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# CEMETERIES: OUR LAST RESORT

By Dorothy Rieke

One evening my uncle, as a young man, walked one-half mile north to a country gas station where he was to meet friends and drink pop. He visited with his friends until it grew quite late. Finally, near midnight, he was ready to walk down the road to his farm home. In order to reach his destination, he had to walk past the Catholic Church and its cemetery.

Undoubtedly, he was so jumpy at the thoughts of that cemetery, so quiet and dark, that his imagination began working overtime. Could he make out some figure standing near that open grave?

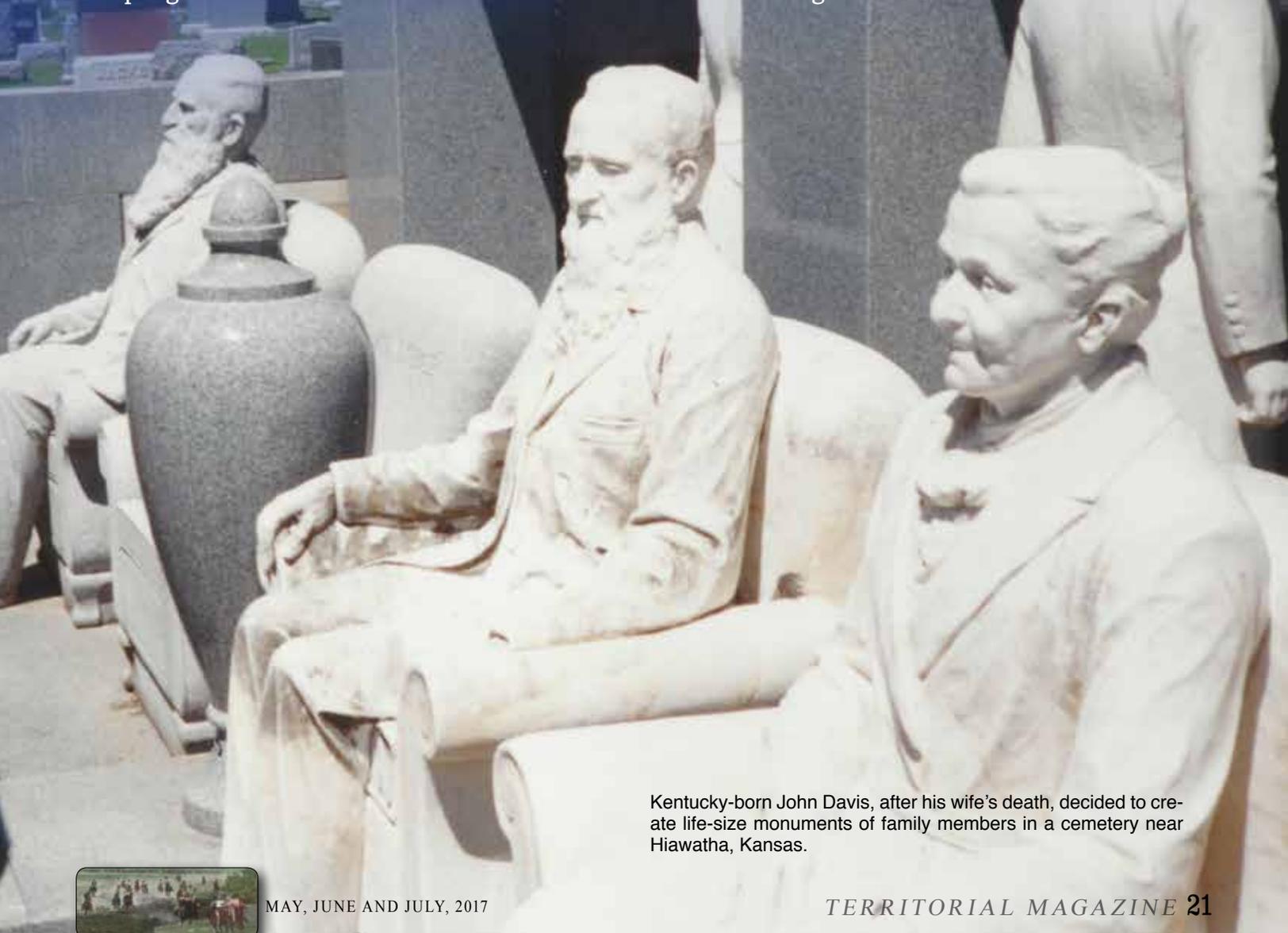
Quickening his pace, he rushed along. Suddenly, there was a loud ear-splitting scream echoing across the countryside. With his hair, seeming to stand on end, he began racing down the road. His heart clamored in his chest, his legs felt like they were stretched to the limit, and his breathing came hard and fast.

