

# A Memorial Day Tribute—Reflections on Bygone Days

Mary Ruth Hammond, *Grantsville Gazette*, Wednesday, May 24, 1989

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[Photo]

Myrtis Hutchinson points to the tombstone that marks the resting place of John B. Walker, believed to be the first man buried in Grantsville. Walker was born in 1814 in Kentucky and died in Grantsville in 1856. Walker's daughter married Myrtis' great-uncle, Alma Hale.

John B. Walker, who was born March 24, 1814, in Lee, Livingston, Kentucky, and died April 1856 in Grantsville, is believed to be the first man buried in our local cemetery. According to his burial records, John was the son of Ephraim and Mary Buchanon Walker.

Each Memorial Day a flag is placed on Walker's grave, indicating that he is a war veteran. According to the *History of Tooele County*, page 595, "Walker fought in the Civil War." However, the Civil War started in 1861, and if Walker's burial records are correct, he died in 1856.

According to Walker's tombstone, located near the center of the east side of the cemetery, he was a member of Johnston's Army. But that too appears to be in error as Johnston's Army fought AGAINST the "Mormons" and Walker was a devout member and local leader of the LDS Church. Another fact that makes Walker's fighting in Johnston's Army seem unlikely is that Johnston's Army came to Utah to squelch a so called "Mormon rebellion" in 1857—a year after Walker's death.

There is not too much known about John B. Walker. According to an employee at the Grantsville City Hall, John B. is the only Walker that the city has a record on as being buried in the Grantsville Cemetery. "However," stated the city employee, "as I understand it, most of our early burial records were destroyed in a fire several years ago. It is very likely that John's wife, Elizabeth Brown Walker, is also buried in the cemetery, but we have no record of that." Some years ago Esther Warner (now deceased) took it upon herself to go to the cemetery and make a list of all the graves. That service was of great historical significance, but of course, it was impossible to make a list of any unmarked graves. So, there may be graves in Grantsville that will be "lost" forever.

It is known that John B. and Elizabeth B. Walker had at least one child. Their daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, was born June 14, 1837, at Tishomingo, Mississippi. She married Alma Hale on April 14, 1856, in the Salt Lake LDS Endowment House. According to stories that were handed down to Myrtis Hutchinson, a great-niece of Alma's, the couple courted for quite some time before their marriage.

Mrs. Hutchinson said, "Apparently, John Walker did not like the fact that his daughter was being courted by Alma. I have no idea why that would be. We've checked records to see if perhaps John felt his daughter was too young to marry, but she was approximately 19 years old when she wed. And of course, Alma, who was a son of Jonathon H. and Olive Boynton Hale, and a brother of Aroet Hale, was also a staunch member of the LDS Church, so that couldn't have been a factor in Walker's objection to the marriage."

Sarah Elizabeth Walker did marry Alma Hale the same month that her father passed away. As recorded in the book, *Bishop Jonathon H. Hale*, by Heber Q. Hale, "By the spring of 1861, Alma and Sarah Elizabeth had been blessed with three children. Their outlook on life had never been happier—but then tragedy entered. Complications developed immediately after the birth of their third child, and within two weeks, on April 21, 1861, Sarah Elizabeth passed away. Her newborn baby also died shortly thereafter." Many members of the family are buried in the Grantsville Cemetery.

The way that we take care of our dead has changed drastically over the years. Elsie Eastman wrote a chapter in the *History of Tooele County* which outlined some of the early methods of burial that undertakers in our area subscribed to. In early days it was the practice to bury the dead soon after death, since there was no way to embalm the bodies.

The method of preserving bodies at that time was to place fruit bottles, filled with ice, around the body. Clothes which had been soaked in saltpeter were wrapped around the face, arms, and hands, making it necessary for folks to sit up all night and keep the clothes wet. The bodies could not be dressed until the day of the funeral. Many women in our area sat up all night, sewing clothes for the dead.

In the early 1900s, Charles J. Stromberg ran a hearse in Grantsville. It is recorded in the *Tooele County History* that the first hearse in Grantsville was a light wagon; then a buckboard; then a white top buggy, later replaced by a fancy white top buggy trimmed in gold. Mr. Stromberg took care of the hearse for the city for a stipulated fee of \$3, which was collected for each funeral.

Many old-timers can remember Charlie Stromberg sitting atop the fancy white-topped buggy, wearing a black Prince Albert coat and a stove-pipe hat. Myron Sutton said, "The hearse was elaborate, with plate glass windows along the side, which were covered with fancy curtains. It was pulled by a pair of white horses. I remember funerals being held in the old Grantsville First Ward building, after which they would load the casket into the back of the hearse. The six pallbearers would walk behind the hearse in two rows, with three men in each row. When they arrived at the cemetery the pall bearers would remove the casket from the hearse."

Myron laughed when he said, "As a kid, I lived in the old Joshua R. Clark house, across the street from the cemetery. We kids would always run over to the cemetery when we saw the hearse coming, and hide in the lilac bushes. We would do this because the hearse had a fifth wheel, which allowed the body of the hearse to swing around in a complete circle. When the funeral was over, Mr. Stromberg would swing the horses around so they were facing the rear of the hearse, then the hearse would swing around, and he would take off. We kids loved to see that."

Mr. Sutton also remembered that Charles Stromberg lived in the home on Clark Street, now occupied by Putt and Maxine Painter (who is Charles' granddaughter). "Stromberg had a garage in his back yard, where he kept the hearse when it wasn't in use," said Myron. "When the mortuaries obtained limousines, the old Grantsville horse-drawn hearse was put in the Martin granary that was behind the old Stromberg Apartments. Later, Rachel Stromberg used the hearse in her yard to display flowers."

It is unknown what ever happened to the old hearse, but Rulon Stromberg, son of Charles Stromberg, had possession of the double harness. Years ago he turned it over to Mayor Keith

Brown. Upon the death of Mr. Brown, Keith's brother, Jack Brown, obtained the harness and took steps to see that it was taken care of. Teryl Hunsaker and his students restored the harness and built a unique stand featuring two horses to display this valuable bit of memorabilia from Grantsville's past. The restoration display project was completed in March 1989 and is now in the Grantsville Donner-Reed Memorial Museum.

Myrtis Hutchinson talked about her memories of decorating graves in the Grantsville Cemetery when she was a child. "There was no grass at the cemetery in those days," she said. "Every year, before Memorial Day, Mother and other residents of the town who cared about the cemetery would clear off all of the weeds. Then they would shovel the dirt up into a new mound."

Myrtis continued, "Before Mother died she was very anxious that we, her children, would continue her tradition of taking care of the graves of our family members. Mother told us to make sure that when we 'mounded' the graves to see that a child's grave was the size of a child—and not the size of an adult."

"My brothers and sisters and I went to the cemetery one year to take care of the graves. We had mounded a row of children's graves when we got to the grave of an adult. I said, 'Well, we'll have to measure this grave off to make it as long as an adult.' My brother, Wendall, replied, 'We don't have to measure it—here, I'll just lie on it, and you make it as long as I am.'"

But Wendall received a surprise when he laid on the grave. The ground sunk seven or eight inches! "Wendall had the funniest look on his face," chuckled Myrtis.

So, ways of taking care of our dead and their resting places have changed over the years. Today we have modern facilities and a nice, green cemetery in Grantsville. But this year, as in days of old, hundreds of local residents will visit the cemetery on Memorial Day to pay respects to their loved ones—and to reflect on the heritage they left us.