

W h i s p e r s o f W i m m e r

~ by Dan Dixon ~

These are the stories of the families buried in Wimmer Cemetery, of their struggles and accomplishments.





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Winter 1830-1831

The pioneers of Auburn township were a sturdy bunch; they survived the first winter of prairie winds in their wagons and experienced many other hardships such as foraging for food and fending off attacks by wild animals. Somehow they survived and began building more permanent shelters in which their families could live throughout the year.

One of the biggest challenges that these settlers faced was that of the winter of 1830-1831 also known as the winter of the “deep snow.” One of the best accounts was written by Dr. Julian M. Sturtevant, who had come from New England in 1829 to Jacksonville to help in the beginnings of Illinois College, of which he was afterwards president for 20 years. “A cold rain started December 20, 1830 occasionally changing to sleet or snow until the day before Christmas, when large soft flakes fell to a depth of six inches. This was followed by a furious gale and a driving snow that piled up to three feet. Then came a rain that froze as it fell, forming a crust, “Nearly, but not quite, strong enough to bear a man” and over this a few inches of light snow, John Buckles described this icy crust in Logan County as “Strong enough to bear the weight of team and sled.”

The clouds passed away and the wind came down from the northwest with extraordinary ferocity,” says Sturtevant. “For weeks, certainly for not less than two weeks, the mercury in the thermometer tube was not, on any one morning higher than twelve degrees below zero. The wind was a steady, fierce gale from the northwest, day and night. The air was filled with flying snow, which blinded the eyes and almost stopped the breath of anyone who attempted to face it. No man could, for any considerable length of time, make his way on foot against it.

The wind drove snow through chinks in Sturtevant’s log cabin, filling it so that he had to move out and take refuge in a partly build college building. Dates were impressed on his mind because of worry of Dr. Edward Beecher, president of the college who had gone to Vandalia seeking its charter from the legislature, and was expected back during the Christmas holidays. Beecher was stormbound at the Tillson home in Hillsboro. There he met Charles Holmes, who had a powerful horse. They improvised a sleigh, and during a mid-January lull in the storm, plowed through the forty mile prairie to Jacksonville. It was the only such journey recorded that winter. Buckles, returning from a hunt with a friend, had a wagon load of game drawn by oxen. Within two miles of home they had to cut loose the wagon, and reached safety by clinging to the tails of the oxen.¹

Fortunately for our little community, all the families survived that harsh winter to tell their stories which have come down through many generations and are still shared today. The following year, however, was not so good for the family of George Washington and Sarah J. (Mackey) Wimmer, their son Abraham died on October 16, 1832 and was buried at the Wimmer Graveyard. A broken white stone once marked the site of his burial and now it has been replaced with a new stone.



¹ Winter of the Deep Snow, <http://www.illinoishistory.com/deepsnow.htm>



Settlement Days

Sangamon County as well as Auburn Township experienced many changes in its landscape and population during the settlement years of 1818 to 1839. The land for the cemetery was deeded to George Washington Wimmer in 1824 by James Patton thus establishing one of the first burial places for those who died in the community. The following people were the earliest burials in the newly sacred grounds: Fall of 1819 Mrs. Elizabeth (Vancil) Walker, daughter of Samuel Vancil; 1822 Mary Vancil, Samuel's wife; 1828 Samuel died; October 16, 1832 Abraham Wimmer, son of George Washington and Sarah J. (Mackey) Wimmer died and then on July 2, 1937 Ezra Dill joined the ranks of the deceased. The last burial in the 1830s was Abraham Wimmer, husband of Susanna (Lemon) Wimmer and father of George Washington Wimmer.

George Wimmer experienced the death of both a son and his father, but he also experienced the growth of the community in the births of many children, the marriages of many couples and the influx of settlers in the community. By 1840 the community was thriving and expanding. The land of the Sugar Creek had become a patchwork of small villages including Sangamo Town, which eventually became Springfield, Illinois' state capitol and Auburn, which was settled first about a mile north of the present city, was platted by the Eastman family and contained but six dwellings and a small square of businesses and would eventually be moved to the present location.

