

Barbara Wendt (below, left) and Helen Hansen know that Oakland Cemetery is alive with stories. Below, for example, is the "Ministers' Monument," which marks the graves of three ministers who died of cholera in 1849.

*Story by John Przybys
Photos by Chris Clark*



Cemetery alive with tales of the dead

Pardon the pun, but the history of Sandusky's cemeteries actually is pretty lively.

It's a history of people like city councilman Voltaire Scott, who once rented cemetery land to a grocer in an action termed "damnable" by a local newspaper.

It's a history of the Sandusky cholera epidemic, and a grotesquely amusing newspaper account about some of its victims.

And, like any history, it's replete with numerous gaps, patiently — history is always patient — waiting to be filled in by books, newspapers, governmental records or the sharp memories of its players.

Barbara Wendt, a member of the Oakland Cemetery Board, has compiled a history of the cemetery and its predecessors. In the process, she's unearthed some fascinating information, not only about the cemeteries themselves, but about life as it was in Sandusky's past.

For example, many Sanduskians might be surprised to learn that, among the area's burial grounds, Oakland Cemetery is a relative newcomer.

Sandusky's first white settlers arrived about 1810. Apparently, Mrs. Wendt said, there was a burial ground located on the east side of Columbus Avenue, between Water and Market Streets, near what is now the Star Cafe.

No official records of that cemetery exist. But an 1889 history of the county calls it the "first ground within the limits of the city ... that

was used for burial purposes."

The account adds that the grounds were "not by any means used by the white residents" of the area.

An 1873 letter written by one of Sandusky's first lawyers mentions that his wife's remains were buried on his home lot. Mrs. Wendt said, "and it is possible that this was the custom followed by other early white settlers."

A more formal burial site was located at the foot of Shelby Street, in an area known as "West Battery." No official records verify this cemetery's existence. Mrs. Wendt said, although it is mentioned in other historical reports.

It is not known whether any remains still are buried at the site. However, in 1974, the Erie County Historical Society erected a marker there to identify it as Sandusky's first cemetery.

Action to develop Sandusky's first municipal cemetery was taken in 1830, when a petition presented to city council asked that the city purchase land for a burial ground.

One year later, the city acquired two acres on what is now Harrison Street. That cemetery — known today as the Cholera Cemetery — is recognized as the first municipal cemetery of record.

However, Mrs. Wendt said, the city's population grew rapidly, and the cemetery quickly began to fill.

The cholera epidemic of 1849 compounded the problem. From July 1 to Sept. 7 of 1849 — a year in which the city's total population was 5,667 —



Sarah Parish was the wife of Francis Drake Parish, who was active in the "underground railroad."

357 deaths were recorded, with unreported cases eventually bringing that total to about 400.

In 1849, a council committee began to pursue the possibility of obtaining another burial ground for the city. On Feb. 22, 1850, the city bought the 134-acre Jane L. Williams farm in Perkins Township for \$35 an acre,

and Oakland Cemetery saw its first burial in September.

Mrs. Wendt's compilation is not a dusty, boring recitation of facts. Rather, it reads easily and includes a number of anecdotes — often humorous — about the times and its people.

For example, Mrs. Wendt quotes a Sandusky *Clarion* article about the 1832 cholera death of Capt. S. Wadsworth of the schooner "Ligure."

The paper said: "he was not a resident, and his habits had recently been such as to be a cause of cholera. During the period there were thirty or thirty-five deaths, all of them strangers or persons of dissipated habits so that there was no loss to the city."

Mrs. Wendt enjoys that quote, part of her effort to "throw a few things in here just to make it more interesting to the layman."

Such old newspaper accounts are "fascinating," she said. "Everything about this is: The weddings, the funerals. Have you ever read some of those old obituaries? They're wonderful."

Another example: About 3,500 of Sandusky's 5,667 residents fled the city during the 1849 cholera epidemic. Because nobody was available to dig graves, one story has it that the "town drunkard" volunteered his services, and dug graves throughout the summer for cholera victims.

Equally intriguing is the case of Councilman Voltaire Scott who, in

1894, took an action the Sandusky *Weekly Register* called "Damnable and an Act of Vandalism."

