



Lyda Conley

Lyda, Helena, and Ida Conley were the sisters who made the famous defense of the Huron Cemetery between 1906 and 1913, when sale of the cemetery was proposed in Congress. The sisters erected a small fortified shed on the grounds of the cemetery and through their efforts were successful in saving the historic spot. Lyda Conley, who defended the cemetery before the Supreme Court of the United States, was the first woman of Native American ancestry to appear before that high court and argue a case.

## Huron cemetery plans 'wouldn't please sisters'

**Bob Friskel**

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**(Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.)**

The federal government has approved city and Urban Renewal plans for the improvement of Huron cemetery. The improvement is expected to proceed peacefully - since the Conley sisters no longer are alive to watch over the cemetery.

Would the Conley sisters have liked the upgrading of the cemetery?

"They would have hated it," said Mrs. Wilma Kollman, 716 Tenney, who was a close friend of the three sisters, and especially Lyda Conley.

After the Supreme Court in 1907 ruled the Indian cemetery could be sold by the Wyandots, the Conley sisters built what came to be called "[Fort Conley](#)," a 6 by 8 foot hut at the cemetery. The sisters, using a shotgun and sorcery, kept potential buyers at bay.

Their stay at the cemetery actually lasted six years, until 1913, but Lyda kept watch over the cemetery for 40 years, until her death in 1946.

Mrs. Kollman was a youngster when Lyda was visiting regularly at the home of her parents at 716 Tenney. Both families were members of 7th Street Methodist church.

"I found out Lyda was a cousin of Zane Grey," said Mrs. Kollman, "and after that I adored her." "She was a beautiful woman. But she never had any boy friends. Didn't want them. None of the sisters married.

"Lyda was the first woman Indian lawyer, and her grave in the Huron cemetery says she was the only woman to take a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. It was the case to keep the Wyandot tribe from selling the cemetery, of course, and she lost. That was when the sisters moved into the cemetery.

"Lyda loved to talk," recalled Mrs. Kollman. "And she talked non-stop, without periods, or a change in her voice.

"Lyda was only one-sixteenth Indian," she continued. "Her great-grandfather, Tarhe, King Crane, was the great sachem of seven Indian nations. He was a personal friend of George Washington, and fought with him in the Revolutionary War.

"Her father was a white man, Andrew Conley, who met her mother in a convent in Canada and brought her back here. They had a farm in Wolcott and the four daughters, one died at about age 16, were brought up like little princesses.

"The father was president of the school board. I've still got the papers where he ordered the lumber of a school, a little one-room school, of course. And I've got Lyda's roll top desk she willed to me."

Mrs. Kollman indicated of the three sisters - Lena, Lyda and Ida - it was Lyda who was the leader. After leaving the cemetery, however, Lyda lived by herself at 1712 N. 3rd, while the other two sisters lived together a few doors down.

"They believed in spirits and fortune-telling, and Lyda didn't," Mrs. Kollman commented. "Ida was a cook at the county jail for a long time; but Lena - she never did anything but tell fortunes."

Leana, or Helena, died in the late 50's at age 94. She also used the name "Floating Voice" which is on her tombstone in Huron cemetery. It was she who frequently put curses on those disturbing the cemetery. Lena once pointed out that after her home on North 3rd was sold for taxes, she put a curse on the city. That was in 1951. Shortly after the flood came. President Theodore Roosevelt, who signed the law to sell Huron cemetery, lost two of his sons in war, and Lena attributed this to a curse she put on him.

Many of the rumors about the sisters sprang from Lena. Miss Kollman said once Lena told her, "Some people came and visited and asked me what we eat. I told them weeds, grasshoppers and bugs. You know, they believed me. The fools."

The sisters fought a constant battle with intruders, police and city officials. Mrs. Kollman stated she saw bruises Lyda suffered from policemen. The sisters used a gun that frightened away many persons. "That gun," laughed Mrs. Kollman, "was an old bell-muzzle musket their dad used in the Civil War. They never did know how to load it. It was never loaded. They just used it for bluffing. Once they tried to bury a white man in the cemetery, and the sisters chased away the funeral with that gun."

Mrs. Kollman also noted that Lydia especially in later years was very poor: "As a lawyer, she almost starved to death. She wouldn't prosecute anybody, and she wouldn't defend anybody guilty except an Indian. So she didn't have many cases. She worked as a telegrapher for the railroad and taught at business school. She also taught Sunday school. Many ministers came from her classes.

"In 1946 Lyda was 72 and was spending most of her nights at the library. To keep warm, I think, as well as to read. Then when the library closed, she went home. One night she got home at 1712 N. 3rd, and a man came out of the bushes and hit her in the back of the head with a brick. He took her purse and ran. The purse had 20 cents in it. She was dead within 24 hours."

Lyda was buried in the cemetery she guarded for 40 years. Even while living on 3rd Street, she kept close watch on the cemetery. In 1937 when city workmen were assigned to cut down a cemetery tree for safety reasons, she chased them away with a broomstick. She was fined \$10 and spent the night in jail. The stay was longer than expected because the jailor lost the key and it was not found until the next day.

"Lyda was always concerned about the cemetery," said Mrs. Kollman. "She wanted it to be the way it was in 1900. Then it had shrubs cut like animals, totem poles, war masks, statues. It was beautiful then. Why can't they restore it, not change it? All this 'improvement.' It's going to be another mall disaster. I can imagine what Lyda would be doing after she saw those plans they have. She'd be going for her gun, or taking them to court, or both."

At least the Conley family might be pleased that in the new cemetery planning, their graves have a prominent place, with a plaque planned telling their story.

As Rev. R.N. Burress said at the huge funeral for Lyda at Huron cemetery on May 31, 1946:

"In every breeze that stirs these trees, in every flower that graces this lofty hilltop, the works of Miss Conley will long be recalled when important men are forgotten."

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