

Coker Cemetery History #21 – March 2009

by Bob Battaglia

Richard Autry was kind enough to extract the following from the old San Antonio Herald Newspaper and send it to me. With his permission, I am putting it in our Coker Newsletter for March 2009.

"I thought everyone else might get a kick out of reading this one like I did Neil Coker's big race....."

-Richard Autry

San Antonio Herald,
Sunday October 9, 1870

Great Sixty Mile Race In Two Hours and Fifty Three Minutes at San Antonio.

A SIXTY MILE RACE - A \$75 PREMIUM.

The Agricultural, Stock Raising and Industrial Association of Western Texas is to offer a special premium of \$50 to the first, and \$25 to the second winner in the Sixty Mile Race around their track at the San Pedro Springs, provided that the distance is made in three hours. None but Texas raised horses and Texas made saddles to be used, no limit as to number. The race is to come off during the holding of their Fair, from the 5th to the 8th of October next. For further information address the "Agricultural Association," Box 151, Post Office, San Antonio.

This announcement caused some little talk on the subject, but the almost universal opinion of the public was, that the race could not be won on Texas raised horses in that time. Up to the morning of the day of the race. not a single entry had been made, and the directors were much in despair. However, before 11 o'clock, Neil Coker appeared upon the grounds, with twelve cow ponies, and declared it was his intention to contest for the prize. Neil Coker was born and raised in Bexar County, is about 22 years old, weighs somewhere between 120 and 135 pounds, and is a likely, active, young man, a fair type of our stock raising community. We examined his twelve horses, and found them very common indeed, but as no one believed he could win the race, no one was willing to loan him a good horse, and of the eleven and one mule which he had, it is safe to say that not over three of them had ever eaten a mouthful of corn in their lives. The track is only half a mile, is entirely new, a hog-wallow prairie, badly plowed, and only but slightly harrowed, with no attempt at filling up the holes, or leveling down the tills. The track is oval in shape, with four sharp curves, which makes it difficult to bring an untrained horse around the corners. Even with all these difficulties, and his kind of stock, at the tap of the bell, promptly on time, young Coker mounted his first pony and applied his first dose of "Texas Quirt." The first four horses, he only ran a half mile each, and he made his changes in from five to seven seconds. The fifth horse, a noble grass-raised animal, belonging to I. P. Simpson, Esq., of this city, carried him one mile in two minutes and ten seconds, this was excellent time, but he was so hard to take up, that he passed the stand by fully five yards, costing the rider a great deal of his badly needed strength, and about 15 seconds of good time. Nothing special occurred up to the

eighth, when an ungovernable mustang flew the track altogether, and made a circuit down through the woods, and meeting the San Pedro Irrigating Canal, he turned back through the Agricultural Department, leaped an eight horse power thrashing machine, and finally, despairing of making his escape, tried his "level best" to pitch young Coker over his head. By this time his attendants reached him with another horse, he got back into the track and proceeded, on his way. About the thirteenth mile, another horse broke on the other side of the track, and came very near jumping a stone wall. He was finally brought to a full stop, but considerable time was lost. With all these mishaps, at the end of thirty miles young Coker was two minutes ahead of time. The Marshal, General Young, made this announcement in a voice that could be heard for half a mile round.

The crowd now began to get excited, and a universal shout went up for more and better horses. Men who had refused the use of their horses, and scoffed at the possibility of such a race, began to believe he would make the trip. General Knox, Captain Story, William H. Jackson, the President of the Association, and I presume at least fifty others, 'exerted' themselves in procuring better horses. Capt. William H. Elliot brought in his splendid black stallion that made its mile in a little over two minutes. Mr. A. Oliver and Mr. McLean stripped the harness from their horses and brought them in. By this time the excitement was so great that every horse on the ground, no matter what his value, was at the service of the young and gallant rider. Gentlemen with gold headed canes, and kid gloves and fine linen would strip their horses, and bringing them in, scream at the top of their voices "Put him through even if you kill him!" From this time on, young Coker's fortunes smiled upon him. He now made time on each horse, once or twice only a mile and a half, and made his changes nearly every ten seconds. It was now evident to all that, without an accident he would win the race, and every man, woman and child on the ground was wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement. Sedate old Judges lost their dignity, and 'hurrahed' at the top of their voices, the ladies waved their handkerchiefs, children screamed, and young Coker gained on his time every round. Finally, the Marshal tapped the bell, as the last mile was made, and announced "60 miles in two hours and fifty-three minutes!" At this, young Coker exclaimed: "Let me give them another mile for good measure!" And with an eye as clear as an eagle's, and limbs as lithe as those of a mountain doe's, he mounted a fresh horse and made his sixty-first and last mile in two minutes and fifteen seconds. It is safe to say there never was such a concourse of people, or such a scene in Western Texas, Men wanted to carry him round on their shoulders wanted to treat Him give him coffee, ice water--anything. Finally, he was taken up into the Judges' stand and introduced by the Marshal; and that the crowd might have a chance to do something for him, a prominent banker of this city pulled off his hat and called out "all who wish to do something for the young man, here's a chance!" The last we saw of him, his hat was laden with gold and silver, which was given to young Coker, in addition to the premium of the association.

Some amusing incidents occurred during the race; your correspondent was at one time sent for by a party of ladies to "come here quick!" Arriving, he was urgently requested to "just think of the poor young man", and let him ride half the distance and get half the money! We tried to quiet their nerves by assuring them that next-year he would ride one hundred miles in five hours, and year after next, two hundred miles in ten hours. The look that they gave us was fully understood to mean "you're a brute," and we left, with the sharp ends of half a dozen sharp parasols in full view.

We have not seen young Coker this morning, but from the way he used that "quirt", and the jolting some of those horses gave him in trying to take them up, we imagine he feels like taking things easy for a day or two. We understand it is the intention of the Society to

present him with a champion belt, spurs, or a cup, to be the property of the champion rider west of the Colorado River, open to all competitors under the supervision of any incorporated Agricultural Association. And next year they intend to offer a liberal purse for a hundred mile race, to be made round their track at the San Pedro Springs, near this city, in five hours. The Fair, all through, has been a grand success. A lady who attended the Fair at Poughkeepsie, New York, last year, declared to us that with the exception of their having more garden and field products, this fair had more interesting features and was more systematically conducted than theirs. We have since learned that young Coker rode seven miles and back the day after the race, for the purpose of returning a saddle he had borrowed for the occasion, and that he was all right in every respect. Beat his time if you can and maybe you can and take his belt!

For the “rest of the story” see article #21A