De Kalb's Union Cemetery

by Bryan Thompson

The Town of De Kalb's Union Cemetery is located on the Risley Road about a quarter mile south of its intersection with the Old De Kalb Road. On November 4, 1863 a meeting of "the inhabitants of the Risley neighborhood and vicinity" was held at the local schoolhouse "for the purpose of organizing an association to purchase and fit up a cemetery". Sidney O. Child was elected chairman and Clark Frazier was elected secretary. Others in attendance included: William H. Smith, Horatio N. Risley, Obed S. Risley, Nelson Risley, George Lobdell, John Merithew, A. Merithew, Calvin Haven, and C. H. Walker.

It was resolved to call the association the Union Cemetery Association. No indications appear in the records as to how this name was arrived at. It was agreed that there would be seven trustees and the annual meeting would be held on the third Tuesday of September at 6PM. The first trustees were: Andrew Barton, Clark Frasier, William H. Smith, H. N. Risley, Samuel D. Stratton, George P. Cahoon, Andrew Merithew. January 1, 1864 Ebenezer and Aurelia Child sold the association one acre of land for the consideration of $80 and one family burial plot.

The association was to be responsible for keeping the grounds fenced. This original plot was located a little way off of the road with a 25 ft. wide right of way leading to it.

In January 1864 the association held a meeting at Andrew Barton's. Reuben Gardner replaced William Smith as trustee and was elected Sexton, a position he would hold for the next 40 years. The association voted to hire Mr. Gutterson to build a fence around the cemetery and pay him $50 if he finished it by the spring of 1865. The fence was painted in 1866 and a spade was purchased for the opening of graves. In 1869 the annual meeting was changed to the first Tuesday in May. The first burial in the cemetery was that of H. S. Cahoon.

Some interesting notes from the early record book include: 1878 The season "being earlier than common", the annual meeting was held on April 8th. In 1880 the meeting was adjourned without doing any business "owing to its being a good time for seeding only 2 or 3 came."

The Union cemetery is laid out in the classic Victorian park style with beautiful rows of Maples. Reuben Gardner is probably largely responsible for the layout of the cemetery. As Sexton he was responsible for all maintenance and the opening and closing of the graves. He acted in this position for over 40 years.

The beautiful trees that dominate the cemetery today probably date from a May 3, 1881 resolution to "meet in two weeks to plant trees and flowers" at the cemetery. After the flowers and trees were planted evidently it was decided it was time to keep the grounds mowed. A bill for $3 was accepted from Reuben Gardner in May 1882 for mowing the grounds twice the previous year. No such payment had been noted before that date.

As the expenses of maintaining the cemetery increased, the association increased the price of lots to $7.50 in 1885. The fence and gates required continual work and are discussed often in the record. In 1902 a large expense was encumbered for trimming the trees. In 1894 the association voted for the first time to buy the quarter acre of land between the road and the cemetery, however this purchase

was to wait sometime yet. In 1905 the association voted to purchase the same land (to be donated by Mr. Child in exchange for maintenance of his lot) and fence in the cemetery with an iron fence. Another special meeting was called in May 1908 to buy the above mentioned land from S. 0. Child for $80. This purchase was finally completed in April 1909.

A new woven wire fence was put up in 1909. In 1913 the beautiful arch with iron gates was purchased for $52.10. After the purchase of the new land the cemetery association evidently needed to raise more money. They twice voted "All persons owning lots in said cemetery who have not paid their assessments within so many days after notice is posted. If said assessments are not paid before the time stated has expired, the lots will be held for sale and the bodies removed from said lots." There is no evidence in the record that any bodies were ever removed.

In 1915 the sexton was paid to mark all unmarked graves with wooden markers. In 1916 a new cemetery map was drawn up and the lots were renumbered. In 1917 the association voted to incorporate itself again. Although the association possesses such papers they are not recorded in the courthouse and it appears that the association still functions under its original 1864 charter.

There is a five year break in the association records at this time but by 1923 the association had established a perpetual care fund. In 1929 the association changed its meeting time to the evening of the last Tuesday before Decoration Day. The first power mower was purchased by the association in 1950. By 1961 the association was again in need of more land. They purchased a strip on the north and eastern sides from James Chase. An additional strip of land was purchased from Enos Herschberger in 1998. Today the Union cemetery is a beautifully maintained example of a Victorian Park Rural Cemetery. The majestic maple trees and sweeping curved drive stand as a living memorial to the community spirit of many generations of the neighborhood.

Sources:

County Clerk (ND) Deeds Liber 71C page 311, Liber 180A page 374, Liber 692 page 71, Computer record #199800000332 St Lawrence County Clerk's office, Canton, NY.

County Clerk (N. D.) Religious Incorporations Liber 2 page 238 St Lawrence County Clerk's office, Canton, NY.

Union Cemetery Association (ND) Minutes Book One Union Cemetery Association of De Kalb.

Union Cemetery Association (ND) Minutes Book Two Union Cemetery Association of De Kalb.