

# *History of Maple Hill Cemetery*

Researched and Written by, Ruth Ann Montgomery

Every cemetery has stories of the people whose remains lie beneath the surface and Evansville's Maple Hill Cemetery is no exception. It is the final resting place of people who once held places of national and international fame. Artists, circus owners and performers, musicians, physicians, soldiers, educators and business owners populate the grave sites of Maple Hill. The cemetery has its own story to tell.

One brief history of the cemetery was written in 1879 and appeared in the History of Rock County. Amos Kirkpatrick, the man who built the first log cabin in what is now the City of Evansville, once owned a substantial part of the south side of East Main Street. Kirkpatrick donated an acre of this land for a cemetery.

Mary Elizabeth Jones Clark, oldest daughter of early settlers, Ira and Sarah J. Jones, wrote about the first burial in Evansville's first cemetery. In an "Old Settlers' Stories" series in Evansville's Badger newspaper, published in 1895, she said: "The first interment was a little girl who was scalded to death. The funeral preparations were delayed and when the grave was reached it was almost dark. After the burial, services were held in the school house by candle light."

In 1855, 61 grave sites could be identified in this cemetery located on the south half of the block that is today bordered by East Main, Maple, East Church, and South Madison Streets. Surveying by the Beloit Madison Railroad Company in 1855 prompted Evansville citizens to urge that the remains in the original cemetery be moved. The original cemetery was located on land that local businessmen hoped would become part of the commercial area as Evansville grew. In November 1855, land for a new cemetery was purchased.

On November 19, 1855, a meeting was called at the store of Jacob West. Hiram Griffith, Sidney H. Grannis, Alfred C. Fish, Henry G. Spencer, Freeman Palmer, Jeremiah Johnson and West were present. The men organized the Evansville Cemetery Association with William C. Kelly, Henry Spencer, Jeremiah Johnson, John Rhinehart and David D. Mills serving as trustees. A week later, on November 26, 1855, Thomas Robinson and his wife sold the cemetery trustees 2 acres of land for \$100. Peter S. and Adelia Brizze, sold the group four acres. The six acres was expected to meet the needs of the cemetery association for many years.

An Act passed by the Wisconsin Legislature allowed the removal of 61 coffins from the original cemetery. The burials in the original cemetery were moved to the new cemetery site. The road running west of the land became known as Cemetery Street. Many years later, as

cesspools and sewers were dug near residences on South Madison Street, more burials were found and moved to the new cemetery.

For many years, the cemetery was operated by the Evansville Cemetery Association. The association board members were supposed to hold annual meetings in January. However, in 1865, the Wisconsin Legislation once again created an Act to legalize the February 1865 election of the trustees of the association. Elijah Robinson, Henry G. Spencer, Levi Leonard, Samuel Cadwallader and David L. Mills were declared by this act to be legally elected trustees. The legislation noted that the association had to be reorganized because the group had not met for six years.

However, even with these well-known and responsible citizens in control of the association, there were complaints about the appearance of the cemetery. In 1873, there was an editorial in the Evansville Review claiming that the cemetery was in a disgraceful state. According to the editorial, lots in the cemetery had not sold as expected and the Cemetery Association did not have enough money to maintain the cemetery in the way that citizens demanded. "The grounds have been deplorably neglected from the utter inability of the association to improve them. The site was well chosen: and a small outlay in embellishment will make it an attractive spot for the living as well as quiet resting place for the dead." The editor also noted that there was a petition being circulated requesting that the Village Board purchase and assume control of the grounds of Evansville Cemetery Association. Trustee Levi Leonard and 70 others signed the petition and presented it to the Board. The Village agreed with the petitioners and assumed the \$494.50 debt of the cemetery association.

When the first brief history of the cemetery appeared in the 1879 History of Rock County, the writer noted: "Much care has been exercised in its adornment, the beauties lavished upon it by the hand of nature being supplemented by the care and attention of the residents of Evansville, many of whom have friends or relatives interred here."

James M. Ballard was one of the early village sextons. He was appointed village street commissioner in 1876. As street commissioner, Ballard built wood sidewalks; graded the streets; kept cows, horses, pigs, and other animals from roaming the village; and dug graves as needed.

A November 22, 1876 newspaper item gave special recognition to Ballard for his devotion to his grave digging responsibilities: "Sexton J. M. Ballard was called out of church a few Sundays since to dig a grave for an old lady by the name of Wheeler, who was 102 years old. She had lived near Albany, Green County, but went last summer to reside with other friends in Johnstown, where she died, and was brought here for interment." The deceased was Polly Wheeler, who died November 4, 1876 and was buried next to her husband, Hezekiah Wheeler, who died in 1869.

