

# Visit a cemetery

## *Echo Press*

By [Tara Bitzan](#) on Oct 2, 2015 at 12:00 a.m.

Looking for something to do this weekend? Why not visit a cemetery?

The Echo Press is currently in week four of a six-week series that features "The Cemeteries of Douglas County." The full page features are printed every Wednesday in the Life section; they began September 9 and will continue through October 14.

In preparing those articles, I've spent a lot of time walking through many cemeteries, and I can tell you that cemeteries are a great place to visit. They are so much more than just places where dead people are buried. A cemetery is a keeper of history, a glimpse into time gone by, and a study in culture and heritage.

By visiting cemeteries from one township to another, you can get a feel for the nationalities that originally settled those areas. From the time it was organized in 1866, Douglas County served as a melting pot of heritage, from the Norwegians and Swedes to the Germans, Bohemians and Finnish settlers, among others, who decided this was the place they would call home.

While all other traces of their existence may have disappeared, their beliefs and customs are still reflected in the gravestones found in those cemeteries. The styles, epitaphs and symbols etched onto the stones hold significance.

Despite the many differences that can be found in the gravestones or the cemeteries of the different nationalities that founded them, these places also share many similarities. All of the cemeteries show that families from times gone by, regardless of nationality or evidence of financial comfort or social status, lived during challenging times and suffered great loss.

Many of the cemeteries within the county were started in the late 1800s. Gravestones will tell you the stories of families who lost many children at very young ages. The stones will show that adults often didn't live to see their 60s. Numerous burials can be found during certain periods of time, telling the story of an epidemic or a tragedy.

The stones have so many stories to tell; one cannot help but wonder when walking among them about the people buried there and the lives they lived. Those stories don't just cry out from the old stones. They speak just as loudly from the stones placed last year or last week.

What I like most about gravestones is that they continue to give proof that someone existed long after everything else has gone away. I like the idea that 100 years from now someone may pass by my stone, read it, and wonder about the life of the woman buried there.

But I also realize that there is a possibility that 100 years from now, my gravestone may be lost to nature or vandals or some other unforeseen circumstance, simply because no one will care for it.

Because another thing that is evident when visiting the cemeteries throughout the county is that some are lovingly cared for, and others are not. Some are cared for by associations with active volunteers who spend hours doing manual labor or raising funds to not only maintain these places but also improve them.

Others have associations that are struggling with limited resources and are barely able to keep the grass mowed and the fence mended.

And sadly, there are those that are simply not cared for by anyone.

Thankfully, there are people here who care about these historic treasures. Douglas County boasts the only county cemetery association in the state. Its mission is to promote cemeteries as the "guardians of the county's heritage and as places of lasting tribute to the memory of those who went before us."

There are currently 78 known burial sites in Douglas County. The goal of the association is to see all cemeteries in Douglas County cared for.

Who is caring for the cemetery where your ancestors are buried? Visit a cemetery, then volunteer your time or make a donation to help preserve these irreplaceable treasures for generations to come.