Lyda Conley
Guardian of Huron Cemetery
1874-1946

by Barbara Magerl

“I will stand guard over the grave of my mother with a gun if I have to.” Lyda Conley’s words reflected her iron will and dedication to preserving Huron Indian Cemetery in Kansas City, Kansas. An 1855 treaty had promised, she insisted, to protect the Wyandot tribe’s burial ground.

Although an 1890 bill in Congress failed to pass, it alerted her to future threats against the cemetery on Minnesota Avenue, a coveted piece of real estate where her parents and a sister were buried. To meet the challenges, she enrolled in the Kansas City School of Law, graduating in 1902.

In 1906, Congress approved legislation to sell the cemetery and transfer bodies. Conley, the lawyer, filed in U.S. District Court for a permanent injunction against the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and Indian Commissioners to prevent the sale and what many considered desecration of the dead.

Conley and her sister Helena moved into a small structure in the cemetery, padlocked the gate, and posted a sign, “Trespass at your Peril.” They guarded Fort Conley night and day with a shotgun.

The lawsuit moved to the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. Helena and sister Ida manned the fort while Conley went to Washington. She became the first woman, or the first Indian woman, to plead a case in the Supreme Court. In 1909, however, the court upheld Congress’s right to interpret the 1855 treaty differently and to sell the land. Her struggle drew the attention of Charles Curtiss, Senator from Kansas, himself a Kaw descendant. In 1913 he convinced Congress to repeal the sale. (Curtiss became U.S. vice president in 1929.)

A Sunday school teacher who counted among her former students the assistant dean of Yale Divinity School, Lyda Conley was admitted to the Missouri Bar in 1902 and reportedly to the Kansas Bar in 1910. She died in 1946 and was buried in Huron Cemetery, now on the National Register of Historic Places.
Denied the permanent injunction she sought, Conley or her sister did it the old fashioned way: One placed a seven generation curse on anyone who disrupts the cemetery. Ever.

**Sources**


U.S. Supreme Court Booklets. Wyandotte County Museum, 1909.

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