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Tombstone epitaphs open mind to thoughts of history and mystery

By Diether Haenicke
October 21, 2009

Occasionally, when I travel in northern Michigan, I like to stop at a certain stand of beautiful big trees under which lies an old cemetery surrounding a small wooden church. It is one of the most peaceful and picturesque places on my trip up north, and the gravesites tell an interesting story: the names of the deceased are all Scandinavian, buried there in the 19th century. Obviously, a group of fellow countrymen with their families crossed the ocean, settled in the wilderness of northern Michigan, worked the land, fished the lakes and streams, built their homes there and lived out their lives in the new country.

When I was a teenager, I frequently visited a remote village in the hills near my home, where the tombstones in the local cemetery bore the names of just five or six families, an indication that for centuries this mountain community had remained isolated and become so inbred that eventually everyone was his neighbor's cousin, uncle, son-in-law, father, grandson or two of the above. Walking across that cemetery, one could learn more about regional history, accumulation of wealth and hereditary diseases than in one year of high school.

Many of the newer cemeteries I find rather bland. They don't tell stories. Reading just their names and dates, one can at best learn about infant mortality statistics, average life spans, or how wars have affected a community.

But old cemeteries are rich sources of lore and feeders of the imagination. They are history books to me, and I reconstruct in my mind the life stories of the dead by reading the inscriptions on the head stones, which often condense a vita into a few dates and words.

What a tragedy may lie behind the words on the twin stones in Little Compton, R.I., which tell us: “In Memory of Elizabeth who should have been the Wife of Mr Simeon Palmer who died Aug. 14th 1776 in the 64th Year of her Age.” And next to it: “In Memory of Lidia, Wife of Mr. Simeon Palmer who died Decem. 26 1754 in the 35th Year of her Age.” The two inscriptions are full of mystery and could provide the stuff for a novel.

In Janet Greene’s book, *Epitaphs to Remember*, I read an inscription said to be found in Lincoln, Maine. It reads more like a want ad than a tombstone: “Sacred to the Memory of Mr. Jared Bates who Died Aug. the 6th 1800. His widow aged 24 who mourns as one can be comforted at 7 Elm street this village and possesses every qualification for a good Wife.”

Not all epitaphs are complimentary to the deceased. When Bezaleel Wood died in 1837, his grave in Winslow, Maine, was inscribed:

Here lies one Wood
enclosed in wood
One Wood within another.
The outer wood
is very good,
We cannot praise the other.

Reported from hearsay is this inscription (1750) from Plymouth, England:

Here lies as silent clay
Miss Arabella Young
Who on the 21st of May
Began to hold her tongue.

Some epitaphs attempt to give a life’s account by citing statistics. A grave in Litchfield, Conn., reports: “Here lies the body of Mrs. Mary, wife of John Buel, Esq. She died Nov. 4 1768 age 90. Having had 13 children, 101 grandchildren, 274 great-grandchildren, 49 great-great-grandchildren, 410 total. 336 survived her.” She and her clan sure did their best to populate the New World. The Rev. Bezaleel Pinneo’s grave in Mildford, Conn., (1849) reveals an active and successful professional life:

During his ministry
He enjoyed 7 revivals,
Admitted 716 members,
Baptized 1,117 and
Buried 1,126 of his flock.

Each old cemetery tells me amazing stories or leaves me with stirring questions. Ever since I stood at Thomas Jefferson's grave, I have pondered the inscription which he wrote himself. He asks the visitor to remember him as "the author of the Declaration of Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." That he was also our third president is not mentioned. What may be the reason?

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