

OPUNTIA

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Joseph Major
1409 Christy Avenue
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2004-09-28

On May 14, 1988, a church group was returning from its recreational visit to Kings Island amusement park north of Cincinnati. They were driving down Interstate Highway 71 on their way home, late at night, near Carrolton, Kentucky. A pickup truck driver coming the other way lost control of his vehicle (as you might guess, he was drunk), crossed the median, and collided with the bus. By a freakish and cruel coincidence, he struck the bus's gas tank at precisely the right spot and it exploded. Twenty-seven of the passengers were killed. The pickup driver was sent to prison for multiple manslaughter convictions.

Roadway memorials proliferated at the site due to the extreme death toll of the accident. The Kentucky state highway commission decided if they can't beat them, join them, and as a result there are highway signs on both sides marking the site of the accident. We saw them going to the Worldcon and returning. They are standard white-on-green reflective signs that say "SITE OF FATAL / BUS CRASH / MAY 14, 1988".

I Also Heard From: John Held Jr, Jeanette Handling, Davida Gypsy Breier, Henry Welch, Kris Mininger, Ross Priddle, Joel Cohen, Dewitt Young, Ficus, Randall Fleming, Christine Douville, Lloyd Penney, Sheryl Birkhead, E.B. Frohvet

ROADSIDE MEMORIALS

by Dale Speirs

History Of Roadside Memorials.

The idea of wayside memorials is common to most cultures and certainly no new thing. Most are placed as a remembrance to the suddenly departed and some are a warning to the wise traveller to take heed.

In Belgium it was noted in 1855 that: *"It is scarcely possible to travel a few miles in that country, either on the high roads or on those less frequented, without finding one or more of those pious remembrances placed by the wayside. Those less pretending record the death "near that place" of someone who, by his own negligence, or through the carelessness of others, there lost his life. Others destined to record a murder are generally more elevated, as the one at Lubbeck, dated 1688, erected by the high road from Louvaine to Deist, on which is a long inscription*

recording the particulars of the murder of a priest, whose life was there sacrificed while travelling towards Malines." [1].

Roadside crosses have been common in Britain since the introduction of automobiles in the early 1900s, and elaborate crosses are built in Greece [9]. The Spanish colonizers in early America used roadside crosses. They believed that since the victims died suddenly without a priest's blessing, their souls would wander the roads. Crosses helped provide some Christian tranquility [6].

The effectiveness of roadside crosses as a warning to travellers does not seem high. In Montana, the American Legion has been placing roadside crosses for 40 years to mark traffic deaths, but with no apparent results in slowing down drivers. In fact, they may cause accidents as a distraction [7]. These days I doubt that; most people are too busy talking on their cellphones to be distracted by the crosses as they drive by. In Texas, the organization Mothers Against Drunk Drivers has put up crosses for victims of impaired drivers [11]. One interesting Australian roadside cross was decorated with parts from a wrecked car, topped with a speedometer/tachometer as a warning against speeding. However, a study with radar guns showed passing vehicles did not slow down for crosses [10].

In the modern era, it is often difficult to research the story behind a roadside memorial unless the cross has a name and exact date. Few local newspapers are indexed, so finding an obituary is hard. A year-only date means going through a full year's worth of newspapers. The Internet, for all its promise, has demonstrated the failures of keyword searching when the information is hidden behind a newspaper's subscriber-only database, and genealogy sites generally cite old off-line material. Privacy and anti-identity theft laws make it difficult to search government databases for recent deaths unless one is a close relative.

Dealing With Memorials.

What is to the rest of us nothing more than a newspaper story or "film at 11" on television is to the families of those killed a great trauma. The friends and family of some of those killed choose to honour the suddenly departed with a roadside memorial. The memorials are usually simple crosses or wreaths of flowers. Most are temporary, but some are made permanent. Roadside memorials are partly due to the lack of personal contact in dealing with death in our modern society. Most people die in a hospital, are whisked to a funeral home for preservation and display, and the ceremony is rigid and defined, both in the chapel and at the grave site. Erecting a roadside cross is an attempt to personalize a traumatic experience for the next of kin [17].

