

A Brief History of the Wadena and Calvary Cemeteries

Presented to the Rotary Club of Wadena around 2014 by Dennis Olson, former President of the Wadena Cemetery Association. The final two paragraphs were updated in 2021 by Myron Winkleman, current member of the Wadena Cemetery Association.

The Wadena cemetery consists of two separately operated entities, Calvary cemetery operated by St. Ann's Catholic Church and the public cemetery managed by the Wadena Cemetery Association.

The Cemetery Association, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, consists of a board of directors who are all non-paid volunteers. Only the secretary receives compensation for duties. Requirements of the secretary include recording minutes, selling and recording the purchase of lots, and locating existing burials for visiting family and friends of the deceased. The duties of the Cemetery Association consist of maintaining the property, selling burial lots, and providing rules and regulations for the orderly condition of the cemetery. Burials and the installation of grave markers are usually coordinated by the family of the deceased with a funeral director and are not the duties of the Cemetery Association. A statement of what the Cemetery Association provides to lot purchasers and what is expected from lot owners has been published. A copy of the statement is included with the lot deed at the time of lot purchase. The Association has also furnished copies of this statement to local funeral homes so that they can distribute it to their clients. **The Cemetery Association receives no financial aid from city, county, state, or federal tax dollars. The sources of income for operation of the cemetery are obtained from the sale of lots and memorial contributions.** Thankfully, there have been some generous donors, but with rising costs for mowing (costs exceed \$1,000 each mowing), tree trimming and removal, tree replacement, pavement improvements, fence maintenance, as well as other items, additional contributions are always welcome.

Information supplied by local historian, Bob Zosel, tells us that back in 1877 during a smallpox epidemic, the town fathers realized the need for a public cemetery. The constitution and bylaws for the Wadena Cemetery date back to 8-22-1878. These bylaws contain some now long outdated rules such as, "horses are not allowed on the grass."

The first burial in the cemetery was a smallpox victim named Emma Knight in July of 1877.

In the early years of the cemetery, the access was from the west side. In later years, the access was established on the east side. This east side access proved to be a problem in the spring due to wet, swampy ground. Horses and people had a difficult time entering the cemetery. To solve this access issue, it was necessary for the city fathers to become involved and after time, the drainage of the ground was corrected to allow easy entry to the cemetery.

Establishing a cemetery is one thing, maintenance of the property is another. From historical accounts, we find that the property was poorly maintained and became overgrown with brush before interested citizens took action to clean up the area. It was 1902 when the first lawnmower was purchased, some 25 years after the cemetery was first established.

The size of the cemetery has, of course, increased since the first land was purchased. Today, there is additional undeveloped expansion room.

Records from July 2010 show a total of 4,231 burials in the public cemetery and another 1,717 burials in Calvary cemetery. These numbers may not be totally accurate since early records were not kept as well as today. Unmarked graves have been found a few times during excavation of modern day graves. The Association allows for two cremation burials per lot. It is also possible to inter one casket and one cremation in a lot.

The Wadena Cemetery has no "famous" individuals buried within its grounds—just the names of many local citizens, some who obviously were able to afford large stone markers. It is interesting to note the size difference in early stone markers and those placed today. Perhaps present cost has reduced the size of current stone markers. The effort to install those early massive blocks of stone prior to modern equipment must have been impressive.

There are hundreds of military veterans buried throughout the cemetery. Of those, there are 11 Civil War veterans. One of the Civil War veterans was a Confederate soldier who, records show, served from April 23, 1864 to August 31, 1864, a total of only four months, and then deserted. Desertion was likely due to lack of food and clothing while in the Confederate army in the late months of the war. From Bob Zosel's historical records, we find that the man became a good farmer in the Wadena area. Civil War veterans from Maine to Minnesota are buried here. Once the war was over, these young men started moving to this area due to available land and opportunities.

In 1992, the VFW along with help from former Wadena Cemetery Association president, Harold Sundby, obtained brass marker plates for all known veteran graves.

One unique item located close to the mausoleum is the large cannon. In 1897, this cannon was donated to Wadena Farragut Post #102, The Grand Army of the Republic. Transportation of the cannon to Wadena was possible thanks to the effort of James J. Hill, president of the Great Northern Railroad. The cannon came along with 40 rounds of ammunition. We can only guess as to what happened to the ammunition, now lost to history. The cannon weighs 7,630 pounds, or just under 4 tons. It must have been quite an undertaking to move it from the railroad terminal into the cemetery using horse and human power.

The cannon was originally located in a section of the cemetery used for Civil War burials. It was moved to its current location sometime in the late '60s or early '70s to allow for better crowd access during Memorial Day programs and to reduce the amount of foot traffic on existing graves. Next to the cannon is the Memorial Wall, built by Charles Sartell.

The mausoleum does not receive the amount of use it once did. The building was erected to store the deceased and their caskets over the winter until they could be buried in the spring. There is a lower level in the mausoleum with racks for casket storage. Years ago, the main upper level room was used on occasion for small funerals and burial services. Today the building is rarely used for deceased storage. Winter burial is common place today. Cremation is also now a commonly used practice, which further reduces the need for winter storage.

The greatest impact to the cemetery in recent history was the June 17, 2010, tornado that struck Wadena. What once was a tree-shaded place of rest for the departed, was turned into a scene of total destruction. Most of the large stately trees lay torn and twisted on the ground. Hundreds of grave stones were also toppled to the ground. Grave stones are considered the personal property of the lot owner family. It has always been their responsibility to have the stone maintained. However, due to the impossibility of finding all the owner families, the Wadena Cemetery Association made the decision to have all the stones reset at their expense. Insurance would not cover any of this cost. The local Elk's club came to the rescue with a fundraiser that helped to cover most of the cost to reset the grave stones. Other donors also stepped up and contributed money to help offset the cost of cleaning up the property and to pay for new trees. There were countless numbers of volunteers from Wadena as well as many other towns who showed up to help out in any way possible. This valuable volunteer effort along with the monetary donations were greatly appreciated, but the tornado damage also took a toll on the Wadena Cemetery Association cash balance, in excess of \$25,000.

Now, some years after the tornado, the damage has been removed and repaired, but the memory of what had been still lingers with many citizens. Dozens of new trees have been planted, but many years must pass before the cemetery regains some of its past personality.

In September 2018, a columbarium was erected behind the mausoleum, and there are two structures for cremation urns.

Records show as of January 2021, there are approximately 4,780 graves