Terrified, sweaty and exhausted, he finally reached the back door of the farmhouse. He threw open the door and staggered in, almost collapsing. Out of breath, he gasped his story to his dad who had waited up for him.

His dad gave a logical explanation. An old house was located west along

the road near the cemetery. Perhaps, someone in that house screamed. I don't know if my uncle accepted that explanation, but I do know he never walked home alone at night past that cemetery again!

Yes, for some, cemeteries are frightening places, but they are intriguing because of the stories told there through monuments and epitaphs. What happened to the deceased be-



Kentucky-born John Davis, after his wife's death, decided to create life-size monuments of family members in a cemetery near Hiawatha, Kansas.





Fort Leavenworth, Kansas cemetery is the scene of many burials. An eagle overlooks tombstones representing army personnel with unique life stories.



This cemetery at Nebraska's Indian Cave State Park contains some century-old gravestones.



The J. Sterling Morton gravesite at Nebraska City's Wyuka cemetery reminds visitors of J. Sterling's campaign to plant more trees on the Great Plains.



This pedestal-styled gravestone in Prairie Union cemetery, northwest of Shubert, Nebraska is one of many very old gravestones. Clair Vaux.

fore cemeteries were established? Most families buried their dead in their backyards. This resulted in some gruesome discoveries later when water lines and more foundations were dug. Finally, graveyards were established near churches or in other locations.

The word gravestone comes from a Jewish custom in which the visitors to a grave placed stones at the head of the grave to honor the deceased. The first gravestones were boulders and heavy rocks that people thought would keep the deceased from "climbing out of their graves." During the Victorian Era, in Europe, iron grills were placed over the gravestones to keep in the zombies and vampires.

Early gravestones were only used by the middle and upper classes to commemorate the life of a loved one. Markers were crafted from wood or rough stones or rocks. Here in the Midwest, limestone, which does not weather well, was used for early gravestones. From 1780 to 1930, granite and marble came into use for more expensive gravestones. These, especially in Europe, were inscribed with winged skulls, skeletons and death angels which frightened people, especially grave robbers who worked for medical schools with a constant need for dead bodies.

Years ago, because doctors had little knowledge of the human body, a person could be buried alive. If that individual was in a coma, he often was pronounced dead. A friend told us that his great-grandfather was injured and fell into a coma. Nearly everyone believed that he was dead. However, his wife insisted over and over, "He is not dead!" Even though a coffin was made for him, his wife contended that he was alive and would not allow burial. After a few days, he awakened. He said the worse thing about being in a coma was hearing people talk of putting him in a coffin, nailing down the lid, and burying him.

In order to prevent these premature burials, a rope attached to the bell in the graveyard, was put in the coffin. If the person awakened, he shook the bell. Cemeteries were monitored at that time, so chances are someone would hear that bell.

Down through the years, gravestones, memorials to the dead, became meaningful with images and inscriptions on unique shapes. The Dodge family, once living in Council Bluffs, Iowa, was responsible for bringing one of the Midwest's finest bronze memorial sculptures to Council Bluffs in form of a memorial.

Created by Daniel Chester French in 1919, this memorial gravestone is located at the head of Lafayette Avenue and North Second St. in Fairview cemetery. It was commissioned by General Dodge's daughters in memory of their mother.