With growth comes change, the once lush valley of prairie grasses was now becoming plowed fields in which corn, wheat and various vegetables were planted. Schools and churches had been established in the area which brought more settlers to the once sparsely populated area. The little village of Springfield had become a bustling center of commerce and several politicians had begun to notice the outlying villages as potential voting members of the county. Although from the southern part of Auburn Township, Job Fletcher became a representative for the community of Auburn which a great deal of our Wimmer neighbors endorsed. Mr. Fletcher brought other politicians to the area like Abraham Lincoln who came to Irwin's Grove and Auburn for campaign fundraisers and election results which aided in the growth of the area. The region had become more than just farm land, there were now established professional services available to its inhabitants. Mr. Lincoln was a popular man in the area known for his legal expertise. He handled many different types of cases which involved a variety of Auburn area families. Job was also popular for his legal expertise as he wrote the first will in Sangamon County.

The cycle of life continues throughout all time, this was no exception in our little community surrounding the Wimmer graveyard. Elizabeth (Groves) Shutt, wife of Jacob Henry Shutt died in 1840. She had experienced life during the American Revolution, the Independence of our nation, the War of 1812, and the Black Hawk War and had raised six children by the time she died. Charles Orr, son of Alexander and Margaret (Ramsey) Orr however, only lived one day, this must have been a very terrible experience for the family. The death of Henry Loving, son of George Washington and Eliza (Wimmer) Loving would have been just as much a burden to his family since he was nineteen years old at his death, December 28, 1843. He probably was helping out on the homestead and the loss of any working male made times harder on the family especially so soon after Christmas.

Another death in the Wimmer family occurred on August 7, 1844, possibly from malaria as this would have been the height of summer mosquito season in Sangamon County. Mahala (Wimmer) Smith, daughter of George Washington and Sarah J. (Mackey) Wimmer and wife of James Smith died at the age of twenty years, five months and three days. The fall of 1845 brought the death of one of the elder Wimmer family members, Susanna, wife of Abraham Wimmer died on October 24, 1845. She outlasted her husband by six short years.

The following list of names and dates shows the influx of new families to the neighborhood: infant son of John M. and Susan (Dill) Henderson died December 17, 1846; Robert Orr was one of the older people to be buried in the 1840s at age fifty-six years, eleven months, fifteen days, he had lived a very long life for that time period. Robert was the son of Alexander and Margaret (Ramsey) Orr Sr. he was survived by nine children and his wife Sarah (Messersmith) Orr he died on December 23, 1846. Emelline T. Hanshaw died at the young age of three years, five months and twenty-eight days on March 17, 1847; she was the daughter of Elisha and Mary S. Hanshaw. The fourth person to die during the 1840s was George W. Turner who died March 06, 1848. George was the son of Andrew D. and Evaline (Wimmer) Turner.

Growth and change are inevitable; by the end of the 1840s the once pristine landscape of sprawling prairies had vanished and become a growing community of households and farmland. Springfield was established as the state's capitol and the villages that surrounded it were now connected through the newly established stagecoach system. One of the lines that ran through the area has left its mark in present day Wimmer Cemetery as one can see when visiting the burial ground a road was carved through the upper portion of the cemetery.





The mid nineteenth century was a time of change for transportation, how crops were produced, social connections and the health of Wimmer and Auburn community. Each of these changes had an impact on how people survived and thrived on the vast prairie landscape.

