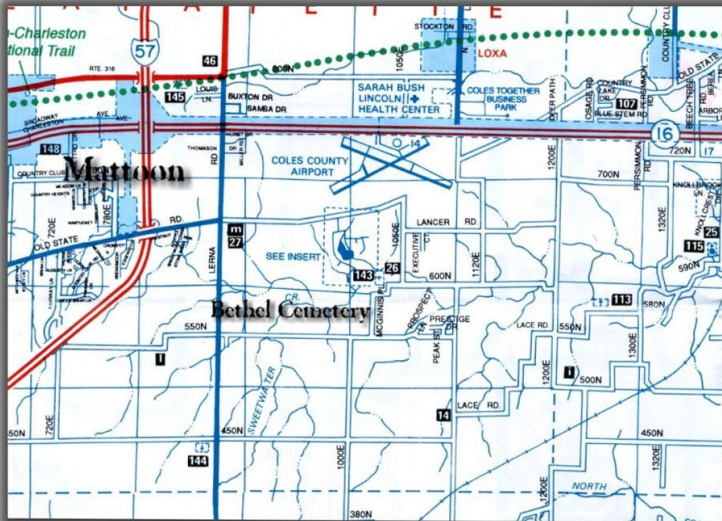


The quaint and unassuming Bethel Cemetery sits nestled among rolling hills, picturesque farms, and new housing developments. The legend associated with the place is little known even to locals, and many people merely pass by on their way home, or on a Sunday drive through the wooded hills completely unaware of the strange tale associated with the hallowed ground.

Even if they were aware of the legend, they might not recognize this cemetery as being home to such a gruesome tale. At first glance it looks very normal, and much of the cemetery has the same carefully trimmed lawn and rows of granite headstones as hundreds of other modern rural cemeteries.



The main gate in autumn.



Just what exactly the story is behind the folk-name of this place (Ragdoll Cemetery), is hard to determine. Depending on who you ask, the story will vary from the mundane to the macabre. The usual yarn goes that there was once a little girl of about 8 or 9 years of age (when she lived changes) who was very attached to her rag doll. The girl died, some say of an illness, others say murder. In the case of the illness, she supposedly asked to be buried with her doll. In the other case, her wish went unknown or ignored.

But a careful examination of the grounds reveals some interesting features. Off to the right of the main gate, just on the outside of the tree line, lies the old section of the cemetery. Two large oak trees stand guard over the worn or fallen headstones. Many of the remaining stones, as well as an assortment of items that have been left there over the years, lay inside of the woods amongst overgrown weeds. A large collection of stones, having been knocked down over the years, is propped up haphazardly against one of the large oaks.

WARNING

Bethel Cemetery is still in use. Like all burial grounds, please be respectful when visiting.





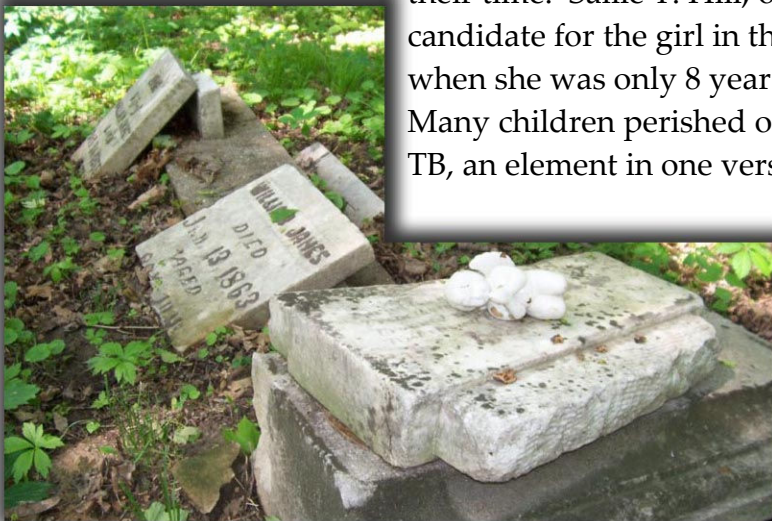
The crux of all the versions of the story is that the girl wanted to be buried with her doll but wasn't. In some adaptations of the tale, the doll forever searches for the girl's grave. In others, the girl's ghost forever searches for the doll, which was lost in the cemetery. In a third version, the doll was buried with the girl and crawls out of the grave every night to look for her killer (No one is sure whether dolls can see better in the dark or not). The doll is also said to be seen hanging from the oak tree near her grave.

Cemeteries with large, gnarled oak trees growing in them seem to attract unusual stories. In Effingham, Illinois, a rural cemetery is said to be the home of both a werewolf and the grave of a warlock. The werewolf and the warlock might be one in the same creature, but the legend focuses around one large oak tree, which has been sprayed with graffiti over the years.

How or when the rag doll story got started has never been brought to my attention. It could be that someone once found a rag doll in the cemetery and the story spread and took on a life of its own. Obviously no one has actually seen a rag doll looking for a murderer. It's more likely that someone hung a doll from one of the trees as a joke, and someone found it there.

The elements of the story do reflect some harsh realities of life. Many people died at a young age during the 1800s, and local cemeteries are scattered with the graves of those who died well before

their time. Sallie T. Hill, once suggested as a candidate for the girl in the story, died in 1873 when she was only 8 years and 3 months years old. Many children perished of diseases like Cholera and TB, an element in one version of the legend.



Another sad reality of rural life is unsolved murder. In the most gruesome version of this story, the girl is murdered and her killer is never found. Perhaps it should be disconcerting to the police to know that people are putting their faith in a possessed rag doll to find justice.