My first impulse was to entitle this essay “Dead People Can Be Really Funny Sometimes.” After my friends suggested counseling, I abandoned the original plan in favor of the present title—though not without some regret, because there really was an important point buried within this seemingly insensitive frivolity. Death may not be funny, but people often are, and it is in the human response to this rite of passage—sometimes collectively, but most often individually—that we find the basis for much of what we would call death-based humor. And nowhere, I would contend, is this phenomenon more visible than in the graveyard.

We begin, then, with a paradox. Graveyards, after all, are places of dread and loathing, or so we have been conditioned to believe. A great deal of our traditional folklore supports this reaction. Throughout much of the twentieth century, older superstitious dread, combined with contemporary death denial, affected behavior to the point where graveyards (now known as “cemeteries” or, most recently, “memorial parks”) became the most conspicuously avoided elements of the modern constructed landscape. Surely, this would seem the most unlikely of environments to spawn idiosyncratic and sometimes quite aggressive (i.e., “in your face”) expressions of humor. Yet humor is definitely there, its presence becoming increasingly evident in recent times. Modern graveyard humor’s manifestations are principally verbal, supplemented in some instances by visual elements. Its focal point is in large part the individual gravemarker, with a range of expression that covers the full spectrum from subtle wit to blatant tastelessness. The vast majority of instances are the result of deliberate decision making, either on the part of the commemorated individuals or others close to them. Yet there are occasional examples of clearly unintentional humor, or of humorous responses stemming from changing cultural perspectives. Finally, there is the matter of the graveyard as staging point for humorous expression by others. Put another way, you don’t have to be dead to be funny!
VERBAL HUMOR

For a gravemarker, whose primary purpose is to serve as a posthumous material surrogate for the person departed, to have any efficacy, it must provide at least the most basic and minimal inscribed data—a personal identifier and, perhaps, a date. Indeed, a number of the earliest markers found in North America consist of no more than a set of initials and a death date crudely cut into a piece of roughly hewn fieldstone. As gravestones started to become more elaborate—as early as the 1670s—specialized carvers, a number of them trained in England and other European countries, graced their handiwork with increasingly more detailed visual decorations, accompanied by a proportionate degree of length and complexity in verbal inscriptions. Over the next 250 years, the verbal inscriptions, which were largely rhyming epitaphs ranging from simple couplets to many lines, and the visual decorations found upon the same stones evolved in lockstep. Harsh reminders of mortality and a stern insistence upon rigorous piety gave way to softer, and often romanticized, expressions of sentimentality and a confident belief in the attainability of paradise. If you sense, given the thrust of the present essay, that something is missing from this pattern, you are entirely correct. Until the last several decades of the twentieth century, death, at least if judged by the material testimony of the graveyard, was an eminently serious business. Humor in any form, whether blatant or in more subtle guises such as whimsy or even delicately playful wit, is simply not a significantly identifiable element in American (or European, for that matter) gravestone inscriptions throughout the greater part of their history.

Which brings about the need for an important digression at this point. How can the confident declaration that concludes the preceding paragraph possibly be correct? Have we not, many of us at least, actually seen examples of such older graveyard humor, epitaphs whose wit and pungency cannot fail to make us chuckle and bring a smile to our faces? Indeed we have, and the sad fact is that we have been duped, for they are in almost all instances entirely spurious. Let us take but two examples: “I Told You I Was Sick,” and “Here Lies [supply any name], Wife of [———], Who on [supply any date] Began to Hold Her Tongue.” Though the first of these has actually begun to appear on recently placed markers (life, after all, does imitate art more frequently than we might care to admit), the long history of these two gravestone utterances, and countless others of their ilk, is due to their having been repeatedly quoted but never properly documented.
The chief culprits in this are a number of small and cheaply printed booklets—sometimes in the shape of gravestones—with grotesque titles such as *The Itty-Bitty Bathroom Book of Bodacious Tombstone Epitaphs* (okay, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but close enough to make the point). They are not particularly difficult to find. Look in the card section of lower-ecl-elon gift stores, or in the glide path to supermarket checkout stands, wedged in somewhere between the junk food and copies of the *National Enquirer*. Seldom providing any documentation for their humorous “epitaphs” (at most a town or city name, and sometimes a year), they quickly go in and out of print, cannibalizing each other even as they provide a sort of dubious immortality to this corpus of ephemeral graveyard humor. Oddly enough, there are occasional real epitaphs indiscriminately intermixed with the phony ones. This becomes doubly frustrating since, as colonial American gravestone expert James Slater has recently pointed out, the ability to “ferret out actual epitaphs from fake ones cannot be assured from these little books” (2001, 9). As if things were not bad enough already, in the past decade a great many of the spurious epitaphs from the “Itty-Bitty” books have migrated to a number of decidedly non-scholarly Internet web sites, where they enjoy a parallel cyberspace existence, reaching ever-widening audiences of gullible believers and compounding the problem of authenticity beyond hope of remedy. The irony in all of this is the fact that—as we shall shortly see—it is entirely unnecessary, for there is plenty of material in American graveyards which is every bit as funny, and a lot more real, than these largely fabricated examples.

