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Beloved bird Polly Bradford's legacy celebrated with Legends and Lore Marker



Langston family kin were among those gathered Tuesday morning at Oak Lawn Cemetery for the unveiling of the Legends and Lore marker dedicated to Polly Bradford, a notable parrot gifted to Sallie (Bradford) Langston as a young girl recovering from illness. Standing in front of the marker, from left: Tim Langston, Tamara (Langston) Arrington, Dana (Langston) Fleming and Neil Langston.



The children and ladies of the house posed respectfully around Polly's grave during "spring cleaning" in 1917.



A West Plains "citizen" that was a minor celebrity in her time, and will now have the added distinction of a special grave marker dedicated to her fame and talent that has been recognized by the William G. Pomeroy Foundation as part of its Legends and Lore program.

The marker is made possible by a grant to the West Plains Council on the Arts and was dedicated Tuesday morning to Polly the Parrot, a bilingual bird that is part of Ozarks history and the only non-human buried in the Oak Lawn Cemetery as a cherished member of the Bradford and Langston families. Polly buried in the Langston family plot when she died in 1920 at the age of about 53.

Polly's story began shortly after the end of the Civil War as a Cuban national who traveled to New Orleans and was purchased there around 1868 by Dr. Thomas Bradford. Bradford was a young doctor who himself immigrated from Dublin, Ireland, and had moved from New Orleans to Hardin in Ray County near Kansas City, seeking relative safety as a Union sympathizer.

The parrot's story is as deeply intertwined with the war, and the hardships and tragedy often faced by those pioneers and overcome by perseverance. Ironically, during a time when specialized veterinary care was surely hard to find, she outlived many of her family members, who succumbed at young ages to disease or accident.

Bradford and his family returned to New Orleans for a time after the war was over, and while his 14-year-old daughter Sallie recovered from yellow fever, Polly was bought to keep the girl entertained. Legend has it the young bird spoke its native Spanish, and the family set about teaching Polly her second language, English.

THE LANGSTONS OF HOWELL COUNTY

Meanwhile, the Langston family which settled in the Howell Valley area just before the war were driven from their farm after Bushwhackers murdered the patriarch of the family, Mote Langston. He was shot as he and his young son Jeff returned home from having a wagon repaired in preparation for a journey north to Rolla, also as Union sympathizers.

Mote reportedly suffered for 10 days before dying of his injury and was quickly buried on the family farm where his youngest of four sons, Walter, had been buried three years earlier after dying of scarlet fever.

A part of the property became Langston Cemetery, now known as Howell Valley Cemetery, off of ZZ Highway. Interestingly, it is noted as an early fully integrated cemetery with a marker placed in 1926 which dedicated it as a "free burial place for all time and for all people without restriction as to race or creed."

Another of the Langston brothers died on the trip to Rolla and was buried along the way, final resting place unknown, leaving Jeff and Sam as the two surviving brothers and in charge of supporting the remainder of the family.

On their return to their Howell Valley farm after the war, Jeff was 12 and Sam was 17, and the pair were tasked with rebuilding the farm. The two eventually became merchants. Sam established a store with an uncle by marriage, Frank Campbell, at the northeast corner of East Main Street and Court Square, now the site of West Plains Bank and Trust Company. Jeff moved to Marshfield to work in another uncle's store and met his future wife, Sallie Bradford, daughter of Dr. Thomas Bradford, who with his family, had returned to Missouri from New Orleans.

Jeff and Sallie were engaged, but to prove he could support a family, Jeff returned to West Plains to partner with his brother in the mercantile business. Jeff and Sallie were married in 1873.

A BELOVED FAMILY MEMBER

Polly, Sallie's parrot, remained in Marshfield with the Bradford family, and rose to notoriety as recounted in a detailed and colorful story published in the 1930s issue of Literary Digest. The story was reprinted in the Spring 1980 issue of the West Plains Gazette, attached to a story about the Langston family written by Gazette Editor Michael Cochran. It is that story that provided most of the background for this retelling.

The Literary Digest story, author not credited, recalls that Polly was taken by the Bradfords to a Methodist Camp meeting and "shouted and sang and prayed as loud as any other good Methodist present," apparently upstaging the preacher who "felt that she really was a bit overzealous."

During a visit to Marshfield by the P.T. Barnum circus, as the story goes, Polly saw the circus animals being led back and forth to a spring for watering and shouted and spoke to the circus workers from her porch. Polly's talent caught the attention of a circus manager, who eventually offered \$100 for her; the offer was turned down by the Bradfords, as Polly was considered a beloved family member.

On April 18, 1880, a tornado struck Marshfield killing 100 of the 800 residents there, including Dr. Bradford and his only son, Sidney, and badly injuring the doctor's wife, Laura Bradford. Polly survived uninjured and was pulled from the debris of the family home as she called for her "Ma," first thought by her rescuers to be a young child. Polly was said to have been crying inconsolably until she was brought to Mrs. Bradford's bedside, where she flew down to her and stood guard over her "Ma."

LIFE AND DEATH IN WEST PLAINS

The story goes that Polly continued to ask about Dr. Bradford and Sidney, and Mrs. Bradford brought Polly along when she moved to West Plains to live with Jeff and Sallie, and the bird traveled by train with Mrs. Bradford on occasional trips to Marshfield.

During her time in West Plains, and until her death in 1920, Polly continued to be a town celebrity. The Langston family, as prominent business owners and deeply involved in the Methodist Church, were well-known citizens and involved community members.

Jeff and Sallie built two mansions, the first of which was on Langston Street. The second is a Victorian that still stands on the corner of a large lot on West Main Street at North Arkansas Street, originally built on 18 acres that bordered the western city limit of Arkansas Avenue at the time. The three-story house was completed in 1896 and had 12 rooms.

The Langstons had five children and their extended family included Mrs. Bradford and Jeff and Sam's sister, Margaret Durham, a widow, and at various times their children and grandchildren. At least two of the couple's grandchildren were raised

there with the help of their grandmother and great-aunt because of the death of a parent.

For example, Jeff and Sallie's youngest child, Clara (Langston) Cochran, was widowed in 1919 after just seven years of marriage and their only child, Bradford Cochran, grew up there. Clara did not remarry, and in 1965, she died as the last member of the family living in the house.

Polly spent the remainder of her years praying along with the family and singing hymns including "Jesus Lover of my Soul," "How Firm A Foundation," and "In The Sweet By and By."

Jeff died in 1928, Sallie in 1932, and both were buried in the same family plot in which Polly had been interred. Charles Pease, related by marriage, died in 1943, and the last of that line of the Langston family, Margaret Pease, was laid to rest there in 1972.