

*"I cant Excuse for the  
Headstone"*



*Valley View Memorial Gardens in Manhattan: The Christus Garden and its feature sculpture.*

# The Memorial-Park Cemetery in Kansas

by Albert N. Hamscher



For the historian, cemeteries are a valuable source for investigating a broad range of subjects concerning the collective values and attitudes of generations past. The inscriptions and images on tombstones, monuments, and other objects of funerary art provide valuable insights into views of death, the relationship between the living and the dead, religious beliefs, and gender and class distinctions. Ethnic influences often are evident, as is the desire of planners and local authorities to offer citizens opportunities for cultural enrichment and to instill civic pride and patriotism. The physical design of a cemetery can reveal as much about prevailing business practices as it does about the evolution of the landscaper's craft. The interested observer can study one or more of these subjects either by comparing one cemetery with another or by identifying change over time in a single location. Kansans and other residents of the Plains states have a rich heritage to explore. In Kansas alone there are several thousand cemeteries and burial sites. These fall along a broad spectrum ranging from the isolated graves, domestic homestead graveyards, and early potters' fields of the pioneer era, through the rural cemeteries of the mid-nineteenth century and the lawn cemeteries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the most recent of

---

Albert N. Hamscher is a professor of history at Kansas State University and the author of two books and scholarly articles that examine judicial administration and politics in seventeenth-century France. He teaches a course on "Death and Dying in History" and regularly speaks on the subject of cemeteries in towns across Kansas under the auspices of the Kansas Humanities Council.

The author thanks his colleagues at Kansas State and Cathy Ambler for their perceptive comments on an earlier draft of this article. He also thanks William Wright for the membership list of the Kansas Funeral Directors Association, which includes some cemeteries. Personal contact with knowledgeable people on the local level was critical to this research, and scores of people helped in this quest; without their aid, this article could not have been written. Especially helpful were conversations with William Wright, Hutchinson; Robert Christians, Hays; Michael Scriven and Diana Frobenius, Salina; Charles Chapp, Kansas City; Chris Lovett, Emporia; William Cozine, Wichita; Eric Lundeen and Lysle Openlander, Manhattan; David Nygaard, Newton; and Robert Brukeman, Dawn Chase, Jeanne Mithen, Mack Smith, and Jan Sachs, Topeka.

all, the memorial-park cemeteries that first appeared in Kansas in the mid-1920s and then proliferated during the 1950s.

An extensive scholarly literature exists on cemeteries in the United States and in western Europe, much of it written in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> The work of the French historian Philippe Ariès certainly played a crucial role in stimulating a renewed interest in all aspects of the history of death and dying, including the cultural significance of cemeteries. With very few exceptions, however, Kansas literally remains *terra incognita* with respect to the serious study of its cemeteries. One aim of this article is to call attention to the possibilities that Kansas cemeteries present for fruitful research.<sup>2</sup> Another is to help fill a significant gap

1. A complete listing of works would expand a note into a small volume. Important studies with useful bibliographies are Richard E. Meyer, ed., *Ethnicity and the American Cemetery* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993); Mayer, ed., *Cemeteries and Grave-markers: Voices of American Culture* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Anthologies in which cemeteries figure prominently are Charles O. Jackson, ed., *Passing: The Vision of Death in America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977); David E. Stannard, ed., *Death in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975). Two works that essentially are picture books but that offer perceptive insights are John Gary Brown, *Soul in the Stone: Cemetery Art from America's Heartland* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Silent Cities: The Evolution of the American Cemetery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989). Michel Ragon, *The Space of Death: A Study of Funerary Architecture, Decoration, and Urbanism*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), widely ranges over place and time but has interesting reflections on the American scene. Since 1980 the Association for Gravestone Studies has published a journal, *Markers*. An article on memorial-park cemeteries has yet to appear in this journal.

2. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981); *Images of Man and Death*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies," in *Death in America*, ed. Stannard, 134–58. For Kansas (Oak Hill Cemetery, Lawrence; Sunset Cemetery, Manhattan; and Highland Cemetery, Junction City), see Cathy Ambler, "A Place Not Entirely of Sadness and Gloom: Oak Hill Cemetery and the Rural Cemetery Movement," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 15 (Winter 1992–1993): 240–53; Jerry Moore, Cynthia Blaker, and Grant Smith, "Cherished are the Dead: Changing Social Dimensions in a Kansas Cemetery," *Plains Anthropologist* 36 (February 1991): 67–78; Nancy J. Volkman, "Landscape Architecture on the Prairie: The Work of H. W. S. Cleveland," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 10 (Summer 1987): 89–110. Brown's *Soul in the Stone* has images from Kansas as does the less scholarly Loren N. Horton, "Victorian Gravestone Symbolism on the Great Plains," *Journal of the West* 33 (January 1994): 67–73. None of the works on Kansas discusses the memorial-park cemetery. One looks forward to the day when articles on death in general and cemeteries in particular find a place in anthologies of scholarly articles such as Rita Napier, ed., *Rediscovering the Past; Reimagining the Future: Kansas and the West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas) (forthcoming).

in the existing historical literature. Even outside Kansas, cemeteries established prior to the twentieth century have received the most attention. This development is understandable because the numerous inscriptions, sculptures, monuments, and symbols found in older cemeteries are an irresistible invitation to interpretation. But what are we to make of the most modern cemeteries, those of the memorial-park variety? Largely devoid of extensive landscaping and elaborate statuary, and featuring markers flush to the ground instead of standing tombstones, memorial-park cemeteries at first glance seem to be unworthy of the historian's scrutiny. Yet the very absence in the memorial park of what one of its early enthusiasts, Herbert Blaney, called the traditional cemetery's "shapeless, ill-kept roads and lawns or grassless mounds, [the] meaningless jumble of freakish, decaying headstones and dreary, moaning cedars, pines, and spruces" suggests that the memorial-park cemetery offers tangible evidence of important changes in American attitudes toward death and the role played by the dead in the world of the living.<sup>3</sup>

If Blaney's characterization of the traditional cemetery reveals a pronounced bias, there can be no question that the contrast between the old and the new is striking to even the most casual observer. Traditional cemeteries, especially those inspired by the rural cemetery movement of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, both encouraged and promoted a close association between the living and the dead. Walk paths cutting through small sections of plots presume that there will be visitors. Standing headstones or monuments erected on family plots require weeding and other maintenance, chores that are assumed to be the responsibility of family and friends. The inscriptions and symbols on stones and statuary are there to be viewed and read: they create a silent but ongoing dialogue between the living and

3. "The Modern Park Cemetery," in *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, ed. Jackson, 219 (written in 1917). The only notable scholarly study is Sloane, *Last Great Necessity*, ch. 7–9, a work that was very useful for writing this article even if it offers nothing specific about the Kansas scene. As Sloane notes, "There are no scholarly studies of the memorial park" (p. 265). See also the works of Ariès; brief comments in Jackson, *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, 146–47, 236; J. B. Jackson, "From Monument to Place," *Landscape* 17 (Winter 1967–1968): 22–26. My aim in this article is to bring together some insights dispersed in the literature, to offer my own observations, and to provide specific information about Kansas.

the deceased. The presence of benches allows the visitor to pause not only to recall memories of the departed but also to reflect upon larger questions of life and death. A landscape rich in trees and shrubbery creates an oasis of retreat from the bustle of everyday life. A tranquil, natural setting, even if shaped by the human hand, is intended to disclose divine revelation. The timeless quality of nature provides a frame of reference within which the brevity of a human life can be contemplated and understood.

In brief, the traditional cemetery familiar to most Kansans rests on a foundation of what we will call the six R's: *regret* over the death of a loved one; *remembrance* of earthly ties; *respect* for the dead body lying in a restful place; the hope for *reunion* in the afterlife; *religion* in the sense of a "natural theology" revealed in a landscape conducive to moral uplift; and a high degree of *romanticism* expressed in such hopeful symbols as fingers pointing heavenward, two hands shaking with the word "farewell," and weeping willows that represent resurrection as well as grief. The entire enterprise reflects Ariès's characterization of the nineteenth century as a period of "Thy Death," when strengthened bonds of affection within the family made the death of a loved one more difficult to accept. Notable examples of Kansas cemeteries fashioned along these lines are Oak Hill in Lawrence, Highland in Junction City, and Sunset in Manhattan.<sup>4</sup>

The memorial park is immediately recognizable by the absence of most of the attributes described above.<sup>5</sup> Its guiding principle is the efficient and profitable use of the land. Walk paths have disappeared, having been replaced by gently curving roads suitable for the automobile. Instead of numerous small sections of plots,

4. On the rural cemetery movement, in addition to Ambler, "A Place Not Entirely of Sadness and Gloom," and Volkman, "Landscape Architecture on the Prairie," see Stanley French, "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the 'Rural Cemetery' Movement," in *Death in America*, ed. Stannard, 69–91; Ann Douglas, "Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830–1880," in *ibid.*, 49–68; Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, ch. 3–4; Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), which also has a useful bibliography.

