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A walk through history

Behind every headstone at Woodland Cemetery is a story worth hearing

Merle Wilberding



Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost is one of my favorite poems. I enjoy the image of a horse-drawn sleigh ride through the quiet snow-covered woods. I think of the poem whenever I visit Woodland Cemetery,

where it is memorialized in one of the beautiful stained-glass windows in Woodland's mausoleum. On a recent December evening, the images of the poem and the window came together on a tour of the snow-covered hills of Woodland.

Woodland Cemetery is a treasure to Dayton. It is a place of quiet beauty, and its monuments, landscaping and championship trees honor the dead and provide the living with a connection to Dayton's history.

Jim Sandegren, the retired Woodland horticulturist, led my tour. While Sandegren devoted his career to hunting for the right landscaping, he also gathered the memories of those who rest in peace there. It's not just that Sandegren knows "where all the bodies are buried," as he notes with a twinkle in his eye. He also knows the stories behind the headstones.

As a Dayton lawyer, I was especially interested in his stories about the lawyers buried in Woodland. So I asked Sandegren to highlight some of the lawyers as we toured. First, I wanted to see my own law firm's 19th century founders: Lewis B. Gunckel (1826-1903) and Hiram Strong (1825-1863).

Gunckel practiced for more than 50 years in Dayton, and served in the Ohio Senate and the U.S. Congress. He is buried on a steep hillside, alongside his father-in-law, Valentine Winters, the founder of Winters National Bank. On the plateau of a nearby hillside lies Hiram Strong, a Civil War hero, who left the practice of law at the age of 36 to enlist and eventually command the 93rd Ohio Regiment until he was mortally wounded at the Battle of Chickamauga. The now-quiet cemetery witnessed 75 horse-drawn carriages accompany Hiram Strong to his final resting place.

Clement L. Vallandigham (1820-1871) commands almost as big a presence in death as he did in life. Vallandigham started the



MOURNERS GATHER at Woodland Cemetery as Orville Wright is buried on Feb. 3, 1948.

succession of firms that has become Bieser, Greer, & Landis. In life, his vocal opposition to the Civil War was memorialized in *The Man Without a Country* by political opponent Edward Hale. In death, he is memorialized on a sloping hillside in Woodland by a grand monument that has his bearded profile chiseled into the top of the marker.

The grave sites for Orville and Wilbur Wright continue to be, perhaps, Woodland's major attraction. I will never forget attending the graveside services for the Wright brothers during the centennial of flight celebration in 2003. The services fell on the 34th anniversary of the first landing on the moon, and Dayton was honored to have Ohio astronauts Neil Armstrong and John Glenn in attendance. The service was made all the more poignant by the sight of the Wright "B" Flyer rising over the hilltops of Woodland on an absolutely clear blue day. In a single moment, the fly-over connected 100 years of powered flight, honoring the past and the future, heroes alive and dead.

We ended the tour in the old historic barn at Woodland. It's a beautiful structure that should serve in its own right as a monument to the classic peg-and-beam method of barn construction. The timbers in the lower level of the barn still bear the marks of the mortise and tenon joints used to separate the horse stalls. I thought of what it must have

been like to experience the pomp and circumstance of grand old funeral processions, with a horse-drawn caisson or a glass-enclosed hearse moving slowly through the trees.

What I especially enjoyed was the hay loft, with its original rail running along the top of the rafters, and its carrier still awaiting another chance to pull hay into the barn. In the corner of the loft I spied a sleigh, a one-horse sleigh, and Frost's poem came alive again.

I asked Sandegren whether Woodland had ever sponsored or permitted horse-drawn sleigh rides. He replied, "Yeah, even as recently as the '50s, the superintendent would be riding through the narrow passageways in a one-horse sleigh." In the winter, visitors to the cemetery could connect to Dayton history by rides over Woodland's snowy hills.

The beauty of Woodland Cemetery's grounds and monuments, and the lives of those honored there, deserve to be remembered and revisited by all of us — by any means and in every season. I can't help but think, though, what a wonderful experience it would be to be able to connect to our history on a hillside by sleigh ride, on a snowy evening.

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