

HUMOROUS GRAVESTONES - "OVER THEIR DEAD BODIES"

When you get right down to it, where is the best place to tell your story or state what you stood for?

Many old timers and a number of modern ones believed that the logical place to have their say was on their tombstones.

They're often stunning frankness has produced centuries of highly personal comments on religion, politics, death, wars, love, marriage and social change carved onto markers in hundreds of cemeteries throughout the world.

This paper was suggested after a recent tour of Riverside Cemetery with William Turner and the Pennyroyal Area Museum's Supper in the Cemetery. (Clarksville, Tennessee has their own "Dinner with the Dead.") This presentation is a companion paper entitled "Humor in Wills: Wicked, Witty and Witless" presented forty years ago to the Open Session of the Athenaeum Society at the Ivy Tower Inn on May 6, 1965.

CNN's Larry King asked famous people to write their epitaphs or obituaries. Here's the response he received from "Garfield" creator Jim Davis:

"I would like to be remembered as someone who was extremely old."

From film director Milos Forman:

“I am speechless. Trust me.”

From former Senator Bob Dole:

“I demand a recount.”

We'll give the last word to Forbes Magazine editor Steve Forbes. His epitaph:

“The income tax is now flat - but alas, so am I.”

Johnny Carson:

According to the New York Times, someone once asked Johnny Carson what he would like his epitaph to be. He thought a moment and reached for the traditional line of a talk-show host:

“I'll be right back.”

Famous epitaphs of celebrity figurines are often found on their memorials or headstones around the globe:

Frank Sinatra “The best is yet to come.”

Bette Davis “She did it the hard way.”

Dean Martin “Everybody loves somebody, sometime.”

Jefferson Davis

“At Rest
An American Soldier
and Defender of the Constitution”

Isaac Newton: "Nature and nurture's laws lay hid at night:
God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light."

Winston Churchill:

"I am ready to meet my maker.
Whether my maker is prepared for the great ordeal
of meeting me is another matter."

William Shakespeare's memorial can be found in Stratford upon

Avon:

Good frend for Jesus sake forebeare to
digg the dust enclosed heare.
Blest be ye man yt spares these stones and
curst be he yt moves my bones.

You may safely laugh in the face of anyone who tells you this epitaph is to
be found somewhere in eastern Kentucky:

Ma loved Pa
Pa loved wimmen.
Ma found Pa
With one in swimmin.
Here lies Pa.

Likewise, scoff if someone tells with a straight face that "somewhere"
in North Carolina is an epitaph with these words:

Here lies John O'Day
He lived the life of Riley,
While Riley was away.

William Turner contributions:

Most interesting locally is a tombstone at Flatlick Presbyterian Church, Lafayette Road:

(modern granite - died in 30's)

"She was one helluva woman."

Old Maid:

"Don't call me Miss, I haven't missed a thing!"

This neat little gem was discovered by Judge McDonald and Margaret on a fox hunt near Grasimere:

British Isle couple with adjoining headstones:

Wife died first:

Grieve not for me husband dear
I am not dead but sleeping here.
With patience wait, prepare to die,
and in time you'll come to I.

Then husband died:

Grieve not for me dearest wife
Sleep on I've got another wife
I cannot come and lie with thee
For I must go and live with she.

Benjamin Franklin:

The body of
B. Franklin, Printer
(Like the Cover of an Old Book
Its Contents^u torn Out
And Stript of its Lettering and Gilding)
Lies Here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be Lost;
For it will (as he Believ'd) Appear once More
In a New and More Elegant Edition
Revised and Corrected
By the Author

Babe Ruth:

May the divine Spirit
That antimated Babe Ruth
To win the crucial game of his life
Inspire the youth of America

Margaret Daniels grave in Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond, Virginia:

She always said her feet were killing her,
but nobody believed her.

On a grave from the 1880's in Nantucket, Massachusetts:

Under the sod and under the trees
Lies the body of Jonathan Pease.
He is not here, there's only the pod;
Pease shelled out and went to God.

In a London, England cemetery:

Here lies Ann Mann,
who lived an old maid
but died an old Mann.