The stage coach had been in existence since the 1830s and was a major source for the mail. Back in 1835 the Eastman family was able to establish a village because of the stage route going through their land, in the 1850s a new town was platted which would eventually kill the family's dream. Philip Wineman had worked for the rail road in the past and knew they would need wood and water to fuel their new steam trains once a line was established. Philip purposefully placed a water tower on the east edge of his newly formed village of Wineman. With this move, he was able to convince the Chicago and Alton Rail Road Company to build their line along the eastern edge of his village. This was the beginning of the end for the original village of Auburn. By 1864 all the buildings from the old town of Auburn had either been taken down or move to the new town of Wineman. Because of the demise of the old town and subsequent relocation of the majority of people from there to the new town that the final plat showed the change from Wineman to Auburn.

Due to the majority of their time being spent on farming pursuits, most families had very little time to socialize. With the establishment of several churches in the area, there was a movement towards spending Sundays in church activities. Sunday school kept the children busy most of the morning and the pastor or priest kept the congregation enthralled with their fire and brimstone sermons. Occasionally a couple would get married and there would be a great gathering of the relatives with a sumptuous meal and dancing. These meals were a time for the best cooks in the region to show off their skills. Women were more likely to gather as a group to accomplish tasks that were more daunting on their own such as making a large quilt or sewing up a variety of family clothing which needed to be repaired from the harsh winter's work. Men gathered together to talk about politics or butcher animals during the winter months. Spring planting and winter harvest times were times when the entire community gathered together to help one another with various farm chores. There would be corn shucking contests, races to see who could pick the corn the fastest and bundle the wheat in the biggest piles. Children were beginning to attend school more and thus spelling bees would happen shortly after the harvest season was completed.

The spread of disease sometimes came with all these gatherings of people. Perhaps Johnny had a cold but it didn't have him sick enough to be in bed. Although worried about his health, mother and father would allow him to come to the event. Sometimes a cough was just a cough but other times it was more dangerous than people of the time period would understand. Little was known at the time about spreading disease and germs would migrate from one person to another. Johnny's cough could end up causing Susie to develop pneumonia. Susie might infect Sally because they shared a doll. One of the more prominent events in epidemic history happened from 1856-1859 when a nation-wide influenza outbreak occurred.ⁱ Seventeen of the forty deaths which resulted in burials in Wimmer happened during this time period. The Berrys, Crulls, Dills, Evans, Gillmores, Hendersons, Orrs, Tabors, Turners, Williams and Wineman families all lost members during this epidemic. Perhaps it was the flu or there may have

been other diseases, but with so many others dying in the nation it is certain that a number of these deaths would have been due to the disease. Two unique deaths however, were an exception to this theory. Martha (Anderson) Harney, wife of James Harney and daughter of Dickey and Ann (Cams) Anderson, age thirty seven, apparently died during childbirth. The husband was so bereaved that he had the most ornate tombstone in the cemetery made to commemorate the life of his wife and child. The white marble stone, which was repaired due to it being broken in half, reads "Little Byron Lies in his Savior's Grace" at the bottom of the stone. What a tragedy it must have been to lose both a child and a wife at the same time. Perhaps she died in childbirth or some tragic accident, only their souls know the final answer. One thing is for certain, prior to lifting up the broken pieces of that stone, a blue racer snake had made it his home.

When the nineteenth century began there was no method of plowing the prairie to establish crops other than digging by hand. By the middle of the century John Deere had invented a plow that changed the farming industry and allowed the once vast stubborn prairie sod to be broken. Farms began to spring up where once stood tall grass. As these plows became more productive for tilling the soil, more people began to settle the land. Land speculators started to plat new towns as shown above, the region was changing.

The nation itself was changing as well. With the adoption of the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1849 the nation began to divide in its beliefs about slavery. A large majority of the area settlers had experienced slavery in their former home towns and some did not care for this trade. Others thought it was a right of human kind to own those of "inferior races" making their lives better by providing them with the basics of life in return allowing them to serve their masters. Whatever the pioneers' beliefs, all the men of fighting age were accounted for in a special census in 1862-1863. This census showed that the majority of men living in the Auburn and Wimmer areas were farmers. They owned small farms and were mainly of the age to help out in the war effort.

