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The Boot Hill Burial Ground

Episode Number: 1871-03

This summarizes key themes and information gleaned from provided newspaper excerpts regarding early cemeteries known as "Boot Hill" in several Kansas towns, specifically Newton, Sheridan, Hays City, and Dodge City.

Main Themes:

- **Origin of the Name "Boot Hill":** The name "Boot Hill" consistently derives from the large number of individuals buried in these locations who died violently, often implying they were buried "with their boots on" as they fell.
- **Newton:** "The place derived its name from the numbers of persons who were buried there with boots on in the wild and early days." (The Newton Kansan, June 3, 1886) and "the story was circulated in eastern states, that when cowboys and ruffians were shot down in Newton, they were taken right to Boot Hill and buried with their boots on." (The Evening Kansan-Republican, January 20, 1915).
- **Sheridan:** "The burial ground at Sheridan contains the bodies of 8 men who died suddenly with their boots on, and is called "Boot Hill." (The Clay County Dispatch, July 27, 1878).
- **Hays City:** The eminence referred to...bears the euphonious and characteristic title of "Boot Hill." On the eminence and its slopes, here 37 victims of the pistol and the knife - men whose lives were full of wild adventure...at last died, to use a border phrase, "With their Boots on." (The Ellis County Star, March 22, 1877).
- **Prevalence of Violent Deaths:** The sources repeatedly emphasize that the majority of those buried in these cemeteries met violent ends, contrasting with those who died of natural causes.
- **Newton:** "Since last August [1871], 20 men have been buried at Newton, every one of whom "died with their boots on."" (The Brown County World, March 7, 1872). "At one time it was said of the thirty-two interments only two had died a natural death, the others had died with their boots on." (The Evening Kansan-Republican, October 27,

1903). Henry Brunner states there were "24 men buried in "Boot Hill," who had been killed in shooting scrapes." (The Hutchinson News, April 5, 1921).

- **Hays City:** "On the eminence and its slopes, here 37 victims of the pistol and the knife..." (The Ellis County Star, March 22, 1877).
- **Dodge City:** "There are now about 20 of these graves, mostly the graves of persons who met death by violent means." (The Dodge City Times, May 4, 1878).
- **Transient and "Wild" Nature of Early Towns:** The descriptions of these cemeteries and the people buried within them reflect the lawless and rough character of these frontier settlements during their early years.
- **Newton:** "shooting and killing was an every Saturday night occurrence" according to Henry Brunner. (The Hutchinson News, April 5, 1921). "Newton then had the reputation of being a tough old place..." (The Evening Kansan-Republican, January 20, 1915).
- **Hays City:** "...a class of men, now fast disappearing, before civilization, law, and order." (The Ellis County Star, March 22, 1877). The excerpt mentions a "drunken street brawl" resulting in the death of a child. (The Ellis County Star, March 22, 1877).
- **Lack of Formal Burial Practices:** Several accounts suggest burials were often informal, and the bodies may not have been interred with the customary care.
- **Newton:** While the rumor of being buried "just as they happened to be when shot, is not verified," Dr. Axtell's findings of some bodies in "wooden boxes" and "buried in the every day suits they had worn" suggest a lack of elaborate burial rites. (The Evening Kansan-Republican, January 20, 1915).
- **Disappearance and Redevelopment of the Sites:** Over time, these cemeteries were often neglected, removed, or redeveloped as the towns became more established and orderly.
- **Newton:** "All the bodies that could be found were removed from there to the present cemetery or elsewhere in the fall of 1873." (The Newton Kansan, June 3, 1886). Later, parts of the Newton Boot Hill were used for filling and grading. (The Republican, June 28, 1886 and The Evening Kansan-Republican, January 20, 1915).
- **Hays City:** "In the division of the town property, "Boot Hill" fell to Martin Allen and C.H. Lebold, and now these gentlemen have a large and well assorted stock of skeletons to dispose of cheap." (The Hays City Sentinel, March 23, 1878). This cynical note highlights the lack of respect for the site over time.
- **Dodge City:** "The old burying ground west of the city, known as Boot Hill, has been sold by the Town Company to Messrs. Fringer and Marshall, who will probably cut the land into lots and place it on the market." (The Dodge City Times, May 4, 1878).

