

My First Memory of the Chapel

By Maurine McCarty Rawlings

My first memory of the chapel at the cemetery was at the age of three. It was a cold spring morning, and my mother had put my wool winter coat on me along with my woolly mittens and scarf.

I was going for a ride with my father. I had no idea just where we were going. I didn't care. I was going. No brothers or sister, just me. Sitting in the old '46 Chevy next to my dad, life was good.

There wasn't a lot to see when I was three and couldn't see over the dashboard. I could look up out of the windows and see cold gray-blue sky. I remember I was happy to have my mittens on.

When we arrived at our destination, my father helped me out of the car. We began to walk into what I thought was a grove or a forest. There were lots of trees, the grass was short and there were many rocks and stones of all sizes. The stones were in a row and there were lots of rows. Just like a corn or bean field. I had never seen anything like it. I asked my father where we were. He told me we were at a cemetery.

I in turn asked, "What is a cemetery?"

My father told me, "That is where people go when they die."

We walked until we came upon a building my father called the "chapel." There were people standing around the building. It was very quiet; some people whispered, some were holding hands, and some were crying, but no one was talking.

Then an old man came up to my father and began to talk in a very loud voice. The old man needed to wash his face and shave like my father always did. His hands were dirty and fingernails were full of black dirt. I remember thinking; *there is no way he would get away with that at our house.* .

He told my father that it was about time that “Jack Frost” got out of the ground so we could be about our business. The old man had no teeth and spit ran down his face when he talked. He patted me on the head like a puppy and continued to talk to my father in a loud voice.

I asked my father, “Do we know Jack Frost?”

My father shook his head yes. I didn’t remember Jack Frost coming to our house to visit or have dinner. Did he have a wife or kids to play with? I couldn’t place him. The old man had said it was about time he got out of the ground. I wondered why Jack Frost was in the ground in the first place.

I could hear more crying. Sad crying. There was a lady near-by that cried so hard her husband made her sit on one of the stones. He put his arms around her and held her close. A man walked up the steps to the chapel, unlocked the doors, and pushed them open. I remember jumping back and throwing my arms around my fathers leg. My father put my hand in his and held it tight, and told me it was okay. Oh, but it was not okay. Not at all. There were long dark boxes stacked on top of each other inside the chapel. Lots of them.

I asked my father, “Are there people in them?”

He shook his head yes. I then asked if they were dead. The old man who had no teeth, told us it was a long hard winter. That must have been a *yes*.

Men began carrying the long boxes out of the chapel to different parts of the cemetery. The old man who had no teeth said, “Thank God spring is here, and everyone can be laid to rest. Now we can move on.”

I don’t know who we put to rest that day, if it was a loved one or if my father was a casket bearer. My father did not say much on the way home. I will always remember the chapel as a place for loved ones to rest until Jack Frost gave way to spring.