¹ Source: <http://genealogy-quest.com/glossaries/epidemics.html>



CIVIL WAR AND ITS AFTER EFFECTS

The 1860s were a time of many historic happenings for both the Auburn area and the nation. After Philip Wineman was given the privilege of having a water tower placed next to his town, the original town of Auburn began to dissolve. People moved from that town to the new town of Wineman pulling their wooden cabins and other structures on ox-driven skids to their new locations. The Eastman family knew this would be the end of the town and sold the remaining lots to Madison Curvey¹ concluding the sales around 1861 and thus the original town of Auburn became farm land. Although Philip was happy with being the winner of the water tower and thus having the rail road locate next to his town, he decided to rename his town Auburn in honor of the former village. The new town of Auburn was formerly introduced during a ceremony of the Illinois legislature during its 1864-65 sessions and thus begins our story of the new village of Auburn.

The rail road brought with it new goods and more people which changed the direction in which the economy was to grow. Farmers were now able to ship their farm products across the nation, which lead to an increased need for labor. With the influx of money in to the economy came new families and more businesses. One of the earliest known businesses to be established in Auburn was Ham and Poley, a grocery store which also contained the post office. People would come to the grocer to purchase goods that they could not produce on their farms such as flour and various other items. This was also a place for gathering information on the world outside Auburn. It is likely that this location is where townsfolk found out about the latest battles that were being waged during the War Between the States.

The settlers of Auburn were facing their own war as far as deaths in the community. Fourteen of the burials that are known for Wimmer during the 1860s were of children from the age of one day to five years. Perhaps there was an outbreak of some disease like measles, mumps, small pox or diphtheria, since recorded deaths do not occur for Sangamon County, this can only be speculation. It is certain, however, that many families in the area of Wimmer Cemetery mourned during the 1860s due to a loss of a child. Loss like this can either consume one's life or make one more steadfast. Since the community population increased as the 1870s approached one would gather that the families continued to thrive yet still honored their dead by erecting tombstones for posterity.

¹ History of Sangamon County, 1881, Interstate Publishing, p. 752.





Auburn showed much progress during the first decade of existence, it went from a tiny village of just a few buildings to notable community in the 1870s. The ***Auburn Herald*** at first then the ***Auburn Citizen*** became the voice of this hamlet on the prairie by 1875. The townsfolk were now able to learn about things that were happening outside of their own community. People spoke of the adventures of family members back east and those brave souls who had wandered west in search of fame and fortune.

Auburn was quite well established by 1875. There were sixty businesses which ranged from Auburn Bank to W. P. Brooks' Supplier of Wagon Parts. Some of the businesses were Sam Lewis' Dry Goods, Large and Sons Blacksmiths, J. A. Jorns¹ Photo Gallery, Kessler Bakery and Restaurant, George Bremer's Boot & Shoe Store, F. P. Buck Groceries and Provisions, Henry Hart's Hippodrome [an early version of the moving picture show], Wm. A. Hill's Meat Market, I. J. McGriff's Grocery Store and Alex R. Barr was one of the druggists in town. Four doctors existed in town and one was also a surgeon, W. D. Wheeler.

There was a Baptist church [Elder M. V. Kitzmiller], St. Benedict's Roman Catholic Church [Rev. Father Ryan], Cumberland Presbyterian [Pastor Wiley Knowles], Methodist church with circuit riders [Rev. Huff and Rev. Powell], Presbyterian Church [J. D. Jones Pastor], and a Second Advent Church [A. S. Caulkins]. There were also several one room school houses throughout the area and the beginnings of a school system in town.

