

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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THE COLLINS FAMILY AND THE FORT BOISE CEMETERY (Advertiser Column By Nancy DeHamer)

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The observance of Memorial Day finds many area residents visiting local cemeteries. One cemetery which is easily overlooked, except perhaps by veterans' groups, is the old Fort Boise Cemetery located behind the present Veterans Administration grounds on Cottonwood Creek. Although there are not many tombstones in the cemetery, there are six in one group, which, if the story behind them is known, makes us painfully aware of how difficult and uncertain life was on the frontier.

The tombstones mark the graves of six members of the Patrick Collins family. Collins was born in Ireland in 1833, emigrated to the United States at an early age, and joined the United States Army as a private in 1855. He saw duty in Missouri and Texas, and served with the Union Army during the Civil War. He was promoted several times, eventually reaching the rank of major. In 1865 he and his wife lost a son, Daniel, who was fifteen months old. The cause of the boy's death is not known, but one small tombstone was placed in the military cemetery.

Shortly after Daniel's death, Major Collins was transferred to Camp Warner, Oregon, and then to Arizona where he remained for three years and eight months fighting Apache Indians. He was then transferred to Sacramento, California, and from there to Camp Harney, Oregon, where he was stationed for three more years.

During these years he and his wife had six more children, four boys and two girls. In September of 1876, he was transferred back to Fort Boise where he served as Commander of Company A in the 21st Regiment of Infantry, and also served as Commandant at the fort except when relieved at intervals by the presence of a senior officer.

His wife and family had gone with him from post to post, with the possible exception of the time he spent in Arizona, and it must have been a difficult task moving often and adjusting to new surroundings. The community of Boise was favorably impressed with the family, as they were described as a "pleasing and interesting group--this amiable and devoted father and mother, with their six rosy-cheeked intelligent children gathered around them." Unfortunately, this lovely group was soon to be broken. In January of 1877, a scarlet fever epidemic hit Boise, and hit the Collins family especially hard. Within six days all four sons, Thomas, aged nine, John, aged three; Charles, aged fourteen

months; and William, aged five, were dead. Four more small stones joined the first one in the military cemetery.

Other children in the community also died from scarlet fever that winter, but no family suffered the way the Collins family did. The newspapers of the area offered their condolences, with the Idaho Avalanche in Silver City noting that "such a family calamity never before occurred here, and every one grieves with the bereaved parents at their unparalleled affliction." A few days after the funeral, The Statesman printed a poem titled "On the Death of Captain Collins' Children" which attempted to offer sympathy. The first stanza was:

Four little souls have departed
This earth for another sphere,
They were worshipped and idoled
Of parents and friends far and near.
Oh! Could there be solace sufficient
To console the bereaved of their loss.
But such is beyond consolation
For we all must bear our own cross.

Major Collins continued to serve at Fort Boise after that sad winter until November of 1879, when tragedy struck again. The major was riding with two other officers in the garrison ambulance when the horses became frightened at some clothing hanging near the road and ran out of control. The men jumped from the vehicle, but in doing so Major Collins received a blow on the head which caused him to lose consciousness and die a few hours later. Again both The Statesman and the Idaho Avalanche offered condolences and sympathy to what remained of the grief-stricken family.

After reporting the death of Major Collins and the details of the funeral, The Statesman does not indicate what became of Mrs. Collins and her two daughters. It is probable that she returned to her home, which was possibly in Cincinnati. It is likely that before she left, she had the large flat stone made which is in the cemetery with the other five grave markers. This stone lists all six members of her family which she lost while living in Boise. The stone can be seen in the cemetery today; five of the small stones nearest it in the row mark the graves of the five Collins boys.

During the Memorial Day season, it is well to reflect upon the sacrifices made by those who pioneered this area and by the soldiers who were here to protect the pioneers. Bringing civilization to this area was not easy, and was costly in terms of human life. The west would never have been settled without courageous people like the Collinses.