Occasionally, Ballard was also called on to remove a coffin for burial elsewhere. In May 1874, Ballard dug up the coffin of Rev. J. N. Bean so that his remains could be sent to Buffalo, N. Y. to

be buried with other members of his family. According to an article in the Evansville Review, Bean's nephew, George H. Palmer, an Evansville tailor, asked that the coffin be opened, to confirm it was Rev. Bean. Palmer was satisfied that it was his uncle, due to his hair, "which had retained its original color, but had grown, apparently two inches during interment." He was also identified by a black satin neck tie, "which had preserved almost its entire original luster."

Vandalism at the cemetery was a crime that the Evansville Village Board would not tolerate. In March 1879, someone deliberately smashed and defaced more than 100 tombstones. The Village Board offered a reward of \$200 for the information that would lead to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the destruction. An itinerant tombstone shop employee, George Craig, was charged with deliberately smashing and defacing more than 100 tombstones so that he could get more work. At his trial, witnesses said that after destroying the tombstones, Craig went to the cemetery and made a list of the damaged stones, and cracked jokes about repairing and replacing them.

He was accused of going from one grave to the next, calling out the names on the tombstone and giving the sum needed for repairs, saying: "Well John, we will have to tax you about \$8." "Hello, Sarah, you're bad off. It will cost you from \$10 to \$15 to get fixed up." Craig also contacted owners and relatives of owners of the burial lots to see if they wanted to repair or replace the tombstones. Craig and his accomplice, George Ingalls were brought to trial before a Janesville judge; found guilty and sentenced to 3 months in jail. Five people petitioned the Village Board for the reward that was offered.

Citizens and the Village Board made several attempts to beautify and improve the cemetery in the 1880s. A well was dug in 1882 to bring water to the cemetery. A gazebo was donated by Lloyd T. Pullen that same year. In 1883, the Village Board purchased and planted a row of maple tree along the road and on the north and west edges of the cemetery.

Some suggested that the cemetery should have a name and the newspaper editor suggested that a committee of ladies select a name "that we might well feel proud of." Many suggested the name Maple Hill Cemetery.

In 1883, the Village Board established a potter's field for those too poor to afford a burial spot but some who had family members buried near the location objected. The Board chose a different location and requested that the sexton, William F. Williams, son-in-law of former sexton James Ballard, remove those who had been buried in potter's field to a new location.

In 1884, Sexton William F. Williams was elected Rock County Clerk and he resigned his position in Evansville and moved to Janesville. The duties of sexton was separated from the street commissioner and M. V. Dresback was named sexton. Ray Gillman took the job as street commissioner and fire warden. Dresback served as sexton for a short time. Then Henry Hubbard was appointed to the position. In August 1888 Hubbard became sick and David H. Johnson was appointed in his place.

Civil War Veterans were active in helping comrades and their families who had fallen on hard times. In 1885, The Grand Army of the Republic (G. A. R.) asked the Village Board for a cemetery lot for Civil War Veterans who could not afford their own burial lots. Lot #81 in Block 1 of the Original plat was given to the G. A. R. The lot had 8 grave sites.

Only two burials were recorded in the Maple Hill Cemetery records for lot 81. William K. Wilson, a private in company D of the 2nd Wisconsin Volunteers, was buried in the G. A. R. Memorial lot. No birth or death dates were added to the record. The list of Wisconsin Volunteers provided the information that Wilson was disabled and discharged from the service on May 15, 1862.

James. A. Flowers, of Company B, 1842nd Illinois Infantry was also buried in this lot. Flowers was killed in a railroad accident in 1887. His obituary said: "The remains were properly taken care of by the Chicago & North Western Co.'s agent, Mr. P. H. Noel, and placed in Undertaker Potter's hands for interment. His funeral was held at the M. E. Church Thursday, and he was buried in the G.A.R. memorial lot in the cemetery, with all the care and consolation that order could bestow. He leaves a wife and two children in poor circumstances." The G. A. R. also provided assistance for those who needed a government head stone. In April 1889, the G. A. R. announced that it was making preparations to "erect the government head stones for the fallen comrades in this vicinity." J. Boyd Jones supervised the placing of the veterans tombstones.

By 1889, the six acres of land purchased for the cemetery was filling with burials and purchased grave sites. The Village Trustees agreed to purchase 4 acres of land from C. J. Mitchell for \$500. Mitchell received \$200 in 1889 with a note for the balance to be paid in two payments of \$200 in 1890 and \$100 in 1897, plus 7% interest. The Mitchell addition was east of the two original blocks of the cemetery. In 1892, the G. A. R. also petitioned the Village for additional lots for veterans. They were given a 17 x 18 foot piece of land on the western line of the new Mitchell addition.

