

The mystery of Lonely Lizzie

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



A lot of local history can sometimes be learned in the serenity of a graveyard. Gravestones call attention to early settlers, military heroes, prominent politicians, attorneys, pioneering farmers and businessmen. Less elaborate markers and sometimes uninscribed ordinary field stones tell where the hardworking yeoman farmers and slaves, whose sweat and tears helped to develop Chatham, now rest. Infant graves all dated within a year or two reflect epidemics. Many stones showing the maiden names of spouses demonstrate the connections between so many local families. Sometimes a gravestone will raise puzzling questions.

Many motorists speeding southward on Highway 15/501 never noticed an unusual feature on the right shoulder just a few hundred feet north of Herndon Road. A solitary polished black granite gravestone marks the resting place of Lizzie Cheek. She was born on December 23, 1892 and died on January 23, 1919, just a month beyond her 26th birthday.

When I first noticed this lonely grave five or six years ago it seemed strange to see a young woman named Cheek buried alone on the side of a highway when there is a whole page of

people named Cheek in the Chatham telephone directory. Nevertheless, except for using a weed-trimmer to remove weeds and poison ivy from around the stone I did little to solve this mystery except to mention it to my associates in the Historical Association. A few Cheeks in the area were questioned, but no one seemed to know Lizzie or how she fit into the family.

The pace of our inquiries picked up in March when Bev Wiggins, the coordinator of the Chatham Historical Association's Cemetery Survey Project, was notified that Lizzie Cheek's grave had been damaged. Apparently a piece of heavy equipment preparing the way to bring utility services into the adjacent site of the Briar Chapel development had run over the grave and partially pushed over the stone. Fortunately the monument was not broken. This incident was briefly mentioned in the local newspaper and caused several concerned citizens to volunteer bits of information.



Pictured are Lizzie's solitary grave, below, and that of one of her sisters at Lystra Baptist Church, at left.

PHOTOS BY CAROLINE R. VATTER.



Hopefully their contributions will help us to eventually determine why Lizzie sleeps alone on the roadside.

Census records for 1900 and current data from the Jones Brady Copeland Perry Ancestry World Tree Project show that Lizzie's parents were Robert David Cheek and Mary Frances D. Fannie Brewer. Mr. Cheek was born in Orange County in 1857 and married Fannie in

September 1885.

Property deeds indicate that the land where Lizzie lies came to the Cheek family via her mother, Fannie Brewer Cheek. The deeds describe the land as near the Riggsbee Post Office, but do not mention a cemetery. That postal facility was in Riggsbee's store which an 1896 map shows on the Chapel Hill-Pittsboro Road, but a realignment of the road well before the recent widening left the site of the store off to the east between SR1717 and SR1719.

Robert and Fannie had seven children: Lola G. (1885), Clarence (1886), Clifton (1888), Laura or Lina (about

1890), Lizzie (1892), Luna (about 1894) and Carl Lee Cheek (about 1891). Their home and farm was located near the Herndon Road going into land now under development as Briar Chapel.

Mrs. Rachel Parrish and Edwin Rives Cheek (no relation) both recall the family having a private graveyard surrounded by an iron fence on their property. Mrs. Parrish recalls that it had more gravestones within the fence but doesn't know if Lizzie's was one of them. The iron fence seems to be the feature that made the cemetery memorable. No one knows what happened to the fence, gravestones, or the graves.

Fannie Cheek and one of her daughters, Luna, attended some preaching services at Lystra Baptist Church, but Edwin Rives Cheek says that his family didn't know them and never had occasion to speak with them. He recalls Luna as having an artificial leg, but according to Mrs. Parrish she was still able to drive her mother around in a big black automobile. Some parishioners grumbled that Robert D. Cheek walked behind his plow on Sunday instead of coming to church.

Lizzie died in Durham County but was brought back to Chatham for burial. One of her sisters, Lola Cheek, married Walter E. Riggsbee and is buried at Lystra Baptist Church. At this writing we have not discovered what happened to Robert and Fannie and the rest of their children. Are they buried in unmarked graves at their former home site, are they under the present highway, or are they buried elsewhere? What happened to the family cemetery? If graves were removed why would Lizzie have been left behind?

Many old birth and death certificates and census records suffer from poor spelling and penmanship. The family surname was transcribed in places as Cheek, Chick and Chuck.

We are very appreciative of contributions and suggestions by Rebecca Cockrum, Rachel Parrish, Margie Brooks, Edwin Rives Cheek, his brother, Leon C. Cheek Jr. and the coordination and assistance of Bev. Wiggins. Hopefully some readers out there will come up with other leads to solve the mystery of Lonely Lizzie.

Fred J. Vatter is past President of Chatham County Historical Association and a Board Member.

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