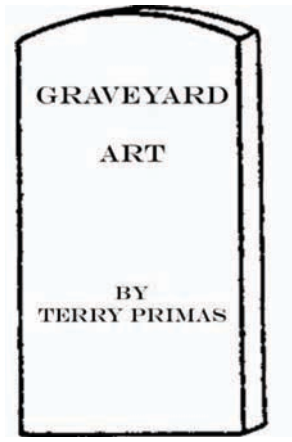
OLD PULASKI BURIAL CUSTOMS AND GRAVESTONE MOTIFS



Most of us have ambled through at least one old cemetery in the Ozarks. The rural countryside is replete with them. In the early 1980s, the Pulaski County Historical Society endeavored to record all of the readable tombstone inscriptions in as many county cemeteries as the committee could locate. The culmination of their efforts was the publication in two volumes of Tombstone Inscriptions throughout Pulaski County. A revised and combined edition was published in 1995.

The inscription book lists 125 graveyards, mostly in Pulaski County but a few in neighboring contiguous counties. The yards range in size from Boulware with a single grave to the relatively large city cemeteries in Waynesville, Dixon, Crocker, and Richland. The books are useful as a desk reference for research and for directions to many of the rural graveyards.

We have been particularly interested in the rural cemeteries, often family burial grounds, and their grave markers set prior to the Civil War until about 1930. We present a representative sample of the variety of stone used and the decorative markings. We begin with a look at the early burial traditions of the hill folks.

Body Preparation

Funeral homes and morticians were not common in the rural Ozarks in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While the railroad towns of Dixon, Crocker, and Richland may have had such prior to World War II, the isolation of the rural folk, particularly in the southern part of the county, made the use of such services impractical. Embalming was also not widespread, which required that the deceased be buried soon after death.

The hill folks had traditions and rituals that guided them in mourning and burying their loved ones.

If a person was being nursed for an illness or accident and the end was imminent, a common expression was "his clothes will soon be hanging on the line." This arose from the early practice of stripping the bedding and clothing and hanging them out of doors on a rope line. Anyone passing the home would know that the suffering had ended in death.

Neighbors participated in the process, making it a public event and providing some consolation. As soon as the person died, someone stopped the clock. (See the sidebar on the next page to see why.) The next action was to cover any mirrors in the house with white cloths. If a visitor should see his own reflection while in the house of death, he would not live to see another summer.

In the meantime, the "settin'" began. A dead body was never left alone. Neighbors, usually a young couple, were always present with the corpse, from death to burial. This apparently evolved from the fear of animals mutilating the body. Cats in the vicinity were particularly loathed.

Vance Randolph, one of the early chroniclers of the Ozarks culture (The Ozarks - An American Survival of Primitive Society, 1931), observed that hill folks had a "veritable mania" for cleanliness in death, if not in life. Neighbors, not family members, removed the clothing and thoroughly washed the deceased. Men washed men and women prepared women. In addition to soap and water on the body, a towel soaked in soda water was wrapped over the head and face to keep the face looking fresh. Some communities boiled the bark of the wahoo bush (Euonymus atropurpurea) to make a weak tea for face treatment. The lower jaw was tied up with a rag until rigor mortis kept it closed. Coins were placed on the eyelids until the body "was set." Some families kept certain coins for just this purpose.

One old tradition was "telling the bees." This necessity was not mentioned by Randolph or Otto Ernest Rayburn (Ozark Country, 1941) but Joseph Nelson, city bred and college educated, tells of the ritual in his book Backwoods Teacher (1949). Nelson lived and taught school in the Ozarks

Local men construct a pine coffin for a rural neighbor. "Store bought" coffins were available in the larger general stores, particularly along the railroad and in the county seat of Waynesville. Grempzynski Bros. & Co. of Dixon advertised the availability of coffins and caskets on display in their 11,000-square-foot dry goods store in the early 1920s. Rural folks made their own coffins. (A coffin is six-sided, as above. A casket is rectangular.) Photo by Townsend Godsey. Courtesy of School of the Ozarks.

The interior of the coffin might be lined with unbleached muslin from the homestead and store-bought satin. Neighbor ladies, as above, would help with the finishing touches on the coffin. Photograph by Townsend Godsey. Courtesy of School of the Ozarks.

community of Big Piney (maybe Pulaski's Big Piney, maybe not) in the 1930s and witnessed the death, preparation, and burial of a hillman, Uncle Johnny Haskins. In Nelson's account, shortly after Uncle Johnny died, his wife Sally beckoned him to look outside into the yard.

She glanced at me and whispered, "Come here."

I went. I saw Lonnie Haskins and an old lady of the Ashtons' Baily kin, and Sue Anne out by the bee gums which sat on a long log under a peach tree by the smokehouse. Sue Anne was squatted before a gum. She rose and moved to the next one.

