

## **History of Bethel Lutheran (Miller) Cemetery**

### ***History from the Hill***

Thousands of motorists pass it daily, never realizing that much of the history of Gary is buried there. Several hundred Gary people know it exists, but not all of them know exactly where it is. Miller Cemetery, around which the former town of Miller and eventually the city of Gary grew, is an historical landmark over 152 years old existing in an age-old natural setting despite industrial and commercial growth brushing its wire fence.

Nestled on the slope of a 2-acre sand hill between U.S. 20 and U.S. 12 near Grand Boulevard in Miller, the cemetery is so small and modest that few of the thousands of motorists who speed past it daily have a chance to catch a glimpse of it.

Most of those interred there are of Swedish origin, a mark of the predominant nationality that from the 1870's settled the Miller region. A large majority were members of Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church, later known as Bethel Lutheran Church.

It was the mid-1830's when the Pottawatomie Indians left the Calumet Region. With the coming of the railroad, white settlers began trickling in to Indiana's last frontier. The 1850 census of inhabitants of North Township, Lake County, Indiana, barely fills four pages. This was before North Township was divided and the eastern part of it became Calumet Township. Page 4 of the 1850 census records the Samuel W. Miller family. Samuel was born in Vermont and listed his occupation as innkeeper. His wife's name was Susan. They had four children, one of them being a 3-year-old son by the name of John S. This is the same young John who died the following year and was buried on the slope of a sand dune. A tombstone was erected at the site. Over the next 30 years at least three other graves joined the small grave on the sandy hillside.

It was not until May 12, 1882, that the owners of the property, John V. Johnson and his wife Johanna, signed a warranty deed to convey the 2-acre parcel to Miller Station, Indiana for use as a cemetery. Thus, Miller Cemetery officially came into being.

The City of Gary claimed ownership of the cemetery after Miller was annexed by Gary.

About 1950 some individuals wanted better care for the cemetery and had meetings to discuss what could be done. There were also rumors that people were looking to mine sand, and the cemetery was one of the places mentioned. Those remarks started the ball rolling and in 1955 the Miller Cemetery Association was organized to fight against cemetery destruction. With a membership of 15, they collected enough money to have the property surveyed by a licensed surveyor and to erect a fence around the property.

On October 8, 1953, the Association asked Bethel to obtain the deed to the Miller Cemetery. A committee was formed of members of the Association and the church council to request that Gary transfer the cemetery deed to the church. On November 2,

1965, the Gary City Council voted to donate the 2-acre cemetery to Bethel. Gary Mayor A. Martin Katz signed a quitclaim deed on March 4, 1966, which conveyed the cemetery as a gift to the church.

The Miller Cemetery Association is no longer active but over recent years volunteers have cared for the cemetery grounds. For many years Sig Lindstrom and later his brother Norman single-handedly kept the cemetery mowed. At present a small but dedicated group meets once a month from May through October to care for the cemetery.

Most of the history of the cemetery is tied to the history of Miller and Bethel Lutheran Church, one of the first religious congregations to form in the area and the oldest one in Miller.

Swedish immigrants Svanti A. Nordstrom (the first lay preacher of Bethel), Magnus Anderson, and Niklas Niklasson (Americanized to Nicholson) were charter members of Bethel Lutheran and all three are buried in the cemetery. Niklas and his family settled in Miller after being burned out in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Veterans of the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II are buried there.

The little cemetery is the final resting place of victims of explosions at the nearby Aetna Powder Company plant that was in operation from 1881 until it closed in 1918. The factory made explosives for Midwest farmers to use in clearing their fields of tree stumps and large rocks. During World War I, the powder plant provided explosives for the war effort. With such extremely hazardous work, there was always the possibility of disaster. In 1888 three workers were killed when 3,000 pounds of nitroglycerin exploded. In 1912, an explosion of 800 pounds of dynamite killed six employees and injured many others. There was also a disaster in 1914, and in 1917 half the plant was destroyed. The victims of each disaster were buried at the cemetery, some in a common grave.

An early Miller settler, Drucilla (Benn) Carr, is also buried in the cemetery. She moved to the lakefront (Lake Michigan) in 1872, and 2 years later married Robert Carr. At that time Drucilla was the only woman in the area. Allegedly, the Carrs did not have legal title to their stretch of beach. With the coming of big industry to the area, many looked at the Carr Beach with greedy eyes. Drucilla was concerned that the lakefront ecology "not be desecrated by huge industrial smoke stacks." Citing "squatter's rights" to the lakefront property, she fended off land-hungry corporations for 17 years, a feud that did not end until after her death. Unprecedented in its length and complexity, the Carr case caused Indiana to tighten its "squatter sovereignty" statutes.

Few improvements have been made on the grounds since the cemetery was first started but those who care for it like it that way. The land is left in as natural and peaceful a state as possible. It is part of Miller and Indiana history.