

HISTORY OF THE RNCIC

Written in the Fall of 1997 by members of the RNCIC Board Of Directors.

National cemeteries were established by an act of Congress on February 22, 1867 at the urging of President Lincoln. There were three designated in Arkansas: Fayetteville, Fort Smith and Little Rock. Fayetteville's is the eighth oldest in the United States.

During the Civil War the dead were buried on the battlefield. In northwest Arkansas this brings to mind Pea Ridge, Prairie Grove, Rheas Mill, Cane Hill and other skirmishes the area sustained.

The first burials in Fayetteville were on land just south of town, owned by J. K. Stone, a public-spirited man who gave permission to use this property in 1862. Over the next five years, many reinterments were done from known battlefields. It is believed this action caused the Federal Government to select the site in 1867.

As to the actual 6.07 acres for the original site, Judge David Walker also gave several pieces of land to the cemetery to help increase its size, but the deeds of transfer were in error and were finally straightened out in 1947 to give Walker's heirs due credit.

Originally laid out for 1700 graves, design changes made possible 3,688 more spaces, but no more land was added to the original six acres on Government Avenue.

By 1984 it became obvious that more room was needed as veterans from World Wars I and II, Korean veterans, VietNam and Gulf War survivors moved into adjacent four-state areas. So the Regional National Cemetery Improvement Corp. (RNCIC) was formed under the Arkansas Non-Profit Corporation Act by Ken Gibson, Col. Larry L. Browne, Jr. (president) , and John William (Bill) Murphy. Its purposes were to raise money and gifts of property to enlarge and improve the cemetery. It allowed donors to give tax-deductible gifts in whatever form. The petition was made and approved May 7, 1984.

Since then, the many veteran organizations like the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and individuals from Fayetteville, Springdale, Rogers, Lincoln, Prairie Grove, Pea Ridge, Bentonville and Bella Vista have joined together in various fund—raising events. Membership comes principally from Washington, Benton, Carroll, Madison, Boone and Newton counties. The corporation is not part of any veterans' organization.

Now under the jurisdiction of the Veterans Administration (Federal), the expansion land must be adjacent to the current acreage, it must be raw land, devoid of utilities, houses, sheds and septic tanks. RNCIC must arrange and pay for such removals before acceptance by the Federal Government. Future maintenance is paid by the federal Veterans Administration.

On September 6, 1991, there was a mortgage-burning ceremony as the gratuitous loan by the Bank of Fayetteville was paid off. It marked the end of the first phase of enlarging the land available for official burial. U. S. Representative John Paul Hammerschmidt was on hand to congratulate the RNCIC. Special thanks were given to Elvie P. Heiney, president, and Ken Gibson, secretary-treasurer, who had worked so hard to accomplish this first phase. These last two men are mentioned with special regret - both passed away recently. Kenneth Gibson died February 24, 1995, and Elvie P. Heiney died March 14, 1997.

In 1984, the Fayetteville National Cemetery would run out of room for burials before 1990. By January 1987, there were only 108 spaces left. The Fayetteville Evening Lions Club gave \$1,000. With this boost, RNCIC bought the first expansion, cleared the land, and presented it to Dean Holt, Director of Field Operations, Veterans Administration, Washington, DC, thus thwarting the closing slated for October, 1990.

Of \$100,000 designated by the State of Arkansas on March 2, 1996, \$40,000 was given RNCIC. Then-Governor Jim Guy Tucker held back \$60,000. This was a grant won by Rep. Charles Stewart and Sue Madison for the Fayetteville cemetery. Governor Mike Huckabee released \$47,000 still left in the fund to RNCIC on Tuesday, July 1, 1997.

In summary, 1989 showed the cemetery down to ten vacant plots. The latest report is that the RNCIC efforts have almost doubled its size to 13.3 acres. Supt. Jim Fitzgerald hopes the additional land will allow burials until 2007. By April 7, 1995, space became available until 2014. The northwest Arkansas veteran population now numbers 34,000, which means the RNCIC must continue its efforts to acquire the adjacent land still available. These pieces are residential properties, and therefore more affordable than commercial land. Future plans include a carillon which will be programmed to play all the service hymns.

When Karen Brown was administrator of the Fayetteville National Cemetery, she, along with help from Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt, managed to persuade the federal government to grant \$1.6 million to improve our Fayetteville National Cemetery, as both these influential people were so impressed with the work done by the RNCIC. The money was used to build a new administration building, a permanent interment shelter, fencing, landscaping, and many other improvements.

Clem McClelland was first president of RNCIC and was a veteran of the U. S. Coast Guard in World War II. He was a highly respected citizen and served in many capacities as head of organizations of great help to the community. His fund-raising for the cemetery was outstanding. He died September 6, 1989 at Fayetteville, was born September 24, 1916 at Griffin, Georgia. His brother, J. E. McClelland, has been of immeasurable help to the RNCIC, offering free the services of his engineering firm for surveys, clearing the sites of underground obstacles so the pieces were acceptable to the Veterans Administration.

The RNCIC intends to continue its efforts for expansion as there are still lots and small pieces of land available. Prices are still being negotiated on plots available.

All contributions are tax-deductible according to present laws. Just contact Don Tuller, treasurer, at P. O. Box 422, Fayetteville, AR 72702 (501 444-4444), or Milo Cumpston (501 442-6084, head of fundraising, or Roger McClain (501 751-6459), current president.