The Way Death Comes

In 1888, the Aetna Powder Plant, located in what is now Gary, experienced an explosion that killed three men. The Chesterton Tribune’s headline the next day announced the men had been blown into atoms and that body parts had been found miles away. What remained of them were buried in the Miller Cemetery, which also contains a plaque for a similarly deadly explosion in 1917. While most people buried in Lake County had relatively peaceful deaths, these men are among those whose ends were certainly not what they had expected.

Only a small percentage of graves in the cemeteries actually list a cause of death. It is not a common addition to headstones and usually are connected to an untimely death, such as Mary Beth Kinsock, who died in a plane crash in the Peruvian mountains at the age of seventeen while an exchange student in South America. She is buried in St. John – St. Joseph Cemetery, which is also home to an officer who was killed in the line of duty. First responders are more likely to have their work-related deaths indicated on their grave, such as a firefighter buried in Maplewood Cemetery who died in a massive fire in Gary in the middle of the century.

There are certainly cases where an educated guess can connect unspoken dots as to a cause of death based on possible circumstances gleaned from other information on the grave. For example, married women who died young or who were buried with children could have been victims of high maternal and infant mortality rates, which reduced as health care and access to it improved.

The County remained relatively unscathed from many of the massive epidemics that affected the majority of the U.S. after 1837, including influenza, cholera, scarlet fever, and measles, among others. Combined, the epidemics killed millions of Americans and devastated entire communities. While this does not mean there weren’t residents who passed on from these illnesses, they did not do so as part of a larger historic event. Given the geographical proximity of Lake County to Chicago, which experienced many of these epidemics, this is truly remarkable.

The highest concentration of cause of death are associated with military action. Battles in both theaters of World War II took lives, including the Battle of the Bulge and the Battle of Okinawa. Additional KIAs occurred during the Civil and Korean Wars. Merrillville and Maplewood cemeteries are both home to the remains of soldiers who died while prisoners of war in the infamous Andersonville (GA) POW camp. These two men were part of the 13,000 who died within the camp – nearly thirty percent of 45,000 POWs who passed through Andersonville during the war.

The full and complex stories of every individual has a beginning, a middle, and an end. How that story ended is as important to the tale as how they got through the middle. While some stories revel in their extraordinariness and place within the larger historical narrative, it is the stories of ordinary people that define local communities. As such, the simple nature of the gravestone gives way to a kaleidoscope of experiences that define the past.
While many causes of death remain a mystery until further research can be done, others are part of the story told on the stone of a deceased individual. One of the newer trends emerging are the use of corresponding colored ribbon on grave-stone by victims of terminal illnesses. Breast cancer is a commonly used one, but is still considered rare due to the newer nature of the Pink Ribbon campaign. Below are just some of the methods of death found in the cemeteries.
The story of Lake County is defined by large migration and immigration patterns that created a unique multi-ethnic and racial identity for the County’s communities. A walk through any of the sixty-two cemeteries and visitors will find nearly forty states and as many countries of origin recorded on the gravestones. Identifying a place of origin on a gravestone goes beyond just ethnic or familial pride, it becomes a testament to the grit of these individuals. The large and often dangerous journeys many made to improve their lot in life could have had a much different ending for them and the communities of Lake County.

Early settlers initially migrated here as the newly formed states back east became crowded and land ownership difficult. Territories and newly established states like Indiana provided cheap and abundant land for homesteaders. Veterans of the Wars for American Independence and 1812 were among the earliest settlers in Indiana. By the 1830s, they were joined by German immigrants interested in establishing livestock and crop-based farms in the American Midwest. Lake County became a prime settlement area for farming due to the fertile lands available and its proximity to the newly established city of Chicago and its ports. Evidence of these migratory patterns can be seen in the cemeteries of Cedar Lake, Lowell, and St. John, where German is a dominate language and graves speak of birth locations all along the East Coast, including Canada.

The turn of the century saw a shift as new immigration and migration patterns emerged. Eastern and southern Europeans alongside Latin Americans immigrated to rising industrial centers like Chicago. At the same time, African American and lower class white residents of southern states began moving north to take advantage of growing job opportunities in the steel yards along Lake Michigan. Dubbed the Great Migration, the rapid movement of residents from the South would continue through most of the 20th century before leveling off in the late 1970s. By the new millennium, immigration from southeastern Europe, east and southeast Asia, and Latin America continued to grow the County’s population as residents sought new jobs in the area’s growing industries and for the ease of access to Chicago.