5. The best description of the memorial-park design is Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, ch. 7–9, but what follows is based also on my own observations in many Kansas cemeteries. It remains unclear how the lawn cemetery, a transitional design between the rural cemetery on the

graves are grouped in several large sections often called "gardens": at Johnson County Memorial Gardens in Overland Park, the "Garden of the Good Shepherd," "Masonic Garden," "Garden of the Apostles," "Garden of the Old Rugged Cross," "Baby Land," and so on; at Valley View in Manhattan, "Christus," "Devotion," and the ubiquitous "Baby Land." Statuary usually is limited to a single signature piece in each garden called a "feature"—at Roselawn in Salina, for example, a bird bath in the "Rest" section, an etched Jesus on stone in "Devotion," a flagpole in "Veterans." In some cemeteries one can detect care, if not always refined artistic taste, in the selection and construction of these pieces. In others, however, the work is shabby by even the most generous aesthetic standards: a giant Jesus lacking in elaborate detail; a poorly painted scene of the Last Supper; or the Lord's Prayer engraved in rough cement.

To facilitate maintenance and mowing, markers of granite or bronze are flush to the ground; they commonly record only the most obvious vital statistics (name with birth and death dates). "There remains scant excuse for the headstone," in the words of Blaney, because the location of an individual can be found easily in the superintendent's register.<sup>6</sup> Detachable urns are set in the marker and when upright often contain artificial (thus reusable) flowers. Except for the open lawns, vegetation generally is sparse. A few trees huddle together at the roadside or along the sides and rear of the cemetery. Shrubby is confined mostly to the signature piece in each garden. Nature, in and of itself, is no longer a source of instruction and consolation. Benches, if any exist, usually are located away from the grave sites. Some cemeteries, such as Roselawn in Salina and Wichita Park in Wichita, have a mausoleum for above-ground burial in individual crypts. But these structures do not obstruct the view of the lawns.

one hand and the memorial park on the other, fared in Kansas. At this point, I suspect that there are few examples. Interested readers should consult Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, ch. 5, and James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), ch. 4.

6. Jackson, *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, 221. The trade journal *Park and Cemetery* began advertising power lawn mowers in the early 1920s, just in time for the introduction of the memorial park in Kansas.

## *West Lawn Memorial Gardens, Inc.*



**Developing One of Topeka's  
Finest Memorial Gardens**

**BABY LAND**

**Our Newest Feature Garden**

**PLOTS IN BABY LAND  
ARE FREE**

**For Information Please Call  
CE 5-6027—401 New England Bldg.**

In the kiss of the Sun there is pardon, In the Song of the bird  
there is mirth; One's nearer God's heart in a Garden, Than any-  
where else on earth.  
—Dorothy Francis

*Selling the memorial park in Topeka. These two advertisements appeared in Topeka newspapers in July 1962 to promote two new sections of West Lawn Memorial Gardens.*

Perhaps the most notable feature of the memorial park for the historian is the disengagement of the living from the world of the dead. Indeed, the dead themselves are the least intrusive element in the landscape. No walk paths beckon the visitor, no elaborate inscriptions and symbols require careful reading and interpretation. The dialog between the worlds of life and death is muted. If vegetation is sparse and the artwork at some sites cheap and unappealing, will many visitors remain long enough to take notice or await inspiration? The fact that in common parlance the memorial park is referred to as a “perpetual care” cemetery speaks volumes: as in many areas of American life, a specialist—in this case the cemetery operator—assumes a responsibility once fulfilled by the family. A memorial park is what it says it is—a park. Gazing over the lawns with a largely unobstructed view, especially if many of the urns are not upright, one may be forgiven the urge to swing a golf club or kick a soccer ball rather than reach for a bouquet of flowers. Writing in 1912, landscape architect Howard Evarts Weed urged towns with abandoned cemeteries to convert them into “a park or a children’s playground” so that “the resting place of the dead will become the enjoyable breathing or recreation place of the living.”<sup>7</sup> The dead serving the living—not a novel

7. Howard Evarts Weed, *Modern Park Cemeteries* (Chicago: R. J. Haight, 1912), 74.

idea. But the visible signs of the dead, even in the cemetery, should be discreet and without ostentatious display.

The memorial parks in Kansas share these basic characteristics even if the cemeteries differ in size, number of interments, and variety and quality of decorations. The uniformity of design should come as no surprise. The memorial park is a national phenomenon. If the rural cemetery movement took its inspiration from Mount Auburn near Boston, the model for the memorial park was Forest Lawn in Glendale, California, which the energetic entrepreneur Hubert Eaton refashioned between 1913 and 1917. Imitations quickly appeared. By 1935 more than six hundred memorial parks had been established, mostly in the West, Midwest, and South. Many hundreds more opened in subsequent years.

Identifying the names and locations of memorial-park cemeteries in Kansas is a difficult task. Because the state has no central cemetery registry, the historian must rely on the membership lists of professional associations as well as oral and written communication with numerous cemetery operators, funeral directors, county registers of deeds, and members of local historical and genealogical societies. The list of thirty-five cemeteries in Table 1 is subject to refinement, but it should be reasonably accurate and comprehensive. It shows two major periods of development. The first was

## ATTENTION TOPEKA'S COLORED CITIZENS!



WEST LAWN MEMORIAL GARDENS

are most proud to announce the  
Opening of our NEW

### BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Section

This—We feel will be the Finest Garden of its kind in the city of Topeka. Located 4 miles West of the city limits on Highway 40—at the Auburn Road Turn-Off. You are invited to see this CHOICE property and Beautiful Cemetery.

For information Please Call

CE 5-6027 — 401 New England Bldg.

*"In the kiss of the Sun there is pardon, In the Song of the bird there is mirth, One's nearer God's heart in a Garden. Than any-where else on earth.*

—Dorothy Francis

1925–1931, when seven cemeteries were established in the wake of Eaton's success at Forest Lawn. The second and more important period of proliferation encompassed the years immediately following World War II and the decade of the 1950s. The years 1945–1959 witnessed the establishment of twenty-one memorial-park cemeteries (60 percent of the total), eighteen of them in the 1950s (51 percent); the years 1954–1956 alone account for 34 percent of the total. Only six memorial parks opened between 1960 and 1998 (Table 1).

Because at the time of their establishment memorial parks were for-profit, private entrepreneurial enterprises, choosing a location favorable for lot sales and other services was essential. A full statistical report on the demographic characteristics of the cities and towns selected for a memorial park would require a separate article. However, several significant patterns can be described briefly. If we concentrate on the period of greatest development, 1945–1959, the size of a locality's population and its rate of growth over time clearly were important factors for establishing a new cemetery.<sup>8</sup> Census records from 1950—

8. The findings reported in this and the following two paragraphs are based on calculations from U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population: *Characteristics of the Population, 1950*, vol. 2, pt. 16, Kansas (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), tables 1, 4–7, 10, 11, 16, 20, 32–34, 37–39, 41, 42, and 45, supplemented by *ibid.*, *Characteristics of the Population, 1940*, vol. 2, pt. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), table 30. Because Overland Park was not a census

unit until 1970, throughout I have used figures for Johnson County in my calculations. Note that median income for "families" is not available for Hays, Liberal, Olathe, and McPherson, so I relied on county figures for "families" (Ellis, Seward, Johnson, and McPherson) as well as state and town figures for "families and unrelated individuals" (see tables 32, 39, and 45 in the 1950 census).

the eve of the memorial park's most dramatic expansion—show that Kansas had twenty-five urban centers with a population exceeding ten thousand inhabitants. During 1945–1959 twenty-one memorial parks opened in eighteen cities and towns. Fourteen of these eighteen localities were among the state's twenty-five largest urban centers. Moreover, comparison of census data from 1940 and 1950 reveals that all but three of these eighteen communities—Chanute, Coffeyville, and Ottawa—had experienced population growth during the 1940s that surpassed the average for the state as a whole (5.8 percent). If the rate of growth was modest in some places—6.7 percent in Kansas City and 7.1 percent at Leavenworth—in many other localities the rate of growth was dramatic: 32.7 percent at Dodge City and 46.4 percent at Wichita; 63.4 percent at Manhattan; and an impressive 73.5 percent at Garden City. Memorial parks also opened in four towns with fewer than ten thousand inhabitants, which at first glance might seem to make them unlikely candidates for development. During the 1940s, however, each of these towns, like most of their larger counterparts, also had experienced significant population growth: 20.8 percent at McPherson; 35.1 percent at Hays; 40.6 percent at Olathe; and 62.8 percent at Liberal. The prospects for future growth must have appeared bright even in these small towns.<sup>9</sup>

9. The importance of a city's population can be seen in other ways. In 1950 twenty-five cities in Kansas had a population exceeding ten thousand inhabitants. During the entire period 1924–1998 memorial park cemeteries opened in all but five of these towns—Fort Scott, Independence, Junction City, Parsons, and Winfield. To my knowledge no memorial parks are in the sparsely populated northwest region of the state.

