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MEMORIES FALL INTO STATE OF DISREPAIR

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The living come with grassy tread to read the gravestones on the hill;
The graveyard draws the living still, But never anymore the daed.--
Robert Frost

COMMERCE-- In this tiny Mississippi River town there is a narrow dirt road, guarded by the outreaching limbs of trees, which winds its way up a steep hill behind the town.

Beginning almost two centuries ago, horse-drawn wagons traveled up the road, wheels creaking and horses straining to pull their load. Behind the wagon walked a group of somber townspeople waiting to pay final homage to one of their own.

At the top of the hill, a location many Commerce residents say is still the most scenic place in town, mourners lowered wooded caskets into a large plot of earth which bears the graves of framers, merchants, laborers and Civil War veterans--some say there is a general buried there from a time long forgotten. This section of town, willed to the city almost 200 years ago by a Commerce landowner, was the city's main cemetery.

In it are buried more people than now live in Commerce (population less than 500). The cemetery bears the graves of those who built the city and saw it swell to a thriving river town of nearly 2,000 residents, only to shrink again after the Civil War.

Not many people visit the cemetery anymore. Weeds have tangled their way around gravemarkers. Tall, concrete memorials have been toppled by vandals and falling trees. Wrought iron fences have been carried away by thieves. Moss has hidden the names of husbands, wives, sons and daughters buried there when the lawn was kept closely cropped and flowers bloomed in the cemetery. The gripping hands of erosion have slowly scratched and clawed away at graves on a hillside, leaving human bones to be carried away by dogs and wild animals.

In not too many years, if the efforts of a handful of Commerce residents who want to preserve the cemetery do not succeed the forces of nature will reclaim the cemetery completely.

"It's really too bad that our children's children will not be around to see it," said Mary Davis, a Commerce resident, and one of those who is working to have the cemetery cleared and preserved. "But nobody seems to care."

According to Ann Huck, a lifetime resident of Commerce and present mayor of the community, land for the cemetery was given to the city by a man named Alex Waters around 1800.

Nobody is sure just when the first burial took place there. Many of the older graves have been covered by soil or washed away. However, the oldest grave found in the historic cemetery by residents still living in Commerce is dated 1801. The City of Commerce was founded in about 1790.