In 1893, James M. Ballard once again was appointed Sexton of the cemetery. The following year, he was called to special duty when the remains of a child buried in the original cemetery were uncovered during excavation of a cess pool at the Methodist parsonage on South Madison Street. Ballard tenderly placed the remains of the unknown child in a new coffin for burial in Maple Hill Cemetery. James Powles served as sexton in the late 1890s and then James Ballard took over again. Two additions were made to the cemetery, the Sawtelle addition and twelve acres of land purchased as the Campbell addition to the cemetery. It took several years to have the land surveyed and divided into burial lots.

An outspoken critic of Evansville's governing body and often elected Mayor of the City, Byron Campbell, pushed to have the cemetery surveyed. In a newspaper editorial, Campbell said: "It is a shame that no effort is being made to set out trees and otherwise beautify and improve the new addition to Maple Hill." He made sure that his own family lot was cared for. In 1913,

Campbell purchased a beautiful statue for his lot in Maple Hill cemetery. It was made by Italian sculptors from Italian marble.

The old wood and wire fence around the cemetery was replaced with an iron fence in 1913. The iron fence was placed along the road in front of the cemetery and was described as “a very artistic one and is put up in a workmanlike manner.”

A perpetual care fund was created for the cemetery by the City. This helped to stabilize funding for maintenance of the cemetery. A one-time fee of \$25 was charged at the time the lot was purchased.

In 1913, it was discovered that several people held deeds to lots in the cemetery that were not recorded by the City. People with deeds for cemetery burial lots were asked to bring them to the City Clerk’s office so that they could be properly recorded.

Charles Morgan served as sexton in 1915 and the following year, Herbert Lee became the sexton. Lee served as the city’s sexton until his death in 1939. Lee buried more than 1,200 people during his years as sexton and was responsible for many improvements at the cemetery. He knew the history of the cemetery and the location of every grave.

Many improvements were made at Maple Hill Cemetery during the 22 years that Herb Lee served as the sexton. Lee was born on a farm near Magnolia. After his marriage to Della Roberts, the couple farmed in Magnolia Township. On January 1, 1916, Lee was appointed sexton of the Maple Hill Cemetery. In many ways, the work of the sexton went unrecognized. Over the years that Lee worked as the Maple Hill Cemetery sexton, hundreds of “cards of thanks” appeared in the Evansville Review following the funeral and interment of loved ones buried at Maple Hill. No one ever thanked the sexton for his part in the service.

His salary in 1918 was \$50 a month. Lee seldom received annual wage increases. In 1920 his salary was increased to \$75 each month and it was not until 1928 that he received an increase to \$100 a month. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lee’s salary was reduced to \$80 a month.

In the 1920’s the Evansville City Council minutes listed every person who was paid for working in the various City Departments. Lee had several assistants who helped mow the grass, trim trees and shrubbery, locate burial sites, dig and fill in graves, move memorials and headstones when needed, and repair the tools and mowers used at the cemetery.

Over the next ten years the names of the workers at the cemetery included, Orrin Lee, William Lee, Ed Sinnett, Eder Whipple, C. Jensen, Leo Bates, Charles Corsaw, E. B. McCoy, J. Zwickey, B. G. Harte, Charles Parks, Alex Curless, O. Murray, Harry Wright, and Everett Funk, They were paid hourly wages for labor in the cemetery. Sinnett and Whipple were also street department employees who were temporarily transferred for cemetery work as needed. Occasionally, Whipple used a team of horses for his cemetery work.

Supplies for the cemetery were generally purchased from the F. A. Baker & Co. hardware store or the Baker Manufacturing company. If the laborers worked many hours, they received more pay in a month than the sexton. Hours for cemetery workers usually increased in late April and early May to prepare the cemetery for the many visitors who came to decorate the graves for Memorial Day services.

The Memorial Day ceremonies at the cemetery were well attended and this was when the public generally took special notice of the upkeep of the grounds. In 1921, the Evansville Review noted that "Those who visited the cemetery Memorial Day all unite in stating that not for many years has its appearance been so fine as this year, showing that it has had excellent care and that people are keeping up their properties there and taking pride in them."

Each year during the month of January, Herbert Lee sent a list of the interments in the cemetery to the Evansville Review. At the end of the list for 1922, Lee recorded that there had been 49 burials and Total number of graves in Maple Hill Cemetery by actual count ending December 31, 1922, 3,091." Lee also kept a scrapbook of obituaries of the burials in Maple Hill. Most of the obituaries were from the Evansville Review.

Although it was an unusual occurrence, in 1931 another burial from the original cemetery was discovered. The Evansville Review reported: "While excavating for a sewer at the residence occupied by Walter Helgesen on South Madison Street Wednesday afternoon, George Berry discovered several bones which laid out on the ground by Dr. J. P. Guilfoyle proved to be part of a human skeleton. This section of the city is the site of Evansville's first cemetery which was established in the early fifties. The bodies were disinterred and removed to the present cemetery some 70 years ago." With the passage of time and the absence of modern DNA testing, there was no way to identify the remains.

