

LOST & FOUND, BUT STILL A MYSTERY
MY GRANDFATHER'S TOMBSTONE

It was two weeks before Christmas and my mind was a muddle of all the things that needed to be done before the 'big day'. The phone rang. It was Linda Wallingford, the wife of a distant cousin, but a friend as well. "I just received the strangest phone call" were Linda's first words to me. My mind went into overdrive, quickly shifting from muddled to mystified. After all, I rarely hear from Linda at this time of year, our contacts being mostly confined to the time leading up to our Wallingford reunions.

Linda continued. Her phone call had come from a clerk in the Waller County Courthouse, Waller County being the birthplace of most of our present day Wallingfords. According to Linda, the Clerk had received a phone call from a Gavin Smith at Ft. Hood in Killeen, Texas. Ft. Hood? Back to overdrive. Mr. Smith, I later learned, is the archeology curator at Ft. Hood. He had in his possession an old tombstone with the following inscription:

Robert Thomas Wallingford
September 2, 1862 – November 17, 1917
"Gone But Not Forgotten"

Now I understand the reason for Linda's phone call. She knew that this Wallingford – Robert Thomas – was my grandfather. But how did my grandfather's tombstone in Waller County, Texas make its way into the hands of an archeology curator at Ft. Hood in Killeen, Texas? I'm more confused than ever. Linda gave me Mr. Smith's phone number and after a few pleasantries we ended our conversation. Muddled mind or not, I wasted no time in contacting Mr. Smith. After stumbling through a brief explanation of the reason for my call, he told me that the tombstone was on loan from Crawford & Bowers, tombstone manufacturers in Killeen, Texas. He said that it was being used by a Sgt. Jones (at Ft. Hood) as part of a demonstration on drunk driving. Drunk driving? Lord, the mere mention of anything having to do with 'demon rum' would surely cause my grandparents to turn over in their graves.

Still puzzled, I contacted Crawford & Bowers and it was then that I learned that the aforementioned Crawford & Bowers were not only tombstone manufacturers, but a funeral home as well.

I spoke with Mr. Dave Crawford, one of the owners of the funeral home. And yes, he did have the by now infamous tombstone and had had it for quite some time. After explaining to Mr. Crawford that I am the granddaughter of Robert Thomas Wallingford, I asked if there was any chance of getting it back. He very graciously, and to my relief, said "of course".

A few weeks later my husband and I met with Mr. Crawford at his funeral home. One of his employees brought the tombstone out with a forklift and lifted it into the back of our pickup. The little stone looked brand new but Mr. Crawford said it was a mess when he got it. He and his men had spent hours cleaning it up, removing mildew and

whatever else old tombstones are prone to attract. When I asked how much I owed him, he said “not a thing.” An entire family is in gratitude to him. And, of course, I asked what anyone would have asked at this point: “How did you come to have the tombstone?”

He said he had gotten it from a family in Harker’s Heights, a suburb of Killeen. Since he had had the tombstone for quite some time, details were sketchy, but he did remember the name General Hemenway. He did not know if Mr. Hemenway was actually a general, or if that was a nickname or even a first name. I was undeterred and with Mr. Crawford’s permission, I looked through the Killeen phone book for Hemenways. There were several and I copied the phone numbers, as well as first names, of all of them. None was listed as “General” Hemenway.

A few days later I started calling. After a few calls – voila! – I had the right one. But the General himself was out, so I spoke with his wife, which was just as well because it was obvious to me that her mind and memory were quite good. The following is her story as told to me.

Their son was working in construction in College Station. His supervisor asked him to paint a house for him. Some college students had been living there and had moved out. He wanted to clean it up and rent it again. He told young Hemenway that there was an old tombstone on the front porch and to please take it to the dump. The young man did not think it was quite right to just dump it, so he took it to his home in Killeen. Although Mrs. Hemenway’s memory seemed quite good, she did not remember how long they had had it. She did say she tried for a long time to find out whom it belonged to but without success. Thus she was very glad to hear from me and to know that the little tombstone would be returned to its rightful resting place. And as to Mr. Hemenway’s title, yes he was a general. He had served in World War II and advanced to the rank of Brigadier General. I was impressed.

After returning home with the infamous tombstone, we found that while the stone was small, it was very, very heavy. Without a forklift ourselves, we could not budge what was now “a little monster”. My plans were to take it back to the Field’s Store Cemetery from whence it came for a second burial. But after talking with Linda again (she and Bobby live very near the cemetery), I found that there is no caretaker for the cemetery. Linda herself keeps the books and someone comes in regularly to mow and clean up. She recommended going through a nearby funeral home, which I did. But since we were unable to make the trip to the funeral home right away, for the next two weeks or so, the ‘little monster’ happily resided in the back of our pickup, making numerous trips to town, to the golf course, grocery store, etc. One thing I did not worry about was that the tombstone might be stolen. That is, unless someone happened along with a forklift in tow.

But one cold, rainy day a few weeks later, we delivered the little stone to the funeral home in Hempstead with instructions to place it between the graves of my grandparents and at the foot of the graves. You see, when my grandmother died in 1959,

her surviving children placed a double tombstone between and at the head of the two graves. Though I had some trepidations about placing a second tombstone on the graves, and at the foot especially, after consulting other family members, we all agreed we didn't have much choice.

So now we have the tombstone, but still have the mystery. First, when and by whom was the little tombstone removed from my grandfather's grave? At the time the double tombstone was put in place? Maybe, but unfortunately all of those who might have known are now deceased. Secondly, who took the tombstone away? Were they the ones who placed it on the front porch of an old house in College Station? If so, why? Halloween pranks, maybe? Or did the little tombstone reside elsewhere, maybe several places, before its arrival at the house in College Station?

We may never know the answer to the above questions, but in my mind one thing is certain: it has traveled and returned to its original resting place. I cannot help but believe that a couple of grandparents are looking down from their celestial homes with amused – or perhaps somewhat bemused - expressions on their faces.

- D. V. Thurman