

## Good Grief: Languages

Common sense, as well as documented research, confirms that cemeteries reflect the cultures of the neighborhoods that create them. As a result, affluent neighborhoods have extravagant gravemarkers, mausoleums, and columbaria; middle-class neighborhoods have middle-priced gravemarkers, and poor neighborhoods have inexpensive gravemarkers.

Reality, of course, does not adhere to such simplicity. Cemeteries not only reflect the present, they reflect the past. They are, in effect, emerging museums. They not only reflect current neighborhoods, they also reflect past neighborhoods. And neighborhoods change. Thus old cemeteries, especially, might have all types of gravemarkers: extravagant ones (erected when the neighborhood was affluent), middle-priced ones (erected when the neighborhood was middle-class) and inexpensive gravemarkers erected most recently.

The languages on gravemarkers reflect the languages of the families that create them. Therefore, a cemetery might have Polish written on its older gravemarkers; then it might have only English; and now it might have some Arabic appearing on a few markers. In other countries, history has also made changes on linguistics markers, engraved in stone. Japan has a famous “foreign” cemetery in the Tokyo area, with gravemarkers written in many languages – including Chinese, English, and German. France has cemeteries with German gravemarkers – and the World War II Memorial Park for American soldiers, with English. And Iran has gravemarkers inscribed in Arabic, as well as Hebrew.

San Antonio cemeteries have their own linguistic potpourri. English and Spanish, of course, are the dominant languages – with English clearly dominant in the 30-some city cemeteries clustered around East Commerce Street, and English and Spanish equally split in the Catholic cemeteries on the West side of town (San Fernando Cemeteries #1, #2, and #3). Among all of the

other 250-plus cemeteries in Bexar County, English and Spanish languages appear in various ratios; yet they do play a more-or-less equal “tug of war “with each other.

German language gravemarkers are in abundance in the City Cemeteries - especially the Old Saint John’s Lutheran - and in the numerous (former) church cemeteries scattered throughout the northern part of San Antonio – cemeteries such as Lockhill, The Evers Family, Salado , Shertz , Schulmeier, the Helotes Lutheran Cemeteries, Buech, and the various Hermann Sons cemeteries. The German-language cemeteries, of course, can be found in abundance in the Hill Country communities. Most of these German-Language markers stopped appearing after the beginning of World War I.

Jewish cemeteries, such as Rodfei Sholom, Beth El Memorial Park, and Agudas Achim have an abundance of Hebrew language gravemarkers.

The St. Hedwig Cemetery, Saint Michael’s Polish Catholic Cemetery, and the Dignowity Cemetery all have Polish language gravemarkers.

Individual cemeteries have their own mixtures: San Fernando #2 has English, Spanish, German, Italian, French, and Arabic. Mission Park South has English, Spanish, German, Greek, and Chinese.

For more recent linguistic input, various columbaria (structures that hold numerous urns with cremated ashes) throughout Texas - especially in Houston – include English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean language inscriptions.

Historically our culture has changed. In the same way that wind-up telephones were replaced by rotary telephones that were replaced by button telephones that were replaced by cell phones, gravemarkers were replaced by mausoleums that have been complemented by columbaria.

But cemeteries belie that telephone analogy. Cemeteries record those changes, much like museums.

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4 July 2013