

## Grave Markers Tell Life Stories

By Kathy Luedke and Betty Taylor

Pleasant View Cemetery in Hartley, Iowa has many beautiful and interesting headstones. The first two examples in this article describe unique grave markers located near the paved road in the central part of the cemetery. Unfortunately, some family names are not visible from the road, but located on the opposite sides of the markers.

In the McGee lot you will see a stone that depicts a tree stump, inscribed with the following: James W--Son of Mr. and Mrs. James McGee--Died Sept. 7, 1896--Aged 28 Y, 2 M, and 6 D.

This type of tombstone first appeared in the 1870s and was popular for approximately sixty years. Traditionally carved out of limestone or marble, the carvings qualify as folk art. The tree-stump design looks like a living tree that has been cut down, suggesting the individual was cut down in the prime of life. When branches appear to be cut close to the stump, they symbolize other family members who have died before their time. On some markers, initials of family members appear to be carved into the cut-off limbs.

Inscriptions cut into limestone, make it appear that bark has been cut away. At times, a scroll appears to be nailed to the stump or suspended from a rope hanger. Flowers and ivy may be carved as offerings at the base or around the stump. Other assorted items often seen range from a cross or a Bible, an anchor, flowers, etc., along with the name and dates for the individual buried there.

While some of the bluish-gray markers resemble stone, they are actually molded metal. A good example is located in the Miller lot, north of the McGee marker. The material, called white bronze to make it more appealing to customers, is actually pure zinc. As the metal weathers, it forms a tough durable skin of zinc carbonate, giving these markers their color. This hard protective skin causes the castings to remain extremely sharp and clear.

The metal monuments were usually ordered through a sales agent from a catalog. Customers could decide on the overall design and choose the various symbols and other decorative elements they preferred. Individual pieces were then molded in zinc and the panels bolted together with decorative screws. When other family members died at later dates, decorative panels could be easily removed and replaced with new castings containing updated information.

There are rumors from the past about the space behind the panels being used during the Prohibition Era for purposes of delivering “prohibited bottle refreshments” to customers in the area.

Other examples of white bronze markers can be found in Pleasant View. Heading east from the center entrance, the Colby plot is second to the right. It has two metal markers on children’s graves. One is a cast angel for little Beth Colby. The other, more traditional, is inscribed with the words, “Our Darling.”

The Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut made markers until 1914. One of the subsidiary plants was located in Des Moines where pieces were assembled. That plant operated for twenty-two years until 1908. The general rarity of zinc grave markers is because they were produced for

only forty years. The short production time span was because metal monuments were never well accepted by the public.

There are several advantages to the white bronze/zinc markers. They do not corrode and because they are comparatively light, are not as likely to lean as stone markers. In addition, lichens are not attracted to them and the writing remains clear and easy to read even after one hundred years and more.

Another interesting gravestone in the older section belongs to the Drake family. It is topped with a large, perfect orb. Orbs are considered to be effigies of the soul. They represent celestial bodies and symbolize the reward of the resurrection.

Nearby are two partially draped stones, in separate Guenther lots. One of them, for Emma, wife of R. J. Guenther, is topped with two books and a large heavily carved drape. Books are known to represent the Bible or to be a record of good deeds; and the drape symbolizes the last partition between earthly and heavenly life.

In close proximity is a tall stone topped with a draped urn. The urn is commonly believed to testify to the death of the body and the dust into which the body will change, while the spirit of the departed rests eternally with God. The cloth draping the urn guards the ashes. Some believe it to mean the soul has departed the shrouded body for its trip to heaven.

A walk through the paved paths in Hartley's Pleasant View Cemetery offers an opportunity for contemplation. Markers have been shaped and inscribed not only for beauty but also to symbolize the departed. Hands are used in several ways: praying hands ask for eternal life; a hand or finger pointing upward indicate the path to heaven; pointing downward, they represents God pointing to a chosen one; and clasped hands mean farewell, friendship, or an earthly and heavenly bond.

An anchor symbolizes hope, cherubs and angels signify innocence, and palm branches stand for victory and rejoicing. Roses are used frequently to show completion and the brevity of life. A rosebud tells us the deceased died too young, and a rose in full bloom means the deceased died in the prime of life.

Much of the preceding information has been gathered from the internet. You may enjoy reading more on the following web sites.

- *Gravestone Symbolism*
- *Headstones-articles-Symbols*
- *White Bronze Grave Markers. Zinc Grave Markers*