Sally said, "What's she doing?"

Behind us, a short, bitter voice said, "She's telling the bees. But you all probably don't take stock in that. You all are smart and fancy in yore ways."

We turned to see Adam Kincaid, the gnarled old father of the school director.

He stepped upon the porch and stalked into the house, Lonnie Haskins saw us now. When the bee ceremony was over, he came to us. He said, "Mr. Nelson, I want to say much obliged fer the pice yore aimin' to write for Pa (eulogy)..." And, sheepishly, "Tellin' the bees is jist an' old custom. Hit prob'ly don't mean a thing—though some says that if the oldest woman an' the least youngun of the kin don't tell 'em when they's a corpse layin' in the house they'll all leave... We done it to ease Gram Baily's feelin's, mostly."

During the settin', neighbors visited, offered condolences, and most often brought food. Of course, in Ozark fash-

Foretelling Death Superstitions

Ozarkers held more than a few beliefs about death signs. Vance Randolph collected more than 60 of these happenings that predicted someone's demise (Ozark Superstitions, 1947). Here are just a few.

- Clocks were stopped at the moment of death for if a clock stopped on its own while the corpse was still present, someone in the family would die within a year.
- The woman who washes clothes on New Year's day is likely to cause the death of a relative within the year.
- If a woman throws an eggshell in the fire on May 1 and sees a drop of blood on the shell, she will not live to see another May Day.
- Burning sassafras wood will cause the death of one's mother. Hillmen don't like wood that crackles.
- If a farmer carries a hoe inside of the house, it will cause the death of a relative within the year.
- If a hillman steps over a spade lying on the ground, it will be used shortly to dig his grave.
- If a cat licks the door, someone in the house will surely die soon.
- If a dog under the house howls four times and then stops, there will be a death soon in the house.
- If a whippoorwill lands on the roof of a building and gives its call, someone in the neighborhood will die within twenty-four hours.
- Transplanting a cedar tree brings death to the transplanter when the cedar's shadow is big enough to cover a grave.
- If a rooster crows seven times in front of the door to a house, someone will die soon.
- A crowing hen brings death.

Old-fashioned bee gums (hives) were made from hollow logs. A very old superstition held that if the bees were not told about significant events in the family, such as births or deaths, the bees would swarm and leave the bee gums. John Greenleaf Whittier, the 19th century abolitionist poet, wrote a poem about that belief titled "Telling the Bees." Photo by Vance Randolph. Courtesy of School of the Ozarks.

ion, stories were told.

In the early days, the corpse was wrapped with strips, torn not cut, of a clean bedsheet. This was called the "winding." Later, some favored being buried in chosen or favorite apparel, such as a suit or simply overhalls (this is the vernacular pronunciation, though not the correct spelling.)

The Burying

Due to the lack of embalming and the subsequent putrefaction of the body, burial usually occurred no later than three days after death. Depending on the time of death (on the hour was most common according to belief and midnight was the best time to expire), the burial would be held one or two days hence. Volunteer grave diggers were needed and weather conditions were sometimes a factor. However, rain would not postpone a burying. It was considered good luck if it was raining on the day of interment. There is a verse that every Ozarker was familiar with:

Happy is the bride that the sun shines on;
Blessed are the dead that the rain falls on.

The grave was always dug on the day of the funeral, never in advance. The digging might be complicated by frozen ground or, of course, the rocky soil. Dynamite was sometimes used in the days before much regulation but mostly it was hard pick and shovel excavation.

There is one unfortunate grave digging episode on record. Emma Page Hicks authored a column, "Pioneer Families of Pulaski County," for the Pulaski County Democrat from 1977 through 1983. She wrote in her August 11, 1977 article:

Silas Marion Sneed, called "Dunk," was born in 1875 and passed away in 1897, a little over 21 years old. He was never married. I remember when he died.

He was helping dig a grave at Big Piney Cemetery [Hopewell] and hit his toe with a pick he was digging with and in a few days he took on blood poisoning in that toe and they doctored that toe in every way they knew how, with old fashioned remedies, for there wasn't a doctor near, let alone a hospital. They bound different things on his foot and poultices as they called them, but nothing seemed to help and this nice young man died.

As previously mentioned, a grave was always dug on the day of the burial. It was bad luck to leave a grave open over night. Doing so would bring an early death to a member of the deceased person's family.

By the 1920s, services at the grave seem to have shortened, compared to the hours-long affairs in the antebellum period. Appropriate words were said and the coffin was lowered into the grave by ropes or leather straps. If a preacher was not in attendance, a later service might be held when the circuit riding preacher visited the neighborhood.

