

Cemetery tells the tales of Willard's first century

by Dean Lesar

Morgal. Trunkel. Boh. Koschak.

A wind chime rings melodiously on a summer day south of Willard, it's velvety tinkle harmonizing with the call of a sparrow and finch from the adjoining forest. The breeze arrives from the southwest this day, it's warm and gusty, and loaded with the smell of new-mown hay. Aside from the metallic ring of the wind chime, this could have been any day in the early 1900s, when this hillside south of the just-born settlement of Willard could have smelled or sounded just like this. But this land was different then. Now it cares for the remains of those who made this town's history.

Volovsek. Dergance. Cesnik. Perme.

The names on the Holy Catholic Cemetery tombstones and simple grave markers are all familiar ones to any folks who have been in Willard any length of time. They are the same names as the ones on ship manifests from Europe in the first decade of the 1900s, of the men and women bound for a new country because of political oppression and hardships in their homeland. They set out from Austria and Yugoslavia, mostly, to a new land into which they would one day be interred.

Parkel. Lamovec. Ruzic. Perovsek.

A hundred years after the first mostly Slovenian immigrants from Europe arrived at a place called Thomson's Crossing because of its place along the Fairchild and Northeast Railroad line, a somber history of Willard is scribed in stone at the graveyard of the Holy Family Catholic Church. The birthdates listed on many of the early stones list the 1870s and 1880s, or the years not too long after this United States had concluded its own bloody Civil War. The first burials in the Holy Family cemetery began in 1918, and have never stopped.

Bayuk. Lunka. Plautz. Lesar.

In the far southeast corner of the cemetery are four weathered gravestones, each bearing a date of passing within three days of one another. It is somehow ironic that perhaps the oldest story written in the Willard cemetery may also be the saddest.

According to the history of Willard published by the Slovenska Druzba in 1982, the Platisha family was nearly wiped out by the influenza epidemic of 1918. The father, Valentine Sr., was the first to succumb, on the morning of Dec. 13. His 3-year-old daughter, Louise, joined him in death that same evening.

Three days later, a Friday, 6-year-old son Stanko passed away in the morning. His mother, Antonia, was gone by afternoon.

"They were buried in homemade

pine boxes made by Mr. Joe Kobal," the Willard history reads. "They were some of the first buried in the Catholic cemetery."

Of the original Platisha family, only son Valentine Jr. and daughter Antonia remained. They went to live with the Krainz family after their family was gone. Val Krainz, 11 months old when his family disappeared, died last year and is buried a few hundred feet away from his parents and siblings.

Staut. Stremikis. Prebil. Matkovich.

Near the Platisha family plot are buried several young children, gone to their eternal rest before the 1930s. The stones tell nothing of the reasons for their premature deaths, just that they were here and gone in so short a span. There is Frankie Kokaly, born on Oct. 3, 1913, gone by May 6, 1916. Edward Cohara

**Please see
Cemetery,
page 17**



An arbor vitae has grown partly around the gravestone of Anton Stamzar since he was laid to rest beside his parents in Willard's Holy Family Catholic Cemetery 43 years ago.



Among the first graves in Holy Family Catholic Cemetery are those of the Platisha family, four of whom perished in the flu epidemic of 1918. Within three days, the mother and father and two children of the family died.

In Memory Of ... the Slovenian pioneers who established the community of Willard



-- Frank and Rose Pakiz

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