Treestump Tombstones in an Iowa Cemetery

by David A. Brose

photos by Steven Ohrn

TOMBSTONES carved in the shape of treestumps are often found among other more conventional grave markers in midwestern cemeteries. Treestump tombstones appeared as early as 1840, and the tradition survived until at least mid-twentieth century. The markers vary in height from fourteen inches to over eight feet.

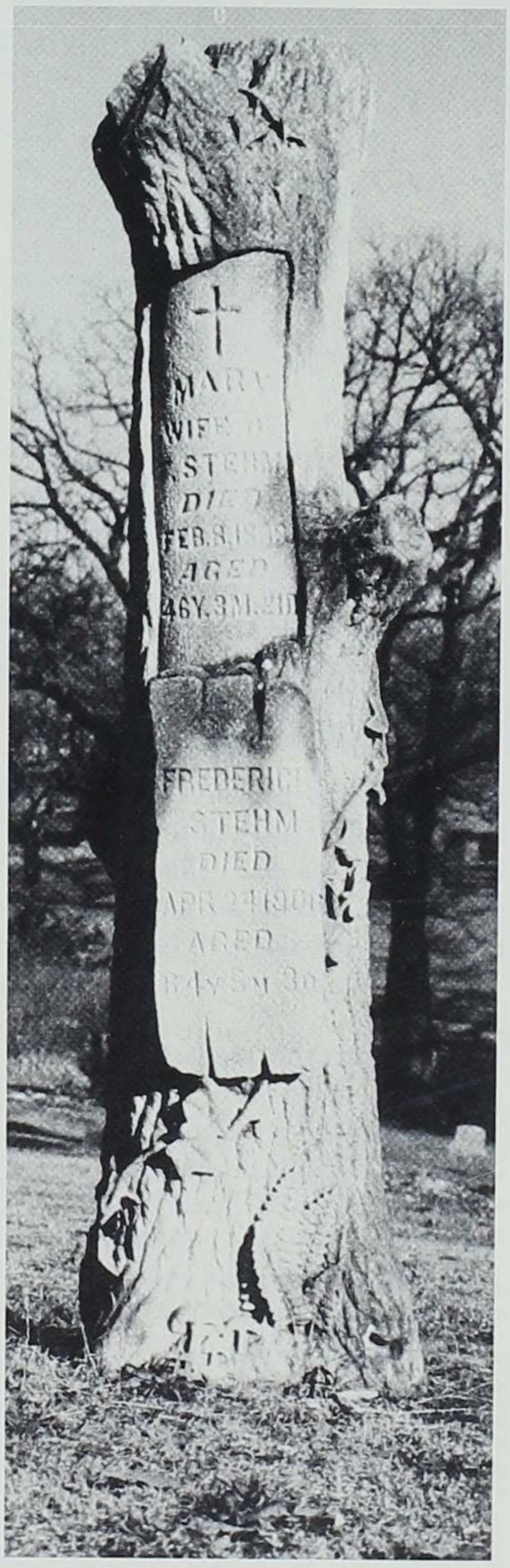
Treestump carvers generally chose Bedford limestone, quarried between Bloomington and Bedford, Indiana. Carving the characteristic "bark" is easier on even-grained limestone than on harder stones like granite. Carvers often added ornamentation to symbolize personality traits, habits, occupations, or hobbies of the deceased. At Woodland Cemetery in Des Moines, where these photos were taken, a range of examples illustrates the tradition.

Folklore professor Warren E. Roberts (Indiana University at Bloomington) explains, "These stones were popular because they were of low cost to produce, and the stonecarvers themselves found them to be easy to create. The log is very easy in size and scope to produce, and they can be ornamented with anchors and chains, flower symbolism, and the like that can represent and reflect the life of the person for whom they are made. With a treestump-style stone you had great latitude. If the carver made a mistake it could be integrated into the stone to look like part of nature. Other stonecarvers could not integrate a mistake into their work the way that these particular treestump carvers could."

Colorado stonecarver Henry Cicutto agrees that "they're not really so hard. The log is easy. Now when someone wants a log with an axe or an anchor with a chain, that's another matter." Yet one reason for the popularity of the treestump marker may have been its potential to be individualized with personal symbols.

