Good Grief: The Full Story

Gravemarkers tell tantalizingly incomplete stories. Ideal gravemarkers, at their best, have only eleven semantics bits – eleven pieces of information that the family of the deceased wishes to tell whomever bothers to read their story.

This information includes (1) the name of the deceased, (2) the date on which the person was born, (3) the geographic location at which the person was born, (4) the date on which the person died, (5) the geographic location at which the person died, (6) kinship (family relationship to the writer – or writers - of the gravemarker), (7) a stylized epitaph, (8) a creative epitaph, (9) lodge and/or religious affiliation, (10) occupation, (11) and means of death.

Envision this:

L. MARIE ROBERTS

BORN FEBRUARY 13, 1897

FREMONT, NEBRASKA

DIED JUNE 3, 1972

DES MOINES, IOWA

BELOVED MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, AND GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

MAY SHE REST IN PEACE

SHE MADE THE BEST CHERRY COBBLER AND INDONESIAN CURRY IMAGINABLE

A MEMBER OF THE EASTERN STAR

A LATIN SCHOLAR, SHE TAUGHT AT MIDLAND COLLEGE, 1940 - 1943

DIED OF NATURAL CAUSES

I created this epitaph for illustration purposes. The woman is my maternal grandmother. Her actual gravemarker includes only her name, birth date, and death date.   But what a story we have if all the semantic markers are included. We can really envision the woman.

Now here is a secret. I have never seen such a complete gravemarker - one that includes all eleven semantic bits. I HAVE seen all of these semantic bits. Many times. But never on a single gravemarker. I have no explanation as to why all eleven are not used. I used to tell my students that it would be fascinating to find such a gravemarker. Nonetheless, I have yet to find - or been apprised of -a semantically complete gravemarker.

But let us be a bit more precise about these semantic bits.

Name. This information usually includes both a first and last name, but sometimes only the last; and sometimes it includes a nickname, like "Ree" for "Marie." (Adult friends referred to my grandmother as "Ree.")

Birth date. Usually just an abbreviated form (03.13.1891), but often complete as given above.

Birth place. Not very common after World War I; quite common during the last third of the 19th century, especially among immigrants.

Death Date. The second most common entry on gravemarkers; second only to the deceased person's name.

Death Place. Usually, but not always, found in conjunction with a birth place.

Kinship. This information takes two forms: a marriage <u>date</u>, especially on a shared gravemarker, and actual terms such as "wife," " husband," " mother," etc.

Stylized Epitaph. Usually, but not always, religious in nature: RIP (or Rest in Peace), Together with our Lord, etc.

Creative Epitaph. My favorite is found on a gravemarker here in San Antonio: twice-married Llewellyn Smith " Sleeps, but rests not; Loved, but was loved not; Tried to please, but pleased not; Died, as she lived, alone."

Lodge and/or Religious Affiliation. This information more often than not is conveyed through symbols: a cross, the Star of David, a Masonic symbol, etc. And, of course, if the gravemarker is in a religious or Lodge cemetery, the affiliation is implied, if not expressed outright

Occupation. This information can either take the form of a title - before the Name (Rev., Dr.) or after (PhD, M.D) – or it can be written out: Pastor, Doctor, etc. And, of course, if the gravemarker is in a military cemetery, the occupation is implied.

Cause of Death: If given, the cause is usually a violent or unexpected death.

In later columns I will develop an argument that five of these semantics bits- name, death date, birth date, kinship, and creative epitaphs constitute a linguistic universal. Only these five consistently occur in all languages inscribed on gravemarkers.

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