



Emma's UNMARKED REST

How the death of a firstborn baby reveals a family's struggle and the story behind potters' fields.

indigent and the unknown. The term's origin is biblical, referring to a field unsuitable for agriculture where potters would come to dig clay to fashion their wares, leaving holes and trenches that provided an almost ready-made burial ground for people with no other means.

Over time, the definition expanded, and potter's fields took on greater roles. In times of epidemic outbreak, they were enlisted as places where communities could bury their victims quickly to prevent further exposure. The graves would frequently be unmarked and the record keeping understandably sketchy. Most often, family members either did not or could not return to mark the grave.

But how did baby Emma come to rest in a \$10 city-owned plot? We feel baffled and a little angry. How could this very wanted firstborn baby, a baby with two loving parents who owned a successful farm, end up as an unmarked charity case? How could they have allowed this?

They may have had no other choice.

Protecting and Comforting

The death of a baby frequently came when a family was still young and may not have made arrangements for a family plot. At Beechmount Cemetery in Edmonton, Alberta, former administrator Yolanda Chrapko told me, "Here, the potter's field ... was dedicated to infants who were buried when there was either no family or the family had little or no money. Most often it was social services

that paid for these graves. Many were babies who died during the flu pandemic from 1912 to 1918. I believe that all these graves remain unmarked."

In Emma's day, some communities thought it comforting to have all the babies buried together, like a celestial nursery or play group. Infant graves are substantially smaller than adult graves, so keeping babies together made practical sense as well.

In times of loss, the community might step in to handle matters for the family, bypassing the need for arrangements. Kathy Samuelson, a family services counselor at the 125-year-old River View Cemetery in Portland, Oregon, says that often a "family or community felt they were protecting the grieving mother by telling her, 'we will take care of this.' The baby could have been in the ground before she even knew what happened."

Chrapko agrees: "Our experience has seen that very often the mothers were indeed too upset about the loss to look after things and the fathers 'just did it.' This still is true in many cases today. One can only imagine what the family was thinking and feeling at that time."

Tragic Events

All this information combined to give us what seems to be an accurate picture of why baby Emma came to rest in the potter's field. Her death from whooping cough, a highly contagious bacterial infection, would have been

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

THEY ARRIVED ON A wave of hope, my husband's great-grandmother and her husband. It was 1910, and Glasgow, Montana, on the "high line" less than 50 miles from the Canadian border, was riding the crest of the homesteading boom, one that would explode

and fade just as quickly and surely as its sonic counterpart.

Their marriage would implode within five years, flogged by a string of failed pregnancies, crops, and dreams. Her path led to the state hospital, although in time she rose from her situation, remarried, and lived out her life in southwestern Montana. Her husband moved north to an expatriate's life in Canada, alone, as far as we know. Nothing remained in Glasgow to suggest they had ever been there.

Except Emma.

The grass grows—or at least, it struggles to—over the nondescript field. In winter, it is frozen solid. In summer, it is parched and protests under the foot. "We can only afford to water the part near the street," the cemetery keeper tells us apologetically. Traverse the field as many times as you will, and you will never find her. But Baby Emma is here, in the potter's field where she was laid to rest 90 years ago. Placed in her parents' arms on a winter night in 1914, she was a candle in the wind, flickering three short weeks until she was snatched away by pneumonia and whooping cough.

I've come over 1,000 miles to reach this field. My research partner, a native Montanan, picked me up in Billings and drove us the last 270 miles. We wonder: are we Emma's first visitors in 90 years?

Why the Potter's Field?

The featureless slope on which we stand is a potter's field, a term generally used for cemetery sections set aside for the





Finding Your Unmarked Ancestor

Locating an ancestor who may be resting in a potter's field is often possible. Many cemeteries keep good burial records of their unmarked areas. "At River View, we know who these people are," says family services counselor Kathy Samuelson. "I have gone out and found them for descendants. People have called us looking for [an ancestor's grave], and we have found them here."