Several years ago, while strolling through a cemetery in Albany, Oregon, my eye was caught by a contemporary flat marker for an individual named Henry J. “Pappy” Padra, who had died in 1986 (figure 1). The sandblasted image of a man panning for gold first attracted my attention, as I was quite preoccupied with visual indicators of occupational and recreational pursuits on gravemarkers at the time. But it was the short inscription at the bottom of the stone that caused me to burst out laughing: “Pardon Me For Not Standing.” Yes, the figure in the image is kneel- ing, but it was immediately obvious that the accompanying statement had a somewhat different reference. Clearly a sense of humor—and the ability to deal with the emotionally complex issue of death in a manner quite outside the norms of conventional expression—lay behind this arresting contemporary epitaph. The idea wasn’t totally original: around the mid-dle of the twentieth century a number of popular American magazines engaged in the practice of asking celebrities to compose their own
epitaphs (Klisiewicz 2001, 26), and variants of this particular epitaph are attributed to a number of figures, including writer Ernest Hemingway and silent film star Clive Brook (Self-Composed Epitaphs 1984, 5). Additionally, a number of the “Itty-Bitty” books throughout the years have featured this oh-too-cutesy epitaph supposedly found on a stone in Ruidoso, New Mexico (no cemetery named):

Here Lies
Johnny Yeast
Pardon Me
For Not Rising

I would have liked to learn the circumstances behind the choosing of this particular epitaph on the Padra stone, but, unlike a number of the instances to be discussed shortly, my efforts some fifteen years later to reconstruct the story of this 1986 marker proved fruitless. Gravestones, like crimes, become increasingly difficult to investigate as time elapses and the trail becomes “cold”. Still, my encounter with this small contemporary marker had the effect of alerting me to the presence of real and consciously created humor in the graveyard; my senses were sharpened in anticipation of more.

I was not disappointed. Soon, as I began to focus my attention more closely upon verbal inscriptions (prior to this time my eyes, particularly in more recent burial areas, were programmed to focus on visual motifs to the virtual exclusion of most other detail), it became apparent that “Pappy” Padra’s interjection of humor into his final material testament was no fluke. Rather, it was part of a growing trend in modern American graveyard commemoration. The majority of such humorous inscriptions
are relatively short and unrhymed (thus, in a technical sense, not true “epitaphs”), and they cover the entire spectrum from cleverly witty to blatantly crude, e.g.:

The Difficult He Did Right Away;
The Impossible Took A Little Longer

I Said I’d Live To Be 100. What Happened?
(1992, Hardy Martens—aged 76—Dallas Cemetery, Dallas, Oregon)

This Wasn’t In My Schedule Book
(1995, Helen Louise Jones, Lone Fir Cemetery, Portland, Oregon)

Loved Everyone /
Loved His Friends and Hated His Enemies
(1974, Sadie Raye and Carl E. Lynn, Eureka Cemetery, Newport, Oregon)

This Is Indeed A True Bummer

Don’t Get Caught With Your Pants Down
(1990, Willard W. Ricketts, Clagett Cemetery, Keizer, Oregon)

Put Your Ass On Some Class
(1988, E. Kalani Padaken, Valley Isle Memorial Park, Paia, Maui, Hawaii / in conjunction with incised Harley-Davidson motorcycle logo)
Born A Fighter—Died A Fighter
—Now I Am Really Pissed—
(1985, Jacob B. Fisher, Woodlawn Cemetery, Las Vegas, Nevada)

Slightly up the ladder of complexity from these utterances is the rhyming couplet found beneath the image of a bucking bronco on the 1981 stone for former rodeo cowboy Ed McKinley in Hilltop Cemetery, Independence, Oregon (figure 2):

Ain’t No Horse Can’t Be Rode
Ain’t No Man Can’t Be Throwned

McKinley’s epitaph is actually a fairly well-established proverbial couplet in American cowboy and rodeo lore (Cunningham 1996), turning up in everything from cowboy poetry to practical advice columns (Underwood 1999, 32). Paired with the visual image, it evokes a sense of the self-deprecating humor found in any number of western texts pairing horses and riders (one thinks immediately of songs such as Curley Fletcher’s “The Strawberry Roan”), a quality strongly present in the personality of McKinley himself, who chose the design and inscription for his marker while still alive as a wry commentary upon the ups and downs of his sporadic career as a rodeo performer (McKinley 1988).

Another, even more complex instance of self-composed and pre-ordered comic gravestone verse is found upon the marker for Paul Lennis Swank (1906–1984), a member of an occupational folk group
with a tradition of esoteric lore every bit as rich as that of cowboys (Meyer 1989b, 76–77). The town cemetery of Canyonville, Oregon, where Swank’s marker is found, is filled with material testimony to this community’s traditional ties to Oregon’s logging industry. There are markers fashioned of log segments or of crosscut sections suspended by chains from pipe frames, parts of logging equipment transformed into folk markers, as well as commercial markers incised with images from logging life. Verbal references are also abundant, and sometimes quite ingenious in their application of occupational imagery, as on the 1986 stone for Virgil R. “Mutt” Campion:

No More Logs Do I Pull  
No More Whistles Do I Hear  
With My Savior Now I Rest  
A Yarder Engineer

But the epitaph on Paul Swank’s gravemaker carries this process to a whole new level:

Here Under The Dung Of Cows And Sheep  
Lies An Old Highclimber Fast Asleep.  
His Trees All Topped And His Lines All Hung,  
They Say The Old Rascal Died  
Full Of Rum.

When I first encountered this stone some years ago in the course of research for an article on logger gravemarkers in the Pacific Northwest, I was struck by the fact that a death date was not present, indicating the possibility that the person celebrated upon it was still alive. This indeed turned out to be the case, and in subsequent interviews Mr. Swank outlined to me the process by which he came to create his own gravestone (Swank 1983). The epitaph was, he claimed, self-composed, although he admitted freely to the influence of the often quite humorous logger poetry he had enjoyed listening to throughout his adult life. He chose these lines because they represented, as he put it, “me,” but felt it necessary to have the stone made and placed upon his plot while still living because he feared that otherwise his wishes would either not be carried out or might be somehow watered down. There already had been enough watering down, he said: when he submitted his original order to the monument dealer, the operative word in the next-to-last line of the epitaph was “bastard,” but, the carver being unwilling to use this language on a
gravestone, he was forced to compromise on “rascal.” This may have indeed been the case, but I have always suspected that, like some of Richard Dorson’s informants in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (Dorson 1952), this old timer was having a good time putting on the “perfesser” fellow who had come down from the ivory tower to do a little fieldwork in the real world. Regardless, the paired elements of occupational pride and good-natured humor present on Paul Swank’s gravemarker (his death date was added in 1984) are more than sufficient to bring a smile to those who come upon it.