It seems Scott rented a portion of the Cholera Cemetery — which was, by then, in a state of advanced disrepair — to Wendel Lieb, a grocer who lived at its southwest corner. Gravestones were removed, and Lieb plowed up much of the land to prepare for corn planting the following spring.

Lieb also used an unplowed portion of the land to slaughter hogs, Mrs. Wendt said. In fact, he was doing just that when visited by a committee city council had formed after receiving complaints from relatives of persons buried in the cemetery.

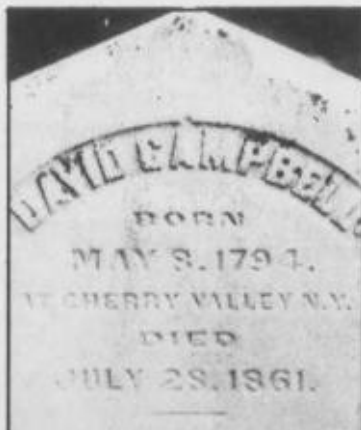
The committee determined that the leasing was done "without the knowledge or consent of the council." A resolution ordering the return of the gravestones was defeated, as was a resolution to begin impeachment proceedings against Scott.

Although Scott's action had not been officially approved by council as a whole, Mrs. Wendt said, it appears he had discussed the matter individually with council members and cemetery trustees.

(A historical footnote: Scott was instrumental in bringing the "Boy with the Boot" to Sandusky. The statue was brought here for use in a park at the foot of Wayne Street.)

In compiling her history, Mrs. Wendt consulted: materials by local historian Charles Frohman; a report

• Please turn to B-3.



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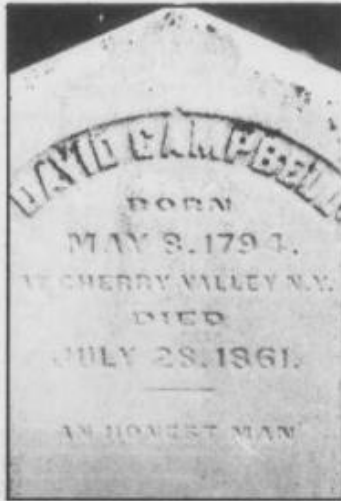
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David Campbell was the publisher of the Firelands' first newspaper, "The Sandusky Clarion." The headstone describes him as "an honest man."



Twin stones mark the resting place of Dr. George Anderson and his wife, Eleanor. When Sandusky was founded in 1818, Anderson became its first physician.



This weathered stone marks the grave of Moors Farwell, the first mayor of Sandusky following the city's incorporation in 1824.

Cemetery alive with tales of dead

• Continued from B-1.

about Sandusky's public cemeteries written in 1965 by Lynn Rosino, and the memory and expertise of Helen Hansen of the Follett House Museum. Also used were several historical references and a variety of city records.

"This wasn't a one-person effort," Mrs. Wendt said. "This has not been all my work. I've just put it together."

Mrs. Wendt found few discrepancies among her many sources. Presenting a greater problem were omissions and large gaps in the cemeteries' histories.

For instance, she said, "I could not believe that there was not a record someplace in the city about the building of the (Oakland) chapel and the sexton's home. But there doesn't seem to be."

Mrs. Wendt enjoys digging through historical records, but conceded that it can be frustrating.

"I thought at one point that I'd like to write the church history of Sandusky," Mrs. Wendt said. Then, laughing, she added, "but I don't think I'll live long enough."

"The thing that was frustrating about this is, for instance, I'd see a mention in a (newspaper) clipping about some action taken at a city commission meeting 'last night.' And there would be no mention of it in the minutes."

In addition, there is a long period of time for which little information can be found about Oakland, she said, "which may mean nothing happened. We don't know."

Mrs. Wendt has been working periodically on the history since 1980. "Then, this last winter, I just made up my mind I was going to finish this with what I had put together and, hopefully, get some response from other people to make it more complete."

"If we don't get any response, at least we can stick this in the file and, when they want to look it up, say, 'At least this much is done.'"