Because members of these groups were employed by industry, rather than farming, the cemeteries north of Route 30, especially in Hammond, Gary, and Merrillville contain huge sections of graves written in languages such as Spanish, Polish, Serbian, and Greek. The influence of the Great Migration’s growth on the African American population in the County is reflected in cemeteries in Griffith,
Canada * Puerto Rico * Ireland * Scotland * Wales * England * Spain * Netherlands * Germany
Italy * Austria * Hungary * *Czechoslovakia* * Croatia * Yugoslavia * Herzegovina * Serbia
Montenegro * Albania * Macedonia * Greece * Poland * Lithuania * Belarus * Ukraine
Romania * Bulgaria * Turkey * Armenia * Palestine * Iran * Japan * Indonesia * Philippines
Australia

RED: State or Country  BLUE: Cities or Regions  GREEN: Former Countries  YELLOW: Known Language Origins

Colorado * Nebraska * Kansas * Oklahoma * Texas * Louisiana * Arkansas * Missouri * Ohio
Kentucky * Tennessee * Mississippi * Alabama * Florida * Georgia * North Carolina * Virginia
West Virginia * Pennsylvania * Maryland * New Jersey * New York * Vermont * Maine
Rhode Island * Massachusetts
Labors & Unions

Given Lake County’s geographic proximity to Chicago and as part of Indiana, it stands at a unique crossroads within the history of labor movements. While the south continued the rural traditions that helped to found the County, the north established itself as an industrial center for steel, although many others industries soon followed. However, this growth was not without hiccups along the way.

Unions associated with farming and rural communities are not evident on the graves of south Lake County. The closest organization with known members buried in County cemeteries is the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry. Grange’s role as an advocacy group certainly has done much to help improve the lives of rural communities supported by livestock ranches and crop farms. While not a union, Grange shares a similar worker-oriented structure, where local Granges drive the national organization’s policies and focus.

Moving further north, the presence of unions make themselves felt and many of the largest cemeteries, such as Chapel Lawn, Elmwood, and Ridgelawn have numerous union logos among their graves. The pride in these union memberships, even for newer deceased, exist in part because of the long and almost brutal history of labor in the U.S. Chicago and subsequently northwest Indiana became a hotbed for strike activities as unions spent the first third of the 20th century attempting to establish themselves in the area.

The 1919 steel strikes were some of the largest and spanned cities across the Mid-Atlantic and East Coast before reaching Chicago. The strikes here were some of the strongest, led by workers from Gary and Indiana Harbor. However, once these cities were brought under control by police and National Guardsmen, the strike lost its momentum before breaking completely in 1920.

During this same period, the Great Migration and new immigration from Europe, was on the rise with many of them moving to industrial populations centers like Chicago. Companies took advantage of these newly arrived residents and used many of them as strike-breakers to further weaken strike attempts. Eventually many of those used as strikebreakers would turn face and joined unionization attempts. This rise in numbers gave unions the strength they needed to negotiate terms in future labor talks. This did not put an end to striking, however, and until the middle of the twenty century, strikes were marred with physical altercations between strikers and police.

Buried in St. John – St. Joseph Cemetery is Leo Francisco, a young man who died in the 1937 Chicago Republican Steel Strike, one of ten killed on Memorial Day in a clash between police and protestors. While not all strikes were this violent, the violence of this strike nearly gutted organized labor attempts in the area. As the century progressed and further gains were made by union groups, the large clashes of the early years abated significantly, ensuring no other striker would meet the same end as Francisco.
Approximately twenty unions or labor-oriented organizations were identified during this project. Almost 80% of these unions are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), including Steelworkers and Letter Carriers.

The remaining unions and labor organizations either are standalone such as United Auto Workers or themselves oversee several affiliated unions such as the Teamsters. Almost all of these union and labor organizations are found in cemeteries in central and north Lake County.
Fifty-three separate organizations have at least one member buried in a Lake County cemetery and include social groups, religious organizations, benevolent societies, and veteran groups. Nearly all of the ones found in the cemeteries are still in operation today, although some chapters have since folded and were absorbed by nearby chapters still in operation.

Organizational memberships are not isolated to any one location in Lake County, although some clubs tied to racial or ethnic identity are more likely to found near higher population centers for that group. The Serbian National Federation’s St. George’s Lodge and Sociedad Union Española are both found only in Hammond and Gary, near high Serbian and Latino population centers. On the other end of the spectrum, just about every cemetery has a grave featuring a Masonic symbol. The Masons are one of the oldest continuously operating societies in Lake County with the first lodge chartered in 1854.

