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MARCO CEMETERY RECALLS TALES OF TRAGEDIES

By HAMPTON DUNN

MARCO ISLAND --- Back before "progress" came to Marco Island, before the causeways and bridges and condominiums and hotels and new post offices and golf courses and that sort of thing, life on Marco Island was simple.

So was death. The old cemetery has been carefully preserved and it lies just off newly widened State Road 951, reached by a winding sandy road. It’s on a peaceful little knoll that overlooks the water where most of the pioneers eked out a living by fishing.

Home-made tombstones, with crude etchings, record the life and death of the island’s first families. There are some modern memorials also in the burial ground.

One of the old tombstones lists the names of George, 8; Thomas, 6; and William, 4, sons of "Captain" Bill Collier. Only the word "drowned" is added and it recalls the tragic tale of 1898 when "Captain Bill" operated a boat service. His sons were among the victims when the schooner "Speedwell" was struck by a squall in the Florida Keys and overturned. Nine persons were caught in the cabin and drowned, including the Collier lads.

Hand-scrawled letters on concrete slabs at the head of graves point up the deaths at early ages of some of the islanders. Parents mourned the loss of a one-year-old with the inscription "Here Lies Our Hearts." A 14-year-old girl is remembered with the message "Loved by God and Man."