Cemetery Symbols on Woodlawn Headstones

By Mark Watkins

As you walk around the cemetery, take a close look at the symbols, epitaphs, and decorations on headstones. They help tell the story of our ancestors. For example, on one particular headstone there is a hand with its forefinger pointing up, signifying that the soul had gone to heaven and beckoning the grieving loved ones to look up. If you should see the same, but with the finger pointed downward, don’t be alarmed. This was used to signify that God was reaching down for the soul.

Many of the symbols and decorations on headstones have religious significance. Palm leaves and lilies are symbolic of the resurrection. Handshakes represent God’s welcome to heaven. If sleeves are shown on the handshake and one appears male and the other female, this represents holy matrimony. Doves on headstones represent the Holy Spirit. In the area where babies and children are buried, cherubs are commonly used on headstones, as are lambs, usually lying down. Lambs are a Christian symbol that represent purity, innocence and gentleness, and relate to biblical references of Christ as the shepherd and the believers as his flock. Religious symbols such as the cross, the crown, the Bible, the Star of David, and the menorah give evidence of one’s faith. Angels are very common, either perched on top of the headstone or carved into them. Angels signify that the deceased has taken flight to heaven.

If you see inverted torches, they signify the end of a family line; that is, there were no more male children to carry on the surname. Carvings of draperies were to give a domestic appearance in order to comfort the deceased. Figures of women carved into headstones represent comfort. Weeping Willows symbolize the drooping spirits of those who have lost loved ones.

If you walk through section 11, you may see civic organizations noted on headstones that the deceased belonged to. The Masons are signified by the compass. The women’s auxiliary branch of the Masons, the Order of the Eastern Star, is signified by an inverted five-pointed star. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.) is represented by three links of chain. Woodmen of the World is a fraternal organization whose members lived in rural communities in the Midwest and South. They operate a large insurance company for the benefit of the members. There is a Woodmen of the World emblem carved on a headstone in Section 11.

Epitaphs are short sayings that are carved into headstones and are commonplace. “Rest in Peace,” “In Loving Memory,” “Until We Meet Again,” and “Together Again” are some examples.

By the 1970’s headstone artwork changed to reflect more of the personal lives of the deceased. You will notice this when walking around the newer sections. Advances in headstone etching made this possible. You can see portraits of deceased couples, cars, maps of Finland, and enamel portraits. Two headstones in Woodlawn are my favorite for the stories they tell. One is of Benjamin R. Batdorff, who died at 15 in 2005. A soaring bird is on the front, along with a long epitaph. Etched on back of the stone is the young boy’s autograph, preserved forever. The other stone is of Shirley Beck in Section 33. The tall rectangular block of granite has a portrait of her and her husband, their 67 Chevy Impala, and an encased sample of her quilting expertise. In the top left hand corner is a hole drilled through the granite and under it says “Was our home for over 50 years.” If you look through the small hole, you will see their house on North Pardee St.

The next time you walk through Woodlawn, take some time to notice the artwork and the stories they tell.

Sources

Cathy Wallace, “Understanding Cemetery Symbols, Part 1 & 2” BillionGraves Blog, Accessed July 2020, Blog.billiongraves.com/understanding-cemetery-symbols

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, *Your Guide to Cemetery Research (*Betterway Books, 2002) pgs 127-148