



Madison County Genealogical Society



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How to get the most out of Grandma's Tombstone

By Richard Strenge

One of the important questions we need to ask is: "What do you want on your tombstone?" It is a question we should all ask and give some thought to the answer. Across America there are many varieties of cemeteries varying in size, design, and style of monuments. The location and type of burial and the style and wording of our monument all reflect our individual styles.

The size of our markers vary from ground-level (flat) to some that are 7 inches high to 3 feet high to well over 5 feet high. We see the styles change depending upon the time when our loved one died. Before 1899, there were slender, square sandstone or slate slabs with or without elaborate carvings. Then between 1830 to 1860 there were moderately sculptured stones of white marble subject to lichens and moss. From 1860 to 1880, we had square, towering marble stones often elaborately shaped or with ornate sculpture. From 1880 to 1910, we see many soft, gray marble or limestone markers subject to weathering. Then beginning around 1910, we began using granite.

If the grave site of a person has a newer stone than the time when the person died, it may be that the stone is a replacement. The original stone may have been damaged by time, weather, or vandals. A relative may have placed a stone at the site when there wasn't one before. I think that every person should have a stone marker or a marker that will last for years. It is said that a grave stone is a scratch left on the surface to let you know someone has been here.

What is placed on the monument is also an individual reflection. There are very elaborate wordings, carvings and sizes. There are more simple ones that give only name and year of birth and death. Some people are so kind that they leave the names of their parents and their children and even their grandchildren's names. What a find for someone doing family research. It is also helpful in finding the dates listed on the marker for birth and death in full month, day, and year. There are inscriptions on some of the older stones and even some new ones that reflect the individual, including poetry and Bible verses. Carvings of a lamb mean innocence and are usually found on small children's graves. Many older stones from the late 1800's to early 1900's have a handshake for farewell, arches for victory in death, drapes for mourning and mortality, or a broken column showing the loss of the head of the family. Other common carvings are oak leaves and acorns for maturity or ripe old age, roses

for brevity of earthly existence, willows for earthly sorrow, and even portals or gateways showing the passageway to eternal journey.

There are different types of cemeteries. There are city, county, national, private, church, military, ethnic, and even family cemeteries. The records for burials vary also from early days to today. Records may be well kept in some and totally lacking in others. The type of records you can find to locate burials are: sextons' records, church burial records, burial permit records, grave opening orders, and family Bibles. Look also for indexes of cemeteries that have been walked and recorded by individuals or society groups.

In caring for the markers of our loved ones, always check to see what kind of stone it is before cleaning. Your cleaning could further damage the stone. Do not use any product containing any acid or oil-based ingredients. These will eat the stone or leave a stain that will damage the stone. Never, never use a wire brush or a rough instrument to clean the tombstone. Never touch a sandstone marker or use any type of waterproofing sealer. It is best to never touch a marker but rather use a mirror to create light and shadows, allowing a marker to be read. If cleaning is necessary, use a soft natural material such as a corncob, or a pink eraser.

The information on a marker should be copied exactly as found. The languages that were used on the stone have meaning that may be lost if we try to change it into our English spelling. We may think those accent and punctuation marks are not important, but they are the letters of their alphabet that need to be preserved. By changing a mark here or there, it could change the location of where we look for records. One example from Norwegian is it's a long way from Lovik to Løvik.

A handout giving some of the genealogical terms found on the stones comparing the English with German, Norwegian, Swedish and Czech languages was given out at the meeting. Also included was information explaining the meanings of some of the various carvings, a Czech alphabet, some things on the Norwegian alphabet, and how to observe and record a cemetery. If any member of our society would like a copy of the multi-page handout, it can be obtained by sending a request and \$2.00 for copying and postage to Madison Co. Genealogical Society, P.O. Box 1031, Norfolk, NE 68702.