

Cowgate - Tree Gravestones

A very American story – sadly, none in Cowgate

Deborah Gasking

Tree gravestones are rare. It is unlikely that you will ever see one – as far as I know, these are unique to the USA. They look so real that they blend in with the surrounding trees, appearing at first to be part of nature.

There are several theories as to why tree-like gravestones became popular. As the industrial revolution grew in the late 1800s, it infringed on forests. Trees were being removed at what some felt was a shocking rate, to clear land for farming and cities. At the same time, funerary art was in transition. Modest gravestones were taking the place of elaborate monuments, following a theme in art and architecture in general. It was becoming more popular to own simple, back-to-nature, rustic items than elaborately carved furniture and elegant formal homes.

By the mid-1800s, gravestone symbols shifted focus from death to the deceased's life. Trees became a natural choice for grave markers as they were a powerful symbol of life, drawing from the Bible's tree of life and tree of knowledge. If live trees were planted on a gravesite, the roots would often interfere with the caskets below ground. But trees made of stone would be a great solution!

Woodmen of the World. In 1882, a gentleman named Joseph Cullen Root heard a church sermon about pioneer men who were clearing the forests to provide for their families. The preacher praised those who were clearing the land for being hard-working and launching the country into a new era of development. He felt that they should be honoured and coined the title "woodmen" for those who were so industrious. The sermon inspired Root so much that he wanted to help provide for

others too. So, in 1890, Root started a non-profit organisation designed for the common man, so no one would have to die without life insurance. It was more than an insurance company; it was a fraternity. He called it the *Woodmen of the World* and they promoted their organisation as being for the "Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, the agnostic and atheist." The company motto stated that "no Woodmen shall rest in an unmarked grave." Rustic treestones were already popular when the *Woodmen of the World* was founded but the fraternity made them even more popular. They created standard designs for treestones and sent them to local stonecutters for carving. Initially, each person who bought life insurance through the *Woodmen of the World* was also given a free gravestone. The company later changed their policy to providing \$100 toward a tombstone if it had their logo on it. The symbols of the *Woodmen of the World* were the axe, wedge, and sledgehammer (also known as a beetle or maul) – symbolizing industry, power, and progress.

Requirements to Join the Woodmen of the World. For all their talk of equity, not just anyone could join the *Woodmen of the World*. These were the original joining requirements (all of which were later rescinded, with the exception of religious freedom): Male. Caucasian. Age 18 to 45. Any religion. Reside in one of the 12 "healthiest" states: Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio. No hazardous occupations, such as underground miners, gunpowder factory employees, saloon keepers, sailors, railroad workers, liqueur manufacturers or wholesalers, and professional baseball players.

Embellishments. Over time, stonemasons began to add plants to the tree gravestones. Early treestones, in the mid-1800s, were simple, they had life-like bark and stumps of branches. Some had ivy on them; being an evergreen plant, it represents eternity, fidelity, and a strong affectionate attachment to the deceased. Since ivy clings, it can also be a symbol of the deceased efforts to cling to life and can mean they had a long battle with illness before they died. Wheat symbolizes a long life for one that was “harvested” by the reaper when it was time. Many of the *Woodmen of the World* gravestones had doves with olive branches on them as well. The olive branch is a symbol of peace. Some families had animals added to their loved one’s treestone – lambs were a symbol of an infant’s death.

A Step Out of Poverty. So how did fraternities and insurance companies come to be intertwined in the first place? A little history lesson will help explain. In 19th century America, only the very wealthy bought life insurance. At that time, men were usually the breadwinners of the family so women were not allowed to take out life insurance policies for their husbands. If a man took out a policy for himself, creditors came after the money soon after his death. This meant that the death of a husband and father would leave his wife and children destitute. In the mid to late 1800s, many families were hit hard with this reality since more than 620,000 men died during the American Civil War alone. Epidemics and

fatal injuries left many more in jeopardy. In addition, accepting charitable donations during that time period was seen as a sign of weakness. So, families were often hit with the double stigma of shame on top of grief. To combat these problems, working-class men joined clubs, societies, and fraternities that supported families after a member’s death. The compensation wasn’t seen as a humiliating hand-out because the man had “earned” it by proving himself to be hard-working and of good character during his membership in a lodge. And what about all the fun that typically went with membership in a club, society, or fraternity? Well, that kept the man coming back for more – and paying his insurance premiums for decades.

The End of an Era. For many years, the *Woodmen of the World* organisation continued to grow. Membership reached 88,000 by 1898 and 750,000 by 1915. This was a highly successful organisation at first, but as the initial members began to age and die, it became expensive to put a treestone on every Woodman’s burial site, especially as production costs for treestones continued to rise. Then came the Great Depression and it hit fraternal organisations hard, causing the use of treestones to dwindle in the 1920s. Furthermore, the creation of welfare and social security programmes in the 1930s made charitable insurance plans obsolete and the *Woodmen of the World’s* plan to provide every member with a gravestone died (no pun intended).



Treestones

Cowgate Update

Our volunteer work parties have dwindled so much this year, despite call-outs for help within the Society, to just three regulars. Negotiations with *White Cliffs Countryside Partnership* have proved positive. They will now commit to two sessions a year – probably Autumn and Spring (the best times for nature!) to have a blast through our cemetery.