Perhaps the most interesting modern effort in this vein is the 1983 marker found in Logan, Utah’s City Cemetery for Russell J. Larsen. The front side of this small upright stone is unremarkable, consisting of Mr. Larsen’s name, his dates, and a brief record of his naval service during World War II. Oftentimes, cemetery visitors—even experienced ones—fail to take the time to examine the reverse side of upright gravemarkers, in which case they would unfortunately miss the inscription (figure 3) which makes this marker anything but ordinary:

Two Things I Love Most,
Good Horses And Beautiful
Women, And When I Die I Hope
They Tan This Old Hide Of Mine
And Make It Into A Ladies Riding
Saddle, So I Can Rest In Peace
Between The Two Things I Love
Most.

Again we have an example of a humorous epitaph based upon older elements of oral tradition. Folklorist Barre Toelken (1995, 37–38) has pointed out the use of remarkably similar lines in a poem entitled “The Two Things in Life that I Really Love” by contemporary cowboy poet Gary McMahan, and is convinced that, in both instances, “...the poem comes out of cowboy tradition” (2000). The connection, especially in cowboy verse, between women and horses is well established and continues to find currency, as in the opening lines of this recent cowboy poem by Fred Engel entitled “Remember the Cow”:

A Friend Of Mine Once Offered A Toast,
To The Two Things In Life That He Loved Most,
“Women And Horses,” He Blurted Out. . . . (Engel 1997)
Larsen’s use of this linkage, however, definitely takes it to a wholly different level. His decision to have the verse—with its clever use of a blatantly erotic image—inscribed upon his tombstone says much to his sense of humor and his desire to leave a lasting material testament to an important element of his worldview. There is definitely more here one would like to know, but again the trail has become cold. Since I first encountered this stone in 1992, I have tried in vain to learn more about Larsen and his intriguing monument, but the closest I have come is a brief conversation I had with a groundskeeper (who did not wish to be identified) in the Logan City Cemetery: “Yes, I knew him,” he said. “He was a real character. It was his liver that got him.”

**VISUAL HUMOR**

The impact of a gravestone’s statement is often most powerfully achieved through a mutually reinforcing pairing of verbal inscription and visual image. This is a principle the Puritans understood well, their elaborately carved gravestones often incorporating such symbiotic combinations as a skull and crossbones perched above the injunction *Memento Mori* (“Remember Death”), or a spent hourglass with the statement “My Glass Is Run.” The Victorians practiced similar pairing, and frequently accompanied the image of a rosebud broken at the stem with the words “Budded On Earth To Bloom In Heaven” upon children’s gravemarkers. In our own time, one is more likely to find markers which employ this pairing technique to emphasize the importance of recreational or
occupational pursuits—the image, say, of a person bowling with the legend “Scoring In Heaven,” or of a 18-wheeler semi-truck with the phrase “Last Load Delivered.”

Humor—most often of the whimsical variety—may also be readily achieved on contemporary gravemarkers through use of this principle of paired elements. An excellent example is the 1986 upright marker found in Seattle, Washington’s Mt. Pleasant Cemetery for Neil E. Edwards (figure 4). Depicted upon the face of the polished black granite surface is the meticulously detailed image of a 1957 Studebaker, with clearly visible letters and numerals on its license plate, and the words “I’ve Had A Great Ride” beneath. The monument was executed by Quiring Monuments of Seattle, a firm known throughout the industry for its leadership and creativity in the modern trend towards highly personalized gravemarkers, but the design concept itself was the result of a careful collaboration between Quiring Monuments and Mr. Edwards’s family. David Quiring, owner and president of the firm (and a third generation memorialist), recalls:

Neil Edwards was the owner of Mt. Pleasant Cemetery and he and my father and our families were close friends for many years. Consequently he was quite familiar with death and dying and in his case he had time to contemplate his own demise. In his final months he told everyone who lamented with him “Don’t worry about me; I’ve had a great ride.” He came from humble beginnings and was proud of his successes. His family thought that this quote aptly summed his philosophy and was a positive thought to leave on the memorial. (2001)
As regards the image of the automobile etched upon the monument, Mr. Quiring, noting with fondness that “Neil was quite a character,” continues:

He was always avid about cars. I remember when Chrysler promoted the hemi-head engine (one of the most powerful of the early 60s and now one of the rarest and most valued engines among collectors), Neil’s son (my age) bought a racing Plymouth with that engine. Neil had to get the Chrysler luxury edition with the same engine (extremely rare car now). He loved to squeal around the cemetery in that car. He sold a grave plot to a widow whose husband had owned the 1957 Studebaker Golden Hawk and was able to buy it before she put it on the market. It had one of the first superchargers available and was blisteringly fast for 1957. He loved that car! In fact, his son still has it. (2001)

The juxtaposition of image and epitaph in this instance, though the elements arguably stem from two separate sets of circumstances, results nonetheless in a coherent and metaphorically powerful statement that, in its whimsical assessment of a life well-lived, clearly captures the spirit of this remarkable self-made individual.

Another example of visual/verbal juxtaposition for whimsical effect may be seen on the double-sided husband and wife marker for Dan and Vera Short in Rochester, Washington’s Grand Mound Cemetery. When Dan died in 1984, Vera Short commissioned the stone and had it placed in the cemetery. On his side she had etched an image of a welding truck (her husband’s business), but she also created a most interesting montage on her side of the marker. Above an extraordinarily well-detailed depiction of a VISA card are the words “Charge It!,” and below, “Send The Bill To Heaven.” “He always joked, ‘No wonder I’m just a poor welder with Vera and her VISA,” she remembers. “When we went to pick up his ashes, the man said, ‘Do you want to pay cash or charge it?’ I paid cash. Dan might have gotten mad if I charged that!” (1996).