A widow wrote this epitaph in a Vermont Cemetery:

Sacred to the memory of
my husband John Barnes
who died January 3, 1803
His comely young widow, age 23 has
many qualifications of a good wife, and
yearns to be comforted.

The living have the opportunity to engrave in stone some thought appropriate to the character, or circumstances surrounding the death, of the deceased individual. Some epitaphs are unique and very revealing.

It is difficult to find anything entertaining about a death, but on occasion, death can be humorous and bizarre. Sometimes, humor can be found where least likely. Cemeteries, for example, can be startlingly funny to the uninitiated. Many epitaphs are unintentionally, and sometimes, intentionally, amusing. Conceivably, the stonecutter or the family members did not realize how future generations would look upon their attempt to memorialize the deceased loved one.

In most large cemeteries, you will probably find an epitaph that goes something like this one found in Graves County on Highway 45 between Mayfield and Paducah, Kentucky:

Come blooming youths, as you pass by,
And on these lines do cast an eye.
As you are now, so once was I;
As I am not, so you must be;
Prepare for death and follow me.

Which is not funny at all but underneath someone had added:

To follow you
I am not content
How do I know
Which way you went.

Lester Moore was a Wells Fargo station agent in the cowboy days of the 1880's. He's buried in the Boot Hill Cemetery in Tombstone, Arizona:

Here lies Lester Moore.
Four slugs
From a forty-four.
No Les
No More.

Lawyers:

A lawyer's epitaph in England:

Sir John Strange
Here lies an honest lawyer,
and that is Strange.

The Defense Rests

Johnny Cochran

The late Johnny Cochran, the defense lawyer for O. J. Simpson, reminded the jurors that Simpson struggled without success to pull on a bloody glove found at his house after the killing. "If the glove doesn't fit," Cochran said. "You must acquit."

Later, he wrote that the rhyme was "the line endlessly quoted to me by people, the line which I'll be remembered and I suspect it will probably be my epitaph.

Dentist:

Stranger tread
This ground with gravity
Dentist Brown
Is filling his last cavity.

Down in Eddy Creek in Caldwell County, Kentucky is the tombstone of an ill woman:

I told you I was sick.

Doctor:

Epitaph on a huge boulder on the grave of a doctor:

This is on me!

Auctioneer:

Going! Going!! Gone!!!

Spinster Postmistress:

Returned - Unopened.

Anna Hopewell's grave in Vermont:

Here lies the body of our Anna
Done to death by a banana.
It wasn't the fruit that laid her low,
But the skin on the thing that made her go.

Jeweler:

In memory of Fowl Clark, a Jeweler
Who has quit running but is
Wound up in the hope of being
Taken by the Master Machinist
For repairs and adjustments to be
Sent running for the world to come.

Debts:

Owing more,
Gone away,
Owing more than he can pay.
(Erected by his creditors.)

Illness, weather:

In memory of Jonathan Daniels
Who early in May
Took off his winter flannels
And died of pneumonia.

Sometimes the name itself is funny. Here are some left over from Halloween and the Haunted Mansion at Disney World.

How about these tombstone names:

Barry M. Deep

Barry A. Live

Berry D. Hatchet

Dr. Izzy Gone

I. Emma Spook

Justin Tyne

Otta B. Alive

R. U. Next

Reid N. Weep

U. R. Gone

Will B. Back

Yul B. Next

Some of these I made up to fill out my twenty minutes.

Here lies my wife
I bid her goodbye.
She rests in peace
and now so do I.

Here lies Frank
Dead by gun
Caught in bed
By another's husband

Here lies the father of 29
There would have been more
But he didn't have time.

Good friends go softly
In your walking
Lest she should wake
And rise up talking

E. J. Johnson had two wives. They're buried side by side in the City Cemetery, London, Kentucky, with the epitaphs on both sides of their stones reading:

No better woman ever lived.

From Niagara Falls, Canada:

Here lies the body of Ephraim Wise
Safely tucked between his two wives.
One was Tillie and the other Sue.
Both were faithful, loyal and true.
By his request in the ground that's hilly,
His coffin is set tilted toward Tillie.

And a final departing epitaph of Bugs Bunny:

That's All Folks.

Wendell H. Rowe
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