THE STORY OF THE FOUNDING OF WAGNER COLLEGE IN ROCHESTER

by Richard O. Reisem

In 1883, German Lutherans in Rochester founded a proseminary, which, in 1886, through generous financial aid provided by John George Wagner, Jr., became Wagner Lutheran Memorial College. The institution was situated on Oregon Street off Central Avenue just north of downtown Rochester. Wagner’s gift, given in memory of his deceased 19-year-old son, Johann Georg Wagner III, purchased the first permanent facility for the young college. The leader of this move to establish a Lutheran school of higher learning in Rochester was the Rev. Alexander Richter, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, who also became the first president of the college. Zion Church, the first German Lutheran church in Rochester, was located at 60 Grove Street. The structure was recently renovated into 12 apartments for Eastman School music students and is known as Halo Lofts.

John George Wagner, Jr., was born August 10, 1824 in Bischmisheim, a small town in southwest Germany. When he was 14 years old, his family emigrated to the United States and settled in Rochester, New York, where there was a large German immigrant population. John George’s father worked as a mason, and his sons joined the construction trades, with John George becoming a carpenter. By 1873, he was a very successful building contractor and highly regarded in the community. He was selected a member of the Monroe County Board of Supervisors, a director of the Rochester German Insurance Company, and a director of Genesee Brewing Company. He became president of the board of trustees at First German Evangelical Zion Lutheran Church on Grove Street.

John George and his wife, Catherine Susanna, had five children. Unfortunately, two died in their first year of life; another died as a teenager. And a fourth, John George’s namesake, J. George Wagner III (Johann Georg on his tombstone) was stricken with typhoid fever and died at the age of 19 1/2 years on October 15, 1873. Only a daughter survived. She married Charles Voshall, who became a partner in his father-in-law’s contracting business.

It turned out that on the tenth anniversary (October 15, 1883) of J. George III’s untimely death, it just so happened that the governing board of the Rev. Alexander Richter’s new school held an organizing meeting. At the time, one of the major concerns of Lutheran ministers was a paucity of Lutheran ministers with preaching skills in German. With the massive recent influx of German immigrants, Lutheran churches conducted services in the German language. Earlier that year, the Rev. Alexander Richter wrote a paper titled, “From What Sources Shall We Draw Our German Preachers?” Richter sought help from a colleague, the Rev. George H. Gomph, pastor of St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Pittsford, a suburb of Rochester. Together, they enlisted the aid of other Lutheran ministers and laymen in establishing a preparatory school, called a proseminary, to educate young men entering Lutheran ministry.

Christian Seel, an elder of Zion Lutheran Church, owned a big brick house at the corner of Jay and Magna streets, and volunteered to rent seven rooms on the second floor to house the first class of six students. The curriculum comprised religion, German, Latin, English, world history, geography, natural history, arithmetic, penmanship, drawing, and singing. Advanced classes included Hebrew, natural philosophy, and chemistry.

Enrollment quickly grew, and in 1884, the school’s board decided to rent new larger quarters in a three-story, 11-room house at 33 South Avenue. In 1885, a third move was made to a substantial three-story building at 4 Oregon Street. Students paid tuition of $52 a year and $2 a week for room and board, plus $10 a year for heat.
Zion Lutheran Church, 60 Grove Street, was the first German Lutheran church in Rochester. Originally, it had a high central spire.

The $12,000 gift "should be considered a memorial to his late son George, who was (had he lived) to enter the Lutheran ministry." With that gift, the name of the Lutheran Proseminary of Rochester, N.Y. was changed to Wagner Memorial Lutheran College, now simplified to Wagner College.

John George Wagner, Jr., was 61 years old when he made his gift that ensured a future for the Proseminary School. That same year, he also retired from the contracting firm that he founded and turned over its operation to his son-in-law, Charles Voshall. In retirement, John George continued as vice-president of the board of Wagner Memorial Lutheran College. He died at age 67 of lung disease on August 13, 1891. He is buried alongside his wife, Catherine, who died a year later at age 74 years. Directly to the left of John George's gravesite lies his beloved son, J. George Wagner III, who gave Wagner College its name. The Wagner family plot is in Section S, Lot 35, which faces Mount Hope Avenue.