The memorials are against the law, but bureaucrats tread warily. Roadside memorials are not part of any official local histories but are well known to the citizenry as sacred spaces or points of pilgrimage [17]. They exist outwith the law (almost every government authority bans them) but are not outlaws (government maintenance workers turn a blind eye to them, and politicians waver if the subject comes up). Some governments have official cross procedures, but most eventually flounder on questions of separation of church and state, or whether or not the crosses are a distraction to drivers. Normally there is no problem from the public about the wayside crosses, but in Calgary, Alberta, at least one complaint has been received from a commuter tired of looking at two memorials en route to work. There is the valid point that the grieving family does not have the right to impose on others using public property; they can mourn loved ones at a grave site. There is also the distraction to drivers, landscape visual clutter, and maintenance disruption [7].

Some cities, such as Edmonton, Alberta, actively discourage roadside memorials, while Calgary tolerates them to some extent [8]. In 2004, the City of Calgary announced a crackdown on such memorials because some were becoming too elaborate [13]. One family was forced to scale back a heart-shaped memorial with numerous elaborations (Figures 3 and 4) and allowed to only have a simple cross [15].

Figure 1: Deerfoot Trail
looking toward Southland
Drive overpass. Roadside
cross marks the death of
Constable Richard
Sonnenberg (see page 9)



Figure 2: 4 Street NW cross for Calvin Corcoran at the crosswalk where he was killed (see page 12). This cross was removed after about two years.



Figure 3: Death scene at southeast corner of Anderson Road and Macleod Trail SE. As the driver came up the ramp, she lost control and hit the concrete barrier (notice the black smear at left). Her car flipped up and over, landing by the telephone pole at centre background of the photo. Police believe alcohol was involved. The cross is to the left of the telephone pole.

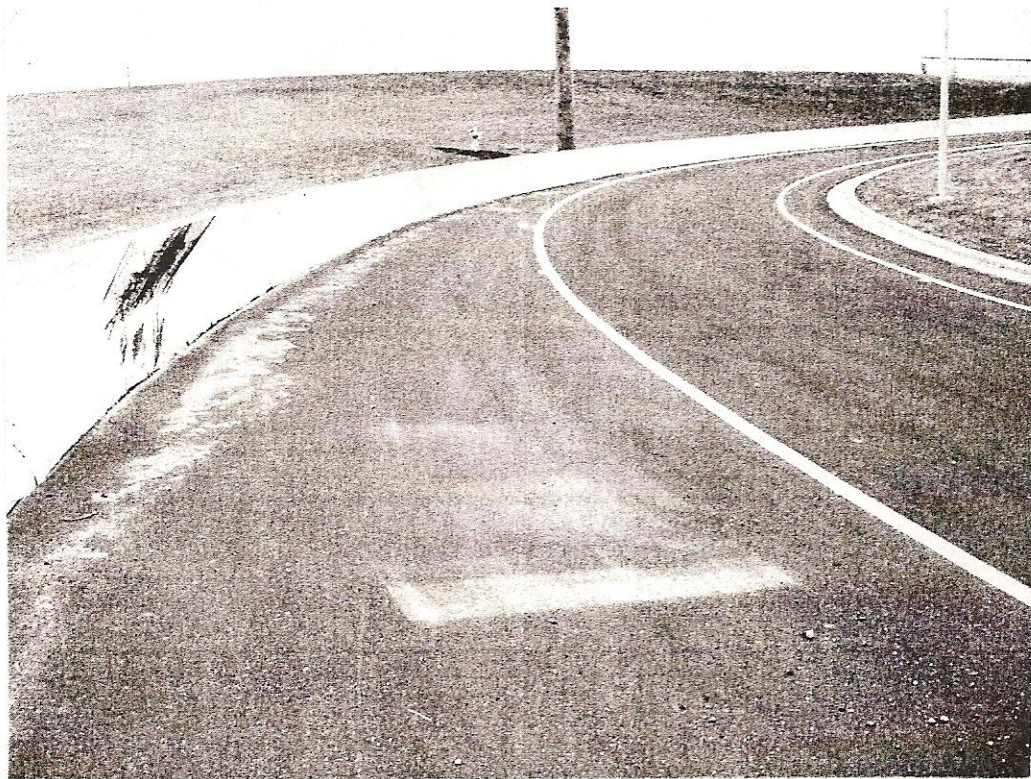
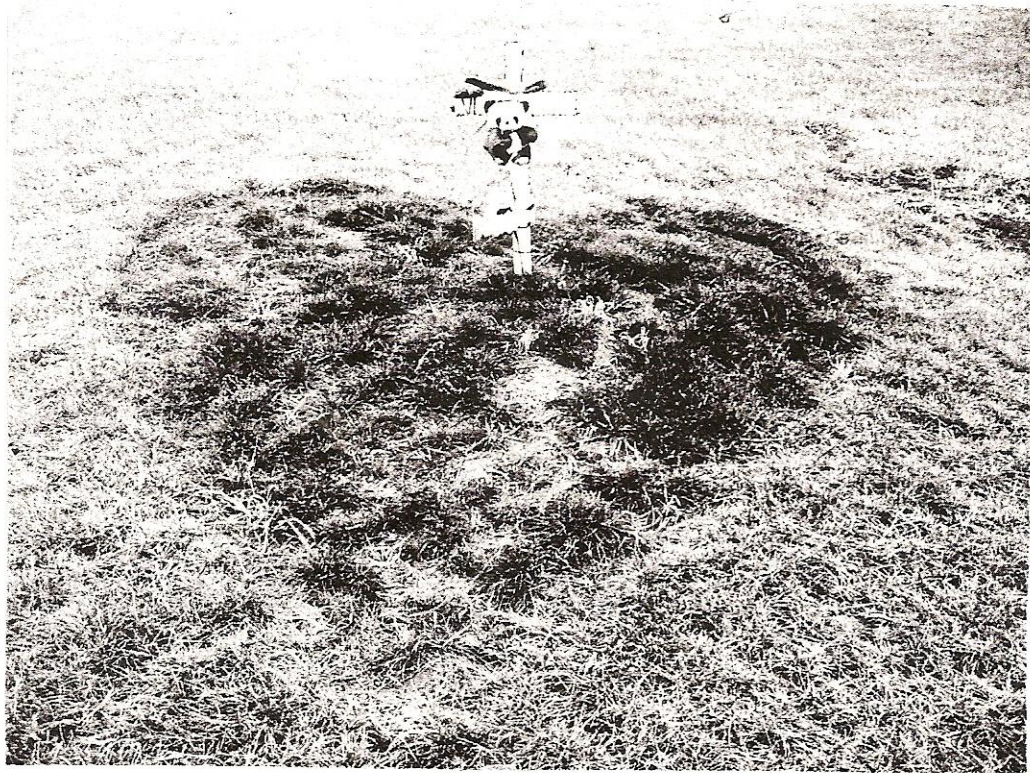