Of course, a new cemetery needs customers, an essential fact that makes still other demographic characteristics worthy of attention. During the 1940s the number of people fifty years of age and older—a reasonable benchmark for identifying the segment of the population that presumably would require the services of a cemetery—had increased in Kansas by 13.1 percent. Without exception, the rate of growth in the eighteen cities and towns that witnessed the establishment of a memorial park between 1945 and 1959 surpassed the state average, in most localities by a wide margin. Examples include El Dorado (32.8 percent), Wichita (46.8 percent), Olathe (47.2 percent), Great Bend (52.1 percent), and, at the top of the list, Hays (72.3 percent). Only at Chanute, Kansas City, Leavenworth, and Ottawa was the growth of the middle-aged and elderly population less than 20 percent in the 1940s. Moreover, a growing customer base needs the financial resources to purchase plots and services. In 1950 median family income in Kansas was \$2,833. In fifteen of the eighteen urban centers under consideration, median family income exceeded this level, often by more than 10 percent (at Dodge City, El Dorado, Garden City, and Kansas City, for example), and in some localities by more than 20 percent (Great Bend, Olathe, Overland Park, Topeka, and Wichita). Only three communities fell below the state median—Chanute, Ottawa, and Pittsburg—but only at Ottawa (\$2,508) was the gap statistically significant.

The history of cremation in the United States suggests that initial acceptance of novelty in the handling of the dead can be related to the level of formal education.<sup>10</sup> Absent strong religious or philosophical objections to a new funerary practice, people who have been exposed to a world outside the confines of their daily experience are more willing to question conventional wisdom and depart from traditional customs. Of course, the private sentiments and convictions of an individual are not easily reduced to statistical correlations, so conclusions on this matter must be tentative. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in 1950 the median number of school years com-

pleted by adults over age twenty-five in Kansas was 10.2. All but three of the urban centers in which a memorial park opened between 1945 and 1959 (Chanute, Kansas City, and Leavenworth) surpassed this level: 11.5 in Dodge City, 11.9 in Topeka, and more than 12 years in Overland Park, McPherson, Manhattan, and Wichita. Perhaps more important was the experience of higher education. In 1950, 15.3 percent of the adult population in Kansas had completed one or more years of college. Viewed from this vantage point, only Kansas City (10.3 percent) and Leavenworth (13.4 percent) fell below the state average. Even a cursory glance at Table 1 reveals that memorial parks opened in many cities and towns with institutions of higher education, and this during the entire period 1924–1998: Lawrence, Manhattan, Pittsburg, Emporia, Hays, and Ottawa, to name a few.

Finally, it has been suggested that memorial parks benefited from the great geographical mobility that occurred in the United States during the post-war years. As people moved from one state to another, they became a potential market for the memorial park in their new community because they were unlikely to be returned to their state of original residence for burial.<sup>11</sup> The 1960 census reported the number of people over age five in a given state who had resided outside the state five years earlier. In 1960, 12.5 percent of Kansas residents fell into this category, a proportion slightly higher than the national average. During 1955–1960, the period covered by the census on this subject, memorial-park cemeteries opened in twelve cities and towns in Kansas. Five of them—Garden City, Leavenworth, Manhattan, Olathe, and Wichita—exceeded the state average, ranging from a low of 12.9 percent in Wichita to a high of 24.4 percent in Leavenworth. But the influx of people from out of state was less pronounced in the other seven communities, where fewer than 10 percent of the inhabitants in

10. Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 136–37.

11. I owe this insight to William Wright and believed it worth investigating with respect to Kansas. Certainly geographical mobility helps explain the success of Forest Lawn; see Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, 163–64; Barbara Rubin, Robert Carlton, and Arnold Rubin, *L.A. in Installments: Forest Lawn* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Westside Publications, 1979), 9–10.

**TABLE 1**  
**MEMORIAL-PARK CEMETERIES IN KANSAS\***

<u>PLAT/DEED</u> <u>DATE</u>	<u>CEMETERY</u>	<u>COUNTY</u>	<u>CITY</u>
1924	Memorial Park Cemetery	Wyandotte	Kansas City
1925	Lawrence Memorial Park	Douglas	Lawrence
	Memorial Park Cemetery of Topeka	Shawnee	Topeka
1926	Wichita Park Cemetery	Sedgwick	Wichita
1927	Memorial Park Cemetery	Reno	Hutchinson
	Roselawn Memorial Park	Saline	Salina
1928	Memorial Lawn Cemetery	Lyon	Emporia
1931	Cowley County Memorial Lawn Cemetery	Cowley	Arkansas City
1945	Restlawn Memorial Park	Montgomery	Coffeyville
	White Chapel Memorial Gardens	Sedgwick	Wichita
1948	Chapel Hill Memorial Gardens	Wyandotte	Kansas City
1950	Johnson County Memorial Gardens	Johnson	Overland Park
1953	Pittsburg Garden of Memories	Crawford	Pittsburg
	West Lawn Memorial Gardens	Shawnee	Topeka
1954	Golden Belt Memorial Park	Barton	Great Bend
	Hillcrest Memorial Park	Barton	Great Bend
	Restlawn Cemetery	Seward	Liberal
1955	Crestwood Memorial Park	McPherson	McPherson
	Sunset Memory Gardens	Leavenworth	Leavenworth
	Valley View Memorial Gardens	Pottawatomie	Manhattan
	Walnut Valley Memorial Park	Butler	El Dorado
1956	Greencrest Memorial Gardens (Maple Grove)	Ford	Dodge City
	Greenlawn Memorial Park	Neosho	Chanute
	Hays Memorial Gardens	Ellis	Hays
	Oak Lawn Memorial Gardens of Olathe	Johnson	Olathe
	Roselawn Memorial Gardens	Franklin	Ottawa
1958	Resthaven Memorial Gardens	Sedgwick	Wichita
	Sunset Memorial Gardens	Finney	Garden City
1959	Lakeview Memorial Gardens	Sedgwick	Wichita
1960	Sunset Memorial Gardens	Atchison	Atchison
1962	Restlawn Gardens of Memory	Harvey	Newton
1965	Sunset Gardens	Wyandotte	Kansas City
1968	Resurrection Cemetery	Sedgwick	Wichita
1972	Shawnee Mission Memory Gardens	Johnson	Shawnee
1998	Kensington Gardens	Sedgwick	Wichita

\* I have attempted to give the current names of the cemeteries so readers can easily find them, even if some cemeteries are located in the outskirts of the towns listed. It is important to bear in mind that establishment of a cemetery passes through several stages: land acquisition, initial landscaping, sales of plots, and then first interments. For the sake of consistency, I have reported plat (the plan of development) or deed dates (whichever are available at county offices of registers of deeds). Relying on these dates is advisable because they indicate the initial official intention to establish a cemetery. Note that owing to confusion in the documentation, the date for Resurrection in Wichita is approximate, and the dates for Cowley County in Arkansas City and Sunset Gardens in Kansas City are the year of the first interment. I have not listed the many cemeteries that simply have a section for flat markers; my interest is in cemeteries that explicitly developed the memorial-park concept. I have visited many but not all cemeteries listed in this table. I welcome any corrections and additions. Sources: Kansas Funeral Directors Association, "Membership List" (provided by William Wright); Deborah M. Burek, *Cemeteries of the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: Gale Research, 1994); directory of providers of the International Cemetery and Funeral Association (ICFA), [www.icfa.org](http://www.icfa.org); and most important for locating cemeteries and determining their plat/deed dates, interviews with cemetery operators, funeral directors, county registers of deeds personnel, and authorities on local history.

1960 had resided outside the state in 1955 (and the proportion was fewer than 6 percent at Chanute and Olathe).<sup>12</sup> The seven communities in question also were at the low end of the state's largest urban centers. In brief, if geographical mobility might have enhanced the prospects for a successful memorial park in some places, in most others it probably had a limited impact. Kansas was not southern California with its spectacular rates of immigration; in the Sunflower State the memorial park had to appeal to native as well as new residents. Indeed, for local residents who did not migrate but whose children did so, the memorial park offered a final resting place that did not require upkeep by the family.

To recognize that a community's demographic patterns were an important consideration for establishing a memorial park is not to deny that other factors also played a role. Scholars who wish to investigate in depth one or perhaps a small group of cemeteries surely will explore such issues as the number of competing cemeteries in a locality; a town's prospects for future economic and population growth; the receptivity of local government to opening a new cemetery; availability of land suitable for development; the presence of nursing homes, regional hospitals, and other institutions that could broaden the clientele base; and the business acumen of individual entrepreneurs. What can be stated at this point of investigation is that memorial parks opened in the state's larger towns and in other communities that had experienced substantial population growth in the recent past both in general terms and in the number of middle-aged and elderly inhabitants. With few exceptions, these towns also exceeded state norms in median family income and in the level of formal education. Census data indicate that the same conclusions generally apply to the communities that

12. U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population: *Characteristics of the Population, 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 18, Kansas (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963), tables 72, 82 (for McPherson I used county figures). Information on internal migration in the United States also exists for 1935–1940 but only at the state level and for cities with a population exceeding one hundred thousand; see *ibid.*, *Population: Internal Migration, 1935 to 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943). The 1950 census is less useful because on the issue of internal migration it covers only a twelve-month period in 1949–1950. The 1940 census was the first to measure internal migration during a fixed period of time.

became sites for a memorial-park cemetery during 1924–1931, and in the period extending from the 1960s to the present.<sup>13</sup> The entrepreneurs who opened memorial parks clearly chose communities whose demographic profiles offered the potential of profits.

