
Importance of Cemeteries by Jan Somerfeld

“We are who we are because they were who they were.” This quote is not attributed to anyone, but it is a reminder that each headstone in the cemetery represents a unique story of someone’s life and that each person deserves to be remembered. It is a reminder, too, that cemeteries are important for many reasons.

They exist for the burial of our loved ones - a “final resting place” - and serve as a place to visit those we’ve lost. Times of reminiscence and reflection at the cemetery help us in the grieving process and visits are a way to pay our respects. For many of us, the peace and quiet of a cemetery also makes it a safe and welcoming place where our loved ones can live on in our memories. There was a day, however, when cemeteries were strictly functional and not considered inviting places to gather.

Prior to the early 19th century, cemeteries were just burial grounds and often attached to churches or located on the family home-

stead. This changed in 1831, when Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, became the first landscaped or “garden” cemetery in the United States. It was not only designed as a burial ground, but also may have launched the American park system. At that time, public parks and gardens were not yet envisioned by the city planners.

Dr. Jacob Bigelow, a Boston physician and Harvard professor, promoted the new idea because of his concern that crowded cemeteries in the denser urban areas would run out of space and might spread disease. Civic leaders supported his idea and formed the Massachusetts Horticultural Society to develop a rural cemetery. The group selected a 72-acre farm between Watertown and Cambridge, and Alexander Wadsworth and Henry A. S. Dearborn collaborated to design the new cemetery. Mount Auburn Cemetery was landscaped with trees, shrubs and flowers, winding paths, water features and sculptural art. The idea

caught on and cemeteries became picturesque attractions and beautiful public spaces where families were welcome to gather. Picnics and children playing became very commonplace at cemeteries.

Cemeteries connect us to the past even though we are generally looking to the future in our daily lives. They bring families together, sometimes entire communities, in times of crisis and in celebration. Cemeteries are markers of human history and help each of us piece together our family story. As a source of history, they serve as a cultural and social link to our past, and as such, can tell us a great deal about ourselves. Perhaps the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana (1863-1952), was noting the importance of cemeteries when he wrote “to know your future you must know your past.”

For the genealogist, cemeteries often yield answers to elusive ques-

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tions not found in census searches, old church records or even the family bible. The cemetery may be the only record that a person even lived or was part of a family. Headstones can reveal birth or death dates and confirm names and relationships within a family. Cemeteries provide tangible connections to ancestors we've never met, and offer a glimpse into the trials and triumphs of their daily lives. Headstones can also provide information on the importance of the person in the community, the job they held or their social connections to other families.

Cemeteries help us unravel our own unique family heritage and story. To preserve these important sources of history, the care of cemeteries and headstones is often left to the remaining family—children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This is a big responsibility. Unfortunately many old cemeter-

Pictures Show Neglect of Pioneers' Graves In Two Dane County Cemeteries Near Madison

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ies have been abandoned and left with no one in charge. They've become relics of a past time and place. My grandfather, Albert Andrew Larson (1874-1963), personally felt this burden.

In 1949, Grandpa Albert began the "forgotten man" campaign to restore abandoned and neglected cemeteries in Dane County, WI. He spoke before the Dane county Board of Supervisors, enlisted the help of Assemblyman William Proximire in the Wisconsin Legislature, and initiated news coverage of the "lost" cemeteries by The Capital

Times. Grandpa Albert said, "People now living actually are reaping the benefits from the hardships the old pioneers went through. It's a shame to let the cemeteries where these pioneers are buried fall into disrepair."

Grandpa Albert's father, Anund Larson Felland (1827-1872), was one of the early pioneers in Dane County. Anund was born in Mo Parish, Telemark, Norway, the oldest son of Lars Olavson Sondre Felland (1798-1868) and Margit Bjorgufsdatter Nordgarden (1806-1881). He arrived in the Wisconsin

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Territory in 1846 and made his way to the Koshkonong Settlement. A short time later he moved to Burke. In 1851 he was one of twelve men who organized the Sun Prairie Lutheran Church of Burke and signed the articles that formed the constitution



for the new church. Today it is known as the Burke Lutheran Church.

Anund's name was on the tax role in 1852, as the owner of 40 acres of land in Section 16 of the Town of Burke. Burke was established as one of the four towns of Windsor in 1847, although settlement in the area began in 1837. In 1851 Burke was organized as a separate township and held its first town meeting in the spring of 1852.

In 1854 Anund married Tarond Halvorsdatter (1830-1916) at the Spring Prairie Lutheran Church in DeForest, WI. Tarond also emigrated from Mo Parish, Telemark, Norway. In 1871, Anund purchased an 80-acre farm in the Town of Burke that became the "Larson homestead." The farm was located less than a mile from the land where the Sun Prairie Lutheran Church of Burke was eventually built.

Grandpa Albert was born on the Larson homestead on December 22, 1874. He was the youngest of Anund and Tarond's nine children, and the third child in the family to be named Albert. Only four of the children survived to adulthood. Anund died when Grandpa Albert was not quite eight years old. His older brothers, Osmund and Henry Lewis, along with hired laborers, took over the farm. When Grandpa Albert finished school at the Northwestern Business College and School

of Shorthand, he joined his brothers on the farm. The Larson Brothers specialized in "farming and stock raising" with "tobacco growing a specialty."

Grandpa Albert married Henrietta (Nettie) Alvira Blanchar (1877-1960) in 1897 and they settled on the Larson farm. Albert and Nettie Larson celebrated 62 years of marriage together and were blessed with 14 children that included my father, Bernard Gilmer Larson (1910-1984).

The Larson family has had a long and committed relationship with the Burke Lutheran Church. Grandpa Albert was a faithful and generous servant of the church his entire life and devoted countless hours to building and maintaining the Burke Cemetery. Under his leadership, the congregation established a fund for perpetual care of the cemetery. Grandpa Albert and Grandma Nettie instilled a strong faith in their children which was passed on

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to the grandchildren and subsequent generations. For us, this relationship continues as many of our family members have been laid to rest in the Burke Cemetery. The history of the Burke Lutheran Church and Cemetery is an integral part of my family's history and heritage. I am proud of this legacy and my Grandpa Albert's work with the neglected and abandoned cemeteries.

At the instigation of Grandpa Albert, the Wisconsin State Legislature passed a law in 1953 for the care of neglected and abandoned cemeteries. At that time the law provided that "where relatives had moved away, and there exists no group or association to turn the cemetery over to in the township in which it is located, the town government itself can take charge." With some revisions over the years, this is now covered in Wisconsin Statutes 157.115, for the abandonment of cemeteries and cemetery lots. Thank you Grandpa Albert.

Resources:

Linnea Crowther, legacy.com, "*Why Cemeteries are Important*"

Tom Gallagher, Nutmeg State Cremation featured blog, "*The Importance of Cemetery to our Community*"

Brad Manzenbarger, Genealogy Wise featured blog, "*The Importance of Cemeteries*"

Burke Lutheran Church, 1851-1951, 100th Anniversary Book

Capital Times, 1949 and 1953 articles on Albert Larson, Grandfather to this author

Personal information collected on the Anund Larson Felland Family

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3. Thereafter, the guest may join as a regular member with full member benefits (newsletters, directory, emails, mailings and events).
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