This statue/memorial is an image of a winged angel standing in the prow of a boat. The story behind this angel is based on a dream Mrs. Dodge had on three consecutive nights sometime before her death. In the dream, as she stood on a shore, an angel approached in a boat and



offered her a drink from a bowl. The angel said, "Drink. I bring you both a promise and a blessing." Mrs. Dodge declined, but on the third night, she drank from the bowl. In her words, she felt "transformed into a new and glorious spiritual being." The gravestone of the "black angel" continues to bring this interesting story to mind.

As time passed, certain images added to gravestones represented certain meanings. For example, spilled flower pots, broken columns, hour glasses and inverted torches indicated an early death. Ferns and anchors gave hope to loved ones, and pointing fingers gave hope to look toward Heaven. Flowers, such as roses or lilies, usually represented love or purity. Books, clothing or forgotten tools symbolized leaving the burdens of life behind. Outer space objects such as planets, including the sun and moon, represented glorified souls. Trees, especially willow trees, symbolized human life. Other symbols on gravestones included the dove, maple leaf, horseshoe, and the Star of David.

Certain gravestones leave indelible impressions on the viewer. One such gravestone is an image of the departed wearing a top inscribed with the image of Mickey Mouse. Another is of a seated man smoking a cigarette. One gravestone has a maze inscribed on it. Another is the image of a life-size girl in a glass box. One gravestone, commissioned by her sister, is of the 16-year-old girl reclining on a couch holding a book in her hand.

Any who has sneaked into a cemetery at night knows that he or she will face terror, as well as experiencing seeing exquisite headstones outlined in the moonlight. A cemetery's real character comes out at night, especially during times of bright moonlight. Many stories have been told about unusual occurrences in cemeteries. For example, one grave in Nebraska's Indian Cave State Park is said to belong to A. J. Ritter, who discovered a new way to fish using dynamite. In doing so, he blew off an arm. Local legends say at times, he rises from his grave in search for the arm he lost in that accident.

Stull cemetery, located in Stull, Kansas, a village, has had a number of legends and stories linked to it. One evening, two young men became frightened there when a strong wind began blowing out of nowhere. When they returned to their car, they claimed it had been moved to face the opposite direction. Another visitor to the abandoned church there claimed that he was knocked to the floor by a sinister air current. Some say no rain will fall inside the old church, even though it has no roof! In addition, the devil is supposed to appear there at least once a year.

In past days, gravestones offered space to engrave an epitaph or a few words about the deceased, whether written by the individual himself or by someone else. They also give details like the date of birth and the date of death of the departed. The following epitaphs appear in southwestern Nebraska's cemeteries: "Our father calls



This gravestone in Nebraska City's Wyuka cemetery brings to mind that some buried here had certain interests.



This very old monument in the Prairie Union cemetery northwest of Shubert, Nebraska bears the inscription, "Dedicated to our country's heroes".



Some of the older gravestones, like this one in Nebraska City's Wyuka cemetery, were ornate and beautiful with carvings.



and I must go and leave those earthly things below,” “As long as the rains fall and flowers continue to bloom, we will remember you,” “We miss thee from our home, dear Mother,” “Lips may not speak when the heart is crushed. But memory’s voice is never hushed,” and “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” II Timothy 4-7.

A few more epitaphs from other areas also are unusual, such as “In memory of Ellen Shannon Age 26 years who

was fatally burned March 21, 1870 by the explosion of a lamp filled with R. E. Danforth’s non-explosive burning fluid.” “Here rests Pancrazio Juvenales 1968-1993. He was a good husband, a wonderful father, but a bad electrician.”

Cemeteries hold even more secrets than we can imagine. In cemeteries, only the brave can last as the night turns dark, the moon drops in the sky, and tree limbs sway overhead, creating frightening shadow images. On the other hand, cemeteries pamper those who appreciate the beauty of nature, indulge those with vivid imaginations, and cater to those with hearty appetites for the strange or unusual. In fact, exploring cemeteries combine history, natural beauty, and unequalled pleasure for some of us.



One lady from Wisner, Nebraska, traveling frequently to Nebraska City said that she visited that city for its cemetery and the beautiful monuments there. This monument makes her statement true.



At times, a tree trunk monument indicated a short life. This one in Nebraska City’s Wyuka cemetery may indicate that.

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