Unlike today, the grave was immediately filled. The grave diggers were still on hand, as it was bad luck to dig a grave and not be present when it was filled. No mourners left before the last shovel of dirt was placed. Leaving would be disrespectful to the dead and invite a calamity. After all, hill folk believed that deaths came in threes. It was not wise to tempt fate.

Right—Some time later, the grave might be mounded with additional dirt and decorated with mussel shells from the river and possibly bits of broken colored glass. This process was repeated on Decoration Day as the grave settled. The grave at right is that of Robie and Anna Ross in McCortney Cemetery, Pulaski County. We found evidence of shells on the grave and redecorated it.

Vintage images of people in a cemetery are rare. Funeral photographs are even fewer. This photograph was taken in Mayfield Cemetery on the Big Piney River. It appears to be a Decoration Day observance. We recognize the tall white-headed and bearded gentleman as Rev. J. J. Watts, who died in 1912. Courtesy of Bob and Geneva Goodrich.

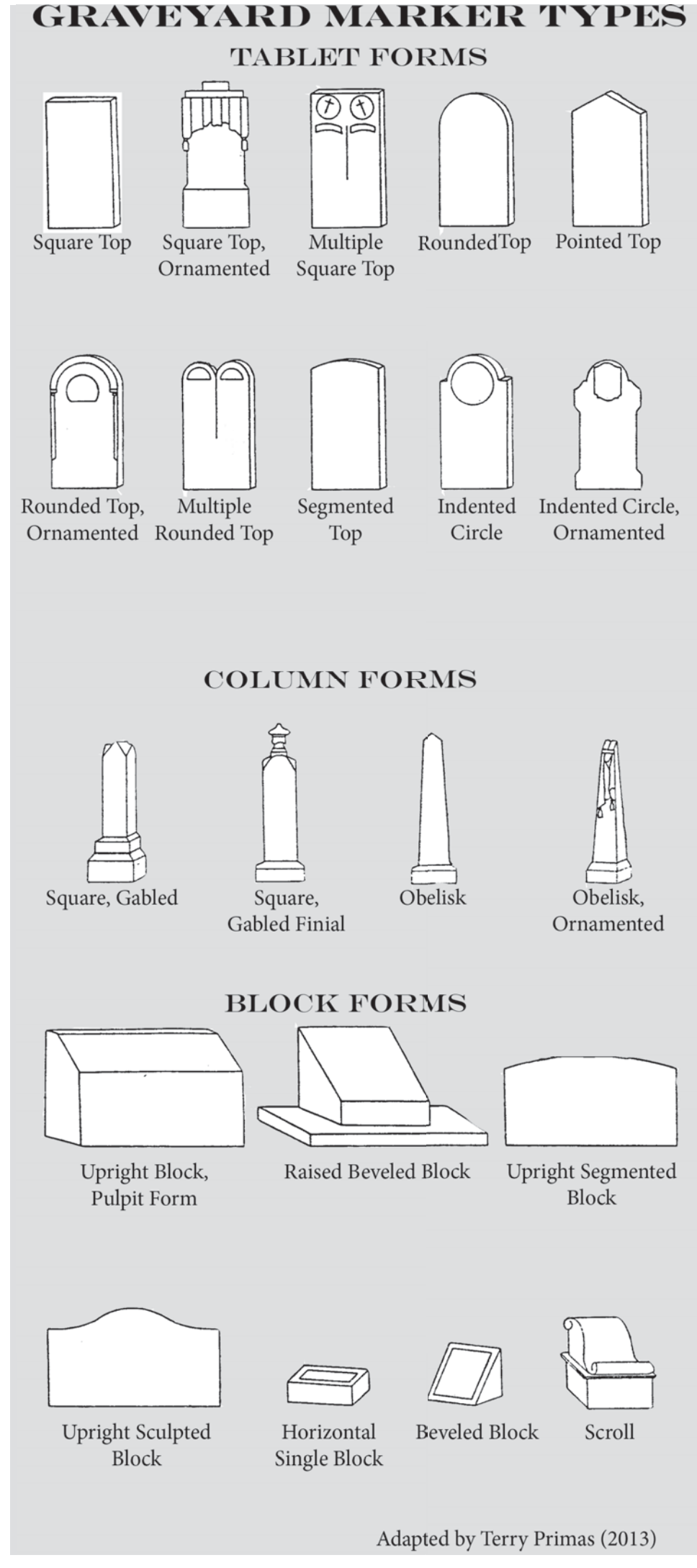
If the previous discussion of death and burial in the Ozarks implied a homogeneity in those practices, that would be incorrect. Variety among regions and neighborhoods certainly existed in those traditions. The general and widespread practices presented were gleaned from contemporary accounts.

That there is diversity among old burying grounds is apparent after visiting several, for no two are alike. They differ in size and certainly upkeep. Many, if not the majority, receive no care at all. However, the variety is particularly visible in the grave markers.