The 1981 gravestone for L.D. “Mac” McCoy (figure 5) found in Coos Bay, Oregon’s Sunset Memorial Park represents a very clever and carefully calculated visual/verbal construction. Beneath an open, spread five-card poker hand are inscribed the words “I’d Rather Be In Reno.” In concept, the epitaph is certainly not original: older variants have been attributed to, amongst others, W. C. Fields (“On The Whole, I’d Rather Be In Philadelphia”), though it is not found upon his gravestone (Koykka 1986, 137–138), and I have seen contextually appropriate applications on any number of contemporary markers (“I’d Rather Be Flying”—images of
Boeing 737 and small private plane, 1986, John Ray Utterstrom, Sunset Hills Memorial Park, Bellevue, Washington; “I Would Rather Be Hunting”—image of hunting bow and arrows, 1983, Keith W. Barker, Price City Cemetery, Price, Utah). The reference to Reno (Nevada), however, is even more than usually personal. According to his eldest daughter, Mac McCoy dearly loved to play poker: “Every Friday or Saturday he used to play poker with his friends,” she recalls, “and he went to the casinos in Reno often” (Carlin 2001). It was so much a part of what made him a special individual that, prior to his funeral, she put a deck of cards in his suit jacket pocket to be buried with him. The love of the game would, of course, also explain the visual image on Mr. McCoy’s stone. But look more closely: the hand depicted appears to be a royal flush (the highest hand in poker), until you see to the final card, which would be the ten of hearts to complete the flush. Instead, it is the two of spades. “He died, so I guess you could say he drew a losing hand, that’s one way you could put it,” his daughter said. We both agreed, however, that the irony of coming so close to a royal flush and then totally bombing out with the deuce of a different suit would certainly have appealed to her father’s highly developed sense of humor. The marker, she says, was designed by the family (she credits her brother with being the primary creative force in the process) as a fitting memorial to a man who enjoyed his time on earth and held a very special role in their own lives.

One of the most striking examples of visual humor in the modern American graveyard involves juxtaposition of a somewhat different sort (figure 6). In rural Scipio Cemetery, on Route 37 in Allen County, Indiana, near the Ohio border, stands a small, nondescript 1982 upright granite marker for Archie A. Arnold. What makes this grave site
remarkable, to say the least, are the two old style parking meters, each frozen with their red “expired” flags showing, embedded in the concrete base to either side of the marker. Obviously, this assemblage required some serious planning! My Indiana informant, who wishes to remain anonymous, says she has it on good authority from her great aunt, a local resident, that Mr. Arnold was a well-known Allen County character with “a quirky sense of humor.” He apparently secretly designed his own mortuary complex and made all appropriate arrangements prior to his death, specifying in his will that his creation was not under any circumstances to be tampered with. His outraged and mortified relatives, so the story goes, tried to fight this provision in his will, but a judge ruled that there was no legal basis for violating Mr. Arnold’s stated desire. That, coupled with the fact that the cemetery—unlike many—apparently has no regulations which might allow for removal of this highly unorthodox grave decoration, has insured that it remains undisturbed to this date. Precisely where and how Mr. Arnold obtained the necessary hardware to complete his final statement remains a mystery.

INTENT AND PURPOSE

In view of the examples discussed to this point, as well as numerous others which might be cited, it should be evident that expressions of humor are an identifiably present element in the contemporary
American graveyard. What, then, are we to make of this phenomenon? What do these artifacts tell us of the persons who created them and, on a broader level, of the shifting parameters of American cultural attitudes towards death and commemoration? Gravemarkers, throughout the larger part of their existence, have served to reinforce the cultural attitudes dominant at the time of their creation. Thus, despite being material surrogates for departed individuals, their texts have, in the vast majority of instances, reflected communal rather than personal perspectives and values. This is why, for instance, variants of the old Puritan epitaph

Hearken Stranger, As You Pass By,
As You Are Now So Once Was I,
As I Am Now So You Must Be,
Thus Think On Death And Follow Me

may be found on literally thousands of colonial New England grave-stones, while a limited number of visual symbols—clasped hands, heaven-pointing fingers, weeping willows, and heavenly gates ajar, principally—dominate the iconography of American Victorian markers in all regions of the country. Until the last four decades of the twentieth century, gravemarkers, with only minor deviations, were predictably conservative and conventional. Beginning in the early 1960s, however, and growing at an exponential rate ever since, there has been a movement in American material commemoration away from collectively conventional expression towards its individual, personalized opposite. Folklorist Carol Edison, noting that “The need to stand apart and be recognized as an individual, not a number in a computer, is a common complaint for twentieth-century man,” was one of the first to offer a scholarly analysis of this phenomenon (1985, 186), and I have also addressed the issue (1984a, 1984b, 1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1993). Indeed, as any fieldworker who has spent a significant amount of time in the contemporary sections of American cemeteries can confirm, there has been a virtual explosion in recent decades of such personalized expression. We now see sandblasted or laser-etched visual images depicting every sort of recreational and occupational activity imaginable: verbal inscriptions running the gamut from snatches of popular song lyrics to long (and sometimes incredibly bad) self-composed poems; and grave goods of the sort once only encountered at the burial sites of Roma and other folk groups with highly esoteric funerary practices.

Not everyone is pleased with this trend. It has, in fact, engendered a long-standing debate within the professional structure of the monument
and cemetery trades. Some see it as tasteless and undignified, yet another appalling indicator of the alarmingly materialistic and "now-centered" preoccupations of today’s society, while others embrace the opportunity to apply their creative energies in new directions, at the same time satisfying the needs of a new generation of patrons (Hanks 1987; Kimball 1997). Regardless of one’s position on this issue, the trend is clear and not likely to diminish at any time in the foreseeable future. As one contemporary monument dealer recently noted, “Seventy-five percent of my work today involves some sort of personalization, and forty percent is definitely custom,” whereas, when her father ran the business a generation earlier, “it was all standard—right out of the book” (Buckley 1996:1A).

