

Lyda Oh Lyda Part II: Lyda Conley would not admit defeat. She and her sister Lena continued their guard together after the death of their sister Ida. Though their fence was torn down repeatedly, the sisters rebuilt it, repeatedly. (It was rumored that in the middle of many nights, towns people would come to help rebuild the fence.) Then, on July 29, 1910, federal marshals acting under a court order entered the Huron Place Cemetery and destroyed their shack.

Undaunted, the two women rebuilt it. It would be destroyed and rebuilt a least twice more before federal officials would give up. The physical presence of the sisters and the notoriety of the lawsuit had dissuaded potential buyers and the Commission established to find a buyer, eventually gave up.

Conley's activities attracted nationwide attention, including Kansas Senator Charles Curtis (to be Herbert Hoover's Vice President). A Topekan of Kaw descent, Curtis visited the Huron Place Cemetery in 1912 and soon after introduced a bill in Congress to preclude the sale of the cemetery. In 1913 Congress approved his legislation, recommended the cemetery become a national monument, and appropriated \$10,000 for its renovation and preservation.

In 1918, Conley sought an injunction to restrain city officials from completing renovations and improvements she believed were being done carelessly without regard for the presence of unmarked graves. In June 1937, Conley chased some people from the cemetery and was charged with disturbance. A young judge gave her choice of a \$10 fine for disturbing the peace or a 10-day jail sentence. Conley served the sentence with pride.

For the rest of their lives, Lyda and Lena watched over and protected the Wyandot graves at the Huron Place Cemetery. They were arrested on several occasions on various charges relating to their attempts to interfere with city officials whose actions, the Conleys believed, were desecrating Wyandot graves. Those who knew the Conley sisters in their later years have attested that they spent much of their time in the cemetery, close to the graves of their ancestors, watching over them and honoring their spirits.

Lyda Conley died at age 72 on May 28, 1946. Within months of her death, the federal government and the Wyandotte Tribe of Oklahoma again initiated efforts to move the Wyandot graves and sell the cemetery land. In 1947, separate bills were introduced in the House and Senate but neither was enacted. Nine years later, Congress enacted legislation to terminate federal supervision over the Wyandot Tribe and explicitly authorized the sale of the cemetery as part of the termination process.

By 1957, the Oklahoma Wyandottes were threatening to move the bodies from Huron Place to a site in Oklahoma. Local businesses were eager to play a part in the destruction of Huron Place Cemetery. But no federal money had been appropriated to pay for the disinterments and the plans for Huron Place languished.

On September 15, 1958, Lena, the last of the four daughters of Eliza Burton and Zane Conley, died in her home in Kansas City, Kansas. Three days later, she was laid to rest near the graves of her mother, father, and three sisters. The tombstone that she herself designed to mark her grave bears her birth name, her Indian name "Floating Voice," and the warning: "Cursed be the villain that molest their graves." Even in death, it seemed, the Conley sisters were unwilling to give up their fight to protect the cemetery and what it represented.

In 1959, the city of Kansas City, Kansas and descendants of the "citizen" Wyandots initiated separate lawsuits against the United States and the Wyandottes of Oklahoma, seeking to invalidate the termination legislation authorizing the sale of the Huron Place Cemetery. A three-judge panel of the district court found unanimously that the descendants lacked standing to bring an action concerning the Treaty of 1855. The Supreme Court summarily affirmed this decision in 1961. However, despite failure in federal court, the cemetery was not sold—for it had come to be regarded as a local historic landmark, and as in 1910, no buyers were forthcoming.

In 1971, after a 65-year legal battle to protect this sacred burial ground, preservation groups succeeded in having the Huron Place Cemetery listed on the National Register of Historic Places, acknowledged by a small wooden sign and a series of bronze plaques. Although this status does not render the cemetery absolutely protected against encroachment or desecration, it is extremely unlikely that the cemetery will ever again face a realistic threat of destruction.

In 2008, actor Ben Kingsley announced plans to produce *Whispers Like Thunder*, a SBK-Pictures film about the epic story of the Huron Place Cemetery and the Native American women who struggled to preserve it.

The mission of Lyda Conley to preserve Huron Place Cemetery appears, at last, to be complete. It is where Lyda Burton Conley, Kansas attorney and direct descendant of the great Wyandot Chief Tarhe, is buried near her family at the Wyandot Burying Ground, the Huron Place Cemetery.

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyda_Conley

"Trespassers, Beware!: Lyda Burton Conley and the Battle for Huron Place Cemetery", Kim Dayton, Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, 1996, at Women's Legal History, Stanford University, accessed 25 Feb 2009

Ben Kingsley's SBK announces, Variety 17. Nov 08; <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117996028.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>
http://www.morofilms.com/index_sub_whispers.html