There are some commonalities. Although the early settlement was in the bottomland along the major streams in the county, the graveyards were typically upland from rampaging flood waters. Another common feature is the grave orientation, east to west. The feet always point east so that on Resurrection Day, the dead shall rise to face the morning sun.

As can be seen from the chart at right, there is a typology for the shape and general decorative elements of tombstones. Finer designs and details were added by the stone cutter. What is missing from the chart is a type of marker commonly found in our oldest graveyards —the fieldstone. This usually unmarked, or at least unreadable, stone sometimes is roughly pointed but most often irregularly shaped. The fieldstone is most often sandstone. Even the earliest grave sites contain a footstone.

Plain field stones were used for markers for several reasons. In the early settlement period (ca. 1820-1870) in the county, few hillmen had the ready cash for a "boughten" tombstone. Stonecutters were few, if any. Another factor was that the railroad was not completed through Pulaski County until 1869. The railway terminated at Rolla in 1861, extending to Jerome and Arlington in 1867. There were no railroad-supplied mercantile centers in Pulaski until the railroad created them two years later. Until that time, supplies for Waynesville had to be transport-



ed by wagon over a very poor road. Heavy goods were even more costly. Most likely, the heavy weight would have been allocated to staples.

Thus, there were few commercial tombstones from the antebellum period. Of the roughly 14,500 markers listed in the Historical Society's inscription volume, only about 120 readable tombstones date to 1869 or before. It is also likely that some carved stones from this early period were placed at a later date.

In addition to the improved availability via the railroad, commercial tombstones received a big boost when they became an item available from the large mail order firms of Sears, Roebuck & Co. (right) and Montgomery Ward. There was a tombstone specialty catalog for customers in 1906, if not earlier.

The commercial markers are carved from marble and granite, with marble being the most common. Marble is harder and more weather resistant than the sandstone fieldstone but softer than granite. Marble markers also have a more porous surface than granite tombstones. This surface offers pores in which dirt and mildew spores collect, accounting for those nearly black marble stones found in old yards. Granite tombstones keep their luster much longer without any cleaning.

On the following pages are examples of tombstone art and marker motifs commercially produced and home made by Ozarkers between the years 1850-1930.

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Give us four to six weeks to finish, letter and ship.

Dimensions: Nos. 61K540 and 61K541. Total height, 16 inches. Base, 14x8x6 inches. Tablet, 10x10x4 inches. Shipping weight, 138 pounds.

No. 61K540 Price, Acme Blue Dark Vein Marble.....$4.90

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Dimensions: Nos. 61K542 and 61K543. Total height, 20 inches. Base, 16x8x8 inches. Tablet, 12x12x4 inches. Shipping weight, 192 pounds.

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Wondrous Art, and a Memorial Breathing Sweet Innocence in its Every Line, $38.40 Dark, $40.20 White.

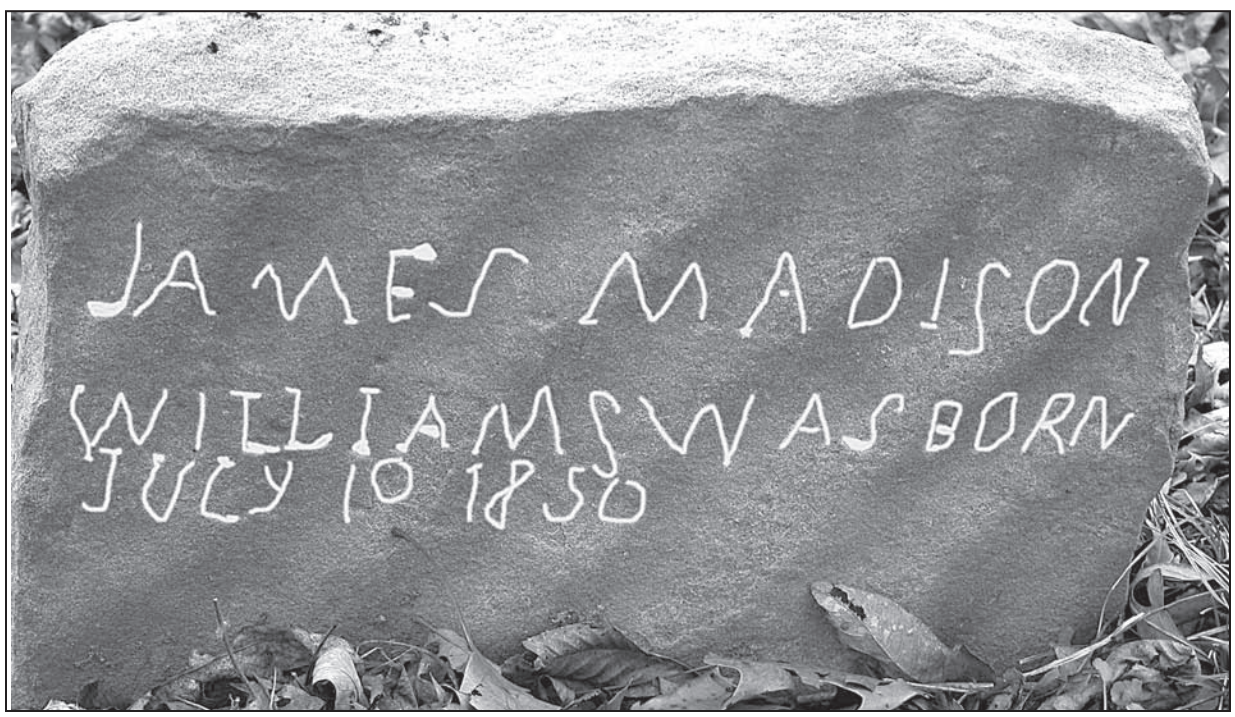
Our sculptor's genius here represents inspiring art in all the beautiful soft lines of this design, carved