Figure 4: Close-up of memorial at Figure 1. After removing the elaborate memorial by order of the City, and leaving only a cross, the family fertilized the grass in a heart shape.



Calgary bureaucrats mentioned that City crews cleaned off such memorials every spring, which seems doubtful in my observation, because many are left alone by workers for fear of adverse comment. Alberta provincial authorities judge memorials on rural highways on a case by case basis [14].

A 2001 court case in Colorado [12] ruled that roadside crosses in median are not authorized by law because they constitute adverse possession of public property; in other words, the grieving relatives are claiming public land for their own use. Roadside memorials can also be discouraged on the grounds of litter control and prohibited advertising.

Families and friends who want to maintain roadside memorials have made the argument that private advertising signs are tolerated despite being just as much the distraction [16]. One can see the validity of this point, since advertising signs that flash or blink, or businesses that have clowns standing on the boulevard waving at passersby are just as much a problem, yet they are not bothered.

Death On Cowtown Roads.

Traffic fatalities are as common in Calgary as any other city. Calgary Parks Dept. maintenance on freeways is 99% litter pickup and turf mowing.

All parks and roadways are inventoried, so Parks can base its budget on how many hectares there are to mow, the number of trees to prune, and areas to litter pick. Not appearing on any official inventory, however, are the roadside memorials.

I've been keeping an informal list of such memorials. Most, I have noticed, disappear after a year or so, but many are kept up for years by grieving families. Others seem to last for years but closer inspection reveals that there is no maintenance and their longevity is due to solid construction.

You will note in this essay that one freeway, Deerfoot Trail, has the largest share of roadside memorials. (All Calgary freeways named 'Trail' were originally cattle trails a century ago.) Deerfoot Trail is an 8-lane freeway running north-south through the eastern half of Calgary. The major east-west roads such as the Trans-Canada Highway, Memorial Drive, Glenmore Trail, and Anderson Road intersect with it. Deerfoot Trail is part of Highway 2, which runs up the middle of Alberta from the American border to Edmonton. It is the second busiest road in Canada; only Highway 401 in Toronto, Ontario, has greater traffic volume. If you are going from one corner of Calgary to another anywhere in the eastern half of the city and are in a hurry, you will take Deerfoot Trail. For commuters, it is the only practical route downtown from most eastern and southern suburbs. For

commercial haulers, it is the only fast route into the industrial district of eastern Calgary. For police, it is by far the highest volume of accidents, which tend to be more serious because of the 120 km/hr traffic.