The new cemetery struck a responsive chord in Kansas. Tens of thousands of Kansans are either buried in memorial parks or have purchased lots for future use.<sup>14</sup> An investigation of the reasons for this positive response must take into account the vigorous marketing that accompanied the opening of a memorial park. After all, few Kansans are strangers to open spaces and flat or gently rolling landscapes! The hallmarks of selling the memorial park to the public—the concept of “pre-need” purchases, establishing perpetual care funds, sales in the home, and advertising services—were not novel business practices in the United States. The “commercialization of death” had emerged long before Hubert Eaton's spectacular success at Forest Lawn. But the entrepreneurs who fol-

13. Limitations of space prevent an elaboration of the findings here. Readers interested in gathering the statistics should consult the following census data, all issued by the U.S. Bureau of Census and published in Washington D.C. by the Government Printing Office: U.S. Census of Population: *General Report and Analysis, 1910*, vol. 1 (1913), tables 53, 54; U.S. Census of Population: *Population, 1920*, vol. 1 (1921), tables 49, 51, 53; *General Report and Analytical Tables*, vol. 2 (1922), tables 13, 16; *Composition and Characteristics of the Population, By State*, vol. 3 (1922), table 8; U.S. Census of Population: *Characteristics of the Population, 1960*, vol. 1, pt. 18, Kansas (1963), tables 1, 5, 6, 8, 16, 20, 32, 33, 36, 47, 73; U.S. Census of Population: *Characteristics of the Population, 1970*, vol. 1, pt. 18, Kansas (1973), tables 1, 7, 21, 35, 40, 44, 45, 51, 103, 107; U.S. Census of Population: *Characteristics of the Population, 1980*, vol. 1, pt. 18, Kansas (1981–1983), tables 5, 19, 26; U.S. Census of Population: *General Population Characteristics, 1990*, CP-1-18, Kansas (1992), tables 1, 17, 61; *Social and Economic Characteristics*, CP-2-18, Kansas (1993), tables 22, 28, 171, 177; *Population and Housing Unit Counts*, CPH-2-18, Kansas (1993), table 1. There are limitations: the 1910 and 1920 data do not allow study of median family income and median years of education; and I calculated age based on forty-five years and older, not fifty. In 1990 I calculated education based on persons over age twenty-five who graduated from high school, then earned a bachelor's or higher degree. Note also some exceptions to the general rule of income, education, and population growth above state norms from 1960 onward: Atchison in all categories; Newton for education; and Kansas City for all categories except median family income. Taking everything into account, however, only Atchison seems to have been a marginal choice for a memorial park.

14. There have been more than eight thousand interments at Roselawn in Salina, more than thirteen thousand at White Chapel in Kansas City; in Wichita, in excess of sixteen thousand at Resthaven and twenty-one thousand at White Chapel. These figures do not include pre-need sales, which no doubt are numerous. Figures for all cemeteries are not available: the historian must exercise discretion when questioning cemetery operators about the details of their businesses.

lowed his lead combined these practices in a particularly effective way.<sup>15</sup> Echoing Blaney's lament about decaying headstones and moaning cedars, a persuasive salesman could portray the traditional cemetery as ill kept and cluttered. An artist's sketch of what the memorial park would look like after development was completed, or better yet a photograph of the first garden and its signature piece, conveyed the image of the memorial park as a clean and orderly place that exhibited dignified decoration.

For a public increasingly eager for convenience, the memorial park offered one-stop shopping for the plot, marker, and vault or liner. Payments for a plot in small monthly or annual installments made expenditure easier to bear. Should a client move far from the place of purchase, a plot and related services were guaranteed by another memorial park that was a member of a large, national association—an early example of "portability." There were other selling points as well. Infants could be buried free of charge or at a discount in Baby Land.<sup>16</sup> The memorial park also tapped an egalitarian impulse: with only flat markers permitted, a pauper need not rest in the shadow of a prince's elaborate headstone or family monument. Although many of the decorations in a memorial park reflect an optimistic, nondenominational Christianity, all potential customers eventually were welcome. If at first memorial-park contracts

15. For an overview, see Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, 128–40, 175–79; see also Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), ch. 4. Despite its cynical and sarcastic tone in the tradition of muckraking, the best introduction to memorial-park salesmanship is Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), ch. 9, revised in 1978 and updated in *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

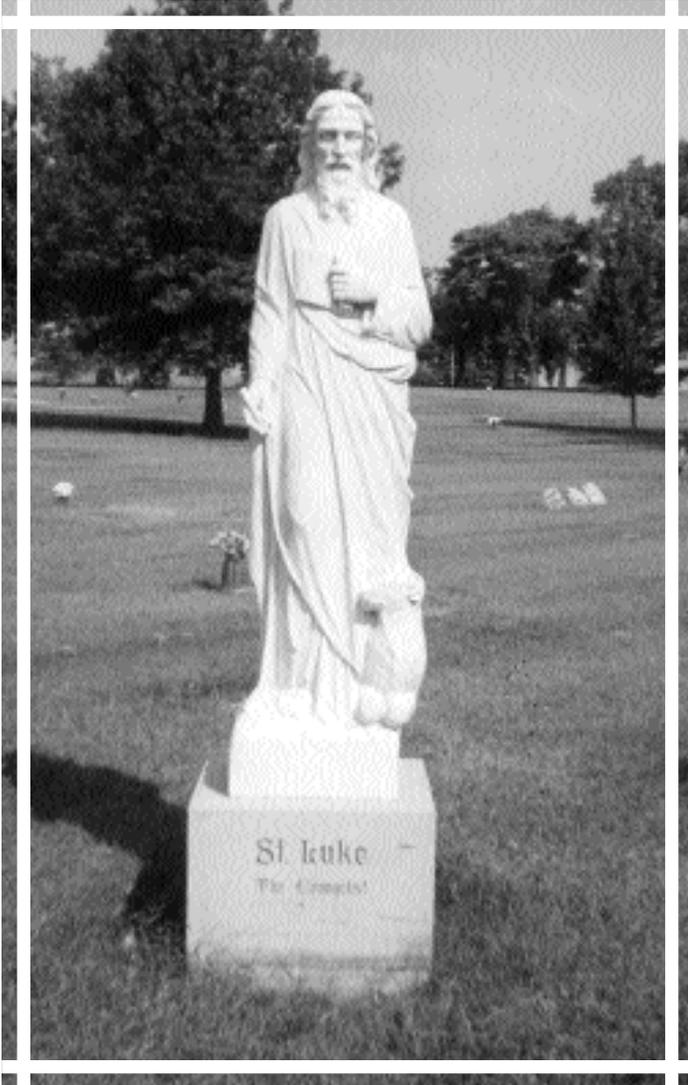
16. Taking convenience one step further, in most states a mortuary can exist on cemetery property. Owing to the Kansas Court of Appeals decision in *Connolly v Frobenius* in January 1978, however, in Kansas any commercial use, including the construction and operation of a mortuary, is not permitted on land deeded for burial purposes. Information provided by a law clerk of the secretary of state; see also the discussion of this case in the *Kansas City Star*, January 15, 1978, and the formal legal citation, 2 K.A.2d 18, 32, 574 P. 2d 971. Nevertheless, nothing in the law prevents a mortuary and a cemetery falling under the same ownership (for example, Roselawn in Salina and Lakeview in Wichita). The International Cemetery and Funeral Association reports that to this day many cemeteries "belong to credit exchange programs which allow for a dollar-for-dollar transfer of services and merchandise between participating cemeteries." See Consumer Resource Guide, [www.icfa.org/cemeteries.htm](http://www.icfa.org/cemeteries.htm). As one of many possible examples of marketing, the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, July 4, 1962, advertised "Plots in Baby Land Are Free" at West Lawn in Topeka.

contained racial exclusion clauses, for example, these disappeared during the 1950s; in 1962 West Lawn in Topeka invited African Americans to its planned Booker T. Washington section.<sup>17</sup> The larger memorial parks developed separate gardens for veterans, Masons, and, should they wish to lie with fellow parishioners, Roman Catholics. Resurrection Cemetery in Wichita currently has a special section for aborted fetuses. In brief, the memorial park catered to egalitarian sentiments while it encouraged people of similar backgrounds or interests to come together a final time.

To reduce the memorial park to an exercise in crass commercialism, however, would be a mistake. Like the founders of rural cemeteries in the nineteenth century, early developers of memorial parks wanted their cemeteries to attract visitors. There, the public would experience cultural enrichment and participate in celebrating patriotism, traditional moral values, and the promise of joyful immortality. Forest Lawn, for example, has a "Court of Freedom" that, over the years, has acquired copies of ancient and Renaissance sculptures as well as authentic pieces of American academic art (sculptures by St. Gaudens and Remington, for example). In the 1970s Forest Lawn ran newspaper advertisements informing local residents that "Michelangelo lives in California" and inviting them to "See La Pieta this weekend. In Glendale. Free." Religious paintings and stained glass windows show nothing of the "solemn and somber Victorian trappings of death."<sup>18</sup> In keeping with the notion that a park is a place where people gather for pleasurable pursuits, by 1929 more than twelve hundred marriages had been celebrated at Forest Lawn. Of course, Kansans rarely wed in cemeteries. But the theme of cultural enrichment did travel well, at least in a more modest form. In 1963, for example, the *Topeka Capital-Journal* reported that

17. *Topeka Capital-Journal*, July 8, 1962, advertisement. I have been unable to discover why this proposed section was never established. On racial exclusion, see Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, 187–88.

18. Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, 164. There is a large literature on Forest Lawn, but the best scholarly treatments are *ibid.*, ch. 7; Rubin, Carlton, and Rubin, L.A. in *Installments: Forest Lawn*. The best-known description is Mitford, *The American Way of Death*, ch. 10. A lengthy and informative discussion of Forest Lawn is in *Park and Cemetery* 39 (September 1929): 204–15, which also includes an informative essay on "advertising the cemetery."



One of the four gospel writers that stands in the Apostles Garden section of Memorial Park in Topeka.

marble statues of the four gospel writers carved especially for Memorial Park were en route from Sicily (they reside in the cemetery today in Apostles Garden). The statues would complement a marble memorial “feature” with the Good Shepherd portrayed on one side and the Last Supper on the other purchased from the same firm a few years earlier. As if to inform the public that this was no small beer, the price of the latter object was reported to have been forty-five hundred dollars (a meaningful sum in the early 1960s).<sup>19</sup> On the eve of Valley View’s opening in Manhattan in 1955, the local newspaper predicted that the new cemetery “will be a definite boost to the

19. *Topeka Capital-Journal*, May 23, 1963.

beauty of Manhattan, with [its] marble memorials, bronze markers, flower beds, and floral lined walkways.” Nor has the park as a place of leisure activity been forgotten: Memorial Park in Topeka to this day welcomes the public to view the ducks in its three ponds and distributes to children pin buttons declaring, “I fed the ducks at Memorial Park Cemetery.” When a new fountain was installed in 1994, “people gathered around [it] like bugs around a light bulb, visiting on the gazebo, roller blading on the streets and enjoying the fountain, ducks and geese.” The following year neighboring West Lawn reminded the public that a “visit to the Gardens is inspiring” and that forthcoming events included “Pet Memorial Day” and a colorful “Avenue of Flags.”<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, things did not always turn out as promised. Instead of four gardens and Baby Land at Valley View in Manhattan, for example, only three were completed, and just one of these—Christus—has a central “feature” (a large statue of Jesus) worthy of the name. A decade after it opened, Valley View’s operators left town without a trace, and a city bank held only a third of the projected perpetual care endowment funds. The “definite boost to the beauty of Manhattan” foreseen in 1955 had become by 1967 “an unmowed, unkept weed patch,” a “nightmare” that caused “slow heartbreak” for lot owners. The assistant attorney for Riley County stated that the targets of the local salesman had been elderly people “with small estates and little ‘worldliness.’” Residents of Manhattan were not alone. In 1964 the state’s attorney general filed suit against a cemetery developer based in El Paso, Texas, for failure to fulfill contracts stipulating that perpetual care funds be deposited in Kansas banks. Memorial parks in nine towns across

20. *Manhattan Mercury*, February 27, 1955; *Topeka Capital-Journal*, July 28, 1994; *ibid.*, December 12, 1986; *ibid.*, September 21, 1988; *ibid.*, November 6, 1995; *Topeka State Journal*, May 19, 1976; West Lawn Memorial Gardens, Inc., brochure, Cemetery file, Topeka Room, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, Topeka, Kans. Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880–1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 182, has observed that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American conceptions of recreation showed a “growing emphasis on activity over contemplative passivity.” Of course, a cemetery is not a ball field or a national park, but the association of the memorial park with leisure reveals an interesting connection to an important development in American life. Staff at Memorial Park tell me that some visitors have confused the cemetery with a nearby park. Moreover, the cemetery hosts about five marriages a year.

*The cemetery as a place of leisure. Waterfowl are welcomed at the ponds in Memorial Park in Topeka for the viewing pleasure of the public.*



the state were affected.<sup>21</sup> Another wave of slow heartbreak washed over Kansas in the 1980s. Armed with “evidence involving allegedly misappropriated perpetual care funds”—this time with respect to memorial parks in six towns—the attorney general in November 1980 and again in June 1981 filed suit against two memorial-park owners based in Kansas for “allegedly liquidating for their own personal use” the funds in question. According to lot owners, one of the cemeteries involved, Sunset Memorial Gardens in Garden City, “is overgrown with weeds and is without water or electricity for upkeep.” A local rancher called the site “disgusting” and stated that the money he had paid for perpetual care “sure disappeared because nobody is taking care of it anymore.” In 1984 Lakeview in Wichita faced foreclosure in bankruptcy court. Attorneys spoke of “exorbitant management fees” and “bleeding of assets,” while the judge noted “years of very, very questionable management.”<sup>22</sup>

21. *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 15, 1967; *Kansas City Star*, November 8, 1967; *ibid.*, May 5, 1964. Affected towns were Chanute, Dodge City, El Dorado, Garden City, Hays, McPherson, Newton, Great Bend, and Ottawa.

22. *Hutchinson News*, July 1, 1981. Cemeteries involved in the attorney general’s suit were Hillcrest in Great Bend, Sunset in Garden City, Fort Hays Memorial Gardens in Hays, Crestwood in McPherson, Walnut Valley in El Dorado, and Greenlawn in Chanute. *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, June 16, 1981, September 30, 1983, October 7, 1984.

There is no need to continue this dreary litany of charges of fraud and deceit leveled at some memorial-park operators. The scandals were sufficiently well publicized to prompt the state legislature to add new rules governing the management of perpetual care funds and to subject the owners of for-profit cemeteries to periodic state audits of their perpetual care trusts.<sup>23</sup> The tumult resulted in a rapid turnover of ownership at many sites, with some cemeteries changing hands several times. Currently, some memorial parks are privately owned (for example, Roselawn in Salina and Kensington Gardens in Wichita); others have been purchased by large corporations such as Service Corporation International (Chapel Hill in Kansas City and Wichita Park and White Chapel in Wichita are three examples); and still others are owned and operated by counties

23. *Kansas Statutes, Annotated* (Furse 1995), especially ch. 17-1311 through 17-1312f, 1319, 1321, and the sources cited under these entries for “history” and “case annotations”; *see also Kansas Laws* (1968), ch. 330; *ibid.* (1971), ch. 71; *ibid.* (1974), ch. 95; *ibid.* (1978), ch. 76. According to K.S.A. 17-1312e and deputy assistant secretary of state to Albert Hamscher, June 19, 2001, the list of audited cemeteries is not available to the public. Clearly the cemeteries so audited at first wished to keep their identity secret from the public. Making the best of an unpleasant situation, however, some cemetery operators, eager to build public confidence, advertise that they are audited by the state. For an example, *see West Lawn Memorial Gardens, Inc.*, brochure.

(Greenlawn in Chanute), cities (Fort Hays Memorial Gardens in Hays and Walnut Valley in El Dorado), and the Catholic Church (Resurrection in Wichita). To be sure, it is important to point out that not all memorial parks were swept up in scandal and that a number of them today are well maintained and do not deserve my own blanket description of them not long ago as “fly-blown wastelands.”<sup>24</sup> Some others that once were targets of consumer outrage, such as Valley View in Manhattan, are clearly on the mend.

Nevertheless, for many consumers the damage had been done. The deceptive business practices of unscrupulous operators only served to fuel the fires of criticism ignited under the funeral industry as a whole by such incendiary exposés as Ruth Harmer’s *The High Cost of Dying* and Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death* published, as if on cue, in 1963. And truth be told, several memorial parks still resemble the unkept weed patches spoken of forty years ago.<sup>25</sup> But if we are to understand the place of the memorial park in American life, we need to recall the original images that flashed in the minds of consumers and that are a reality at many sites today. Surely the early enthusiasts of the memorial park would have been dismayed by the dishonest behavior of some of their successors, and reputable operators today no doubt wince at the mention of scandals still fresh in memory.<sup>26</sup> An inescapable fact emerges: all the well-crafted

24. Albert N. Hamscher, “Talking Tombstones: History in Your Own Back Yard,” (paper presented at the Local History and its Audiences Conference, Charleston, Ill., October 28, 2000); Hamscher, “Talking Tombstones: History in the Cemetery,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Kansas History Teachers Association, Topeka, April 21, 2001). Perhaps it does not speak well for the reputation of memorial parks that my unwarranted generalization based on incomplete research passed without significant challenge from the audiences. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course, but even a critic of the memorial park would be hard pressed to find fault at Roselawn in Salina, Memorial Lawn in Emporia, Memorial Park in Topeka, several in Wichita, and many others. Indeed, Memorial Park in Topeka received favorable press attention for its efforts to improve appearance. See *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 24, 1989. In 1971 the new owner of Memorial Lawn in Emporia announced a five-year improvement program. See *Emporia Gazette*, May 8, 1971.

25. Ruth Mulvey Harmer, *The High Cost of Dying* (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1963); Mitford, *The American Way of Death*. Valley View in Manhattan is proof that a cemetery’s appearance can improve. For this reason I hesitate to identify cemeteries in poor condition. But they do exist. Readers who visit the sites listed in Table 1 can draw their own conclusions.

