

East Side cemetery holds history

Not far from where the Tanque Verde Wash reaches the valley floor from the Rincon Mountains, there is a stamp-size patch of land, covered with aging, knotted mesquite trees.

Evelyn Gonzales rarely comes to this place near Speedway and Houghton Road anymore. But it remains a special part of her life and Tucson's history.

It is a cemetery where her great-great-grandfather, Nicholas Van Alstine, is buried alongside his second wife and three of his sons. It is an almost secret resting place for Tucson valley pioneers who homesteaded this once rich swath of farmland.

Two days before Día de los Muertos, the celebration of the dead, Gonzales came to the cemetery to remember.

"I guess it makes me think of the olden days and how people lived here," said Gonzales, as she gingerly walked among the burial plots.

Gonzales recalls the stories told to her by her grandmother, Petra Van Alstine Peyron, who grew up on the Van Alstine ranch.

"She used to play in the river and she would run after roadrunners, barefoot, to catch them and open up their gizzards to see what they had eaten," Gonzales said.

The Van Alstine family no longer owns the cemetery, but the property owner permits family members to visit. Gonzales will not return to the cemetery this weekend but she expects other people will, to pay their respects.

There are about 100 identifiable



Ernesto Portillo Jr.

graves. Some are barren mounds of earth with no markings. A few graves are simply adorned with anonymous weathered wooden crosses. Others have rusted metal signs or smooth granite headstones with etched names.

They represent the Mexican and American families who once swam in the wash, tended to livestock or harvested chiles, squash and beans.

Manuelito Alcantar, Josefa Miranda and Dolores Salaz are buried here. So are Abundio Otero and Madeline Cramer.

Enrique Perez was 20 years old when he was buried on Oct. 24, 1926. Pedro Salcido was a private in the Army during World War I and died in 1955.

Alfredo J. Campos, born Sept. 5, 1907, and buried April 5, 1985, is flanked by his two wives, who preceded him in death — Dolores King Campos, who died Nov. 16, 1959, and Guadalupe Martinez Campos, who passed away Sept. 7, 1983.

In one corner of the barbed wire ringed cementerio is where Nicholas Van Alstine rests.

He was born to a Dutch family in 1816 in Canajoharie, N.Y., near Albany. Van Alstine came to Tucson in 1856 as a foreman on Solomon Warner's 12-mule pack train from Yuma.

Van Alstine liked it here, as would so many easterners after Southern Arizona became part of the United States in 1854.

He established ranches near Tubac and Tubutama, Sonora, where his first wife was born.

He died March 14, 1898, at age 81. One lasting reminder of his life is Van Alstine Street, which faces the railroad track in Barrio Anita near St. Marys Road and Interstate 10.

Another reminder can be found on the 1893 map by territorial surveyor George J. Roskrige. Van Alstine's ranch is noted along with the school and other pioneering ranches at the foot of the Rincons.

Gonzales finds the cemetery well tended and quiet. Horses from an adjacent stable and birds make the only sounds.

"Like my nana would say, this is a far away and lonely place. That's why she didn't want to be buried here," Gonzales said.

While she infrequently visits the cemetery, this historical place of tranquility remains invaluable to her. The memories of her grandmother, the stories she told of those hardy people who are buried in the land that sustained them, gives her solace.

■ *Ernesto Portillo Jr.'s column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Reach him at 573-4242 or at netopjr@azstarnet.com. He appears on "Arizona Illustrated," KUAT-TV Channel 6, at 6:30 p.m. and midnight Fridays.*

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