



Locomotive parts in stone at Oak Woods Cemetery commemorate an engineer who died saving his passengers, while helmet and billy club speak of a policeman long departed.



Tribune photos by Quentin Douth

# Cemetery makes best of the past come alive

## Oak Woods has venerable history

By Johanna Stoyva

Back in 1853, when trains and horse-drawn trolley cars were the most rapid forms of transit, Oak Woods Cemetery was founded on Chicago's Southeast Side. Although the site, at 67th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, was considered to be "out in the country," families could take the 67th Street streetcar line right to the cemetery's entrance.

After visiting the grave of a loved one, families and friends would settle down to a picnic and the afternoon's leisure. This combination of duty and pleasure became so popular that the cemetery management opted to move the entrance from Cottage Grove Avenue to its present location at Greenwood Avenue—perhaps fearful that the revelers were undermining the place's decorum.

The Illinois Central Railroad and the streetcar company offered their services for transporting coffins to the cemetery. In the 1890s, for example, an entire funeral train could be rented for \$25, while one special coach of a train could be had for \$5.

Today a white 1956 Cadillac limousine is the preferred mode of traveling about the 183 acres of winding roads and meticulously groomed greens. The development of Oak Woods has remained faithful to the original plans drawn up by noted Cincinnati landscaper Adolph Strauch.

To 1980s eyes, accustomed to automobiles of varying cubic and triangular dimensions, the limousine's shape resembles that of some marine creature—a hammerhead shark, perhaps. But Bruce Holstrom, president of Oak Woods Cemetery Association, sees it differently.

"I think a cemetery's real mission is memorializing people and honoring the past," he says. "One way to honor the past is to use an old car." Holstrom, who has been president for about four years, has refrained from going earlier than 1956 with this particular tribute, however. "If you go back much further, you often don't get air conditioning."

Even if it's not an antique, a car is the easiest way to tour the cemetery, stopping to make forays into the thickets of endlessly varied monuments gracing the park.

No one style of gravestone dominates the landscape. A spartan cross, soaring 15 feet high, lies just across the path from a polished marble mausoleum designed with ancient Rome in mind. Its colonnades of slim pillars shroud a stone sarcophagus in which a Chicago grain trader from the old New York Van De Grift family is entombed. White sandstone pilings marking the graves of children snuggle into the close-cropped grass. Egyptian obelisks pierce the cool spring sky.

A disassembled stone steam locomotive commemorates a New York Central engineer who saved his passengers and crew from a head-on collision with another train at York, Ind., on July 27, 1887. "Gale Cramer told his crew to jump, then stayed on board because in those days, once the engineer jumped off, the brake would release again, making it even worse for the passengers," recounts Holstrom. "He was the only fatality in the train wreck." Passengers, grateful for Cramer's act of heroism, raised the funds to pay for the monument.

Tinted light streams through the stained-glass window at the rear of a Gothic mausoleum; the door is fortified by wrought iron spikes. James "Big Jim" Colosimo, from whom Al Capone inherited the Chicago racket, is buried here. Once a year, a bouquet of red carnations is left in front of the mausoleum.

Nearby, the statue of a woman kneels beside a flat stone, a bird's nest cupped in her hand. "Maternal Solicitude Awakened," reads the inscription.

"The Bronze Lady," as Holstrom and community representative Soubretta Skyles fondly refer to the 1890s monument, leans wearily against a rectangular slab of cool, polished stone. Her flowing drapery and tears perpetually mourn the deaths of members of the Eastman family.



Bruce Holstrom, president of the Oak Woods Cemetery Association, stands at the grave of track star Jesse Owens.



A lady weeping soundlessly at a gravesite is one of the more melancholy figures at Oak Woods.

From a granite base shaped into a Star of David rises the Eternal Light Monument, erected by the cemetery association to the memory of the 6 million Jews who died in Nazi Germany.

A small portion of Oak Woods is owned and maintained by three Chicago synagogues. The graves and mausoleums found here are reminiscent of an older, more European concept of a cemetery. The gravestones are close together in rows, and there is nothing park-like or landscaped about the area. Often photographs are set into the monuments, adding to a sense of mystery.

Oak Woods is perhaps best

known for its Confederate Monument, which was dedicated on May 30, 1885, before an audience of more than 100,000, including President Grover Cleveland and his cabinet. The 6,000 Confederate prisoners of war buried here were exhumed from land adjacent to Camp Douglas—what is now 34th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue—where many of them died of smallpox and cholera.

