Home and locally made markers in the Great Plains and Midwest

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I immigrated to the United States three years ago and have spent much of this time traveling and photographing gravesites on road trips. I come from Finland and I've never before seen cemeteries that haven't been churchyards as well, so I began to take pictures in 2018, finding obituaries to go with the pictures and generally getting acquainted to American burial practices. They vary a lot.

I put together a summary of the things I noticed about rural gravesites. They were often tucked away from sight and required caution to enter. I did not like places where I could get shot for trespassing. Although most states have a law requiring landowner to allow access to registered cemetery on premises, I didn't feel the need to test the practice.

This piece is only about markers that aren't traditional headstones. Some areas it was likely because they appeared to be far away from commercial routes and some were explained by poverty. Nowadays people can choose the non-traditional marker to display individualism.

Materials

- *Wood, mostly crosses* -rarely preserved over a few decades. Wood was easy to obtain and to work with. It makes a dignified humble marker that's semi-permanent from the perspective of a human lifespan (1, 1b, 1c)



1. A rotting stake in the undergrowth of the forest was left of the only marker in Beartown Cemetery in 1880, MT.



1b. Wood marker for Raymond Boy from 1974, Four Horns Cemetery, MT.
The cross has been reinforced since then to prevent decay.



1c. Older wood crosses combined with a bird house in Rest Haven cemetery, Cloverland, WI

- *Temporary marker becomes permanent w/ modifications. Cast aluminum/ galvanized steel ground marker* with name. Ground markers were provided by funeral homes as temporary markers but often stayed as permanent ones. A common sight is a funeral home marker later embedded in a slab of concrete or on a stone, sometimes with a personal touch of decorations added. (2a, 2b)



2a. Valley Cemetery, Park County, WY



2b. Powder River, Natrona County, WY

- Local sign makers also make grave markers. Old ones are aluminum like signs for businesses or traffic signs. New ones are weather resistant polymer prints. (3a, 3b)



3a. Pressed aluminum marker for Arvid Lyons, a Swedish soldier immigrant who attempted to set up a farm in Namekagon Forest, WI. He died of stomach cancer in 1914 and was buried in The Barrens, the inhospitable marsh he raised a family in. Namekagon, Burnett County, Dry Landing Rd., WI.



3b. Big Island Cemetery, Berlin, WI

- *Homemade mortar, concrete*. Cement and concrete are thousands of years old building materials and it's not hard to make some. (Commercial Portland cement was invented in 1824 but supply was not consistently available for small buyers) Homemade cement was simple ground limestone, clay, and aggregate such as sand or ash (4).



4. Combination of natural rock and homemade mortar. Kenney Cemetery, Crawford County, AR

Homemade mortar could be kiln -cured if durability was a concern. Concrete was used for elaborate individualized markers too, by pouring concrete and casting slabs either on-site or nearby, in desired shape rather than using stonecutter services. This is seen often in remote sparsely populated areas where stonecutter and stones may have been hard to acquire and expensive. (5a, 5b, 5c)



5a. Roberson cemetery. Concrete slabs poured in 1864 and cast to construct a sarcophagus –shaped marker for Rev. Daniel Howry and his family. Georg West hollow, near Middle Fork White River, Whitehouse Rd., AR.

Another reason for using cement was ease of engraving while cement was wet.



5b. Marker for Nickolas Seppanen, Forest Home cemetery, Marquette County, MI.
A typical cement slab with engraving probably after the slab had dried out.



5c. Marker engraved while cement was wet.
Lichen has beautifully taken hold of the bed of the lettering. Morgan Cemetery, Franklin County, AR.

- *Natural rock,* minimally cut, rarely engraved. You would see rocks chosen for their particular shape to bear semblance to a marker, or with minimal cutting to produce an upright rectangle (6)



6. Woods Mountain cemetery, Johnson County, AR.: it's possible that earlier, decayed wooden markers have been replaced seemingly at a same time frame with limestone rocks typical for the area. Area rocks without engravings are also typical for African American slave cemeteries.
Arkansas is abundant with sediment rock that splits easily, with a high calcium carbonate content. You see a lot of grave markers with natural rock there.

- Pipe/other repurposed home goods. I've seen a handful of markers made of either metal or PVC pipe. It seems to be popular, for obvious reasons. (7)



7. Marker of Peter and Mary Larson, both died in 1958. Carp River Cemetery, St. Ignace Township, MI.

- Miscellaneous media for painting. Rocks, cinderblocks, tiles. (8a, 8b)



8a. Seiber cemetery, Campbell County, TN.



8b. Carp Lake cemetery, Ontonagon County, MI.

- *Embossed/engraved metal plates.* Often attached to a natural rock. Embossing can be made by stick-welding metal alloy to create lettering, or it can be engraved with chisel or more modern laser cutters. (9)



9. Highland cemetery, Fall River County, SD.

Modern homemade markers are personalized, intimate and cost effective. Homemade markers have a story to tell and people to tell it. (10)



10. Ziegler-Lone Star Cemetery, Bouse Junction, OK.

A common sight is a hybrid between commercial and homemade: family cemeteries often combine a commercial headstone and personalize it with mementos after installation. (11)



11. A revolver, a diecast model car and pebbles to signify visits paid. Headstone a typical polished black "suitcase" model from a commercial stonemaker. Morgan Cemetery, Franklin County, AR.

- Lastly, cowboy graves, a surviving style of American gravesite individualism. Preferred by people who have strong ties to the land they were buried in, nearby ranches, retirees returning to a lifestyle, naturalists. Often a colorful obituary is found in the archives of the local newspapers.

Gravesites have the typical paraphernalia associated with cowboy life, such as the worn saddle, boots and hat belonging to the deceased. (12)



12. Mountain View Cemetery, Carbon County, Wyoming.

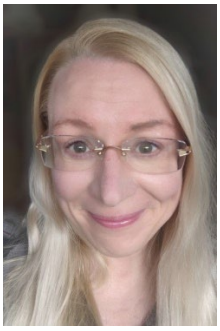
If the cowboy grave has an engraved headstone (often there's no stone but a simple aluminum plate or a wooden cross in addition to the elaborate furnishings), the epitaph is often highly personalized.

An example:

“Two things I love most / good horses and beautiful women / and when I die I hope they tan this old hide of mine / and make it into a ladies riding saddle / so I can rest in peace between the two things I love most.” (Logan cemetery, Logan, Utah)
Not surprisingly, Wyoming and Oklahoma had the highest density of the cowboy graves I’ve seen.

Fanny Behrens, Kaukauna, Wisconsin

Author image:



Reincarnation By Wallace McCrae, a cowboy poet

What is reincarnation, a cowboy asked his friend.
Why its something that happens when your life has reached its end.
They comb your hair and wash your neck and clean your fingernails,
And lay you in a padded box away from life's travails.
Now this box and you goes in a hole that's been dug into the ground.
And this here reincarnation starts once your planted 'neath the mound.'
Now pretty soon the clods melt down along with the box and you
who are inside,
and then your just beginning on your transformation ride.
And then one day some grass will grow upon the rendered mound.
Until one day, on your moldered grave a little flower is found.
Then say by chance a horse should wander by and graze upon that
flower,
That once was you and now has become your vegetative bower.
Now the posy that that horse done ate along with all the rest of his
feed,
becomes fat and bone and muscle, essential to the steed.
But some is consumed that he can't use
and so it finally passes on through,
And just lays there on the ground.
This thing that once was you.
And then I sees this on the ground,
and I wonder and I ponder at this object that I found.
And I begin to think about reincarnation and life and death and such.
And I come away concluding old pal, You ain't changed that much!