The building at 4 Oregon Street proved to be an excellent structure for the growing Wagner College. The property was 120 feet square with a three-story building and four-story dormer tower.
The Wagner family plot, which faces Mount Hope Avenue in Section S, contains more than a dozen family members.

But by the early 1900s, Rochester had become a significant city and Oregon Street was in the middle of industrial and commercial development. By 1917, the bustle and noise became nonconducive to educational purposes, and the school faced the need to make another move. Rochesterians preferred a new location in another part of the city or in the suburbs, but another group favored a move to New York City, where Lutherans had established a large center. New York City won when a 38-acre Samuel Cunard (founder of Cunard Lines Steamship Company) estate on Staten Island became available for $63,000. The setting on Grymes Hill was rural; it overlooked New York harbor, and there was rapid transportation to the great metropolis.

Today, Wagner College has an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students. It is coeducational, occupies a campus of 72 acres, and is considered an excellent liberal arts college in the top tier of northeastern U.S. small schools.

This year, 2008, marks the 125th anniversary of the founding of Wagner College in 1883. The college announced: “At Wagner College’s 125th Anniversary Founders Day convocation, we will confer upon the late J. George Wagner III a posthumous doctorate in divinities, *honoris causa*, honoring both his own clerical aspirations, which were frustrated by death, and his father’s gift, which helped hundreds of other young men fulfill their dreams of becoming ministers.”

As part of the college celebrations this year, representatives from Wagner College traveled to Mount Hope Cemetery and laid a memorial wreath on the grave of Johann Georg Wagner III, who was memorialized in the naming of Wagner College. That event occurred at 3 p.m. on Saturday, November 8, 2008.

**MINNIE SNYDER BUFF’S CERAMIC GRAVESTONE**

by Lynn Selhat

When Philadelphia clay artist, Lynda Skaddan, installed a handmade colorful sculptured gravestone in memory of her great aunt, Minnie Snyder Buff, in Mount Hope Cemetery in 1995, she could not know that five years later the ceramic stone would catch the attention of a University of Rochester sophomore, Kelly Watts, who became so intrigued by the marker that she devoted months of research to unlock its mysteries. The two women would not know of each others’ existence until 2007, when, by chance, Skaddan’s son-in-law was doing some genealogy research and happened upon a charming paper that Watts had written about the headstone. By this time Watts had already graduated and was living in Massachusetts.

Minnie Snyder Buff’s gravestone first caught the attention of Kelly Watts, a studio arts major, during her walks through the cemetery on her way home from class. “This stone is hard to find at first because it is camouflaged among the green and brown trees and grass. But in the middle of a vast field of plain-colored gray headstones, one after another, this particular colored stone quickly catches the viewer’s eye,” she wrote in her essay. When the opportunity to do a research project in a religion class presented itself, Kelly Watts decided the subject would be that pottery headstone. In her paper, titled *Flowers Bloom and Die*, Watts wrote, “I could not have imagined the mystery behind this stone, and all the unanswered questions it left.” Old newspaper files, historical society records, and Mount Hope Cemetery day and log books brought Watts few answers other
than that Minnie Snyder was born on April 25, 1871, and died in 1942. She was the wife of William Buff, who died four years later, in 1946, and was also buried in the same plot in an unmarked grave.

When Skaddan and Watts eventually met via e-mail in 2007, Watts was surprised to learn that her sophomore paper had been discovered on the Internet. Skaddan was able to fill in some missing pieces.

Minnie Snyder and William Buff were married in 1902 at Minnie's family home in Rochester. She was 31 years old at the time. Her parents had died the year before. Also living in the home was Minnie's sister, Lu, who also never married. When William Buff married Minnie Snyder, he moved in and lived with her family for the rest of their lives. They never had any children of their own.

The reason Skaddan was so moved to honor Minnie Snyder Buff with a memorial sculpture was because of Minnie's great act of kindness in raising her four nieces. The girls' mother died in 1918, and their father abandoned them in Buffalo when the girls were still young. Their Aunt Minnie and Uncle Will took Minnie's four nieces into their already crowded home full of relatives, all of whom welcomed them with open arms. The eldest niece, Fran Telford, who died suddenly at age 27 in 1936.

While Kelly Watts' efforts to learn more about Minnie Snyder Buff were frustrated by a lack of historical documentation, too was her attempt to uncover any information about the gravestone itself, leaving Watts to conjecture who might have made it and why.