The soldiers had first been buried at City Cemetery, which became Lincoln Park. In 1867 the federal government purchased 2 acres of land at Oak Woods when they were disinterred from City Cemetery to make way for Lincoln Park.

To single out one person as the most-distinguished individual buried at Oak Woods would be impossible—the list of dignitaries and notables buried at the cemetery is long and varied.

Jesse Owens, who threw a wrench in Hitler's Aryan supremacy theory by winning the 100- and 200-meter sprints and the broad jump at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, is buried by one of the many manmade lakes. Jesse Binga, Chicago's first black banker, was buried at Oak Woods in 1915.

Despite the many prominent blacks buried at Oak Woods, Holstrom says that the cemetery discriminated against them from 1920 until the early 1960s. Before 1920, the cemetery, which was city's first private, non-denominational one, did not discriminate. From the '20s to the '60s, Holstrom says, blacks could only be buried at Oak Woods if they had purchased the plot before 1920 or

from a white person who owned a plot.

According to Holstrom, the city's seat of power moved from south to north, and this probably contributed to the change in the cemetery's policy. The area evolved from a suburb populated by wealthy and powerful industrialists, academics and merchants into the urban fortress described by Richard Wright in his novel "Native Son."

Nuclear physicist, Enrico Fermi, who achieved the first sustained nuclear chain reaction in 1942 in his lab at the University of Chicago, is buried beneath a simple grave marker.

Oak Woods also has its share of present-day figures. A map that shows who is buried in the Tower of Memories community mausoleum might lead one to believe that convicted heroin dealer William "Fluke" Stokes and his son Willie "The Wimp" are the most sought-after people interred there. In the upper left-hand corner of the map, their names are printed with arrows pointing to the mausoleum's Alcove of Love, where they are buried. [The mausoleum has several alcoves located off a central hallway.]

Willie was shot to death in 1984 outside a South Side motel. At his wake his body was shown in a Cadillac-shaped coffin with \$1,000 bills between his fingers. "Fluke," a convicted heroin dealer who had achieved the status of an urban Robin Hood of sorts, was gunned down two years later. He was buried with a telephone in his coffin.

Outside, the wind is picking up. "I lost my Mom last month," says a young woman visiting with a friend. "She's not buried here, but he brought me out here anyway."

"It's so peaceful..." she says, indicating that the cemetery's serenity has given her solace for her loss.

In spite of the Stokeses' popularity, Holstrom says the most asked-after grave is that of Ben Wilson. The No. 1 high school basketball player in the country in 1984, he was shot to death that November after a casual bumping incident turned into a robbery attempt. He was 17. "A lot of high school kids ask for directions there," Holstrom says.

Wilson's tombstone is engraved with a basketball player and a hoop. "Best In The Nation," reads the inscription, and at the top of

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the stone, "In God's Care."

While Oak Woods offers a panoramic view of the history of Chicago's South Side, it has also been working on bringing a visual panorama of art to the community, despite the incongruity of a mausoleum hallway being used as an art gallery.

Chicagoland Afro-American artists were featured in a show at the Tower of Memories in 1986. In February, the Oriental Institute of

the University of Chicago presented ancient artifacts from the Nubian Dynasties of Africa (3500 B.C. to 1200 A.D.), in tandem with works by the students at Alexander Dumas Elementary School, called "Impressions of Nubia."

Next on the agenda is a show entitled "A Day in the Park," which will run through May 28. Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily, the exhibit will feature maps and architectural materials such as origi-

nal drawings and blueprints for the early parks of Chicago found in recently opened park district vaults.

Oak Woods has found another, different way to work with its community: It has "adopted" Alexander Dumas Elementary School, just across 67th Street from the cemetery's entrance.

Holstrom is clearly delighted by the fact that students from the school make use of Oak Woods' ponds and plant life for natural

history experiments and come for history lessons. Most recently, the cemetery staff hosted a readathon, a story-telling day with writers, poets, actors, playwrights and educators reading stories to the students, plus stressing the importance of an education.

Skyles says people in the community feel that the cemetery belongs to them. She tells the story of going to visit the grave of her grandson, Milton James Blake Jr., who died when he was 13, and meeting three boys about his age

near the monument. "I told them that they were about the same age as he was, and they asked all kinds of questions. I told them, 'You take care of him, all right?' And they said they would."

Oak Woods will continue to sell plots for at least 70 more years, Holstrom says.

Recently, at the Nubian art exhibit, Holstrom respectfully reminded Rev. Jesse Jackson that Oak Woods would be there, should the need arise. "I'm not ready yet!" retorted Rev. Jackson.