Alongside social-based groups, benevolent societies also developed strong memberships in Lake County. The services they provided their members were mostly financial — life insurance, medical care coverage, and more. The rise of benevolent societies, both secular and religious, would continue well into the 20th century, driven by the need for lifelong security. Larger organizations such as Woodman of the World and the Catholic Order of Foresters expanded out and today, their offerings include a whole range of banking, investment, and insurance opportunities. Some smaller benevolent societies attempted to reorganize as fraternal organizations, but this was often unsuccessful.

Alongside the many social club and benevolent society symbols are Greek fraternities and sororities. Greek organizations claim millions of memberships globally and yet these symbols are not as common as other organizations. In deed, many groups affiliated with children and young adults, including college, are rare finds in any cemetery. The known Greek symbols were primarily found on grave of people who had passed away relatively young.

Three fraternities and two sororities can be found in cemeteries located in Gary, Merrillville, and Hobart, three of which are historically black Greek organizations. Alpha Phi Alpha, the Indiana-established Kappa Alpha Psi, and the sorority Delta Sigma Theta are some of the few exclusively black-oriented as well as minority focused organizations found among the cemeteries. Today, these groups and their alumni organizations continue to meet the social needs of minority communities in Lake County.
The vast array of social groups found in the cemeteries of Lake County can be divided into four major categories: social groups, benevolent societies, youth organizations, and veterans groups. Most fraternal and vet organizations have an sister auxiliary group for women.
Located in Ridgelawn Cemetery is the unassuming grave of Lida McGinnes. Buried in 1955, Lida’s stone lies flat against the ground and its green tone can render it hard to see from any sort of distance. Unless one is directly on top of her grave, visitors miss a woman who dedicated herself to the care of veterans through active auxiliary memberships in Gary’s local posts. It is a far cry from Karen Brooker’s gravestone in Lowell Memorial Cemetery. Located near the entrance, Brooker’s large granite stone stands approximately four feet tall, a fitting memorial for a woman who broke glass ceilings as the first woman elected to Lowell’s Town Council in 1999.

Lida’s work as an auxiliary member most certainly raised hundreds of dollars every year to help improve and dignify the lives of area veterans. Brooker channeled similar energy as she drove project after project to create a vibrant and successful 21st century Lowell. And yet their stories, like those of thousands of women buried in Lake County, are belied by simple inscriptions on their gravestones. An entire history is hidden with the words, “Here Lies the Beloved Wife of.”

Early female settlers like LaRose Surprise braved long journeys to homestead in the territories. The success of these early farms would not have occurred without their participation in farm life. The raising of livestock such as chickens, goats, and sheep not only fed families, but through the sale of their milk, wool, and meat would provide much needed ‘egg money’ to household finances. Until towns began to grow, women also provided their families and neighbors with medical treatments, taught their children remedial lessons, and created many of their own household goods.

As it grew from a predominately agricultural economy, Lake County’s industrial and suburban growth was driven in part by women who worked outside of the home as well as from within. Like LaRose, the women of families who migrated or immigrated to the community did much to contribute to the household finances and served as a lynchpin that kept families together. Women took up jobs in traditionally female fields like clerical work and teaching, moving to industrial jobs during times of war when more workers were needed, such as Ramona Pfeifer who worked as a ‘Rosie’ during World War II. Those that didn’t work contributed tens of thousands of volunteer hours annually for auxiliary groups, social clubs, and even politics to improve the lives of their communities.

As the 20th century progressed, doors continued to open for women in education, labor, and community involvement. Regardless if a woman worked or volunteered, this seismic shift didn’t just change how our communities saw their female residents. It also changed how these women saw themselves – their graves no longer merely say beloved wife of. Personal details such as maiden names can be found alongside images of hobbies, favored pets, memberships, and even military records.

Whether women cared for the home and raised children like LaRose, took active roles within their communities like Lida and Karen, or unknowingly became a part of vibrant history like Ramona, the tens of thousands of women buried across Lake County changed the very lives we live by simply living theirs.
Earliest migrants settled in the territory in the 1830s. Women’s labor contributed heavily to the success of these early farms.

Immigration from Europe rose in the early 20th century. Women were vital to the journey prep and settling of the family in their new home.

As Lake County moved into the 21st century, women took more and more active roles in politics, breaking barriers in many places like Lowell.

Women’s roles in social clubs and auxiliary groups ensured that schools, churches, and hospitals were built as well as supported.

Latina and African-American women came north alone and with families, where they joined social clubs and the workforce en masse.

Beyond the role of mother and wife, women’s work outside of the home contributed heavily to the economic growth of Lake County.