FATHER or MOTHER

$20.48 and Upward.

Dimensions: Nos. 61K760 and 61K761. Total height, 30 inches. Bottom base, 20x12x8

This is a partial page from the 1906 Sears, Roebuck general catalog. The company was touting its tombstones and monuments and offering a free 150-page catalog. Tombstones were offered in white marble, blue marble, and granite. Sears also offered Woodmen of the World monuments. Prices for a tablet started at $3.30. There was a charge for each letter inscribed.



At left is the oldest inscribed field stone marker that we have seen. The inscription is more visible when sprayed with water. We have enhanced the etching to make it readable on this paper. The epitaph was engraved with a sharp object in the sandstone. The sandstone has a "wavy" look, called "ripple stone," and was considered decorative by Ozarkers. The marker was found under a fallen tree by Karen Carroll, while helping with the restoration of McCortney Graveyard, located on a high bank along the Big Piney River. James Madison Williams was the son of Meredith and Comfort McCortney Williams and apparently an infant death. The inscription in the relatively soft sandstone did not weather away because it slumped over on its face. Probing also discovered the footstone.

For a diary account of a rural graveyard restoration, see the Old Stagecoach Stop Foundation's website at www.oldstagecoachstop.org. In the left contents column, near the bottom, click on "McCortney Graveyard Restoration."

The largest 19th century memorial we have found in our area is in north Texas County at the junctions of VV and AB, near Licking. Buried therein are Thomas Canning, born December 5, 1819 in County Derry, Ireland and his wife, Catherine Skelly Roy, born February 15, 1838, in Longford, Ireland. They immigrated to the U. S. and Texas County in 1853. The Cannings homesteaded one section of land south of Licking and Thomas "died instant" in 1885. Catherine remarried twice and died in 1895. William Roy, Catherine's third husband, buried her by her first husband.

"The [grave house] over grandpa's grave was built by Mr. Paddy Brummint, who lived nearby. In the 1940s, lightning struck the tomb, tearing it completely down and Rev. A. B. Garrison of the Methodist Church raised funds and had it rebuilt. In the 1950s, it happened again and myself and Uncle Raymond and Aunt Francis built it back and have tried to care for it since."
Quote from an article by Lee Roy Maxey (1983) in Texas County History - Volume I, published by the Texas County Historical Society.

Gracing the grounds of the Dixon Cemetery is this memorial, probably the largest marble marker in the county and undoubtedly the most elaborate. Sitting atop the six column, mansion style monument is a large praying angel. Six white bronze (an alloy of copper, tin and zinc) curved top plates are bolted to the structure on the walls of the mansion. Three of the plates show funerary motifs: a wreath, a harp, and an open Bible with a rose (inset). The other three plates memorialize two burials. One is Eva, infant daughter of Lib M. and Walter Wilson, 1886. The second burial is that of Lib M. Wilson. Two plates contain a 40-line epitaph that recounts Lib's life and achievements (1854-1900). This piece of mortuary artwork would not look out of place in either Bellefontaine or Calvary, the showplace cemeteries of the elite in St. Louis.