26. For example, Weed, *Modern Park Cemeteries*, ch. 8, 11, urges, indeed assumes, integrity on the part of the cemetery superintendent and the careful management of perpetual care funds.

arguments a salesman could muster, all the touted conveniences of one-stop shopping and the advantages of advanced planning for burial associated with selling the memorial park, would have counted for very little had the new cemetery offended the sensibilities of the general public. A cemetery is, after all, a place of death, and perhaps nothing more than the certainty of death encapsulates our hopes and aspirations, our anxieties and fears. Black humor aside, the cemetery is where we consign those whom we loved. Few people take this responsibility lightly. The memorial park cemetery could only have succeeded, in Kansas as elsewhere, if its overall conception were compatible with American attitudes toward death in the twentieth century. The public did not demand memorial parks, but it did accept them. The developers planted the seeds of the new cemetery in sites that could yield profits. Business practices provided the sun and the rain. But prevailing views of death and dying were the soil in which innovation in cemetery design could take root and grow. It is to this fertile ground that we now turn.<sup>27</sup>

Writing in 1974 and reflecting on attitudes toward death in twentieth-century western culture, Ariès detected

a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings, a revolution so brutal that social observers have not failed to be struck by it. It is really an unheard-of phenomenon. Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear.<sup>28</sup>

In his various writings and lectures, Ariès hoped to capture the essence of this development in memorable phrases—“forbidden death,” “death denied,” death as a “taboo,” even “the reversal of death.” At first glance, such stark terms might elicit skepticism. Certainly, the interdict has not applied to violent death. During the past century large numbers of Americans have perished on distant battlefields and on nearby highways. Every evening the general pub-

27. The inspiration for the nature metaphor is William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 128.

28. Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 85.

lic is exposed to images of bloodletting on television news and entertainment shows. Instead, and perhaps more insidious, the curtain of denial descended on natural death, the death that most of us will experience. In this respect, the distancing of Americans from death has been so pervasive and evident that recent scholarship for the most part has confirmed and elaborated upon Ariès's central observation rather than challenged it.<sup>29</sup> Of course, one might prefer less provocative descriptive terms than those provided by Ariès: I find the word "malaise" in its French meaning to be appropriate—a feeling of unease, of discomfort in the presence of death. However one chooses to describe the general sense of anxiety that Americans have exhibited toward natural death, the sentiment has revealed itself in many ways.

Elements of denial have become commonplace in our vocabulary. People pass away rather than die. Coffins became caskets; undertakers became morticians and then funeral directors, even grief counselors. Mortuaries became funeral homes, and not a few of these memory chapels. The word "corpse" has largely disappeared from common parlance, and perhaps the reader has noticed already that the terms "memorial park" and "memorial gardens" avoid the use of the word "cemetery." If many of these euphemisms were promoted by the funeral industry it-

29. The following paragraphs combine my own interpretive observations with insights and information obtained from a large body of scholarly literature. In addition to the studies by Ariès, Mrozek, Sloane, Rogan, and Rubin, see also Leroy Bowman, "The Effects of City Civilization," in *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, ed. Jackson, 153–73; Robert Blauner, "Death and Social Structure," *ibid.*, 174–209; Charles O. Jackson, "Death in American Life," *ibid.*, 229–43; Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," in *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), appendix 4; David Dempsey, *The Way We Die: An Investigation of Death and Dying in America Today* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977); Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, *The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1972); Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); James T. Patterson, *The Dread Disease: Cancer and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor; and, AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Peter Uhlenberg, "Death and the Family," *Journal of Family History* 5 (Fall 1980): 313–20; Herman Feifel, ed., *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959); Robert Fulton, ed., *Death and Dying: Challenge and Change* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1978); Edwin S. Shneidman, ed., *Death: Current Perspectives*, 4th ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1995). For additional works, see *Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, ed. Jackson, 250–53, and the extensive list of works from many fields in Michael A. Simpson, *Dying, Death, and Grief: A Critical Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987).

self, they found a receptive audience. Funeral practices too evolved to mask the reality of death: not simply embalming, which to be sure has a history in the United States extending back to the nineteenth century, but also more recent developments such as the gradual replacement of black hearses with more cheery silver, white, and pink ones. One could make a good case that the growing popularity of cremation is the ultimate expression of Ariès's forbidden death. The dead are literally effaced, their ashes scattered to the wind or tucked away in a modest niche in a mausoleum.

The importance of funeral rites has diminished considerably in American life. Attending burial services in the cemetery used to be a community event with family, friends, and even casual acquaintances present. These days, viewing interment often is a private affair reserved for the family and a few intimates. Others might drop by for several minutes to offer some words of condolence the evening before burial or, as is more often the case, attend a "memorial service" at a later date, a service at which the deceased is (conveniently?) absent. As once widely accepted rituals have disappeared, we fumble for the right words to say to those in grief and wonder about the proper attire to wear to a funeral or memorial service. In the absence of clear guidelines for proper conduct, makeshift rituals erupt spontaneously in response to the deaths of public figures and the victims of well-publicized tragedies: think of the piles of flowers, the ribbons, plastic balloons, and teddy bears heaped in large, disorganized piles at such places as Columbine High School, Oklahoma City, the home of Princess Diana's immediate family, and, most recently, New York City and Washington, D.C.

The act of dying has become progressively more difficult, not only because technological advances have complicated a definition of when death actually occurs (brain death, but which *part* of the brain?), but also because the dying are expected to put aside any thought of resignation to the inevitable and instead to fight to the bitter end to deny death its dominion. The availability of medical technology ensures that the fight might well be both bitter and prolonged. It is as if death is forbidden even in the dying chamber, a strange notion that would perplex a mind not stamped by modernity. By the 1950s the hospital, not

# Kansans Suffer Cemetery Fraud

MANHATTAN (Special)—The Valley View Memorial Gardens Cemetery stands nearly neglected these days, only 10 years old, but covered with a heavy growth of weeds.

The cemetery and 600 Kansans may have been the victims of fraud.

The 10-acre cemetery, located three miles east of Manhattan on Highway 24 in Pottawatomie County, was incorporated in 1956. Its finances were believed sound in 1963 when Glenn Collins, formerly of Albuquerque, N.M., took over, and Royal Williams, believed to be from Merysville, became its lot salesman.

More than 1,500 lots were sold, mainly to residents of Riley County, and 100 persons were buried in the cemetery.

## Left Manhattan

Then Collins and Williams left Manhattan. Too late the townspeople admitted they had had suspicions about transactions at the cemetery.

At least 85 persons had not

Since then a warrant has been issued by Riley County attorney John Fay for the arrest of Williams on charges of fraud involving transactions at the cemetery. Williams also is sought by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

Collins is under indictment by a grand jury in Albuquerque on charges of fraud involving cemeteries there.

Fay said Monday his office is actively seeking the men and is working with the Internal Revenue Service.

Several of the lot owners are planning to file a civil suit to determine who is to become owner of the cemetery.

The problem already has involved commissioners of two counties, the state attorney general and the Riley County attorney.

## Vowed Action

Riley County commissioners have vowed to take action even if the cemetery is outside their jurisdiction. Pottawatomie County commissioners previously had

to another, in 1965 Geoffrey Gorer compared grief in modern times to masturbation, an almost shameful act that requires privacy.<sup>30</sup>

And children? For countless generations, children were encouraged to gaze on the face of death because the encounter provided religious instruction, gave a sense of family continuity, and, it was hoped, prompted some measure of contemplation of mortality. In the past half century or so, however, children have been shielded from such reminders of natural death as visiting a dying person *in extremis*, viewing a corpse, or witnessing an interment. At the same time, young people are exposed daily to all manner of behaviors that insult and degrade the human condition. How strong the denial of natural death must be if to confront it directly is perceived to be more harmful to children than having their eyes glued to continuous, relentless images of violent and malicious mayhem! And children grow up to be adults, with the result that as one generation gives way to the next, the malaise surrounding natural death intensifies in a cumulative process. It is in this way that death takes on the characteristics of pornography. A forbidden or taboo subject is drained of emotion and given exaggerated dimensions—in sexual pornography, it is the act that matters, not sentiments of love and affection; and the participants are endowed with body parts of a size to titillate. In the pornography of death, players who are likewise devoid of character development are slaughtered in larger numbers in bloody fashion, often in slow motion. And the instruments of their destruction often are quite elaborate. In either case, the excitement comes from tasting vicariously forbidden fruit, be it sex or death. An increase in the intensity of the stimulus produces a greater level of satisfaction: the horror comic of the 1930s gave way to the explicitly violent films of the 1960s and beyond.

