

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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ART & SYMBOLISM IN LOCAL CEMETERIES

The tour which I conducted of Mt. Albion Cemetery last October brought out an enthusiastic crowd of over three hundred people. This alone suggests there is interest in local history as it can be interpreted, through, in this case Mt. Albion. Although Mt. Albion is our largest cemetery in Orleans County with over 30,000 internments, there are other rural cemeteries with equally interesting monuments and history.

On Saturday evening, March 4, it will be my privilege to be the featured speaker for the annual Cobblestone Society mid-winter community dinner. My topic will be Art & Symbolism in Local Cemeteries, illustrated through a slide presentation. This event will be held at the Erie Inn at Knowlesville beginning at 6 p.m. with a social hour followed by a 7 p.m. dinner and then the program. For menu choices and prices you may call 589-9510. Reservations are required but you do not have to be a Cobblestone Society member to attend. So come out for an evening's relaxation and cultural entertainment.

Let me give you a sampling of my program. Our photo illustrated with this column is the Ingersoll Monument at Mt. Albion. It represents an angel with a trumpet and in this case emits a feeling of triumph over death. Angels are traditionally seen as messengers of God. This slightly larger than life size angel is portrayed in a baldachino with Tuscan revival columns. The garland over the angel is significant of remembrance. There are at least eight figural statues of life-size or greater than life-size dimensions in Orleans County. Our angel here is one - but we can also find three different statues of Hope (2 Mt. Albion, 1 Hillside) two of Victory (1 St. Joseph's, 1 West Ridgeway), one of Faith (Boxwood) and one of an actual person, Asa Hill (Millville). Such images as these are bold and rather conspicuous. By contrast we can also find some equally intriguing cemetery art tucked away in some very remote cemeteries in Orleans County. In my program we will have a chance to encounter some of these.

As I started taking pictures of monuments over twenty years ago, I have one documented which no longer exists. Our Victorian ancestors, in particular, had great imagination in contriving monumental symbolism which not only reflected their outlook on death but invited contemplation and education. They often borrowed pagan symbols and reinterpreted their meaning for Christian uses.

Wealthy people were more apt to erect elaborate monuments which often testify to a family's prominence. Consequently, cemeteries became a center of community identity and pride.

Not only do we have some interesting visual representations but also some equally interesting epitaphs. Two of which come to mind are located



in West Kendall Cemetery. The first is as follows:

"My children all and husband dear
Don't mourn for me as you stand here
For I have gone with Christ to dwell
He who doeth all things well."

Incidentally, this appears on the headstone of Olive Rice who died in 1887. Nearby on the headstone of Zebulon Rice who died in 1884 we find:

"Depart my friends dry up your tears
Here I must lie till Christ appears."

Do you notice both of these epitaphs are written as though the person in the grave is speaking? These are indeed, much more unusual than for instance: "Asleep In Jesus" or "Gone Home" or "Gone but not forgotten" or "At Rest" which are commonly found. Many epitaphs are simply Biblical statements while the more unique ones are of a personal nature such as: "He has done what he could" which is on the headstone of Herman C. Chuchra also found at West Kendall.

Believe it or not, there is a headstone in the West Ridgeway cemetery which dates back to the 1870's that has advertising on it. Near the bottom it gives the name of the monument works: "L. Downer & Co., Lockport."

Since the tour of Mt. Albion met with such popularity, I plan to arrange a tour of Boxwood Cemetery north of Medina some time in May.

Our cemeteries are a valuable resource as we come to recognize them as a wealth of education and enjoyment. Our March 4th program will simply give an over-view of what we can see and learn from our local cemeteries.