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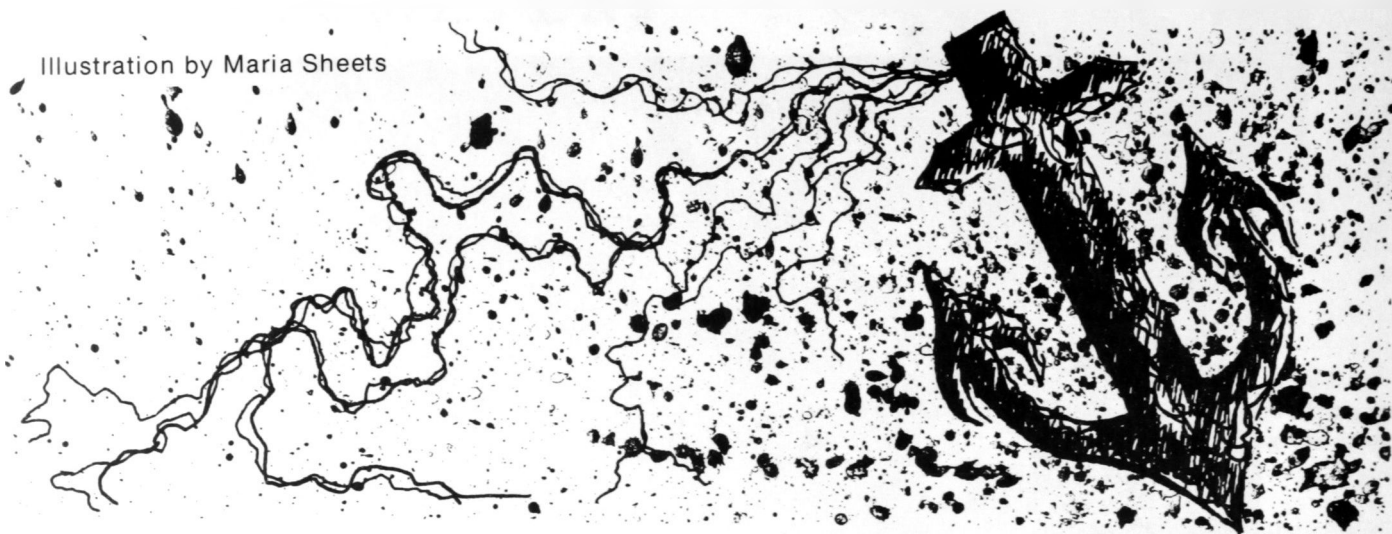
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VOICES OF IDENTITY

By Janet Fountain

Illustration by Maria Sheets



It was located about ten miles southwest of Canton in Dewey County. For nearly fifteen years around the turn of the century, it thrived. The community known as Fountain supported two grocery stores, a livery stable, a blacksmith shop, a school, an Odd Fellows Lodge, and a Woodman Lodge. As people settled in Western Oklahoma, this traffic-dependent town waned. Although the community has long since ceased to be, its cemetery continues, in a sense, to thrive. Cemeteries tell much about us. Fountain Cemetery, for instance, speaks to anyone who thoughtfully listens.

The small acreage is chain-link fenced and graced by several tall old cedars. Natural grasses and wildflowers decorate the earth. It's a serene place, suitable for meditation. Immediately the visitor detects that messages are important here because wired to two of the main gates are communications systems—quart-size mayonnaise jars containing strips of paper and a pencil. Too, just a few feet inside of the gates stands a mailbox. These two systems mainly offer ways to *deliver* messages that pertain to the cemetery. But communication is reciprocal; we expect also to *receive* a message. The cemetery can convey effectively. We must learn how to hear.

In the cemetery, we hear with our eyes. Our lives are mirrored there. We

can see our ancestors' values. Many of them greatly influence our lives today. Fountain Cemetery, or simply *Fountain*, as the local people refer to it, announces high regard for family and community. Past generations lie in definite, reserved, family territories; yet, they also have "close neighbors." As each actor in our life's experience affects us, similarly, each memorial contributes to Fountain's personality. Our striving for order is reflected in the careful placing of graves, pathways between, mowed grass, and groomed trees.