There were many reasons for this shift—this brutal revolution—in attitudes toward death, and only the most important ones can be outlined here in broad strokes. Curiously, sentiments of love initiated the new prudery surrounding natural death. As bonds of affection within the family strengthened in

This August 15, 1967, article from the Topeka Capital reported the neglected state of the Valley View Memorial Gardens in Manhattan and the fraud surrounding the cemetery's perpetual care fund.

the home, had become the place to die, a place where the dying are entrapped in a bureaucratic routine not of their making. Many people these days die alone, in a drugged condition, departing with a faint groan instead of the proverbial famous last words. When the tubes are finally removed and the machines have ceased sighing, those close to the deceased frequently feel isolated, not because their friends and acquaintances do not care, but because the lack of rules for appropriate conduct leaves all parties confused and reticent. How many of us have not witnessed grieving persons struggle to restrain an outburst of grief that might prove to be an embarrassment to those around them? For many a widow and widower, grief in the twentieth century has been a trial to endure alone, not in a public space. Relating one taboo

30. Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning*, 128.

the nineteenth century, the loss of a loved one became less tolerable. A new dance of death appeared. One partner, the family, refused to release the dying person from its tight embrace. The possibility of imminent death was swept aside, and open discussions of mortality that might distress the dying person were replaced by words of hope and promise of recovery. Until recently, family members and physicians often did not divulge to the dying the gravity of their condition. Perhaps death would retreat if the family simply refused to acknowledge a tap on the shoulder that might interrupt the dance. For his part, the dying person, wishing to spare his loved ones anguish, swayed to the new music as if it would never end; he would struggle heroically at all costs and against all the odds. For all concerned, death became less an impending reality than a disease to be combated and conquered. The cover-up had begun.

Changing demographic patterns contributed to the alienation of modern Americans from natural death. As the twentieth century progressed, infant mortality declined, life expectancies rose, and, perhaps most important, death became concentrated in the elderly segment of the population, those who had already “retired” from “productive” life. The average citizen simply did not have to deal with death as frequently as previous generations had done. The majority of those who died were not vital to the essential operations of society and few of them would be missed outside a small circle of intimates. The visibility of natural death also declined as the place of death shifted from the home to the hospital, where medical professionals presided over the process of death. Still other specialists—funeral directors and cemetery operators—stepped in after death occurred. Natural death and the dead themselves became less intrusive in the daily lives of the general population. A lack of familiarity with something so basic in human experience as death deepened the mystery of mortality and sharpened feelings of unease, of discomfort, in brief, of malaise.

**D**espite its many benefits, modern medicine further removed natural death from public awareness. The transfer of the dying person to the hospital already has been noted, as has the role played by medical professionals in managing the

death process. Equally important is what we might loosely call the psychological implications of medical progress. Successful medicine raises expectations and prompts us to recall the colloquial expression, “We can put a man on the moon, so why can’t we . . . ?” Because skilled physicians and therapeutic drugs have pulled many seriously ill people back from the abyss, natural death appears to be avoidable. When it does occur, it can be easily interpreted as unfair, as a failure. In addition, the heroic and frequently painful struggle to defeat death leaves a vivid and lasting impression on all those who visit a dying person in a hospital: standing over someone surrounded by hissing machines and punctured with multiple intravenous devices immediately causes unease. “Will I end up this way?” we ask. An affirmative response seems likely, which is all the more reason not to dwell on the subject of death and dying. Simply hearing names of diseases that are perceived to be incurable—tuberculosis in the past, cancer until recently, and AIDS at this very moment—instantly generates fear because the diseases defy the medical solutions we have come to expect. In all these situations, death becomes less an inherent condition of human life than an alien force whose coming is as unwarranted as it is unwelcome.

Perhaps, as is often said, people with strong religious convictions are not tortured by thoughts of their own mortality. Ultimately, we shall never know for certain: often there is a gap between what people say and what they actually believe. But there can be no question that religious doctrines provide answers to broad questions about the meaning and purpose of a life that inevitably will end. If, as in the United States since the early nineteenth century, religious discourse has been progressively stripped of an obsession with the possibility of eternal damnation, a theology of hope and reassurance can reduce the anxiety associated with death. In an increasingly secular society, however, the potential of religion to offer solace is reduced because religion itself no longer enjoys a central place in the lives of many Americans. Advances in scientific knowledge have raised doubts for some about the immortality of the soul. The prospect of a blissful afterlife can no longer be assumed. In an atmosphere of uncertainty, death loses the profound meanings once ascribed to it—it becomes simply an interruption without overarching purpose. Death



*Personalizing the gravesite in the memorial-park cemetery in (left) Restlawn Gardens of Memory, Newton; (right) Memorial Park, Topeka; and (far right) Forest Lawn, Glendale, California.*

may be our destiny, but there is little need to dwell on the subject when old assurances have waned.

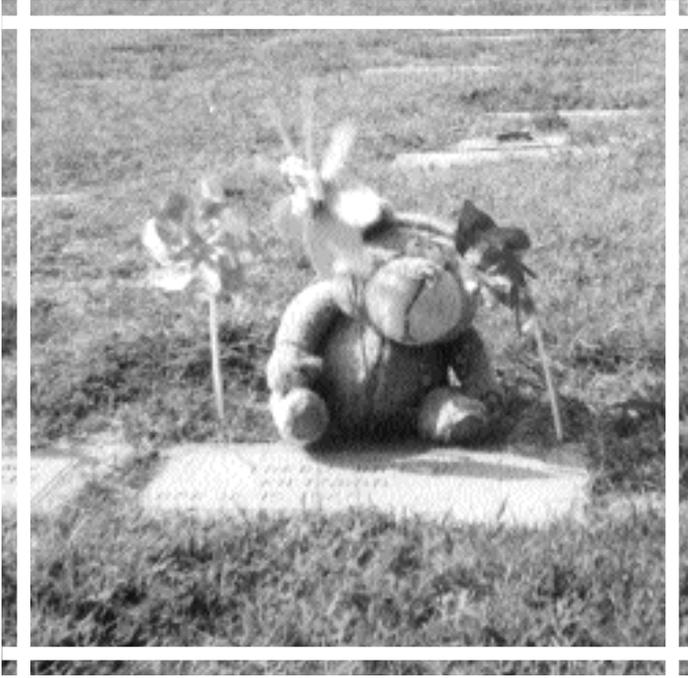
Nor does a society steeped in secular concerns invite contemplation of death and a close association between the living and the deceased. Since the eighteenth century, political and social life in western civilization has proceeded on the assumption that happiness not only is desirable but also achievable. As the twentieth century unfolded, the cultural command to be happy increasingly centered on the active life, the glorification of youth, and the pursuit of pleasure through the acquisition of material goods. "Being happy" and "having fun" became practically synonymous. A life rich in contemplation became less valued. Surely, death has no place in a happiness so defined, which is one more reason to set aside a subject considered to be morbid. At the time of the memorial park's greatest proliferation, the late 1940s and 1950s, adults who had experienced the stresses of war and had witnessed scenes of death and destruction either on the battlefield or on theater screens were ideal candidates to continue a tradition of death avoidance that was already well under way.

Whether one or several of the developments just discussed were more, or less, important in Kansas than elsewhere is difficult to determine. All generalizations are subject to nuance and refinement. One must always allow for regional differences and, within a region, local variations. In a single community, whether urban or rural, people do not behave the

same way, and attitudes toward death can vary according to sex, age, social class, ethnic background, religious affiliation, and so on. With this said, the fact remains that the malaise surrounding natural death has been a major feature of American life in the twentieth century, a feature so pervasive that few readers today will not immediately recognize at least some of its principal characteristics because they have directly experienced them. If there have been variations on the common theme, the theme itself remains intact. It should also now be clear how well the memorial park reflects the public's withdrawal from natural death. The absence of standing headstones and the paucity of other visible reminders of the dead, the reassuring religious images that pose no threat to complacency, the verdant lawns that invite thoughts of leisure and recreation, and the rarity of benches at grave site that encourage the visitor to pause and contemplate all bear witness to the disengagement of the living from the world of the dead and from death itself.<sup>31</sup>

If the memorial park was in harmony with one set of American attitudes toward death, however, it was incompatible with another. The result was a contradiction that elicited its own

31. Hubert Eaton, speech delivered to the Association of American Cemetery Superintendents, *Park and Cemetery* 39 (September 1929): 209, put the matter succinctly in his "builder's creed" written in 1917: "I shall endeavor to build Forest Lawn as different, as unlike other cemeteries as sunshine is unlike darkness, as Eternal Life is unlike Death."



type of malaise. The practice of memorializing the dead, of personalizing the grave site, has a long history in the United States. Long before the era of “forbidden death,” many generations of Americans had used standing headstones and family monuments either to profess religious faith or to tell the passerby something about the personality, affections, or interests of the deceased. By the mid-seventeenth century even the Puritans of colonial New England, who at first eschewed elaborate funeral rites, placed carved stones in their cemeteries for the “symbolic and iconographic marking of the individual’s mortal remains.”<sup>32</sup> The impulse to memorialize the dead is as much a part of the “American Way of Death” as the current vogue of death avoidance. At bottom, American society in the twentieth century confronted the subject of death and dying in two very different ways. On the one hand, there was the attempt to render natural death invisible by denying its presence. On the other hand, many Americans continued to insist that the deceased be treated with respect and receive some tangible recognition in the cemetery.<sup>33</sup>

32. David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 117.

33. Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*. Perhaps because he was a foreigner not steeped in conflicting American traditions, Ariès sensed the ambivalence: “It seems that the modern attitude toward death, that is to say the interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness, was born in the United States around the beginning of the twentieth century. However, on its native soil the interdict was not carried to its ultimate extremes.

