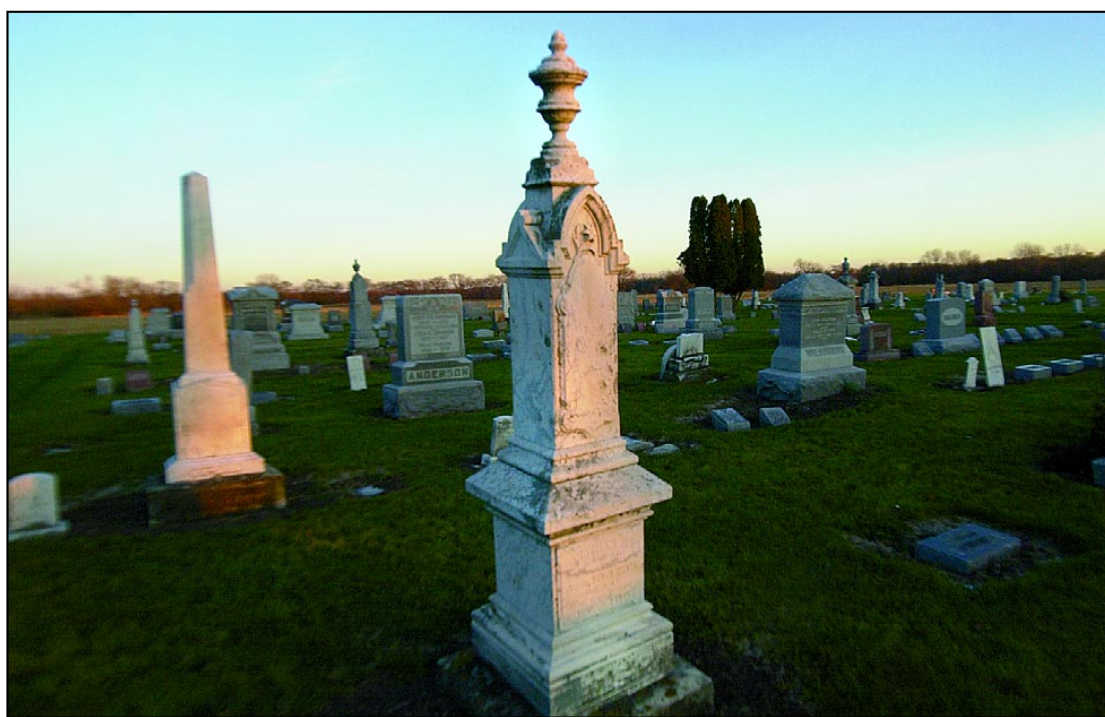


Remember, respect, learn

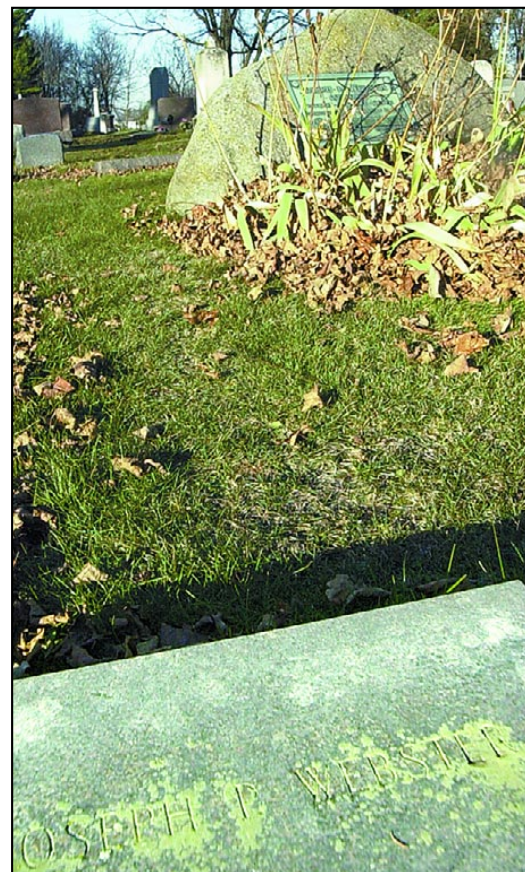


■ Donna Kjendlie, secretary-treasurer of the Walworth County Cemeteries Association, cleans and examines a grave marker in the area of Delavan's Spring Grove Cemetery where many of the area's early members of the circus colonies are buried.

