

Memories of a Sexton's Daughter

by LaVonne Hesebeck

Friends and citizens of Hartley, I come bringing you greetings and reminiscent thoughts of Hartley's cemetery in honor of my father, Eldo Braunschweig who was sexton at Pleasant View in the late 30's and early 40's. Dad was assisted by Rollo Sherman in those early years. The two men were hired to work during the growing season, probably April through October, on monthly salaries. In winter months they were hired to dig graves as they were needed. There were some instances I remember when the chapel was used for holding funerals for people whose bodies came from other communities farther away. I find it very commendable that you citizens have come forward with your time, efforts and money to restore this building keeping alive history that would have been forgotten had you not taken such action.

My parents, Eldo and Ida lived five houses up the street on Central Avenue. That house is no longer there. It has become a vacant area between two existing homes. So I remember Dad walking to work, usually carrying his lunch box and a thermos of coffee so he could spend the entire day working.

I had no siblings and the neighborhood was small with no other children living there, so for something to do, I often walked down the street to see my father at work. On hot days, I might take him and Rollo a cold drink with fresh baked goods for their break if Mom had just made something. As I recall, I was about ten years old one day when I arrived at the cemetery. Dad said, "I have something for you to do."

I replied, "Oh, what's that?"

His reply was, "The chapel needs sweeping because there will be funeral there tomorrow."

As I stated earlier, I didn't have much to do as a child, so I was more than ready to do the job. Father took me to the chapel, unlocked the door, handed me the broom, dust pan and a cloth

and said, "Sweep the floor clean. Then dust the chairs and arrange them in rows facing this way." He then left me, returning to the work he was doing in the cemetery for that day.

I remember I did have an eerie feeling as I swept around the hole in the floor where the coffins were lowered to the underground vault. I called it a cellar because it was like a "hole in the ground." It was not the most fun sweeping, because at that time I'm thinking the bats were already frequenting the chapel as I swept away a lot of droppings. Of course there was dust and other kinds of dirt to be swept up. After sweeping I arranged the chairs after dusting each one. Thank goodness there were not a lot of chairs. *

You might wonder, was the underground vault was used? Yes, I know it was used when my father was sexton. I can remember a winter when we had a lot of snow and it was very cold, so the ground was frozen hard making it difficult to dig a grave with a pick-ax and shovels. At that time they had no way of heating the ground to dig through the frost. So I recall there were three or more bodies place in the vault to remain until spring. I am not certain that all families returned again for the committal services in the spring. They could make a choice of what they wanted to do. The bodies were interred as the graves could be dug.

If I remember correctly there were steps to the cellar on the east side of the chapel and close to a well that was there. These steps were covered with a wooden door that was hinged on one side and opened up the stairway so coffins could then be carried out of the vault. This door could be padlocked shut.

A few other remembrances about the care of the cemetery that intrigued me as a child were:

1. There was on large mower with a motor that the men had to push. It was not self-propelled and seemed hard to push. There were other small, hand-pushed, reel-type mowers that were easier to push and to trim around the tomb stones and markers. The

size of the cemetery reached from north to south, as it does now, but extended only from the road (Central Avenue) east to the first driveway that is running north and south. It took the two men most of the week to mow and trim that area.

2. There were some walnut trees that dropped their walnuts, which had to be picked up in the fall to make easier mowing. I was often asked to do that job, and oh! How stained my hands would get from those green walnut shells.
3. The things that probably intrigued me most as a child were the plot books that had to be kept. These brown books, about 8 inches by 6 inches and bound by like a thick tablet, held pages of graph paper for each lot in the cemetery, all categorized by their locations. Each grave was plotted according to scale on the proper page. Children's and infants' were smaller. These books were kept at the City Clerk's Office. Lyle Shinkle was the City Clerk. Dad would pick up the books each time a new grave was dug so it could be plotted. Father taught me how to plot a grave accurately using a hard lead pencil to shade in the lines to form a rectangle box on this graph paper. I never did learn how lots were numbered and located, but my dad always would locate the proper page for me to graph.

I'd like to share one story about how my father purchased our family lot. Father told us one day as he was mowing, a gentleman walked up to him and began talking and asking questions. He inquired what he could do to sell a lot, explaining he really needed the money. He stated further that one body was buried on the lot, but there never was a marker placed, and he didn't know where it could be. Father explained that they could go to the City Clerk's Office, and check in the plot book to find the lot. They did this, and my father learned it was

a large lot and well located, so he offered to buy the lot from the man. Both agreed on the price and the deal was completed that day with the City Clerk's assistance.

Taking this story a step further, my parents were in a car/train accident, killing my mother and seriously injuring my father, placing him in the hospital. I was left to handle burial arrangements with no one but my husband and myself to do it. I had the consolation of a place available for Mom's burial. How great that was. This lot is now filled with my parents' graves; those of my father's brother Paul and his wife who was also my mother's sister; their daughter Pauline and her husband Marvin Meyer, and my husband George Hesebeck.

I hope you understand that preserving this chapel does mean a lot to me for keeping the memories that I have. Thanks to all of you for sharing that you do appreciate and want to maintain our heritages. Thanks also for allowing me to speak to you. May you all be enabled to continue with this good work.

**During a recent conversation with LaVonne Hesebeck, I learned the original chairs had rounded backs and spokes, similar to kitchen chairs of the day. When I mentioned that to Bryan Nelson, he informed me a chair of that type was in the vault—located directly under shroud surrounding the hole. He and Orv Taylor went out to the chapel, lifted the lid, and snagged it with hooks. They cleaned the many years of spider webs and dirt with a water hose, then took it back to the chapel. LaVonne confirmed our hopes that it was one of the chairs she had once cleaned and arranged. She used it for a prop during her presentation, and we now have it on display in the chapel. Betty Taylor*