Fountain's most salient reflection of our lives is seen in the attention given to roles and to names. In these, identity is determined. Relationship roles, rather than professional roles, are announced by the monuments—daughter, son, mother, husband, wife, "friend to all." Fountain seems to tell us that these roles are meaningful to those whose lives we touch. Too, we humans have an ancient history of name importance. In life, we want to "live up to" our names and "make a name for ourselves." In many old languages, the word for *soul* and the word for *name* are virtually the same. Names had magical, holy, and miraculous powers. Outside its function of providing a place to dispose of bodily remains, Fountain's main purpose appears to be to provide a lasting declaration: "The one named here lived. We shall remember."

We can also hear the cemetery speak through symbols. They quietly announce beliefs and serve to connect the living with immortality. Although none in the Fountain Cemetery are particularly large, the older monuments are the most varied in shape and ornamentation. Both of these aspects are symbolic. Several are shaped like miniature cathedrals and steeples. Some are pulpit-shaped with an open book on top. Many of the children's monuments have sculptures of lambs resting on them. All of these are traditional religious symbols. Pictures etched in stone reflect the Christian heritage of people living in the area. Carvings of wheat and grape vines symbolize communion. Crosses are long-recognized symbols of Christian identity. Doves represent the Holy Spirit. Open books and scrolls depict reliance on and hope in scripture. Also seen are praying hands, hearts, and various kinds of flowers. A less-used yet powerful symbol, an anchor, is displaced on a cathedral-shaped stone that announces—"Hope."

While symbols quietly speak, epitaphs and last words explicitly communicate. THE OXFORD BOOK OF DEATH has collected many writings which portray our beliefs, hopes, and humor about death. Many of the epitaphs listed there came from churchyards in England. An example on page 322 is John Gay's epitaph (1685-1732):

Life is a jest; and all things show it.
I thought so once; but now I know it.
And on an unidentified woman's grave
(321):

Her body dissected by fiendish men,
Her bones anatomized,
Her soul we trust has risen to God,
A place where few physicians rise.
The inscriptions found at Fountain are also "poetic," though none make attempts at humor. The messages come in four forms. First are messages by visitors: "On that bright, immortal shore, we shall meet to part no more"—"Gone but not forgotten"—"Honored, beloved, and wept, here Mother lies." The second type of messages is sent to the deceased: "Sleep, dear Mother, in quiet rest. God called you home. He knoweth best." A rather guilt-inducing inscription directs: "Rest in sleep while friends, in sorrow, for thee weep." Third are messages *from* the deceased. One affirms, "The Lord's my shepherd—at rest til we meet." Too, there is this very explicit, perpetual goodbye: "Farewell, my wife and children. From you, a father, Christ doth call." Finally, there's a prayerful message of submission to one's Lord—"Thy will be done."

As we consider these messages, we notice a general, consensual belief

and hope in life after death. The hope seems to be one which includes resumption of relationships and roles as they were experienced before death's separation. One inscription reads. "We will never say goodbye in Heaven." We also notice our ancestors' death-denying tendency. Euphemisms tell us that the one named here is—"not lost, but gone before"—"asleep in Jesus"—"at rest." These tendencies have deep, cultural roots and continue today.

The messages today's cemeteries give are examined by John Stephenson in his book *DEATH, GRIEF, AND MOURNING*. A trend of recently constructed cemeteries requires that the monuments be flat stones set close to the earth, allowing for machine care of the grounds. The stones are smaller than traditional ones and generally devoid of sentimental words and images. The values he sees reflected here are death-denial, a cost-benefit mind-set, and de-emphasis of emotions" (218, 219).

Western Oklahoma's cemeteries speak more traditionally. An English writer, Edmond Burke (1729-1797), succinctly expressed the attitudes of most living in this area: "I would rather sleep in the southern corner of a little country churchyard than in the

tomb of the Capulets. I should like, however, that my dust should mingle with kindred dust (Enright, 130)." As Mrs. Erma Fountain Snyder, a niece of the Fountain community's founder, stated, "Bout everybody I ever knew is buried there." That's much kindred dust!

Fountain, the community, led a short life, as—so it seems—do we. Yet the cemetery, representative of its death, has been enlarged at least twice and continues to live. In death, the cemetery speaks to us. Similar is our hope; our symbols shout it—that through our inevitable death, we too will grow and continue to live.

Sources for this article were:

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