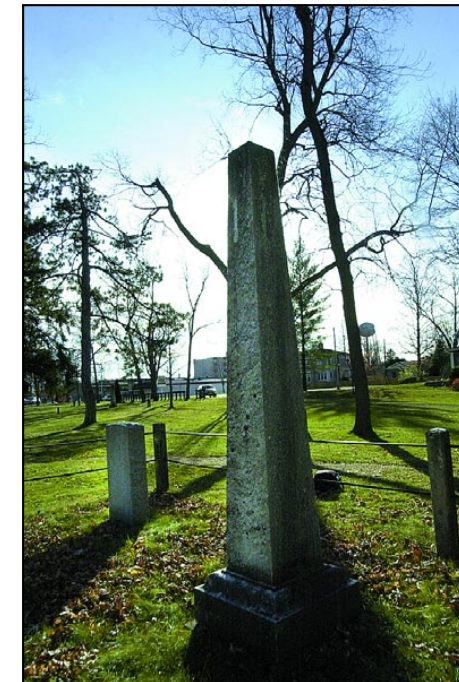
Walworth County cemeteries are alive with history



■ A woman who lies in Big Foot Cemetery made the *Guinness Book of World Records* for living through three centuries. She was born on Sept. 10, 1799, and died Sept. 17, 1900.



■ Pioneer and composer Joseph Webster, whose former home is now a county historical museum, is buried in Hazel Ridge Cemetery in Elkhorn. He is known for his famous song "In the Sweet By and By."



■ Samuel and Henry Phoenix, founders of Delavan, have their own large markers in a fenced section of Old Settler's Cemetery in that city.

■ Cemeteries link the past to the present

Story by Margaret Plevak
Photography by Terry Mayer

They may have picked up nicknames like "bone yard" or "boot hill," and become a staple setting in horror movies, but cemeteries don't have a creepy connotation for everyone. Walworth County historian Doris Reinke's dad taught her to drive a car in a cemetery.

"My father figured I couldn't do anyone any harm there," Reinke recalled with a chuckle.

Of course, besides reminding her of a peaceful place where she learned to drive, she sees cemeteries as places to remember and respect the dead. Yet on another level, cemeteries also offer a wealth of history and culture—not just for researchers like Reinke, but anyone who cares to peruse them.

Walworth County cemeteries have their share of noted personalities buried here. One is pioneer composer Joseph Philbrick Webster, whose former home is now a county historical museum. Webster was interred at Hazel Ridge Cemetery in Elkhorn. A large granite marker bears the title of one of his compositions, "In the Sweet By and By," Reinke said.

While James Jesse Strang, founder of the local Mormon settlement of Voree, lies in a Burlington cemetery, his body was moved from an old Mormon cemetery near the White River along County Highway 11 in Walworth County, Reinke said. The Mormon cemetery—like the settlement—no longer exists, but a granite marker on the site of Strang's old grave bears a map of Voree.

Capt. Israel Williams, one of the first white settlers in Williams

Bay and a veteran of the War of 1812, is buried in East Delavan Union Cemetery. Samuel and Henry Phoenix, founders of Delavan, have their own large markers in a fenced section of Old Settler's Cemetery in that city.

Many pioneers somehow ended up here in their trek westward across the country, said Diana Bird, librarian for the Walworth County Cemetery Association. "I think everybody must have come through the Walworth County area," she joked.

Bird frequently receives letters and e-mail from people trying to track down information on an ancestor's burial site. "It's amazing how many queries we get from California," she said.

Politicians, such as Alfred Delavan Thomas, a U.S. District Court judge for North Dakota, and Evan S. Tyler, a member of the North

ALIVE continued on **NEXT PAGE**



Kjendlie in the Walworth County Geneological research area located in the basement of the Aram Public Library in Delavan.

Alive/A wealth of history

From **PREVIOUS PAGE**

Dakota state house of representatives, are buried at Delavan's Spring Grove Cemetery. John Fox Potter, a Wisconsin state court judge, lies in Oak Ridge Cemetery, East Troy.

Even an Indianapolis 500 racecar driver Gary Congdon—tragically killed in a car crash—is buried in Whitewater's Hillside Cemetery.

According to historian Gordon Yadon, a number of artists are buried in Delavan, including internationally known portrait painter William T. Thorn, and Ada Shulz and her son, Walter, prominent landscape painters.