Most Important Ideas or Facts:

- **Newton's Boot Hill Location and History:** Newton's first cemetery was "Boot Hill," located "on the south side of east First street, just before reaching the dry creek bridge." (The Newton Kansan, June 3, 1886). The first interment occurred around June 1871. (The Evening Kansan-Republican, October 27, 1903). Bodies were largely removed in the fall of 1873. (The Newton Kansan, June 3, 1886). There is some debate about the precise extent of the original Boot Hill area. (The Evening Kansan-Republican, January 21, 1915 and January 26, 1915).
- **Scale of Burials:** While numbers vary, the sources indicate a significant number of burials, particularly those resulting from violence. Newton is reported to have had between 20 and 32 interments. Hays City had 37 victims of violence and one child. Sheridan had 8. Dodge City had about 20.
- **"Newton Massacre" Connection:** At least one skeleton from Newton's Boot Hill was positively identified as being from a victim of the "Newton Massacre," but others were known to be buried there (The Evening Kansan-Republican, January 20, 1915).
- **Humanity of the Deceased:** Despite the violent circumstances, the Hays City excerpt offers a poignant perspective, suggesting that not all those buried were inherently "bad" and acknowledging their pasts and the potential for something more under different circumstances. "For all, they were men - not cowards; they were not ALL "bad," and there was something in the very quality of the daring courage..." and "No, they were not always bad. Who knows of their childhood..." (The Ellis County Star, March 22, 1877).
- **Ephemeral Nature of These Sites:** The accounts highlight how quickly these "landmarks" were altered or disappeared as progress and development took hold. The sentiment that "the last vestige of memory of those who rest beneath the sod will fade away into oblivion" in Dodge City is a recurring theme. (The Dodge City Times, May 4, 1878).

In summary, the provided sources offer a glimpse into the harsh realities of early Kansas frontier towns through the lens of their "Boot Hill" cemeteries. These sites were primarily burial grounds for victims of violence, reflecting the lawless conditions of the time. While the name "Boot Hill" became iconic, the physical locations were often temporary and subject to change and even disrespect as these towns evolved.

Thought-Starters

What was "Boot Hill" and where were some of these located?

"Boot Hill" was a common name for early cemeteries in several Kansas towns during the late 19th century, specifically Newton, Sheridan, Hays City, and Dodge City. These burial grounds were often located on the outskirts of town, sometimes on elevated ground or mounds.

Why were these cemeteries called "Boot Hill"?

The name "Boot Hill" directly reflects the common belief that the individuals buried there had died violently or unexpectedly. Newspapers and accounts from the time frequently mentioned the high number of men who had been killed in shooting scrapes or other sudden events. The phrase "died with their boots on" became synonymous with these circumstances, leading to the adoption of the evocative name for the burial grounds.

What kind of people were buried in Boot Hill cemeteries?

While the popular image of Boot Hill is one solely of desperadoes and those who died violently, the sources indicate a broader mix of people. Many were indeed victims of shootings and knife fights, reflecting the rough and wild nature of these frontier towns. However, at least in Dodge City, the cemetery also included individuals who died from natural causes but lacked the financial means or connections for a more formal burial. In Hays City, a particularly poignant account mentions the burial of a young child who was a victim of a stray bullet during a street brawl, highlighting that not all buried there were involved in criminal activity.

What was the general atmosphere or reputation of towns with Boot Hill cemeteries?

Towns with Boot Hill cemeteries, like Newton and Hays City, had a reputation for being "tough" and lawless in their early days. Accounts describe frequent shooting and killing, particularly on Saturday nights. Hays City was characterized by "wild revelry" and "a hundred bloody scenes," where life was cheap and violence was commonplace. This atmosphere directly contributed to the grim necessity and notoriety of the Boot Hill burial grounds.

Were the stories about people being buried *with their boots on* literally true?

Despite the name and the circulating stories, the sources suggest that the literal act of burying individuals with their boots on was not always, or even frequently, the case. An account from Newton based on skeletons exhumed by Dr. John T. Axtell indicates that bodies were placed in wooden boxes and, while buried in their everyday clothes, boots were not always found with the remains. This suggests the name was more symbolic of the circumstances of death rather than a literal description of the burial practice. If they were good boots, they were likely taken for someone who could use them.

What happened to the Boot Hill cemeteries over time?

Over time, the Boot Hill cemeteries in these towns were generally repurposed or the bodies were moved. In Newton, most bodies were relocated to other cemeteries in 1873, although years later bones were still being found when parts of the original Boot Hill site were leveled off and used for filling or development. In Dodge City, the land was sold and intended to be developed into residential lots. In Hays City, the land was also divided and sold, with one account humorously mentioning the buyers having ***"a large and well assorted stock of skeletons to dispose of cheap."*** This indicates that as the towns grew and became more established, these initial, informal burial grounds were phased out or built over.

Were the graves in Boot Hill always identifiable?

No, identifying specific graves in Boot Hill cemeteries became difficult over time. In Hays City, a report from 1878 stated that only 3 out of many graves could be identified. Most graves were marked only by a rock. As the sites were left untended and witnesses grew older, the identities of those buried faded.