The poem on the front of the stone reads:

Years Fly
Flowers Bloom and Die
Old Days, Old ways
Pass By
Love Stays.

Lynda Skaddan found the poem on the front of a sundial in a garden in Salem, Massachusetts. Watts guessed at the symbolism of the four flowers on the front of the stone, but did not know that each represented one of the four girls their Aunt Minnie so lovingly raised and that the hands are their aunt's hands holding them.

The rosebud is Fran; a daffodil, Jane; a daisy, Edythe. The bent-over lily symbolizes the death of one of Aunt Minnie's precious nieces, Phyllis Telford, who died suddenly at age 27 in 1936. Aunt Minnie chose a beautiful pink marble urn as a tombstone for her great grandparents in the Binder plot (Range 3, Lot 192), of Mount Hope.

Skaddan and her sister remember being treated like grandchildren when visiting Aunt Minnie and Uncle Will in the house that they had moved their expanded family to in Brighton at 858 Landing Road, from where each of the four Telford sisters had commuted by trolley to the Prince Street campus of the University of Rochester. Minnie's older brother, Uncle Frank, was still living with them when Minnie Snyder Buff died in 1942.

In her religion-class essay, Kelly Watts concluded, "Despite all the changes and cycles, there is one constant part of life that never falters: love."

Of all the garden ornaments Lynda Skaddan has made that are life-size figures (i.e., birdbaths, vases, etc), gravestones are her favorite, because each one tells a story. Ironically, her latest project is to procure a military gravestone for her great grandfather, Minnie's father, John B. Snyder, who survived fighting in the Civil War with the 140th New York Volunteers. He is buried in the Snyder plot in an unmarked grave. Minnie Snyder Buff's ceramic headstone is located in Range 3, Lot 163.

**HYMAN AND JEANETTE KOMESAR'S GRAVESTONE**

*by Sarah Harvey*

Every gravestone in a cemetery has a story. Every person buried beneath the ground at one time lived, breathed, cried, and laughed. Sometimes gravestones are very bland and ordinary. Others are very elaborate and say a lot about the person(s) they memorialize. One good example of a gravestone representing the lives of a couple is that of Hyman and Jeanette Komesar. Their monument is located in Range 7 in one of the B'rith Kodesh sections of Mount Hope Cemetery. The gravestone is elegantly designed as a bench for people literally to sit on. This shape may seem odd to some, but it represents how Hyman and Jeanette worked to create an environment of love.

Hyman was born on July 20, 1895 in Russia. He came to America with his family when he was 11 years old. Family members arrived in stages, but eventually the entire family moved to Rochester. In the 1920s, Rochester was filled with factories for men's suits. Hyman's father, Samuel Komisar, probably came to Rochester in order to find a job as a tailor. The whole family lived at 27 Pryor Street. Hyman followed in his father's footsteps as a tailor until, at age 22, he entered the U.S. Army on November 23, 1917. He was assigned as a private to the 133rd Depot Brigade. As part of Company F, 38th Infantry, he served overseas from March 29, 1918 to February 11, 1919. During the Second Battle of the Marne, he was wounded and captured on July 15, 1918 and...
Hyman and Jeanette never knew each other before the war; they met after Hyman came back from Europe with only one arm. Many handicapped men who came back from the war found it difficult to marry. Their handicaps sometimes repelled women, yet this was not an issue, with Jeanette, and they fell in love. Their love would set the tone for the rest of their lives.

When Hyman Komisar returned to Rochester, he resided at 27 Pryor Street until he married Jeanette Brown in 1922. Jeanette Brown was born on August 8, 1900 in Lithuania. Like Hyman, she too came to America around 1905 with her mother, Rose, and her brother, Max. Their name was Brownvitsky, which was changed to Brown at Ellis Island. Jeanette’s father, Joseph, was a freelance carpenter, who traveled all over Europe working on building projects. Eventually, he traveled to South Africa where he made enough money to send his family to America. He immigrated later and joined the family in Rochester, where there was plenty of work for him. The four of them were naturalized in 1917 and lived at 67 Fairbanks Street. While in America, Joseph and Rose had at least four more children, Emanuel, Isadore, Ira, and Ethel. When Jeanette was 20, she worked for Eastman Kodak Company and lived with her parents on Fairbanks Street.