Occasionally the weather interfered with the interments at Maple Hill. In 1936, winter storms dumped record inches of snow on the grounds. Two burials, Carl Brunzell, who died on February 2 and William Miles, who died on February 24, were delayed until April due to the deep snow. According to Lee's annual report, the bodies were held in a vault in Janesville "on account of deep snow."

The following year ice storms made digging graves very difficult. In January 1937, Lee had served as the Maple Hill cemetery sexton for 20 years. The Evansville Review reporter interviewed Lee about his service to the community. "We have had considerable more snow in other years, but never before have we had to contend with so much ice which makes the excavation of graves nearly impossible," Lee said. "We were completely blockaded for several weeks last winter and were even obliged to secure the services of the county snow plows to clear the drives and areas for burial, but this year the heavy sheeting of ice makes it nearly impossible to even locate graves."

The cemetery was laid out in blocks and lots, with each grave site having an address. Maps showing the location of graves and the owners of the lots were kept by the City Clerk and the

sexton. A permanent care fund was established for Maple Hill Cemetery in 1917. When the funds were audited in 1918, there was \$730.78 in the fund and \$431.18 in the City's funds for annual care of the cemetery.

There were many improvements at the cemetery during Lee's term as sexton. One of the first was the installation of a large flag pole in the spring of 1917. There were few reports of improvements in the 1920s. Upkeep of the grounds was the primary focus of the work done by Lee and his assistants. In 1931, local road building contractors, Drew and Garry were hired to place gravel on the roads in the cemetery. Lee and his crew mowed and trimmed trees along the drives.

The Evansville Review editorialized that Maple Hill cemetery was one of the best kept burial grounds in the state. "Evansville can boast of one of the most beautiful and best kept cemeteries in the state for a city of its size. Too much credit cannot be given Herb Lee, custodian, for his untiring efforts in making Maple Hill cemetery one of the beauty spots of the city." The reporter continued to plea for improvements.

The water system at the cemetery, a windmill and tank, for watering flowers and plants was considered obsolete. There often were not enough watering cans. The filled cans had to be carried great distances in order to water the flowers that were on graves. "The cemetery is badly in need of a new water piping system to enable visitors to obtain water close to the graves which they are decorating without being obliged to walk long distances to the present pump and tank."

The City's water mains ended at Main Street, but a Review reporter said that it would take little effort to bring the water to the cemetery. For several years during the Depression, the City Council tried to keep taxes low and any new project was usually denied. Water to the cemetery was a low priority. It was not until federal funds became available through the WPA projects that the Council finally considered the project to be worthwhile. Tentative plans for a water system to the cemetery were considered in 1933 when it appeared that federal funds would be available.

However, under the 1933 federal funding rules, the city was required to provide all the materials for the project. The federal funding paid for the labor. Funding of park projects took priority and the cemetery water system continued using the old windmill and tank. It was not until 1937 that the water pipes were finally installed to the cemetery. The City had to guarantee that local matching funds for the project were available before the federal funds were authorized.

At a Council meeting in August 1937, the Councilmen agreed that the water system project for Maple Hill was worthwhile. However, no action was taken until November when the project was finally underway. Then on November 4, 1937, Evansville Review reported: "A crew of sixteen WPA employees started work Monday morning on the installation of water for Maple Hill cemetery. A six-inch main will be laid on Cemetery Street from Main Street to the northern

entrance to the cemetery before the work is completed, R. J. Antes, WPA superintendent stated.”

The water system project continued into 1938, with 45 men at work on the project. When the water system was completed there were 19 locations for obtaining water in the 25-acre cemetery. The services of Herbert Lee as the Maple Hill cemetery sexton ended abruptly on April 26, 1939, when he died of a heart attack at his home on South Madison Street. An obituary in the Janesville Gazette, described Lee as “a man of friendly disposition and a great lover of nature. He was well informed on cemetery history and knew the location of every grave. Under his direction the cemetery has been beautified each year so that it has become outstanding for attractiveness.”

Just a few months before his death, Lee reported that in his 22 years of service, he had buried 1,215 persons in the cemetery. “Of the 3,908 graves in the cemetery, Mr. Lee states that 159 are the resting places of Civil War veterans.” Herbert Lee was buried in the Mitchell addition to the cemetery. When Memorial Day 1939 was observed, the Review noted that Lee’s crew “had been working diligently since his death in an effort to maintain Mr. Lee’s high ideals as a caretaker. Maple Hill cemetery presented one of its best appearances in years.”

For a few months Maurice Lee took his father’s job as sexton of the cemetery. Then in January 1940, the City Councilmen on the Cemetery committee, J. W. Ames, Robert J. Antes, and Harley A. Smith, recommended the appointment of Orville C. Jones, a night policeman and fireman. Jones agreed to the \$80 per month salary that Herbert Lee had received.