

Russian Brotherhood cemetery is world apart on Patten Road

Compiled by June W. Kennedy

This is the fourth in a series on the influx of Russians to Westford early in this century:

Alexander Belida draws upon his experiences as a second generation Russian to vividly recall the ethnic uniqueness of his past.

"From the time of arrival in this country, the Russians in Westford, being of the Eastern Orthodox religion, were buried in St. Catherine's Cemetery.

About 1918 the influenza epidemic was raging; they had to find a place to bury their dead. No doubt they sought comfort in their unity.

"My father and two or three others organized a committee and showed town authorities where they would like an acre of land. Attorney Fisher came down. They say he paced it off and said, 'This is where your bounds will be.'

"He did the paper work for them; hence the formation of the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery on Patten Road. The first soul buried in the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery was an influenza victim of 1918.

"In 1950 a second acre was purchased by the Brotherhood.

"In their spare time this first generation of Russians cleared the brambles, scrub oak, big trees and commenced burying their own. Today descendants of these very families still meet twice a year to care for the cemetery themselves.

"Membership in the Russian Brotherhood Cemetery, with yearly family dues of \$2, guarantees an unlimited number of grave sites for a descendant, spouse and offspring. A newly married couple has a two-year option to join the Corporation.

Markers of the times

"Some stones are lettered in the old Russian alphabet. When the first immigrants came, they had gone to school under the old Czarist regime. After the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks discarded six or seven unnecessary letters, making the language simpler and easier to read.

"The monument inscriptions of the 20s reflect this change. Now the newer generation uses English on their markers.

"Anyone could go and dig graves in the early days. The first graves in this cemetery were rather haphazardly arranged and without foundations. They have since been aligned.

"Russians are proud of their



Staff photo by Marc Holland

A modern tombstone inscribed in Russian in the Brotherhood Cemetery on Patten Road reflects the desire for continuity with the ethnic past. The first person to be buried in a plot there was an influenza victim in 1918. The epidemic claimed a large number of the new immigrant population in Westford.

monuments; some have even been replaced. A handmade cement one, still in place, was made by a chap from Forge Village.

"Common Russian and Polish names with their meanings are: Woroby, sparrow; Kovolcheck, smithy; Chudak, magician or mystery man, and Sosnowski, pine. Also, Pupchick, little button; Posnik, late or tardy. Belida, Kiver, Secovich, Harasko, Beskalo and Minko are other names.

"They are not all Russian

names on the headstones. Costello and McAllister, for example, are Irish; as sons and daughters married into other nationalities, their families would also be buried here.

Waking the dead

"Russian wakes were held at home. People were never embalmed then. I do remember Mr. Healy having a little garage in back of his house. Those going there had no family.

"Wakes were held for two or

Russians

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three days with someone keeping vigil around the body until time for burial. It was the place of women, mothers and daughters, to wail over the person — a must in those days.

"Because Westford was too small to support a church, priests, dressed in regalia resembling Greek priests, came from Lawrence and Maynard for funeral services. They consecrated the ground and delivered a lengthy service.

"Some of the older folk continue to wear their babushkas and wail at the cemetery as was the Russian custom. Some of the younger members try to copy the tradition, but many are cutting that all out. A long period of mourning followed a death."

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of 'Westford Recollections', a series of historical vignettes and photos.

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