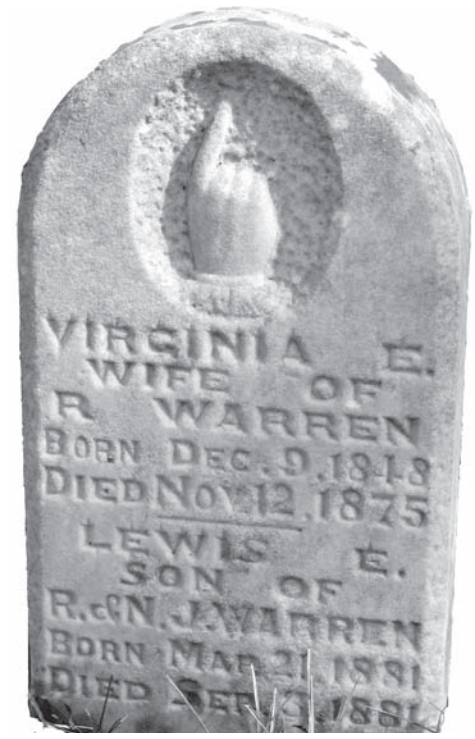
On the next few pages are motifs found on markers in graveyards around Old Pulaski. Some are very common to the 19th and early 20th centuries, as noted, and others are unique, as far as we can tell, or home made. The last item in the description indicates the graveyard in Pulaski County where photographed, unless indicated otherwise.

Finger Pointing Up— One of the most common motifs, a finger pointing heavenward with engraved "Gone Home." Cedar Hill, 1873.

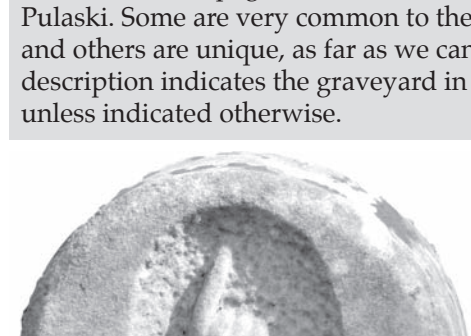
Finger Up and Crown—A more ornate version of the top motif featuring a heavenly crown. This fractured stone is held together with an alumminum band. Bradford, 1860.

Clasping Hands—Equally common is the clasping hand decoration. The epitaph "GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN" is even more common on marble tablets. Merrill, Texas County.

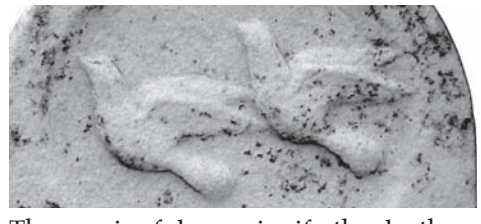
Flying Dove—This signifies that the deceased has found peace. This particular carving in marble shows a very simple style, lack of detail. Berean, 1879.



This marker is distinctive, not for the motif, but for the burials. Virginia Warren, first wife of Robert Warren (right), was interred in this grave in 1875. Lewis E., six months old, was buried in the same grave or nearby in 1881. Lewis was the infant of Robert and his second wife, Nancy (at right), who was the sister of Virginia. McCortney, 1875 & 1881.



Tree of Heaven—Carved in several styles. The tree of life grew in the Garden of Eden and yielded fruit which gave everlasting life. The tree in heavenly Jerusalem has leaves which heal the nations. Hopewell, 1896.



These pair of doves signify the deaths of two infants, less than 16 months apart. Hopewell, 1880.

Robert and Nancy Warren share a square gabled style marker. The decoration is simply oak leaves. It is the only granite marker in this rural graveyard and shows virtually no sign of weathering. It was carved at two different times and, apparently, by two different carvers as seen by the varying letter styles. Its only foe has been meandering cattle from the surrounding pasture which have rubbed on it, knocking the column off its base on several occasions.
McCortney, 1909 & 1915.

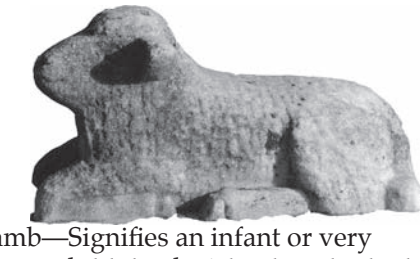
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Atypical tablet—Incorporates a circle design with a rectangular tablet. Not noticed in any other yard. Hopewell, 1907.

Holy Bible—This rather common motif is combined with the uncommon pointed tablet style of marker. The Bible is inscribed in the above marker but is more commonly found carved in relief, as below. Above, Hopewell, 1904. Below, Spalding, 1917.

Heaven's Gate—A more "modern" motif, it appeared in the early 20th century. Trout, Phelps County, 1939.

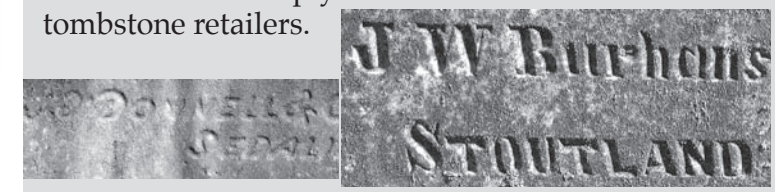
Beehive—The only one we have seen, possibly meaning the deceased led an industrious life. Bradford, 1874.