The post office was located in the train station near the tracks that Philip Wineman had persuaded the Chicago and Alton Rail Road authorities to build next to the town. Now along with the mail for news outside the area, the community had the telegraph system and a local newspaper, the Auburn Citizen. The town was maturing from its infancy to its teenage years. There were times of trouble and strife, as with any teenager, although there were doctors in the area, disease still struck this small community. An influenza outbreak most likely took the lives of the following people who were buried in Wimmer Cemetery from 1873 to 1875: Herman Ahlers, Anna Duckworth, Johny McKay, Minnie A. McKay, David W. Moomaw, Barton H. Orr, Benjamin F. Orr, Lilly B. Orr, Mary Orr, Saloma J. Owen, Obie Seales, and Jacob Vancil. Yellow fever took several lives throughout Sangamon County in 1878, included in this list could possibly have been: Rosa Bland, William Featherstone, Alford G. Harney, Cessie S. Merrill, Stinsey Morrell, Samuel Orr, and an infant of the Vancil family. The stories of the deaths of others buried in the cemetery during the 1870s have to be uncovered or told. Perhaps some members of the present day community can help us uncover their histories.

¹ "J O R N S" is the correct spelling for the photo gallery





Auburn was a bustling town by 1880. We had a bank, a newspaper, doctors, notary publics, judges, dentists, barbers, grocers and hardware stores. The Dawson and Reader Tile and Brick and Coal Company had been established as our first industry. Shortly after the discovery of coal underground in Auburn several other mines also were established.

Although Auburn was still considered a farming community, industry was beginning to come to the forefront of life. The Robert Morse Carriage Company was known throughout the area as one of the better dealers in farm implements and transportation. Mr. Tarr also had a stable in town that repaired horse shoes and provided horse oriented modes of transportation. The coal mine brought more workers to town and thus more specialized shops arose. Ladies as well as gentlemen were wearing more hats thus millinery shops and haberdasheries sprung up all over Auburn's business square, we even had a tobacco shop.

Another byproduct of the influence of new people in the town was the increased risk of diseases. One of the more prominent diseases to afflict the region was consumption which is a wasting disease of the lungs or other part of the body; tuberculosis of the lungs. Ella Moomaw, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. David Moomaw died at age sixteen from consumption and was buried in the Wimmer Cemetery. Lewis R. Hart died March 9, 1881 then the infant son of Susan and William P. Harris died March 11 and Mrs. Susan Harris wife of William P. Harris, died March 23 after the death of her infant son. Perhaps they died from whooping cough which was prevalent in the area during that time in history.

The most notable person to die during the 1880s from our little community though was George Washington Wimmer, founder of the Wimmer Cemetery. George was born in Maryland near the Potomac River on Washington's birthday, February 22, 1796. He moved with his parents to Botetourt County, Virginia in 1804 then, in 1814 to Preble County, Ohio where he married Sarah Mackey in 1818 and came to Sangamon County in 1819. Mr. Wimmer was instrumental in setting aside land for burials in the cemetery which would eventually be named after him. He donated the land in 1824 and thus the Wimmer Cemetery was established. George Washington Wimmer was the father of five children four of which died prior to his death on 27 July 1888.

Although death took several members of the neighborhood surrounding Wimmer Cemetery, the town of Auburn continued to flourish. The cemetery had become a final resting place for early settlers of the region showing both their fortitude and strength in determination to advance society through examples of their lives.



1890s

The 1890s, as most genealogists know, is a difficult time period in which to find primary resources. Although a census was taken in 1890, it was destroyed in a fire at the National Archives in the 1930s. This makes researching that time period a challenge when it comes to placing particular people in a particular part of the country. Luckily for family historians who are researching Auburn, we have the Auburn Citizen microfilm at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library that covers that time period. The newspaper gives us a sense of what life was like at the turn of the nineteenth century. New things were being invented and discovered throughout the country and world. Auburn had several firsts occur during this time of change.

