the graves sank throughout the years under the tremendous usage. More rock was used as filler and as the stones disappeared, so did the respect for the dead. The public forgot the friends, families and loved ones who once allegedly were laid to rest in the earth beneath "the empty lot." When Polly Baggenstoss was asked why Tracy Citians would walk and drive on graves, her sentiment was, "People have no respect for the living or the dead!"

Buster Sweeton remembers going to the theater and walking across the empty lot with its sunken graves. He doesn't recall any headstones being present. Buster and his wife Clara remember the stories that some of the black folks who worked at the coke ovens were also buried there.

The cemetery seemed to have had nothing to do with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church that joined the "empty lot." In their archives, there is no mention of the church

having ownership of that section of land, nor a cemetery. Matter of fact, I can find any old record of it being owned or sold. It's as though no one wanted it—I wonder why? As mentioned before, in an effort to find evidence of graves and determine their location, the Grundy County Historical Society contracted with a professional company in Atlanta that uses 3-D array ground penetrating radar (GPR) to locate burial spots. Virtual Underground scanned the paved lot and adjacent areas on Thursday, August 06, 2009.

It was a long wait, one week, before the Historical Society got the official results of the scans. On August 15, 2009, the results came back to the Society as being negative—no graves in the scanned area. Could it be that due to extended and heavy usage that the soil has simply returned to its original state? There is certainly sufficient information in the form of family and local folks' stories to indicate that there was once a small cemetery in the vicinity. However, the exact spot of old Ben Wooten's grave will perhaps never be known, but some of his descendants have no doubt as to the area where he was interred. It is my belief that an old photo or lost deed is lurking. I'll just keep digging for proof one way or the other.

Note: I would like to have your input on the subject discussed above. Please send any additions, corrections or opinions to jackiepartin@blomand.net . If you know of graves that may not be recorded or are unknown to the Grundy County Historical Society, please let us know. You may call the Heritage Center at 592-6008.