

The Lawyers' Cemetery

By

Douglas A. Hedin

• February 2019 •

M— suggested we meet at the Lawyers' Cemetery early one autumn afternoon, and T— and I agreed. We had been there many times before but not together. There are no roads, only walkways and benches for visitors at the cemetery. We walked through the iron archway emblazoned with its proper name: "Bar Memorial Cemetery."

"Let's head over there," M— said, pointing to a manicured area where there were large, colorful oak and maple trees. It was probably the oldest or earliest section of the cemetery. We walked and carried our books of bar memorials.

When we reached a knoll, we opened them and read silently. "These were delivered in the second half of the nineteenth century," T— said. "A few before the Civil War. They were published in newspapers."

He continued, "Most lawyers, it seems, served in some public office. It was almost required. They threw themselves into 'upbuilding' their towns and counties. What we call volunteer work. That continues right up to the present."

"Sometimes the bar 'deplored' a young lawyer's death," I said. "We wouldn't use that word today. They were bewildered why a man could die suddenly at an early age. Medicine was helpless."

“I notice a few memorials of this period instruct young lawyers to emulate the deceased, use his life as a model to follow,” M— said.

“I suppose that goes back to funerals in Greece and Rome,” I said. “You won’t find that today.”

“Memorials change over time, that’s for sure. I mean, what they emphasize,” M— said. “Nowadays they emphasize the lawyer’s closeness to his family whereas not so long ago family members were just on a list of survivors. Do you think this indicates a change in the profession?” she asked.

T— and I chuckled. “No,” he answered. “It’s more demanding than ever before.”

“They are shorter today,” I said. “They don’t have nearly as much information now as they did even fifty years ago. We’re losing a lot of our history.”

“Somethings are rarely mentioned,” T— said. “Individual cases aren’t cited as they are soon forgotten, nor is the wealth of a lawyer. That seems in bad taste.”

He pointed to a large overgrown area of bushes and grasses some distance away. “That area over there holds hundreds of memorials that need to be excavated.”

“Recovered is a better word,” I said. “Perhaps, recovered and read.”

“That’s what we are doing this afternoon,” M— said.
“Walking and reading our way through the Lawyers’
Cemetery.”

As we started down another path, we saw five or six people on the slope of a hill across a hollow. They were talking and reading a memorial. Several other visitors approached them. They met, shook hands, embraced.

T— speculated: “Someone in that family found an old memorial to a family member and told others, and they told others, and here they are today, in this cemetery, talking about their family and reminiscing about him.”

“And pleased and proud of that memorial, I’m sure,” said M—.

“No profession honors its dead like the bar,” T— said.

“Go on,” M— encouraged him.

“The military has its cemeteries and flagged headstones but they are not like portraits prepared by a memorial committee or a member of the bar. The clergy and some universities and medical societies pay tribute to their dead in funeral and memorial services and note them in their journals. The families of lawyers have funeral services too.”

He paused, then continued, “But the bar is unique in coming together and remembering its dead through memorials delivered in court and entered in the records of the court; the transcript is typed and given to the family,

many even filed with the state historical society. Other professions have nothing like the Lawyers' Cemetery."

"A well-written memorial is a real gift to the lawyer's family, as we see over there," M— said.

And to us as well," I added. "I find every one interesting. They came before. A lot of our history is right here."

We came to a section of the cemetery where there were memorials from the first decades of the last century. We sat on a bench and read.

T— broke the silence. "These are law school graduates, better educated than those who read in a law office for a couple of years. Many are remembered for being well prepared for trial, courteous to others, willing to represent the poor. Office-centered memorials."

"World War One veterans too," I interjected. "They came out of that war with energy, most practiced law, held office, a few went on the bench, others opened a business. And then the depression came, and then World War Two."

"Listen," T— said, and read: "He graduated from law school in 1941, admitted to the bar a few months later, enlisted in the army in 1942, and killed in action in 1943. He never had a chance to practice even one day."

M— stood up. "Yes, this can be hard. Let's go meet our friends," she said, indicating an area that was the newest section, with the most recent memorials.

For a long time we walked and read about lawyers we had known, practiced with, heard about, and judges we had appeared before, others whose reputations linger on.

“This brings memories,” T— said, holding his book open to a page. “I owe him so much. He was there when I was hired at the firm. I turned to him for advice.” He trailed off.

M— and I were quiet, absorbed by our own thoughts. Later she told me she kept thinking about lawyers she knew who were younger than she is today when they died.

We walked back to the entrance. As we separated, M— said, “Let’s meet again next spring.”

I turned and read a small plaque on the archway to the Lawyers’ Cemetery:

The gates to this cemetery are never closed.