On December 10, 1896 the first rural mail delivery in the state of Illinois was inaugurated at Auburn. This was part of the program started by the national government as a test to ascertain if rural free delivery was justifiable. There were forty test routes throughout the United States and three out of Auburn were the only ones in Illinois. F. O. Lorton, Samuel Lewis and Allen Hatcher were the three men who entered the bids for the routes. Hilma Kinney, daughter of F. O. Lorton related in an interview:

My father had the first mail routes. Really he was one of the first in the nation. He was on one of the test runs here. He delivered mail on horseback and walking because he had mail all around here.

When the weather was good and not knee deep in mud, he rode his horse. When the snow would get deep he would have to walk part of the way and the people on his route would feed him and sometimes he had to stay overnight. That was the first job he had.

The first electrical system was established in the 1890s. On September 30, 1897, eight arc lights were installed as follows: one each at the northwest and southeast corners of the public square; one at the W. H. Hummel residence (7th and Adams) just west of the [Methodist] Church; one at Dr. S. C. Ham's (4th and Adams) just west of the Baptist Church; one at the corner of the Catholic Church parsonage lot; one at the Slegmilk's corner (1st and Monroe); and one just north of the Presbyterian Church.

The first telephone system was established in Auburn on February 25, 1899 by William H. Ramsey and his helper Charles Sinniger. In the early days of the telephone, a death was announced by the ringing of a church bell. The funeral director usually called the operator first so he could have time to get extra help because as soon as they heard the bell people would be calling to find out who had passed away. Along with the firsts mentioned above, Auburn was also becoming a more social township. The Wineman Opera House was opened in a wooden structure on the west side of the square in 1881. Many civic groups held meetings there as well as school plays. April 1897 the west side of the square burned including the opera house, by October 16 of that same year the building was reconstructed of brick from funding by Charles H. Wineman the new building was christened with various exercises including the Merchants' band, a ladies quartette and the play "The Deacon" was performed.

The 1890s was a busy time period for the undertakers of Auburn and vicinity as far as burials in the Wimmer Cemetery. Two veterans of the Confederate Army died

during 1889 and 1890, Martin Baker Harris died 3 April 1889 and George Anthony Rucker died 15 August 1890. John T. Duckworth, a Union veteran, died 30 August 1897.

The family that was hit hardest during the 1890s, in the region of the Wimmer Cemetery, was the family of Wiley Edgar and Georgie A. Orr, they lost Lester at the age of six months dying 30 July 1890, then an infant son on 27 August 1893 at two months and a third infant son at two months on 5 November 1894. What a shock this must have been to such a young couple.

Sixteen other people were buried during the 1890s at Wimmer Cemetery: Martha P. (Brown) Wimmer 19 January 1891; Nancy (Vancil) Featherstone 22 March 1891; Abram Dill 25 March 1893; George McKinney 20 July 1893; Grace Duckworth 16 September 1894; Sarah A. (Kent) Shutt 25 January 1895; Andrew D. Turner 25 April 1895; James Vancil Jr. 20 February 1896; Mrs. Elizabeth Ann Jenkins 28 February 1896; Willie Turner 10 May 1896; Nellie Finney and Della Finney died 22-23 October 1896; Miss Willie Rebecca Jenkins 24 February 1897; Frances Moomaw 31 July 1897; Sarah J. (Mackey) Patton 7 June 1898 and Winaford (Mackey) McKinney 11 August 1898.

The Finney girls mentioned above were twin daughters of Erastus Newton and Lucy Jane (Turner) Finney. These poor girls died from diphtheria at the age of ten years. They led short lives but were “much missed in the home circle and by their little companions.” A quote was placed in their obituary of 29 October 1896 in the Auburn Citizen as follows: “What though the shadowy valley with death’s dark form is dim, light cheers the stormy passage, and they are safe with him.”

1899 brought competition to the Wimmer Cemetery; Mary Buck donated enough land to the west about a mile and a half west of Wimmer for the people of Auburn to be buried which eventually became the Auburn Cemetery. This competition began the decline in burials at the little cemetery on the hill near Sugar Creek.

