On Huron Cemetery at Kansas City, Kansa

Media Contact: Tozier - Int. 4306 | Information Service
For Immediate Release: June 3, 1959
Print PDF

Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton today said he will send a representative of his office to Kansas City, Kansas, to participate in a hearing to be held soon by the House Subcommittee on Indian Affairs on bills affecting the future status of the community's controversial Huron Cemetery. The date for the hearing ill be announced later.

Subcommittee Chairman James A. Haley, who will conduct the hearing, invited the Secretary to send a representative.

The 1.9-acre cemetery, located in the heart of Kansas City, is the property of the Wyandotte Indian Tribe of Oklahoma and has long been the subject of controversy. Under a 1956 law providing for termination of Federal trust supervision of Wyandotte tribal property on or before August 1, 1959, the Department may put the cemetery property up for sale if the tribe so wishes.

One of the bills to be considered at the forthcoming hearing would eliminate the Department's authority to sell the cemetery. Another would require the Department to investigate the advisability of establishing the cemetery as a national shrine or monument.

Lewis Sigler, Assistant Legislative Counsel, will represent the Department at the hearing.

Three years ago Secretary Seaton said that before approval of any' plan for sale of the cemetery, a hearing would be held at Kansas City so that interested historical groups might express their views. The Haley Subcommittee hearing, he said, will fulfill that promise.

August 1 has been set as a deadline for removal of Federal trust supervision the Wyandotte tribal property. Therefore, Secretary Seaton said steps are being taken, looking toward disposal of the tribal property in compliance with the provisions of existing law.

First of these steps is a poll by mail of the adult members of the Wyandotte Tribe to learn their wishes on the disposal of the tribal property.

In questionnaires that will be sent out shortly by the Area Office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Muskogee, Oklahoma, each tribal member will be asked to express himself for or against three possible methods of disposition.

One would involve the transfer of the cemetery to a private trustee or cemetery association so that the property could be preserved intact. This would mean that the only income to be received by the tribal members would be that realized from sale of one small tract of tribal property located in Oklahoma.

Secondly all of the tribal property might be sold by sealed bids to the highest bidder regardless of

proposed future use. This would require removing the bodies from the Huron Cemetery and the purchase of a new cemetery site. Such costs would be deducted from the proceeds of the sale and the net balance would be distributed equally among the members.

Under the third proposal, the members will be asked whether they would approve sale of the cemetery to a civic body or other legal entity at the appraised value less the cost for removing the bodies in the event such an offer should be received. Under this plan the net income from the sale would also be distributed equally among the members.

Before the referendum vote could be initiated, three important steps had to be taken.

One was the compilation of a final roll of the tribal members. This was recently completed and the roll consists of 1,154 individuals--697 adults and 457 minors.

Second was a survey of the Huron Cemetery by the Bureau of land Management. This revealed certain encroachments and unauthorized occupation of certain areas by the municipality and certain private parties.

Third was an appraisal of the cemetery based on the legal description. This was recently completed. The value of the site, with all graves removed, is estimated at $291,000.

Because no accurate records of burials have been kept, only a rough estimate can be made of the costs of reinterment. From the information on hand, the Department indicated that there may be between 800 and 1, 000 interments and the reinterment costs could conceivably be about $130,000. Allowing for the cost of a new site and a monument, this would mean that the share of each Wyandotte member would probably not exceed $130.

In addition to arranging for the referendum among the tribal members, the Muskogee Office of the Indian Bureau is also being directed to (a) start negotiations with the city of Kansas City, Kansas, and abutting property owners on the sale of the areas of encroachment, (b) invite sealed bids from all potential purchasers of the cemetery site, (c) secure contract proposals for removing and reinterring the bodies and for other items incident to such relocation including a suitable site for reinterment, and (d) advertise for sale and solicit sealed bids for the small tract of tribal property in Oklahoma.