

CEMETERY VISITS REMIND US OF LIFE IN AN EARLIER TIME **06/06/00**

As we put yet another Memorial Day behind us I am reminded of many things. Yesterday on my way through Forestport I noticed the old Beechwood Cemetery and its faded grave markers. My mind began to dwell on the similar burial plots I have encountered in my travels in Io, these past 72 years. Many are tucked away in obscure places far from modern day haunts of man. Inhabitants, who once tried in vain to wrest a living from the woods and hardscrabble farms, rest there.

This was especially true in the Southern tier of New York where my work as a District Ranger led me. Many contained 20 or fewer graves, speaking to the temporary nature of many locals of that era.

Their aged markers evoke poignant messages of the tragedies life sometimes holds. Significant of most was the tender ages and preponderance of children and the mothers who paid a terrible price for giving them life. No other lasting memorials so graphically illustrate the advance of medical science as the inscriptions on the gravestones.

The many military burial sites send me an entirely different message. We have not changed or improved our ability to get along as human beings. It seems that those who cry the loudest about compassion and understanding inevitably bring about conflicts that lead to war. Interestingly enough, most of them never have to run the risk of putting their bodies where their mouths are. It makes one wonder if those who had to pay the ultimate price for freedom died in vain.

My long departed friend Bob Peel, who as an outdoor columnist for the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, thought along similar lines on old abandoned burial plots. He wrote an interesting missive on the topic which I enjoyed and then communicated my appreciation for it to him.

I had several requests from Scout Masters and other civic leaders for ideas on projects their members might work on while I was working for the State. My first choice was for them to restore these plots to their original condition and then tend them. Some are being kept up, but sadly, most of them are not.

One that is, and stands as a tribute to those who maintain it, is St. Patrick's Cemetery west of Martinsburg in the middle of Tug Hill.

Individual markers on private property are especially intriguing to me. One immediately

speculates on how it came about, who the persons might have been, and their history in general. The fact is appealing to me that families can share and have their own final personal resting-places. This is something that is entirely possible with cremation and present laws on the disposition of ashes.

For the most part, custom has long dictated how human remains are treated, often based on religious beliefs. They range from cryogenics to placing the corpse outside the village on the African veldt at night for the hyenas to dispose of. One might say, these customs go from the sublime to the bizarre.

I didn't intentionally begin this article to get everyone in a morbid mood, but more as a salute to those ancestors who made the life we enjoy today possible. I believe it's particularly fitting that they be honored with a national holiday, and it's in the spirit I present same.