

## Summer Travels are a Good Opportunity for Cemetery Visits

by Dee Gibson-Roles

With summer in full swing many people traveling stop by cemeteries in which one's ancestors are interred. There is something very satisfying to a genealogist in standing at a special ancestor's grave – something akin to a feeling of connection with the past.

Researchers should visit cemeteries armed with a good camera. Photographing a tombstone is a great way to collect the information in the shortest amount of time. For each photograph taken, the date, time, and position of the grave in the cemetery should be recorded. This information and the photograph can then be stored with family history files – either in hard copy or digitally.

Another way to obtain the information on a stone is by a rubbing. One should check with the cemetery officials before doing this, however, as the practice has been banned in some cemeteries due to the possibility of damage to the stone. NEVER attempt a rubbing on a stone which is chipping or crumbling or if it is not steady on its base. (We should note that taking a photograph of the stone is by far the preferable way to record the information on the stone.) One of the best materials to use for rubbings is interfacing material. It is readily available and very reasonably priced in craft and fabric stores. Another choice is rice paper, available at art supply stores. Cut a piece of the material and tape it to the stone. Position it so that it covers the surface of the stone and so that there is no risk of the rubbing material getting on the stone itself. After the material is securely anchored, rub the stone with chalk, rubbing wax, or crayon. Start by very gently rubbing, increasing the pressure to get the image desired. If chalk is used, spray it with a fixative before removing the rubbing from the stone. An advantage of using interfacing material is that wax can be set with a hot iron. Place the rubbing on a flat heat-proof surface such as an ironing board and put an old towel over the rubbing. Press down on the towel with a hot iron (do not move the iron across the towel). This will set the wax for preservation.

A word of caution concerning reading tombstones: never put anything other than water on a tombstone. For many years, chalk, talc, shaving cream, and other substances were used to bring out the letters on a stone to make it readable. It is now known that most all of these substances can lead to damage and deterioration of the stone. Once there is a small crack where water can enter, the stone is subject to the freezing/thawing cycle of the water in the winter, and the deterioration multiplies exponentially. A very handy item to have in cemetery research is a spray bottle filled with plain water. Fritze the water over the stone and allow to dry. There will be a window of about 30 seconds in which the surface will dry faster than the indentation of the letters, leaving the letters still darkened enough to distinguish them. This can be repeated several times until all the information is obtained, doing no more damage to the stone than a gentle mist of rain would do. Another excellent way to read a tombstone is to use a large mirror. Sometimes it may necessitate moving around until the perfect angle is found for the light to reflect from the mirror onto the stone, but once it does, the stone will usually be very readable.

Lichen, moss, and even mold and mildew may be found on the stone, especially in older, overgrown cemeteries and on older stones. The best way to clean the stone is with a soft brush and pure water. Cleaning solutions such as bleach can cause damage and start the deterioration process. Again, if the stone is chipped or crumbling, do not attempt to clean it.

And finally, a word of caution for the researcher him/herself: ALWAYS let someone know where you will be, especially in a remote cemetery. With the increase in violence and vandalism, it is also wise to avoid going alone. Observe where you are walking; some older cemeteries contain abandoned wells used for watering flowers on graves in the past. If the cemetery is overgrown, wait until the weather is cool enough to assure that uninvited guests such as snakes and spiders have retreated for the winter.