In April of 1927, they had their first son, Earl. According to the 1930 Rochester census, they spoke Yiddish and English at home. They lived on Avenue E until Hyman secured a job as a guard in 1928 and in that same year, they moved to 15 Wilkins Avenue. Finally in 1930, Hyman became a clerk at the Bureau of Traffic Control, which is where he worked until he retired. Hyman learned how to use his left hand effectively and became a sign maintenance foreman for the Bureau of Traffic Control. In 1944, they moved to 1964 North Clinton Avenue. They then had their second son, Neil Kent, in July 1941. Both of their sons attended Benjamin Franklin High School. Earl graduated in 1944 and Neil in 1959. The Komisars became members of Temple Beth Kodesh on September 30, 1947 and were very active there. Hyman also joined the Jewish War Veterans and other local Veteran’s groups. Hyman retired from his job in 1961, and after he retired, he still worked around the house and even took up painting. In 1963, the couple moved to Brighton to be closer to their son, Earl, and daughter-in-law, Miriam. Jeanette died of respiratory failure on December 6, 1983, and Hyman died of heart failure on November 9, 1985.

Neil describes his father as a “sweet man, gentle, quiet, hardworking”. Likewise, Earl talks about his father as being loving and soft-spoken. He never talked about the war. Not only did Hyman never act handicapped, but after Hyman retired, the city of Rochester divided his job into five new fulltime jobs. This shows that he did not use his handicap as an excuse, but persevered and became successful. Earl tells the story of when his wife Miriam met Hyman and Jeanette for the first time, she was shocked that Hyman had only one arm. No one in the family seemed concerned about Hyman’s handicap or ever mentioned it. When describing his mother, Neil emphasizes that she was creative, bright, and intellectually curious. In the forward of his book entitled, Imperfect Alternatives, Neil thanks his parents by writing: “My mother, Jeanette, taught me a love for intellectual curiosity and creativity. My father, Hyman, taught me the importance of honesty and determination. His life was a lesson in quiet courage.”

Earl also agrees with his brother, and adds that Jeanette was ahead of her time. Jeanette had several very progressive female friends, some of whom even operated their own businesses. Even though Jeanette never worked outside the house, she was naturally artistic. She painted several paintings, which are now in Earl’s house. She also volunteered at a school in Rochester teaching children how to make art out of everyday objects. When Earl became a Freudian in college, his mother was one of the only people who understood Freud’s theories and accepted the fact that there are more to people than meets the eye.

The Komesar gravestone is made out of pink granite and consists of four parts. There is the back of the seat, which has engraved in large letters KOMESAR. Below that is engraved:

Together they built a
Timeless sanctuary for
Love Freedom Creativity

The back of the stone says KOMESAR, similar to the front of the stone. On the sides of the seat are two rectangular pieces of stone with smaller cubes on top of them. You could sit on the gravestone, but you would step on the pachysandra in front. Overall, the gravestone is elegant, modern, and unique.

The monument was designed by Earl Komesar and his wife Mimi. The pieces on the sides with their individual names inscribed represent male and female figures. The taller side symbolizes a male and a carved-out piece in the granite signifies Hyman’s missing arm. Earl laments that he should not have written “Hyman” on this figure, but rather “Hy”, the nickname that everyone called him. The other figure is shorter and wider and represents a woman. The bridge that connects them together is the seat. The inscription, created by Earl and Mimi, is descriptive of what Earl and Mimi felt Hyman and Jeanette did in their home. The whole piece is also representative of Earl’s artistic connection to his mother.

Even though they are buried in a Jewish section of the cemetery, there is no Hebrew on their monument. But the fact that they chose to be buried in this particular section connects them to their Judaism. Symbolically, the Komisars are living on through their religion. The Komisars are part of a community that has lived before them and will live after them. Participation in a religion means that one is offered the opportunity to be reborn into a timeless realm of ultimate, death-transcending truths. Their Jewish identity will never die, but will continue to live in people who believe in the same Jewish truths as they did.
Thus, their connection to the Jewish history, religion, and community means that they continue to live, if only in symbolic ways.