The new symbolism of gravemarkers, then, is highly personal and idiosyncratic, and, in most instances, concrete rather than abstract. It is a conceptual framework widely favored by a whole new generation of monument patrons, and in this sense, at least, shares with earlier eras the adoption of an accepted vocabulary of memorialization that reflects and supports a collective worldview. The essential difference is that, for the first time in the history of American funerary commemoration, the focus of that vocabulary has become dominantly retrospective rather than prospective. Modern gravemarkers, in ever greater numbers, are a celebration of life, not death, the hereafter, or abstract metaphysical principles. Highly particularized football helmets and oil rigs are today’s equivalent of winged death’s heads or weeping willows, while “The Wind Beneath My Wings” has replaced Memento Mori on the gravestone inscription top ten hit list.

Humor has its part in all of this, though it does up the stakes just a bit, for the risks of misunderstanding or censure are potentially greater. Persons who select markers of the type discussed in this essay, whether these individuals be the deceased themselves or others who act on their behalf, are certainly endowed with a more-than-common sense of humor. But this quality is often matched with an equally entrenched streak of independence, and perhaps a bit of courage as well. It all comes down, in the end, to individual personality, a point which folklorist J. Joseph Edgette made clear a number of years ago in his analysis of epitaphs, such as the one chosen by retired West Virginia coal miner Julian C. Skaggs (“I Made An Ash Of Myself”) to mark the site of his cremated remains (1989, 90–91). Edgette’s findings, I submit, have been validated over and over again by the markers and individuals we have been examining here. Modern American graveyard humor, while
clearly embraced by the contemporary trend towards personalization of all sorts in monument design, is almost always directly linked to personalities whose strength is such that they can find a laugh even in death.

UNINTENTIONAL HUMOR

There is, of course, another type of humor found in the graveyard, one not stemming from a conscious and deliberate attempt to create such an effect. This unintentional humor can take many forms, and may be the result of any number of initiating factors. In earlier eras, for example, stonecarvers, working character by character with mallet and chisel, quite frequently made mistakes which were the equivalent of modern-day typos without the luxury of backspace keys or typeover features. These generally resulted in misspelled names or incorrect dates. Occasionally, however, a moment of absentminded chiseling might produce a more humorous effect, as on the 1781 marker for James Erwin in East Derry, New Hampshire’s Forest Hill Cemetery. What appears at a glance to be one more instance of the ubiquitous utterance “My Glass Is Run” turns out, upon closer examination, to be the far more interesting “My Glass Is Rum”!

Changes in language over time can produce a similarly unintentional humorous effect. Visitors to seventeenth and eighteenth century cemeteries, for instance, are often vastly amused by markers noting that the deceased was “Casually Shot” or “Casually Fell Down A Well,” not realizing that the term “casual” was an archaic synonym for “accidental.” Old-fashioned familial terms (“consort” = “wife”; “relict” = “widow”; etc.) or given names (Experience, Submit, Exercise, etc.) will frequently produce the same results (one wonders what these inhabitants of colonial America would make of “significant other” or “Heather”).

By far the largest number of instances of this type of graveyard humor result from unintentional double meanings buried within otherwise well-meaning inscriptions. A somewhat celebrated occasion of such language is found upon the 1866 marker for Edward Oakes in West Cemetery, Middlebury, Vermont:

Faithful Husband Thou Art
At Rest Untill We Meet Again (Wallis 1954, 169)

More recent instances might include the 1984 flat stone for Peter Kindante in Portland, Oregon’s River View Cemetery (“You Can’t Keep A Good Man Down”), or the 1989 upright marker for Troy David Gray,
aged 18, in Crown Hill Cemetery, Salem, Indiana (“I’m Outta Here”). Nor is the possibility for this type of unintentionally humorous interpretation limited to the gravemarkers themselves. Regulatory signs posted within cemeteries, for instance, are sometimes not as carefully thought out as they might be:

NOTICE
All Grave Markers Will Be Installed
Flush With The Ground & Grass Over
The Grave. Anyone Violating These
Rules Will Be Subject To Removal
(St. Wencelaus Cemetery,
Scappoose, Oregon)

. . . . . . . . . .

PLEASE TAKE TRASH WITH YOU
This Is A Cooperative
Graveyard And All Must
Share To Keep It Clean
(Yankton Cemetery,
Yankton, Oregon)

Inappropriate and/or incongruous language may inspire a humorous reaction from the viewer, an example in point being the inscription on the 1934 marker in Crown Hill Memorial Park, Dallas, Texas, for notorious gun moll Bonnie Parker (of Bonnie and Clyde fame):

As The Flowers Are All Made Sweeter
By The Sunshine And The Dew,
So This Old World Is Made Brighter
By The Lives Of Folks Like You

Incongruity also sometimes becomes evident in the unfortunate visual juxtaposition of landscape elements (e.g., figure 7). Ask any cemetery fieldworker who has been at it for a while, and they will generally admit to having at least one photo in their collection of a yellow “Dead End” or “No Exit” road sign standing alongside a cemetery setting.