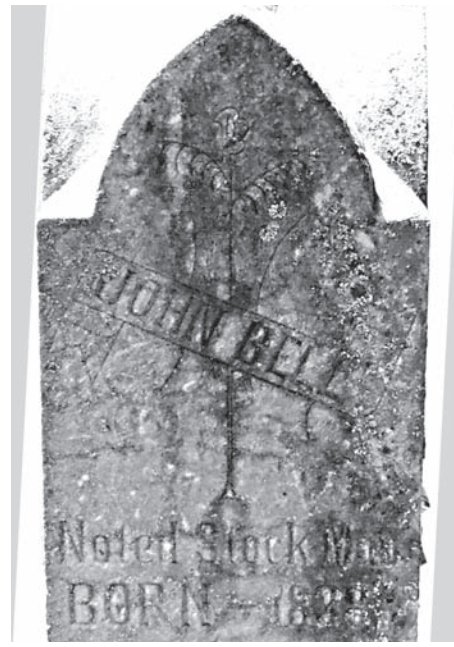
Lamb—Signifies an infant or very young child death. A lamb embodied youth, purity, and innocence. The above carving sits atop a tablet marker but shows significantly more deterioration, possibly softer marble and easier to carve. Hopewell, 1904.

Wreath—Wreaths were popular motifs in the 19th century, signifying victory over death. They exhibited much variation, probably according to the stonecutter's artistry and expertise. Left, Berean, 1878; Center, Cedar Hill, 1883; Right, Hopewell, 1887.

Most early tombstone cutters were itinerant craftsmen. Only a few markers have any identifying signatures. There are four stones in our survey that are "signed." Three are by J. W. Burhans of Stoutland and Richland, two at Cedar Hill and one at Friendship. Another stone at Cedar Hill is signed "J O Donnell & Co Sedalia." It has not been determined if these were stonecutters or simply tombstone retailers.



This scroll tablet form is unusual in Pulaski graveyards. It has quite a bit of carving, including cross hatching on the sides, which is not visible on this paper. Even more unusual is that it is inscribed with four deaths but only one date, that of an infant. Spalding, 1887.



Few gravestones provide any information about the deceased's life and vocational pursuits. Familial ties are often inscribed, e.g "Mother," "Father." The most notable exception is Lib M. Wilson's memorial on page 45, which provides a lengthy biography. Another exception is the gabled granite and lichen covered column above, the marker of John Bell, 1838-1906. His epitaph reads "Noted Stockman," undoubtedly a source of pride during his lifetime. Friendship, 1906.

Wayman Cemetery, Phelps County

Some markers are memorials to a life and death but the remains are not interred. Solomon King (above), very early Spring Creek settler and owner of a hotel in Rolla, died in his native Canada. His wife, Mary, is buried here.

There are serveral markers scattered among the rural graveyards of Old Pulaski memorializing service in the Civil War, such as William Wheeler (left), who fought with a Union regiment organized in 1864 in Hamilton County, Tennesee and George Gan of Waynesville (below).

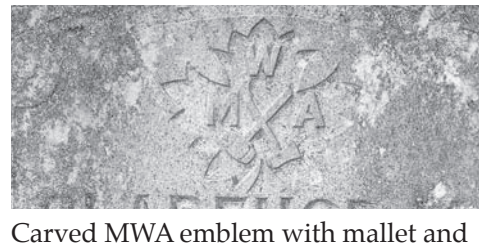
The plant of choice in old yards was the Spanish Bayonet or yucca plant, often planted around the headstone. It also is found on old homesteads.

Membership in a fraternal or service organization sometimes included life insurance and a provision that included a distinctive marker or emblem of the society.

One of the most striking markers in a graveyard is a stone tree stump, signifying a member of the Woodmen of the World (WOW) or Modern Woodmen of America (MWA), fraternal societies founded in the 1890s. They offered life insurance and a $100 rider for a tombstone. The societies sent plans to the local stone cutter, where it was often modified. No two stones are alike. WOW/MWA had camps in most of the county's towns. Due to rising costs, the marker compensation ceased by the 1930s. Both of these organizations offer life insurance today.

The other popular fraternal societies also lent a distinctive emblem to gravestones. The Masons' familiar shield with compass and square is seen, either carved or as a bronze emblem. The Oddfellows' three-link chain representing Friendship, Love, and Truth adorns some gravestones.

A MWA marker, tree stump on four short logs. Berean, 1912.



Carved MWA emblem with mallet and axe. Bradford, 1913.

