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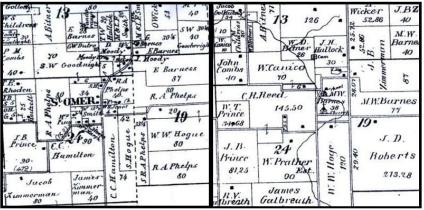
St. Omer Cemetery and the small, defunct village of the same name probably would have been forgotten a century ago had it not been for one unusually shaped headstone and a misprinted date. As is often the case in Coles County, these unusual circumstances gave birth to an obscure, but enduring legend.

The legend is that Caroline Barnes, one of the four people buried under the massive orb-and-pyre, was put to death for practicing witchcraft. It is said that no pictures can be taken of the monument, and that the large cement ball on top of it glows on certain nights.

The only evidence for this legend seems to be the dramatic tombstone, the way local citizens grow nervous whenever the story is mentioned and, most strikingly, the impossible date of death: February 31st. Of course, all three of these things can be explained

without appealing to the supernatural. Ironically, orbs in cemetery art represent faith, and logs, or tree trunks, are fairly common. This particular kind of headstone is rare, but can be found scattered in several different rural, Central-Illinois cemeteries. Being such a large monument, it seems likely that if a mistake had been made in the date, it would be difficult and expensive to correct. As for the reaction of locals: vandalism as a result of the legend has been a very real and present danger. But the cemetery is located on every map of the county, so keeping the curious away is almost an impossibility.

The most interesting aspect of the location, even more interesting than the legend itself, was the presence of a small village just south of the cemetery.



A comparison of the 1869 and 1893 plat maps for Ashmore Township. The roads changed and the village of St. Omer vanished in less than 25 years. (Note: *Jakes Branch*- the stream- doesn't appear on the 1869 map.)



The village, also named St. Omer, has been defunct for over a hundred years, and any remains, aside from a few, conspicuously-square fields of grass, have been completely obscured.

St. Omer, named after a 7th century French saint who was also known as Audomarus, was officially founded in 1852, although it had been called Cutler's Settlement since 1834. According to *The History of Coles County*, the village was a collection of around six houses, a store, post office, and a blacksmith's shop, but the Vol 1. Issue 3 May, 2006

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Coles County Map & Tour Guide says that forty to fifty families once lived there.

A church and schoolhouse still stood on the land, owned by the Barnes family, in 1893, but nothing remains of either of the buildings. St. Omer disappeared in the 1880s, around the same time both Caroline, the alleged witch, and Marcus (her husband) died. The small town of Hitesville, formerly located a few miles south east of Ashmore, suffered a similar fate, as was common for small communities in the late 1800s that weren't located near a railroad.

Historically, Marcus and Caroline's deaths are something of a mystery. According to Carolyn Stephens, a local historian, Marcus Barnes is said to have died in a sawmill accident in December of 1881. Caroline Barnes, only twenty-three years old, died two months later of pneumonia on either February 26th or 28th, depending on what document you look at. In yet another strange turn of events, Caroline's birth family, the Prathers, came to own the large plot of land directly south of what used to be St. Omer several years after her death.

Legends of witch's graves are not foreign to Central Illinois. The small community of Chesterville, a few miles west of Arcola, has its own witch's grave, but contrary to the St. Omer story, the Chesterville Witch actually has some evidence to back it up. There is no established story supporting the idea that Caroline Barnes was accused of witchcraft, let alone put to death for it. Many people died young of a wide variety of what we would now consider treatable illnesses in the harsh world of rural life in the 19th century. Such a death might be less romantic for believers in the myth, but it is more than likely what actually happened.

Whatever you believe, no one can deny that the fascinating story of St. Omer Cemetery and its long-vanished village has captured the imaginations of generations of Coles County residents. Offerings in the form of flowers or coins make regular appearances at the grave, and the tiny cemetery has found its way into nationally-published books and local newspapers.

If nothing else, Caroline Barnes and her family's unique monument have inadvertently kept the memory, and perhaps the cemetery itself, alive for many future generations.