Finally, we must consider the fact that sentiments once expressed in all seriousness may seem funny to others, perhaps wholly or in part for
that very seriousness itself. This is evident in a number of epitaphs (sometimes very elaborate ones) on the monuments of professed atheists or others who, for lack of a better term, we might call “God Haters.” Consider, for example, the rather idiosyncratic 1872 East Thompson, Connecticut, inscription for Jonathan Richardson:

Who Never Sacrificed His Reason  
At The Altar Of Superstition’s God,  
Who Never Believed That Jonah  
Swallowed The Whale (Klisiewicz 2001, 25; Wallis 1954, 102)

In a somewhat similar vein, the badly weathered 1913 granite marker for confirmed bachelor William Hartley depicts a man in Victorian formal attire, standing atop a rock and facing (across a chasm) a woman with outstretched arms. The inscription beneath reads:

Figure 7. Unfortunate juxtaposition of city street sign and mortuary landscape, Cohasset Central Cemetery, Cohasset, Massachusetts.
To An Independent Good
Looking Old Batchelor
Who In His Younger Days
Preferred Living A
Single Life Rather
Than Get Married And
Have A Petticoat Boss
Ruling Over Him The
Rest Of His Life And
Perhaps Through An
Endless Eternity

(Myrtle Point Cemetery,
Myrtle Point, Oregon)

A celebrated final example is the 1873 gravestone of Joseph Palmer (figure 8), located in Evergreen Cemetery, Leominster, Massachusetts. Palmer, a well-known local eccentric and reportedly a very difficult person to deal with (Malloy 2001), apparently delighted in flaunting current standards of fashion and decorum by cultivating a full beard as a younger man (Edgette 1989, 90). His defiance reached a head in 1830, when he was attacked by four locals who attempted to shave off his beard. He successfully defended himself with a knife, was arrested, and spent more than a year in the Worcester County jail for refusing, as a matter of principle, to pay a fine stemming from the incident (Malloy 2001). Upon his death, Palmer managed to achieve the last word on the matter by causing to be erected above his grave a white marble monument that features a bust portrait of himself in full hirsute splendor, accompanied by the words

Persecuted for
Wearing the beard

OTHER HUMOROUS USES OF THE GRAVEYARD

By way of a brief postscript to this essay’s central arguments, it might be noted that the dead are not the only ones who have found the graveyard a fertile ground for humor. Editorial cartoonists have, since the 1870s, consistently employed images of gravestones and cemeteries as metaphorical vehicles for their often sardonically tinged brand of humorous commentary, and nonpolitical cartoon and comic strip artists have not been far behind. Of the latter, perhaps the most active of all in
using this device is Wiley Miller, creator of Non Sequitur, a cartoon and comic strip series syndicated by the Washington Post Writers Group. My personal Wiley favorite among the dozens I have chuckled over—and one I might have missed entirely had it not been for the diligent clipping efforts of my late mother-in-law—is a four-part strip entitled “A Modern Life Lesson...” In the first two frames, a briefcase-toting business executive hurrying through the cemetery pauses to contemplate the inscription “Stop And Smell The Roses,” carved in oversized letters upon a very large, upright, tablet-style gravestone. The third frame shows him doing just that, bending with a peaceful, almost beatific, expression upon his face to inhale the fragrance of a beautiful red rose planted immediately in front of the marker. In the fourth and final
frame we see only the man’s feet, hands, and briefcase protruding from
the flattened tombstone, which has toppled forward and squashed both
him and the rose. This sort of black humor may not be to everyone’s
taste, but in my view it beats “I Told You I Was Sick” any day.

Upon occasion, the graveyard wanderer stumbles upon the curious
handiwork of certain individuals whose clandestine creations, shrouded
in anonymity, straddle the dubious boundary between vandalism and
art. Some of these performances are visual, but the preferred medium is
verse. A few examples will have to suffice. Some years ago, in the old pio-
neer cemetery located on the campus of the University of Oregon in
Eugene, I noticed an early twentieth century marker that featured a
variant of the old Puritan epitaph mentioned earlier in this discussion:

Remember, Friends, As You Pass By,
As You Are Now So Once Was I,
As I Am Now, You Soon Shall Be,
Prepare For Death And Follow Me.

Ho hum—But wait! Beneath, hastily scrawled with felt-tip pen, per-
haps the work of an aspiring creative writing major, was a postscript
Cotton Mather would definitely not have approved of:

To Follow You I’m Not Content
Until I Know Which Way You Went!

In a similar vein, the mid-1980s saw a rash of such bardic and largely
ephemeral (the felttip pen again being the instrument of choice) addi-
tions to conventional Victorian epitaphs on tombstones throughout
southwestern Oregon pioneer graveyards. Presumably the work of one
individual (the styles share a certain, shall we say, distinctiveness), they
were all outrageously bad—and thereby good—to the point where it is
difficult to choose a representative example. However, in the interest of
brevity, consider the following old/new collaborative effort found in the
Jacksonville Cemetery:

Weep Not For Her Who Dieth,
For She Sleeps And Is At Rest;
The Couch Whereon She Lieth,
Is The Green Earth’s Quiet Breast.

............
Finally, one group which has a proclivity for generating esoteric humor within the graveyard setting is composed of those very individuals who are at one and the same time intensely occupied with the serious study of cemeteries and gravemarkers as highly relevant features of American culture. Cemetery scholars and fieldworkers have a dark and irreverent side! They delight in such activities as photographing each other in absurd, unflattering (and sometimes compromising), graveyard-specific postures, and they can tell you with uncanny accuracy exactly how many fieldworkers can be crammed into a certain large chair-shaped monument in a New Hampshire cemetery which shall remain unnamed. Nor is such behavior the sole province of one discipline: cultural geographers, linguists, and sociologists are every bit as bad as folklorists, and I have even known an art historian or two to occasionally descend to such levels of depravity. Recently, one wag within the Cemeteries and Gravemarkers section of the American Culture Association—a large and multi-disciplinary assemblage of scholars who regularly present upwards of thirty separate conference papers at their annual meetings—has begun to poke fun at the group’s very *raison d’être*, issuing first a bogus set of conference paper abstracts (see Appendix), several of which constitute elaborately esoteric in-jokes, and then an outrageous parody of the section’s annual “Call for Papers” format (figure 9). I could say more, but I really must stop now: after all, I must work with these people!