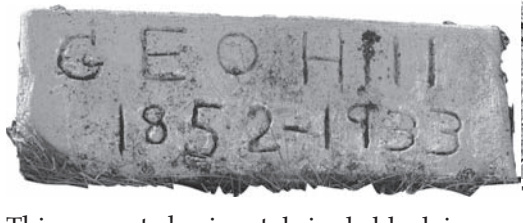
Of the half dozen or so tree markers viewed in the county, this memorial is the most finely detailed, with woodmen tools, fern leaf, vine, and a dove near the top. Richland, 1909.

The three link chain of the I.O.O.F. (Oddfellows) with the letters F-L-T for Friendship, Love, and Truth is surmounted by an unusual motif of a heart in hand. Wayman, 1909.

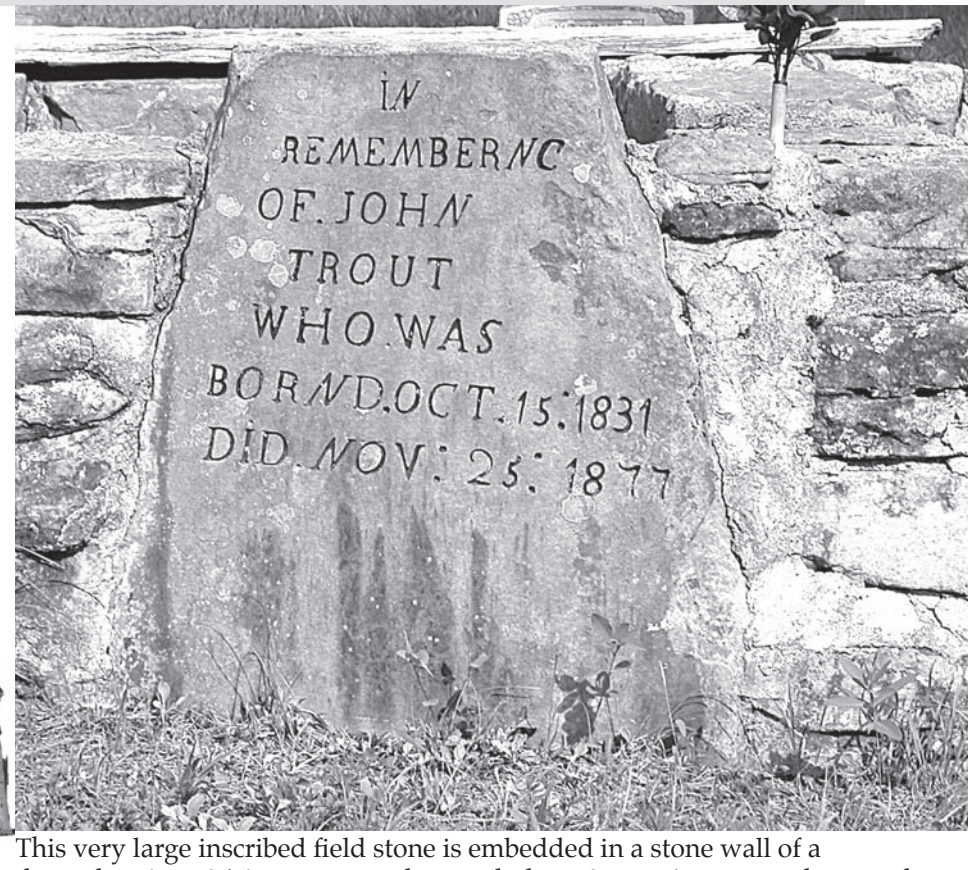
The often-seen Masonic square and compass, appearing as early as the 1870s. Cedar Hill, 1907.

The most unusual markers in a rural graveyard are the folk art or home made ones, typically made from concrete.

This block form has three protruding knobs of concrete. There are two pressed leaf patterns on either side of a heart shaped figure with the epitaph "At Rest With Jesus" inscribed therein. Trout, 1919.

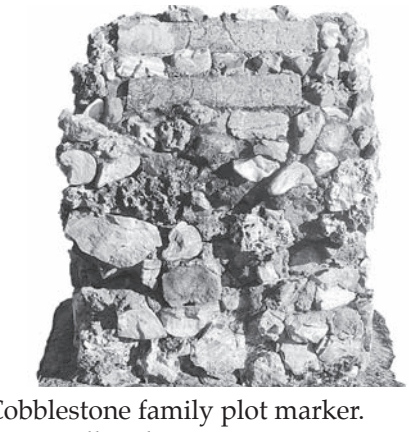


This concrete horizontal single block is one of three. Undated wife and daughter flank the father. Bradford, 1933.



This very large inscribed field stone is embedded in a stone wall of a three-chambered false crypt or what might have been a large gravehouse. The letters were carved with quite a bit of skill, although the spelling lacks some. Trout, Phelps County, 1877.

This concrete rounded tablet displays the backward "s" and "n" found in Ozark lettering. Trout, 1928.



Cobblestone family plot marker. Hopewell, n.d.