What significance did Boot Hill have as a landmark?

Despite their grim origins, Boot Hill cemeteries were considered significant landmarks in these early Kansas towns. They served as tangible reminders of the wild and violent frontier era. Old timers remembered them and the stories associated with them, and their potential removal was noted as taking away one of the oldest landmarks of the area. While the violence they represented was a dark aspect of the past, the cemeteries themselves became part of the historical narrative of these towns. The "Boot Hill" seen in Dodge City today is simply a re-creation for the benefit of tourists.

Boot Hill: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. Where was the first Boot Hill cemetery in Newton, Kansas, reportedly located?
2. According to early newspaper accounts, how did the Newton Boot Hill cemetery get its name?
3. When were the bodies from the original Boot Hill location in Newton reportedly moved?
4. Who was Henry Brunner, and what was his connection to early Newton violence and Boot Hill?
5. What conflicting accounts exist regarding the location of the Newton Boot Hill in 1915?
6. According to newspaper accounts, how many bodies were estimated to be buried in the Hays City "Boot Hill"?
7. What did the Ellis County Star article suggest about the victims buried on Hays City Boot Hill, beyond simply being "bad"?
8. Besides victims of violence, what other type of burial is mentioned in the Hays City Boot Hill account?
9. What happened to the land that was formerly the Dodge City Boot Hill cemetery?
10. What did Dr. J.T. Axtell find when he exhumed bodies from the Newton Boot Hill area in 1879, which contradicted a common story?

Quiz Answer Key

1. It was reportedly located on the south side of east First street, just before reaching the dry creek bridge, near where the G.O. Smith residence or Missouri Pacific railroad was later located.
2. It derived its name from the number of persons buried there with their boots on, signifying they died violently or unexpectedly.

3. All bodies that could be found were reportedly removed from the original Boot Hill location in Newton in the fall of 1873.
4. Henry Brunner ran a restaurant in early Newton and was present during many violent incidents, including the death of the first marshal. He estimated 24 men killed in shooting scrapes were buried in Boot Hill.
5. Some believed the area being graded by Dr. Axtell was Boot Hill, while L.H. Pershing contended the actual Boot Hill was west of Slate Creek, planted with shade trees, and used as a lot for animals.
6. According to the Ellis County Star, there were 37 victims of the pistol and knife buried on the eminence and its slopes.
7. The article suggested they were not all "bad" and possessed a daring courage that, under other circumstances, could have led to heroic deeds. It also mentioned they had childhoods and mothers who loved them.
8. A little child, a victim of a stray bullet during a street brawl, is mentioned as sleeping on Hays City Boot Hill.
9. The land was sold by the Town Company to Messrs. Fringer and Marshall, who planned to divide it into lots for residential development.
10. He found that the bodies had been put in wooden boxes and were buried in their everyday clothes, but no boots were found with the skeletons.

Essay Format Questions

1. Compare and contrast the descriptions of the Newton and Hays City "Boot Hill" cemeteries based on the provided newspaper excerpts, focusing on their perceived significance, the types of individuals buried there, and the public's view of the sites over time.
2. Analyze the evolution of the physical location and memory of the Newton "Boot Hill" as described in the various newspaper articles, paying attention to the conflicting accounts and the reasons for disturbing or leveling the site.
3. Discuss the role of violence and sudden death in the early history of Kansas towns like Newton, Hays City, and Dodge City as portrayed through the context of their "Boot Hill" cemeteries.
4. Examine how the newspaper articles portray the "Boot Hill" burials, considering the language used to describe the deceased and the emotional or romantic elements sometimes associated with these cemeteries.
5. Based on the provided texts, evaluate the extent to which the historical reality of "Boot Hill" burials aligns with or contradicts the popular image of individuals being buried haphazardly "with their boots on."

Glossary of Key Terms

Boot Hill: A common name given to early cemeteries in Western towns, often where individuals who died violently or unexpectedly were buried.

Died with their boots on: A phrase signifying a sudden or violent death, often in the context of frontier life or conflict.

Hyde Park: An area south of the tracks in early Newton, mentioned as the site of a violent incident.

Marshal: A law enforcement officer, particularly in frontier towns.

Newton Massacre: A specific violent event mentioned as occurring in early Newton, in which individuals were killed and wounded.

Old timers: Long-time residents of a town, often relied upon for historical accounts and memories.

Prairie mound: A natural elevation or hill on the open prairie.

Shooting scrapes: Violent confrontations involving firearms.

Slate Creek: A dry creek near the location of the Newton Boot Hill.

Town Company: An organization responsible for developing and selling land in a new town.