

ARTS & CULTURE

Decoding the secret language of cemetery symbolism

By Brett Blocker
Editor

In the realm of academia, there exists a field known as semiotics: an off-chute of linguistics devoted to making sense of nonverbal signs and symbols. The study explores ideas like how the bright red reflection of a stop sign represents danger, or how the striped markings on a caterpillar's abdomen warns predators of its toxicity (zoosemiotics.)

From logos and advertisements to the orange wings of the monarch butterfly, examples of semiotics can be found just about everywhere. Graveyards are no exception.

Hidden in plain sight in cemeteries across the world, the tombstones of loved ones speak a secret language of symbolism. While some messages are easy to decode, like wedding bands engraved on the headstone of a side-by-side plot, others, like anchors and fern fronds aren't quite so obvious.

What message does a lily convey? Or a bundle of wheat? The dialect of the deceased could have its own book written about it – and in fact, has.

The author of 45 books, photographer and writer Douglas Keister is the brain behind what taphophiles

(tombstone enthusiasts) refer to as “the Bible of cemeteries.”

Initially focused on architectural photography, Keister has since scoured the globe, documenting the history, design and symbolism of headstones in his series “Stories in Stone.”

Keister said he was inspired to take on the project after he wandered into a cemetery while a scheduled meeting with his editor ran late.

“But the short story I always tell people is, ‘if you want to become an expert on something, find something obscure.’” For the California-based photojournalist, that obscurity became cemetery symbolism.

His background in photographing Victorian architecture lent itself particularly well to the ongoing project, as traces of the centuries-old style and iconography continue to be found in – and inspire the design of – cemeteries across the U.S.

“The thing is, you only have a certain amount of real estate available, so a symbol can tell a whole story,” he said.

With a full-mooned Halloween night upon us, the Lakes Area Review reached out to Keister for insight on what cryptic codes can be found in New London's own Lebanon Cemetery.

Founded in the mid-to-late 1800s, the cemetery's storied history includes Latin epitaphs commemorating early Scandinavian settlers; a monument details the “West Lake Massacre” in which members of the Broerg and Lundborg families were killed in an altercation with the Sioux.

For Keister, cemeteries like this serve as an architectural time capsule, preserving not only the stories of those laid to rest, but the evolution of motifs and design elements common among American gravesites.

“Whenever I go to a cemetery, one of the first things I look for are what are called ‘zinkies,’ and you’ve got two of them right next to one another,” Keister said of an emailed image depicting the Olson and Broerg-Lundborg obelisks. “They’re made out of zinc, and there was only one company that made them,

in Connecticut. But they were shipped everywhere, and there were some assembly plants in various parts of the country.”

Zinkies, he said, are relatively rare, and haven't been constructed since the 1920s. Initially, many cemeteries refused to allow them as grounds keepers were skeptical of the material's ability to weather the elements.

“The irony of it is they last longer. You look at the lettering on those – they're well over a



Clasped hands, like those depicted on this local “zinkie,” can represent marriage or an earthly farewell. The panels can be unscrewed to allow for the placement of sentimental notes from family members or, as the story goes, for bootleggers to hide alcohol during the Prohibition Era.

hundred years old and look perfect.”

Typically, he added, where you find one, you're bound to find more, as the salesman to that area tapped in on a market where these stones were accepted.

Engraved on the panel of Andreas Anderson's zinkie is a pair of clasped hands. When one of the cuff links is masculine and the other feminine, the emblem represents marriage. When the hands are identical, the message is a simple heavenly welcome or earthly farewell.

If one were to rap their knuckles on a zinkie, they would hear a hollow echo. This, he said, is because loved ones would often unscrew the panels to insert sentimental notes

in lieu of flowers. However, in some cases, they may have stored spirits – literally. “As the story goes, they were also rumored to be used by bootleggers to store alcohol,” Keister said.

Visitors to Lebanon Cemetery also may notice another peculiarity: wood. Atop the 1914 headstone of Carolina and Erick Holstein, an open book rests against stack of three chopped logs.

“You have a Victorian cemetery [in New London], so you'll see lots of flowers and lambs, but you'll also find a lot of secret society emblems.” Masons are almost guaranteed to be found in any given cemetery, along with the “Odd Fellows,” represented by three links of a chain. As for the Holstein logs, Keister suspects this may indicate membership of “Woodmen of the World.”

Between 1850 and 1920 cemeteries – especially in the midwest – were influenced by the Victorian Rusticity Movement in which tombstones (and park benches) were carved to resemble twigs or logs. These were called “tree stones.”

Although the Holstein headstone may simply be a tree stone and it does not make any overt mention of “Woodmen of the World” as is common, the style is consistent with the logs and trees on members' stones.

“The reason you see a lot of these is because when you became a member, one of the things you got as a benefit, besides burial, is a tombstone. So it was a great way of marketing... They were an insurance company and a secret society combined, and they used logs as part of their tombstone art.”

Art, however, may be minimal on the future Keister plot. As for expert's own funerary plans: “I like the idea of a green burial.”

Common symbols and their meanings

Acorn: Prosperity; power; triumph.

Anchor; sextant; Mariner.

Anvil and hammer: Blacksmith.

Basket: Fertility; maternal bond.

Bird: Flight of the soul.

Candle: Life.

Column/broken pillar: Life cut short; sudden death.

Evergreen: Faithfulness, remembrance.

Fern: Sincerity; humility; solitude.

Fruit: Eternal plenty.

IHS monogram: Christian, name of Jesus.

Key: Knowledge; entrance into heaven.

Lamp: Knowledge; spiritual immortality.

Lily: Innocence, purity and the resurrection (Easter); marriage and fidelity (calla); innocence and humility (lily-of-the-valley).



Photos by Brett Blocker
A zinc obelisk in New London's Lebanon Cemetery. Rife with symbolism and lore, “zinkies” like these are a treasured find for taphophiles.

Oak leaf: Strength; stability; endurance.

Olive tree: Peace; reconciliation between God and man.

Palm: Life conquering death.

Plow; hoe; racking; stalk of corn; shock of wheat: Farmer.

Rose: Love; beauty; virtue; strong bond (intertwined); youthful death (rosebud).

Sphinx: Courage; honor; power.

Tree-shaped: Possible member of the Modern Woodmen of America or Woodmen of the World fraternal organization member.

(Source: 2021 Old Farmer's Almanac)



A relic of the Victorian Rusticity Movement, “tree stones” like this were common throughout the midwest between 1850-1920. However, stacked logs also may signify the individual's membership in the “Woodmen of the World.” In joining the organization, members would receive a complimentary headstone. Open books, like the above-featured, often include the deceased's date of birth and death.

913 Hwy 71 NE • Willmar • 320-214-9433

Whitney Music

Music is a Smart choice!

Did you know? Music Education helps students develop mental & physical skills. We help parents & students decide on which instrument will fit them best!

The best is located right here!
Check our website for the latest!
www.whitneymusic.com

ON THE SPOT IN-STORE REPAIR!

- QUALITY INSTRUMENTS
- SCHOOL PICKUP/DELIVERY
- LOW RENT-TO-OWN (MAINTENANCE INCLUDED!)