
March to the Grave

Episode 39: March 1, 2009

Written and read by Cheryl Spencer, Library Associate in Special Collections.

This is Cheryl Spencer, Special Collections Associate at the Newton Gresham Library at Sam Houston State University. Our topic today is the March 2nd celebration of Sam Houston's birthday and Texas Independence Day. The Walker County Historical Commission in cooperation with the Sam Houston Memorial Museum sponsors and directs the annual ceremony at the grave of Sam Houston in Oakwood Cemetery, Huntsville, Texas. The public is encouraged to join Walker County pioneers, heritage organizations, students and visitors.

In 1889 the Students at Sam Houston State Normal Institute, the state's earliest teacher training school, began a tradition that lasted until the mid-1960's. Marching from the Austin College Building on the campus to the grave of Sam Houston bearing an American flag, a Texas flag, students and faculty honored the memory of our great leader with the laying of a wreath, usually magnolia leaves, and giving a short speech of tribute. In the 1920's, automobiles joined the procession, and later the ROTC organization rendered a 21 gun salute at the close of the ceremony, followed by the playing of Taps.

Over the years, presidents of the Teachers College, and then the University attended and participated in the ceremony. On many occasions, legislators, congressmen and women, as well as Texas governors have attended as well. Public school students have attended and sometimes provided musical tributes.

In 1981, through a program called "Texas Heritage Days", the Walker County Historical Commission reinstated the tradition which had been neglected during the 1970's. Local officials representing the city, the county, SHSU student government, and the Alabama-Coushatta Indian Tribe take part in the observance, as well as descendants of the Houston family. The program has been expanded to include an address by a Texas historian, and is supported by the History Department at Sam Houston State University.