These conflicting sentiments were apparent to the earliest critics of the memorial park. In a lengthy article in the staid trade journal *Park and Cemetery*, an anonymous author in 1929 extolled the virtues of Atlanta’s West View Cemetery, which featured numerous monuments and standing headstones. He then paused to observe: “Incidentally, [West View] is a rebuke to the commercial and transitory form of ‘park cemetery’ by which well-meaning people, to their later regret and unhappiness are induced to bury their dead without fitting symbol of love and memory.”<sup>34</sup> Writing in the same journal the following year,

In American society it encountered a braking influence which it did not encounter in Europe. Thus the American attitude toward death today appears as a strange compromise between trends which are pulling it in two nearly opposite directions” (p. 94–95). Although Ariès was referring to the broad range of American funeral customs, his observation applies well to the memorial park.

34. *Park and Cemetery* 39 (October 1929): 246.

the cemetery architect Ray Wyrick presented a scathing critique of the memorial park “laid out in a distant pasture and supported by a flock of salesmen fully experienced in playing upon human emotions or cupidity.” But not to fear, in his estimation: “Trained salesmen of lots in memorial parks do not have the argument in favor of their lawn plan,” he noted. “Tasteful and durable monuments, both large and small, have a fitting place in the cemetery of the future. A cemetery is intrinsically a burial place, and burials should be permanently marked, and people who have done their share in building civilization are certainly entitled to some type of recognition after they are gone.”<sup>35</sup>

Of course, the memorial park proved not to be a transitory phenomenon. But its critics were correct in asserting that its design does not accommodate well the American tradition of personalizing the grave site. People have a way, however, of doing as they please on matters concerning their loved ones. With or without the permission of cemetery operators, they will erect, if not permanent monuments, then all manner of temporary ones. At Forest Lawn, for example, there regularly appear at grave sites what Barbara Rubin has called “plastic apples in Eden’s garden”—cardboard snowmen, styrofoam clowns, inflated Easter bunnies, and artificial Christmas trees, wreaths, and fireplaces.<sup>36</sup> The same phenomenon can be observed in Kansas but on a less ostentatious scale—a cluster of howling wolves at Restlawn Gardens near Newton, small floral tributes to a mother and father at Roselawn in Salina, or a teddy bear and pinwheels recalling a baby’s brief life at Memorial Park in Topeka. These objects can evoke a smile and a tear at the same time. But they indicate an interesting development: an effort by ordinary people to restore some vitality to the memorial park and to extract their dead from a barren anonymity. It is true

35. *Ibid.* 40 (March 1930): 6–7. Wyrick’s views had not changed more than a decade later: “How convenient it is for [the salesman of the “no-monument” cemetery] to tell what a lot easier it is to clean up a rug with a sweeper in a room with no furniture, as compared with a room with chairs and tables. Although he says nothing about the lifeless and cheerless appearance of a room which gives no evidence of making living comfortable.” *See* *ibid.* 56 (September 1946): 78.

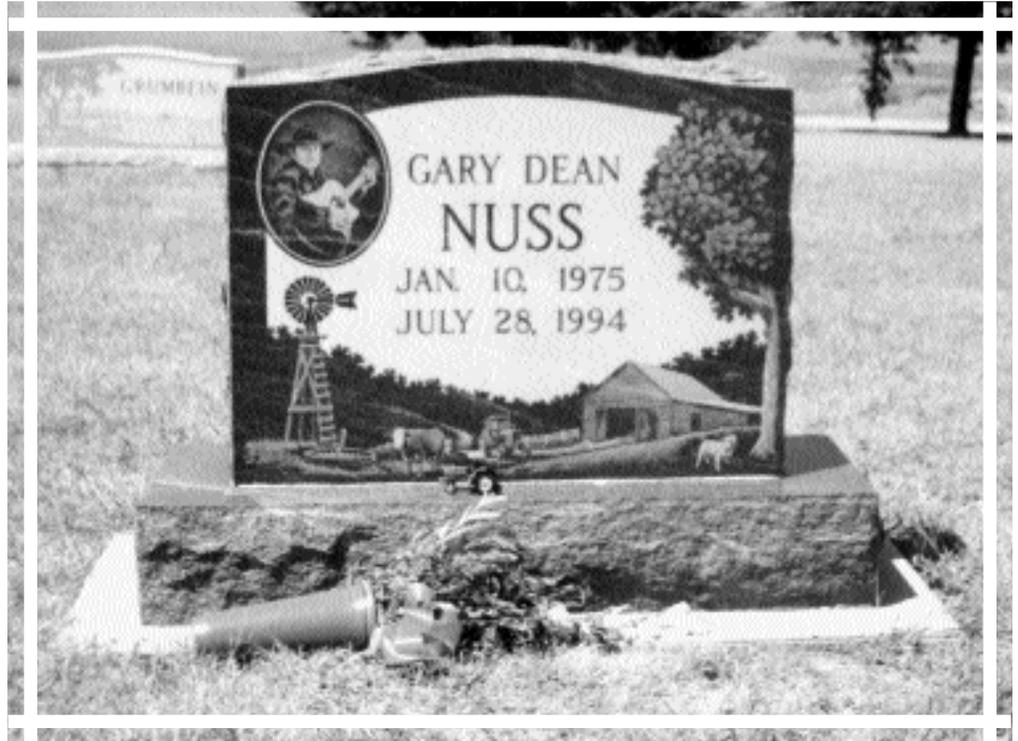
36. Rubin, Carlton, and Rubin, *L.A. in Installments: Forest Lawn*, 63–87.

that such displays are not unique to the memorial park. They also can be found in large number in traditional cemeteries: there is an artificial tree fashioned of sparkling aluminum stars at Highland Cemetery in Junction City, for example, and in rural Jetmore the personalization of headstones has become quite elaborate at Fairmount Cemetery (and also quite secular, but that is a subject for a future article). In the traditional cemetery, where a certain amount of disorder is to be expected, efforts to personalize grave sites cause little surprise because they conform with the cemetery’s original design and purpose. They project dissonance and appear out of place in the memorial park, however, because they are at variance with the concept of well-manicured and uncluttered space. Indeed, it was this dissonance that prompted the writing of this article.

In 1992 the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* reported the renewed interest of Americans in personalizing grave sites.<sup>37</sup> The article discusses the kind of tombstone pictured here from Jetmore rather than the far more modest tributes left in the memorial parks, and there is no reference to the larger context of American attitudes toward death. It is clear, however, that in whatever way the impulse to memorialize the dead has found expression in recent years, it comports well with broader developments in the way Americans are confronting natural death. If the malaise surrounding death still is very much with us, some of its more depressing manifestations are beginning to recede. The hospice movement allows people to die at home rather than in an impersonal hospital setting. Physicians now speak more frankly with their seriously ill patients and devote more attention to managing pain. The fear and shame associated with cancer have diminished. The popularity of “living wills” and debates about the “right to die” have brought the subjects of death and dying to a national audience. The publication of advice for “coping” with grief and mourning has become a cottage industry. The very phrase “death with dignity”

37. *Wall Street Journal* (New York), September 3, 1992. Closer to home, see the recent article dealing with “new ways to say goodbye” in the *Kansas City Star*, August 1, 1999, sect. G. The article concentrates on caskets and funeral services, but it is instructive nonetheless for the historian of cemeteries.

*A personalized headstone  
in Fairmount Cemetery,  
a traditional resting  
place in Jetmore.*



presumes that dying in modern times has been distinctly undignified. Of course, the risk inherent in all this attention is that it will prove to be superficial—yet another fad that will fade quickly after an initial flurry of activity—and that Americans will add yet another layer of specialists, the grief counselors, to serve as a buffer against a thoughtful and introspective approach to natural death.

The fact remains, however, that the recent interest in personalization, which at root is nothing more than the reappearance of a deeply ingrained American tradition, means that the memorial park might well become a curious anachronism on the landscape of a new century. The operators of established memorial parks will be compelled to seek new ways to attract business, perhaps even to modify the original design of their cemeteries; surely, they must learn to indulge, if not welcome, the Santas, bunnies, clowns, and miniature wolves. And the cemetery of the future in Kansas? If the historian may be permitted to make a prediction, new cemeteries in Kansas likely will combine different design elements in order to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The as-yet-uncompleted Kensington Gardens in Wichita, the most recent memorial park in Kansas, will have more than markers flush to

the ground and a flat landscape. There likely also will be English-style gardens, sections for standing stones and family monuments, perhaps even a wooded area for cremation urns. If successful, this diversity in design will be as much in accord with the prevailing “climate of opinion” (to borrow a venerable term among historians) as the memorial park was compatible with collective sensibility during much of the twentieth century. Returning to the architect Ray Wyrick writing in 1930, one must acknowledge his incisive observation: “The ‘memorial park’ is a sign of the times. The old graveyard has been doomed. . . . Most of the advantages are naturally with the cemetery which can give the best and most enduring service to its community, and it needs fear no competition if it is ready for the future.”<sup>38</sup> In an age of increasingly assertive and knowledgeable consumers who are relearning the old lesson that natural death can be neither forbidden, denied, nor reversed, the future lies in offering the public a variety of alternatives for burying the dead. Giving the public what it wants—yet another idea that is not novel in the broad sweep of American history. 741

38. *Park and Cemetery* 40 (March 1930): 8.