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to make the point that real humor does exist in the contemporary American graveyard, that a great deal of it is the result of conscious and deliberate decisions on the part of persons wishing to make a final and lasting statement which is consistent with their living personalities, and that the whole fits within the larger framework of an ever-growing emphasis upon individuality and personalization in monument style. Whatever form this humor may take, it is for all of us—whether those who cause it to be or those who delight in its various manifestations—a most happy and welcome phenomenon, for it is but one
of the many indicators of this age’s growing rejection of the death-denial behavior which characterized so much of twentieth century American society’s attempts to deal with the great mystery of death and dying. Past ages had their own solutions and means of coping with this profound experience: if a sense of humor and a belief that life is not invalidated by death is ours, then I, for one, am all for it.

Virtually every time a reporter interviews me on the topic of gravestones, they ask me what epitaph I have chosen for myself. After first
reminding them that these stones do indeed “speak” to the living (see Meyer 1989b; 1991b), I like to tease them with deliciously Puritansounding quotations from Shakespeare, Richard II’s “Let’s talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs.” Or, even better, his “I wasted time, and now doth time waste me” (to be accompanied, of course, by a suitably disquieting visual image of Father Time with his scythe, or at the very least a spent hourglass). Of late, I tend to favor Mercutio’s final pun from Romeo and Juliet: “Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.” Any of these might also have sufficed as a clever way to bring this discussion to an end. But a far better—and shorter—example springs to mind. The gravemarker for Mel Blanc (figure 10), a man who brought us decades of laughter, shall have the final word here. Listen, and just perhaps, in its finest Porky Pig voice, you will hear it say

“That’s All Folks!”
Appendix to Chapter Five

COVER LETTER

Dear members of the Necropoli and Sepulchral Monuments Section, American (Counter)Culture Association (ACA):

Because he suspects that a horrendous and most unfortunate mixup between the computerized mailing lists of two important academic organizations to which he simultaneously belongs (and chairs sections within) may have resulted in your recently having erroneously received the abstracts of papers to be presented in the Teeth and Jaws Section of the upcoming annual meeting of the American Crocodile Association (ACA), THE CHAIR has asked that I send you the enclosed abstracts for our paper sessions, along with his most obsequious apologies and abject grovelings for any confusion(s)—past, present, or future—caused by this unspeakable lapse.

Most humbly and sincerely,

THE CHAIR's footstool

ABSTRACTS

AMERICAN (COUNTER)CULTURE ASSOCIATION
Necropoli and Sepulchral Monuments Section

THE CHAIR
The University
The Department
The Address
The Telephone Number
The Fax Number

ABSTRACTIONS OF PAPERS/PRESENTATIONS
2000 MILLENNIAL MEETING
[Not!] April 1, 2000
The Big Easy

AHI, T. Una: Center for North/South Studies
University of Hawaii at Mauna Loa
Pele, HI 96240

“On the Cutting Edge of Gravestone Carving Technology: The Macadamia Method”

Once falsely touted as a powerful aphrodisiac, the juice extracted from Hawaii’s native macadamia nuts is being put to a radically new use in the Hawaiian gravestone carving industry. When forced at extremely high pressure through a special nozzle, the juice triggers a complex chemical action upon the surface of the stone, resulting in the conception of incised images so dramatically realistic that
passerby in local cemeteries often mistake them for the real thing. Though “macadamia etching” has so far proven successful only when applied to Hawaii’s native lava rock, it is anticipated that similar techniques using extracts from walnuts, pecans, and peanuts may be adapted for use on traditional mainland stones.

BROWN, Bud: Department of Physical Education
MidEastern Ohio State Technical and Vocational College
Wintergreen, OH 43801

“The Final Score: Graves of Famous Football Players”

Just like in life, the graves of famous football players sometimes feature their famous football feats. I’ll show you a few examples, like the one for Douglas “Wrong Way” Corrigan (or was he that flyer guy, hell I can never keep ’em straight!), who once scored a touchdown (well, a safety, actually) against his own team by running the length of the football field the wrong way (his tombstone faces a different direction from everyone else in the graveyard, I think maybe that’s symbolic or something), and then also there’s the presidential seal on the pre-need tombstone of Gerald Ford which substitutes the University of Michigan Wolverine for the American Eagle. I’ve got others too.

DORQUE, Jerry W.: Tru-Valu Software, Inc.
9908 Flakely Ave. N
Seattle, WA 98008

“Research in Progress”

If I register and show up for the conference, my paper will deal with my current research. I’m not going to say what that research concerns because feedback from the last conference where I didn’t show up indicates certain people were unreasonably upset they didn’t get to hear my previously announced paper, and I don’t want anyone to worry their little heads about whether it’s going to happen again or not. So, if I’m there you’ll get to hear about it. And if not, hey, that’s just tough!

FUBBENHEIMER, Gretchen N.: School of Cognitive Learning Experiences and Gender Studies
Desdemona College
Othello, MO 65001

“Gravestones as Symbols of Sexual Oppression in the Poetry of a Neglected Victorian Writer”

Unbeknownst to her family and friends, (Mrs.) Sarah N. Goatlips, prominent Philadelphia socialite and widow of Victorian financier Horace T. Goatlips, composed scores of poems which were discovered after her death lining the litter-boxes of her seventeen cats. Though virtually ignored by chauvinistic male editors of poetry anthologies and literature textbooks, these verses are remarkable for their use of gravestone imagery (obelisks, table stones, gates ajar, etc.) as powerful and disturbing symbols for male oppression and (unconscious) female submission.
“The Emperor Crab Cemetery: Breaking New Ground in Ecotourism”

During the catastrophic “Good Friday” earthquake of 1964, the tiny fishing hamlet of Emperor Crab, Alaska sank 276 feet and disappeared beneath the waters of Katchemtrap Bay, leaving only the town cemetery miraculously perched atop a vertical shaft of basalt rising from the ocean floor. “Winch-Downs” to the site from hovering flightseeing helicopters are increasingly popular amongst tourists seeking exotic travel options.

