

*In prison cemetery*

# Only numbers on graves

By HUGH A. MULLIGAN  
McALESTER, Okla. (AP) —  
Years before the computer  
threatened to reduce all human-  
ity to a statistic, men lived and  
died by the numbers:

- 60939
- 12-25-1900
- 10-29-59
- Women, too:
- 70376 B-F
- 1-16-1938
- 7-4-1961

Stark in their entirety, blunt  
as the presiding judge's gavel,  
these are epitaphs on the white-  
washed headstones in the prison  
cemetery across the highway  
from the maximum-security  
wing of the Oklahoma  
penitentiary. By the hundreds,  
the convict dead lie in orderly  
rows, each in his last narrow  
cell forever laid, serving the fi-  
nal sentence.

No crosses, no sculptured an-  
gels, no uncouth rhymes im-  
plore the passing tribute of a  
sigh. Not even a "Beloved Fa-  
ther of . . .," a "Loving Wise of .  
" or a "Rest in Peace."

All we know of 60939 is that he  
was born on Christmas Day,  
1900, and died at age 58 on Oct.  
29, 1959. Somewhere along the  
way, melancholy marked him  
for her own. If he wasn't a lifer,  
it turned out that way.

Off to the side near the un-  
locked gate, segregated by race  
and sex, 70376 B-F, a black fe-  
male who died at age 23, rests in  
the shade of a giant cottonwood  
tree. Free at last. What was her  
crime? How long could she have  
served to die so young?

There is no question of the  
fate of:  
W

18354  
EXC  
White male, executed. The  
crude printed figures don't tell  
us when or why. With that low  
number was he hanged? Or had  
the electric chair come to Okla-  
homa by then? Time and the  
wind that never seems to cease  
blowing across these plains  
have obliterated the numbers  
on most of the other stones in  
"Death Row," which seems a  
strange designation for that  
part of the graveyard reserved  
for prisoners dispatched by the  
state instead of their Maker.  
One tombstone has its head lop-  
ped off so that only the letters  
"EXC" appear on the portion of  
stone remaining.

W 20391 rates yellow plastic  
flowers on his grave, the only  
evidence of grief save for the  
keening of the locusts in the tall  
grass. On visitors' day at the  
penitentiary, a handful of rela-  
tives may cross the road and  
open the gate, but perhaps  
months and years and decades  
go by without anyone pausing to  
remember W 11252 or B 7563.

From yonder machine-gun-  
mounted tower, sirens wail the  
prisoners' passing hours—get  
up, wash up, line up, chow up,  
work details, bed check—with-  
out disturbing the sleep of W  
14021 or B 19722.

Not all the numbers are  
nameless in death. James  
Whithope, Leroy Ellis, John  
Barber, Andrew Suggs and a  
few others have names as well  
as numbers on their headstones,  
a custom that seems to have  
begun around 1939, judging  
from the dates.

Nothing fancy or jolting like  
Pretty-Boy Floyd, Machine-  
Gun Kelly, Baby-Face Nelson  
or Bonnie and Clyde, who  
operated in these parts but died  
elsewhere. Just ordinary  
phonebook names.

And, for sure, there are some  
proven innocents here, like:

- Baby of 44119
- 3-7-42 and:
- Baby of Emilie Hind
- 50270
- died
- 9-29-49

In the rising heat and dust of  
another summer afternoon,  
four boys on bicycles with  
fishing poles across the han-  
dlebars pause in the shade of a  
sign: "Warning. Hitch-hikers  
may be escaping convicts."

A mound of straw-colored  
earth over a freshly dug grave  
catches their eye. No white-  
washed headstone yet. But a  
metal marker with a cardboard  
name tag has been implanted in  
the dirt: "Michael Lancaster,  
1952-1978, Chaney Funeral  
Home."

Lancaster is the latest arrival  
and, at the moment, the best-  
known occupant.

With Claude Eugene Dennis,  
Lancaster broke out of the  
McAlester penitentiary on April  
23, escaping through a sewer.  
The two shot their way across a  
half-dozen states in the Deep  
South, killing eight people.

On May 26, they met their end  
in a shoot-out with police in the  
little town of Caddo, Okla., and  
were reported to have been  
riddled with more bullet holes  
than the legendary Bonnie  
Parker and Clyde Barrow.

For 34 days, Michael Lancas-  
ter was the most-wanted man in  
America.

In death, nobody wanted him.  
No one came to claim the body.  
While they get around to carv-  
ing his stone, the undertaker's  
coffin marker will wrinkle and  
vanish in the late summer rains  
and only a black scrawled num-  
ber will identify him.

To the kids pausing on the  
way back from the fishing hole,  
he'll be just another nameless  
number among the unvisited  
dead.

## St. Marys designates three historical sites

ST. MARYS (Bureau) — The stone  
water tower on Queen Street, a land-  
mark here for more than 80 years,  
should continue to be one for years to  
come following a town council deci-  
sion Tuesday.

Council passed a bylaw designating  
the tower as a structure of architec-  
tural or historical value under the  
Heritage Act.

This means the town is eligible to  
collect \$12,000 in grants to help pay  
for the \$40,000 in repairs being done  
to the tower.

*July 1978*

Council similarly designated Vic-  
toria Street bridge, which spans the  
Thames River at the western edge of  
town, and the mill race, a stone chute  
that once supplied water to turn the  
wheel at the Great Star Flour Mill.

Town clerk Ken Storey said the  
mill race needs repairs to its stone-  
work, estimated to cost \$15,000 to  
\$20,000.

Storey said he doesn't know what  
repairs the bridge requires but that  
project may be eligible for grants un-  
der the Heritage Act as well as fund-  
ing by the transport ministry.