Because of Delavan's connections to the circus, 130 circus performers and workers are buried in Spring Grove and St. Andrew's cemeteries; the last such interment took place in 1966, Yadon said. Many of the graves can be identified by markers, added in 1962, bearing the word 'circus' and the picture of an elephant.

Yadon believes that one of the most striking features in Delavan's cemeteries is a Civil War monument erected in 1871 at Spring Grove. A stone eagle, perched atop a pillar, caps a list of names of residents who lost their lives in the war. It's also the spot where the city's Memorial Day services take place, Yadon said.

Civil War veterans' graves abound throughout the county, many marked with bronze stars engraved "GAR" for Grand Army of the Republic. Veterans from others wars—World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam—are represented as well.

Astonishingly, even two Revolutionary War soldiers are buried in Walworth County. Reinke said one, Thomas Lyon, is buried in Lyons Millpond Cemetery. Another, Philip Allen, lies in Mt. Philip Cemetery, Allen's Grove.

Bird noted that a woman

who lies in Big Foot Cemetery made the *Guinness Book of World Records* for living through three centuries; as her gravestone attests, she was born on Sept. 10, 1799, and died Sept. 17, 1900.

It isn't usually longevity that makes Donna Kjendlie pause before an old gravestone, but just the opposite. Kjendlie, the secretary-treasurer of the Walworth County Cemeteries Association, said the high infant mortality rate of the 1800s is reflected in many children's gravestones.

"When I was doing research and photographing stones in Hazel Ridge for a family, I spotted the stone of a 5-year-old, I think, and a 3-year-old and maybe a 2-year-old and an infant. It was all in one family and it was just wiped out in a period of four or five years," she said. "It could have been cholera or diphtheria. Disease then could take you, take your whole family, in nothing flat and without warning."

Frequently, children's gravestones featured lamb sculptures or engravings, and their epitaphs are often poignant, such as one found in Old Settler's Cemetery.

"We love thee," reads the stone of Johnnie Kemp, who was two weeks old when he died on June 17, 1865. "Just came to show how sweet a flower in paradise would bloom."

Verses taken from, or relating to, the Bible were common on gravestones of the 1800s. "At rest in heaven," says one; another, "He is not dead, but sleepeth."

Besides lambs, which signify innocence, other old engravings seen are fingers pointing up, hands clasped in farewell, weeping willows, open books and broken rings. Some older stone monuments feature angels or draped urns.

Kjendlie, a genealogist and

author who's compiled comprehensive books of grave listings in Walworth and Green county cemeteries, said such markers were part of a slower-paced, more reflective world.

"I don't think everybody was necessarily more religious, but they just had this deeper feeling for those that passed on," she said. "They didn't want someone to just leave this earth and not have the next generation know them."

Leaving a lasting impression seemed to be on the minds of several wealthy Chicago businessmen who had homes in Lake Geneva over 100 years ago. In that city's Oak Hill Cemetery, four mausoleums for the Moore, Byllesby, Sears and Chapin families are designed like graceful stone chapels, with neo-classical and gothic elements, such as arched doors and ironwork flowers.

Another eye-catching monument in Oak Hill is a pair of stone tree trunks-markers for William Karl Schenck and wife Jennie Donaldson—which are realistically depicted down to the rough-edged bark. Stone vines wind around the trunks, and a potted stone plant nestles at the base of one.

Kjendlie said that later gravestones offer insight into the deceased, too.

"You can tell a genealogist by the names of family members engraved on the back of the stone," she quipped.

While researching East Delavan Union Cemetery, Bird came across a marker only about 20 years old that listed the rules of life.

"At the bottom there was even a postscript," she said. "It read, 'It's cold down here.'" Sidebar: When Donna Kjendlie happened upon Blooming Prairie Cemetery in Darien, she saw a sadly neglected site. Kjendlie got permission from the town board to (with a group of volunteers from the Walworth County Cemetery Association) clean up and catalog all the graves. Kjendlie's brother even offered to keep the cemetery's grass mowed. Restoring such sites is a way for the group to preserve records of the past, she said.

Diana Bird, who spent a whole summer recording Lake Geneva's Pioneer Cemetery, agreed. "You can volunteer for a lot of things," she said, "but I don't know if there's anything more gratifying than to save a piece of history."

Walworth County Cemetery Association is always looking for volunteers to help them record cemeteries. For information, e-mail Kjendlie at kjendlie@charter.net or phone (608) 363-0554.

The author lives in Elkhorn and is a frequent contributor to The Week.



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