“Mort pour le Nid’: The French Carrier Pigeon Cemetery at Oiseau sur Oeuf”

Perhaps the most curious of the many World War I cemeteries dotting the landscape of northern France is the Nécropole Nationale des pigeon voyageur militaire, wherein rest the heroic remains of some 476 carrier pigeons who gave their lives in the service of La France during The Great War. Amongst the precisely aligned rows of nest-shaped gravemarkers may be found the final resting place of Hércule, ace of aces, who flew more than 63 successful missions before being shot out of the sky by the infamous Baron Manfred von Richthofen (may his boche name live in infamy forever!), as well as the massive granite egg representing “le tombeau de pigeon inconnu.”

“Hezekiah Effingdon: The Master Turkey Carver of Bildad, Massachusetts”

In addition to the usual assortment of winged skulls, hourglasses, coffins, and (in his later, degenerate period) willow and urn designs, the work of Hezekiah Effingdon (1698/9–1768) is remarkable for the exquisite representations of wild turkeys he carved in the tympanums of some 60% of the slate gravemarkers found in the area immediately surrounding Bildad, Massachusetts. While debate rages as to the symbolic meaning of these arcane motifs, there can be little doubt that Hezekiah’s turkeys are far superior in design, execution, and taste to the rats carved by his Bildad rival, Jehosaphat Hopkins (1704–1759).
MOONEY, Joe Bob: Cell Block C
Chumagee County Correctional Institution
Chumagee, OK 73803

“No Stone Unturned: A Revisionist Look at Cemetery Vandalism”

Virtually all studies of cemetery vandalism conducted to date are flawed by the erroneous assumption that such acts are essentially antisocial in nature and possess no redeeming qualities whatsoever. In this paper, which is based upon research conducted with colleagues at the last three institutions with which I have been associated, I shall argue that a number of highly desirable results, including powerful male bonding, release of potentially dangerous testosterone pressure, and enhanced economic opportunities for liquor stores and cemetery restorationists, are in fact the inevitable byproducts of these misunderstood community relations activities.

PUTZ, Jasper N.: Center for the Study of Arcane New Englandia
113 Lanterne Street
Boston, MA 02119

“By Their Droppings Ye Shall Know Them: A New Look at Slater’s ‘Guano Thesis’”

In the mid-1980s, researcher James A. Slater energized the worlds of gravestone and ornithological studies when, in a paper presented to a special joint meeting of the Association for Gravestone Studies and the Audubon Society, he advanced the notion that seemingly random specimens of bird droppings found on old gravestones actually represented complex, sentient patterns of symbolic communication. This paper challenges certain fundamental tenets of the Slater thesis, arguing—among other things—that a significant number of these motif clusters were actually the result of squirrels.

PUTZ, Jasper N., Jr.: Department of Anthropology, Sociology, Folklore, and Speech Communication
North Dakota State College of Education
Ubetcha, ND 58199

“A Sociological Analysis of Automobile Graveyards”

Analysis of samples from 206 automobile graveyards in Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, and The Yukon demonstrates patterns of natality, mortality, and banality bearing significant statistical compatibility (when utilizing the ??? test of reliability) with those found in human graveyards in the same locales. Further, seasonal patterns of planting, harvest, conception, and drunk and disorderly arrests seem linked to these identical patterns, though sometimes in reverse order. Charts, graphs, and slides of chicken entrails will be used to illustrate and validate these findings.

REYEM, E. Drahtcir: Department of Leisure Studies
Polk University
Monmouth, OR 97361

“Total Saturation Fatalities as Recorded on Early Oregon Gravemarkers”

Along with disease, accidental and deliberate shooting, and the more traditional forms of drowning (e.g., in a river, lake, hotel bath, etc.), total saturation—a
medical condition wherein the body absorbs an excess of concentrated moisture and explodes, often causing death—ranks as one of the most frequently occurring types of fatality recorded on early Oregon gravemarkers. Analysis of death dates on the stones reveals that more than 80% of such fatalities took place in the months of December through March, Oregon’s notorious rainy season. Sophisticated water repellants have virtually eliminated this affliction amongst modern residents of the Beaver State.

WEST, Rex D.: Department of Texan Studies
Bluebonnet State University
Longhorn, TX 78464

“You Can’t Judge a Symbol by its Shape (Usually)”

Visitors to Mt. Holymaple Cemetery in Dunder, Illinois are frequently amazed by the 27 ft. high solid granite Texas-shaped gravemarker for Leonard Fudde, mistakenly assuming it to be one last sign of allegiance by a wandering son of the Lone Star State unfortunate enough to be buried on foreign soil. Actually, it may be classified as an occupational symbol. Mr. Fudde, a noted contortionist who billed himself “The Human Pretzel,” was best known for his famous stunt wherein he contorted himself into the shape of Texas with his left eyeball precisely denoting the location of the state capitol, Austin.

WIGGINS, Astral: 16 Crystal Canyon Rd.
Sedona, AZ 86077

“Spirit Rubbings: A Breakthrough in Thanatological Research?”

By utilizing and readapting the basic time-tested techniques of gravestone rubbing, a growing number of thanatological researchers are embracing the principle of spirit rubbing as an effective alternative in instances where spirit photography might yield faint and/or insubstantial results. This paper discusses the basic materials, methods, and controlled substances essential to mastering this revolutionary technique.

ZORCH, Uzitzizus: Department of Ethnolinguistic Theory
The University of Chicago at Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI 53520

“I Spit Upon Your Shoes!: Ritual Insulting on Uzitzistani Gravestones”

In the tiny former Soviet bloc country of Uzitzistan, ritual insulting is a customary form of greeting and linguistic “icebreaking” at gatherings such as effigy burnings, committee meetings, and family reunions. It is an especially important element in courtship rituals. Given this emphasis in life, one is not surprised to find splendid examples of such insults frequently used as epitaphs upon Uzitzistani gravemarkers. In many instances, these represent personal favorites of the deceased, and a number of them are either direct or debased quotations from famous works of Uzitzistani poetry.