The treestump itself symbolizes an ended life, as these markers most often replicate a broken tree trunk, abruptly cut off. Though one treestump marker in Woodland is actually ceramic rather than limestone, the size may symbolize the infancy of the person it commemorates. Only fourteen inches high, the ceramic marker was made as a tribute to infant Edward Louis Israel, whose short life spanned December 26, 1911 to January 21, 1912.

Details artfully carved into treestump markers bear more symbolism. The rose, for example, can symbolize everlasting love. One marker uses the symbol figuratively and literally. A treestump adorned with a large carved rose is inscribed "M.H. King and His Wife Rose." The limestone treestump that marks the grave of Henry Sanders (1858–1892) includes carved ivy, a symbol of strong and enduring faith and steadfastness. Another incorporates musical symbolism; a large harp is carved into a treestump marker inscribed "Louis." In the



Typically, a section of "bark" appears to have been peeled back, leaving space for carving.

Russell family plot, a carved book rests on top of a treestump marker inscribed "P.T.R."; the book may symbolize a love of literature or represent the Book of Life, a common Victorian symbol on grave markers.

Similar to the treestump markers are examples that use branches or logs. In the Russell family plot, a chair is formed out of a limestone slab for a seat and limestone "branches" for the arms and backrest. The marker for Peter Barton Henry (1820–1875) is a cross, made of two large limestone logs. The cross symbolizes the Christian faith of the deceased or "the old rugged cross."

Treestump markers sometimes bear the motto or insignia of the fraternal benefit life insurance society Woodmen of the World, or sometimes of Modern Woodmen of America. Denver monument carver Roy Erickson recalls, "Thirty or forty years ago people who belonged to Woodmen of the World would bring in a certificate which would entitle them to either fifty dollars, some of them maybe a hundred dollars, credit towards the purchase of a monument. It was part of their insurance policy. And [the organization] encouraged members of the Woodmen of the World to put the insignia on their markers." From a society catalog members could select markers carved to resemble treestumps, branches, logs, or the like. In choosing this sort of marker through their organization, they participated in a tradition practiced by many people.

The markers remained popular into the 1940s, roughly paralleling the decline of quarrying and stonecutting in the Bedford quarries. Although individuals across the country still carve treestumps, most modern stoneworkers lack the necessary skills. Taste and costs are also factors. Today's technician can laser-etch or sandblast-stencil a standardized stone marker (generally a granite blank, readily available at monument dealers) much more quickly and inexpensively than a craftsperson could handcarve the more individualized treestump marker. Furthermore, today's cemeteries often limit the height and size of markers to accommodate grass mowers. Modern tastes, methods, and restrictions simply leave no place for the limestone treestumps.

The question that remains is who carved the treestump markers that were apparently once so popular in Iowa and the Midwest. Stonecarvers traditionally carved their name near the bottom of the marker, but as the stone settles the name may sink from view. Because most treestumps are carved from Bedford limestone, it is possible that they were carved in southern Indiana, where the stone is quarried and where a deep-rooted tradition of carving still exists, and then shipped to Iowa, where a local cutter added the name and dates. Or perhaps treestump carving was a widespread skill, practiced in Iowa and elsewhere.

Though their origin remains a puzzle, the treestump markers we find in Iowa cemeteries clearly express the creativity and sensitivity of the carver. Still creating the treestumps, Colorado stonecarver D. Deorio observed, "I know that these will last. We leave our mark. These will be here long after I'm gone." □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources used include interviews by Phyllis Harrison of various Colorado stonecarvers in 1984; interviews between David A. Brose and Warren Roberts (1979 to present); and articles by Roberts in *Pioneer America*, including "Tools on Tombstones: Some Indiana Examples," 10 (June 1, 1978), 106-11; and "Traditional Tools as Symbols," 12 (Feb. 1980), 54–63. Brose has photographed and documented treestump tombstones in the Iowa towns of Des Moines, What Cheer, Marshalltown, and Cedar Falls.