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Let the Dead Speak: The History of Lake County Through its Cemeteries

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Let the Dead Speak: The History of Lake County Through its Cemeteries Exhibit and App

Curator: Rhiannon Cizon

Throughout Lake County, Indiana are several archives, historical societies, and small town museums that attempt to interpret their community's history with limited budgets and space constraints. Their narratives are driven by their collections – items predominately donated by a few local citizens for one reason or another – and by the nostalgia these communities have over shared experiences. For the average citizen, there is a prevailing sense that museums are places for visitors to experience history while alive, but not places for their history after they have passed away. It is from this disconnect that *Let the Dead Speak* (LTDS) is born.

The purpose of this project is to investigate what the average citizen – one who may not have considered their history worthy of a museum exhibit – felt was important enough to leave behind on a gravestone for perpetuity and bring it to the public through a two-part approach. The project additionally serves as a reminder that cemeteries can be important sites for history, memory, and preservation beyond their ever present use in genealogical research by professional and amateur historians across the county.

The first part of *LTDS* is an exhibit exploring five common themes that emerged during the research phase of this project: Social Organizations, Labor and Unions, Military, Immigration/Emigration, and Ways People Died. Each topic will be explored in a set of interpretation panels that bring context to the symbols that were discovered. Given the industrial nature of northern Lake County, unions are strong and well known, but rural organizations that support agricultural laborers are less known and often are not included in discussions of labor history. Here, visitors viewing the exhibit are given a broader look at the affect of labor history on their communities and their role as part of the larger story of labor movements in the U.S.

Like any exhibit, *LTDS* can only interpret so much history in a small amount of space. Thus many more symbols and smaller historical themes that emerged during the research were left out of the exhibit itself. In order to rectify this, the second part of the *LTDS* experience is an app. This app serves as a complimentary addition to the exhibit's narrative as well as a stand-alone tool in and of itself. The app's mobility allows for visitors to create their own experiences in the cemeteries and includes maps to help find these locations as well different "symbolpedias" that help visitors interpret the symbols they find.

Integrative technology is important to museums because it allows an expansion beyond standard limitations – understaffing issues, location accessibility, and of course, space constraints for exhibits. Beyond the museum, this app like other tourism and hobby apps can appeal to a broad range of visitors. Geocachers can use it for finding new locations to hide their latest caches and tourists of any type are always interested in unique places to visit while on vacation. Here, *LTDS: The App* gives tourism bureaus and visitor centers another opportunity to make a tourist's trip even better.

This research discovers what people felt was worth sharing – elements of their lives that deserved to live long after their mortal bodies did. Pride in memberships, hobbies, and ethnic backgrounds are on full display to tell a story about a person, but when paired with other stories found in the cemeteries, a narrative emerges and a history is created. The *LTDS* exhibit and app give local institutions another opportunity to tell the unique story of their communities and the contributions the average citizen made in the founding and growth of cities and towns all over Lake County.