These Jewish values have been most directly passed on to their children and grandchildren. The Komesars’ sons grew up in a Jewish home where not only religion, but heritage was important; they spoke both Yiddish and English. Not only did their children receive their Jewish values, but Earl understands that his artistic ability comes from his mother. He researched his mother’s ancestors and found other artistic people in her family. Similarly, he believes that his granddaughter has inherited that same artistic talent. Hyman’s handicap never got in the way of his life, and again, his hard work motivated both of his children. Earl and Mimi think that the inscription of their gravestone is representative of Hyman and Jeanette’s love. This love was an example to both of their children. These traits and values are the most obvious way that the Komesars live immortally. Their values and talents have been proven to have been passed on in their descendants and will continue to do so for generations.

The Hyman and Jeanette Komesar Monument in Range 7 is composed of a set of red granite rectangular blocks that present an architectural appearance.

The central element of the Komesar gravestone presents an epitaph that aptly describes the family values.

Another way to understand the gravestone is through the “life is a burden” metaphor. There are many difficulties in life and “if one further conceives of life as one constant, relentless difficulty, then it is possible to think of the whole of life as a burden”. This connects with the “life as a journey” metaphor, because all of these burdens prohibit individuals from taking their life path easily. In this particular case, the gravestone acts as a short release from the burdens of life. The viewer of the gravestone is able to sit for a moment and contemplate life and death. The cemetery is certainly a good place to do this, and this gravestone helps with this process.

Even though Hyman and Jeanette Komesar led normal lives, to the people who knew and loved them, they were extraordinary. Hyman survived not only German imprisonment, but also the loss of an arm. His perseverance was an example to his children and community. The fact that they had such an unbroken love for each other is something that is praised and represented for all to see on their gravestone. Earl and Mimi felt that it was important to show this connection.

The lives of Hyman and Jeanette Komesar are a good example for all to follow.

(Editor’s Note: The author, Sarah Harvey, is a student at the University of Rochester and prepared this essay as part of the requirements for the course, Religion 167, Speaking Stones, which is taught by Prof. Emil Homerin, who is also a trustee of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery.)
I was called upon to rehabilitate a baby screech owl that was found on the ground in Mount Hope Cemetery. As one of few people licensed by the State and Federal Government to care for distressed wildlife in the area, I get calls like this frequently. Wildlife rehabilitators are volunteers who must pass certain standards of knowledge and experience to obtain the necessary licenses. Having a background in wildlife management and experience working in related fields for New York State, the Peace Corps Environmental Program, and Seneca Park Zoo, I find rehabilitation an interesting and rewarding endeavor filled with opportunities to get to know wildlife as few others are able.

I was presented with the baby screech owl, which was still in its baby down. I knew from experience that at least a couple months of care would be necessary before this little guy could be released. A diet of mice and mealworms ensured that the owl grew healthy and strong. This youngster had a gray coloration pattern. Other screech owls may show a less common color pattern, which is reddish brown. After almost two months of care, the owl showed all the characteristics of being ready for release. He attacked his food, and his flying in the practice-flight cage was strong. His feathers were well developed and showed good waterproofing. The accompanying picture was taken just before his release.

Marilyn Nolte, president of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery, who brought the owl to me, was very interested in the owl's progress and wondered about the possibility of improving the habitat for screech owls in the cemetery. I confess that I had never visited Mount Hope Cemetery, but I had heard that it has some wonderful wildlife. Awhile after the owl's release, I met Marilyn Nolte at the cemetery to view the habitat and see what possibilities might exist to improve it for owls. I was pleasantly surprised to see the magnificent, mature trees in the north end of the cemetery. Such old trees are likely to have woodpecker holes and natural cavities that can provide some natural nesting possibilities for screech owls, but nest boxes could add some good additional locations. Screech owls prefer open woodland with nearby meadows for hunting. The large trees form a canopy that provides open space underneath as good nesting habitat, while the flat area of the cemetery with fewer trees provides good hunting space.
We will install six nest boxes this fall. The nest boxes might well be used by owls, squirrels, or even some species of woodpecker. I mentioned to Marilyn that this woodland would very likely have a population of flying squirrels, which are rarely seen but are one of the most interesting small mammals of our forests. I have had some squirrel boxes donated by an RIT class, which I will install as a bonus. Owls nest early, so they can claim a box before other species are ready to utilize it. It should be noted that the likely tenants of the boxes are in predator-prey relationships. This is as nature intended and in general, although individuals are lost in the process, the dance of life and death goes on with both predator and prey both thriving on a population level. Perhaps this balance of life and death is nowhere more appropriate than here in Mount Hope Cemetery.