A caretaker at Portland, Oregon's 100-acre Mt. Calvary cemetery notes that if you are able to locate an ancestor's unmarked gravesite, it doesn't hurt to look around for a headstone. The site may in fact be marked. Ground tends to settle over time, and very old headstones sometimes sink below the lawn line and become overgrown. A pole probe sometimes reveals a headstone, which can then be dug out and reinstalled at ground level.

a cause for public concern—her almost immediate burial confirms the urgency. The community may have been in the grip of an outbreak, losing other babies and children at the same time; there are a number of baby graves clustered together in the Glasgow potter's field.

We knew that Emma's mother endured multiple miscarriages and serious post-pregnancy health issues both before and after Emma's birth. Emma's death had dealt her the double blow of losing her baby on top of her own physiological trauma. With no other family around, it would have been left to Emma's father to deal with burial arrangements for his first-born child as well as care for a wife

who may have been critically ill. It's easy to imagine public health or social services workers coming to him and saying, "This is where we are putting the babies, the city is providing the space, and this needs to happen quickly. You can come back and mark the grave later."

"Emma's father may well have intended to come back and do something about a marker," says Samuelson. "But many variables could have gotten in the way. We all know that there are times in our lives when we fully intend to do something that just never gets done. It is not to say Emma's parents didn't care; it's just to say that life events can conspire as to become overwhelming."

Too true. Not only were the cemetery's records not precise enough to locate Emma after her burial, but in the space of a few short years following, her parents bore the loss of several more pregnancies, and the community suffered through a world war, an influenza epidemic, and a years-long drought that financially broke thousands of families.

Today

So Emma's grave remains unmarked. Although we have come to understand why, this new explanation has not lessened the grief we feel for her parents' loss and for the life Emma never got to live. But it has given us peace in the knowledge that good people made honorable decisions and did the very best they could under terribly painful circumstances.

With today's upsurge of interest in family history, increasing numbers

of relatives are finding lost ancestors and buying markers for previously barren graves. Generations later, we are seeing value in that memorialization—validation that these lives mattered, even if the marker is just a very simple name and date.

I would buy the marker myself, but the parched potter's field in Glasgow, Montana, will not give up its secret, will not answer our question—*Where is baby Emma?* But we are close. How close? We pull scraggly tufts of grass away from several markers reading "Unknown Baby." We choose one.

It's close enough.

ELLEN NOTBOHM is a Portland, Oregon-based author and columnist, a two-time *ForeWord Book of the Year* finalist, and a contributor to numerous publications and websites around the world. Her previous *Ancestry Magazine* articles are available on her website at <www.ellennotbohm.com>.



Why Is This Grave Unmarked?

Lack of identification and incomplete recordkeeping can result in an unmarked grave, but the most common reason for a grave to be missing a headstone is purely financial. Burials could be just as proportionally expensive for our ancestors as they are today. Consider the case of a husband dying young, leaving a widow with children and no income. In earlier days, a burial with all the traditional trimmings would have had major financial impact at a time when providing basic living necessities was all the surviving could muster. "Money was often the issue," says former cemetery administrator Yolanda Chrapko, "but also many families didn't really see the importance of it. It's not right or wrong; it's just the way it was."

New York's Hart Island: The Most Famous Potter's Field

The potter's field at Hart Island, New York, dates back to the Civil War era and is home to some 750,000 burials. It is tended by Department of Corrections inmates, who in 1940 petitioned the warden to allow them to build a memorial to the "unbefriended dead." Today, a 30-foot monument stands in the center of the island, engraved with a single word: PEACE.

Compassionate Families

In generations previous, before our society became as mobile as it is today, families were less likely to disperse over the course of their lives, and many bought family burial plots with as many as 30 or 40 spaces. Family researchers today will sometimes find a person buried in the family plot whose name doesn't seem to fit. Who is this person? A little bit of delving may uncover a situation where the family stepped in to offer assistance to someone in need. Perhaps the maid's mother died unexpectedly, or a close friend suffered a sudden loss. In these cases, a family with a large plot might help with the financial burden by offering a grave.



A LONELY FIELD: Few graves are marked in the Glasgow, Montana, potter's field where author Ellen Notbohm's relative is buried. But even an unmarked gravesite deserves to be memorialized—regardless of the exactness of the location.