Police Memorials: Constable Richard Alan Sonnenberg.

Calgary is a big city, and like other cities must face the reality of police constables dying in the line of duty. It averages out to about once a decade, but two years in quick succession two constables died in the city. The second of these is the first I will write about, because his marker is adjacent to a Parks maintenance depot, just down the hill on the southwest corner of Deerfoot Trail and Southland Drive. It was in the small hours of the morning of October 8, 1993, that police were chasing teens in a stolen car down Deerfoot Trail. Const. Rick Sonnenberg, 27 years old and engaged to be married, was laying down a spike belt across the road to stop the car. It was a combination of him misjudging the speed of the car, travelling about 150 km/hr, and the panicky driver swerving in the wrong direction, that killed him. He was hit by the car, his body hurled down the freeway and cut into three pieces.

His memorial is on a slope on the interchange, overlooking the place where he died (Figure 1). A granite tablet set flush to the ground commemorates him, with his name, dates of birth and

death, and an engraved enlargement of his badge. The site always has wreaths surrounding the marker. The freeway slopes are only mowed twice a year at a height of 5 cm by big multi-deck tractors. Police volunteers mow the grass around his marker at 2 cm with a lawnmower. Some years the grass is cut close in the shape of a giant cross stretching down the slope, with the marker at the centre of the cross. Other years it is a heart shape.

Sonnenberg's death led to a major change in police policy regarding pursuits. They now use a helicopter equipped with infrared sights and arc searchlights that illuminate a target brighter than the noonday sun. Car chases have dropped dramatically in Calgary over the past decade as joyriding teens learn that they can't outrun a helicopter nor can they hide from it as the dragnet closes in.

Police Memorials: Constable Robert Vanderwiell.

Memorial Drive east of 36 Street SE is a secondary collector street for Calgary commuters, funnelling four lanes of traffic past rows of suburban bungalows. One such bungalow in the vicinity of 47 Street SE has cotoneaster hedges separating it from the neighbour's yard. Against the hedge is a thin angle-iron cross about waist high. A small metal plaque has Const. Vanderwiell's name and the dates 1956 - 1992.

It was a situation that every constable wonders about in the back of his mind when he steps out of the police cruiser after pulling a car over for a minor traffic violation. Is it a routine traffic ticket? Or will it be how Vanderwiel met his death? The car he stopped was driven by a drug dealer. As the constable approached the car, the driver leaned out and fired a shotgun. Finis.

The cross is relatively inconspicuous against the hedge, unlike Sonnenberg's memorial which can be easily seen by passing traffic. The homeowner whose yard was where Vanderwiel died was sympathetic to the idea of a memorial but understandably did not want it to be the focal point of his landscaping. Traffic driving by can easily miss it against the dark hedge, save perhaps for the flowers at the base of the cross.

Calgary: Glenmore Trail.

Glenmore Trail is the only east-west route across the Bow River in south-central Calgary. It was built as a 4-lane freeway decades ago, but now handles enough traffic for double that.

I don't have the date or the details of how Jill Higgins died other than it happened circa 1995. The location was Glenmore Trail where it intersects Deerfoot Trail, only a few kilometres from Const. Sonnenberg's memorial. The intersection is a dangerous one, and accidents are common.

The vicinity contains two confusing interchanges in rapid sequence after each other, with complicated ramps and drivers suddenly cutting over a lane because they misunderstood their turnoff. Down the centre of Glenmore runs an old-fashioned metal guardrail, of a type no longer used on new freeways. On this guardrail, just east of Deerfoot Trail, is a cross for Jill. Whoever put it there risked their own life. The guardrail is on a narrow median so dangerous that Parks workers do not trim the weeds because of traffic zooming past only centimetres away. Her manner of death is easy enough to surmise; a sudden change in speed or direction by a car, no place to swerve to avoid collision, then rollover or high-speed impact. Her cross is still there as of 2004, albeit badly worn by road salt. -10-

At the eastern end of Glenmore Trail, where four lanes of north-south traffic on 52 Street SE cross the two-lane section of the freeway, is another white wooden cross. It is on the northwest corner by the turning lane onto westbound Glenmore Trail. The cross bears the inscription "Al Newhook (Dad)" on the one side, and the dates "3/8/33-3/9/99" on the other. Take a closer look at those dates. Newhook died on March 9, one day after his 66th birthday. He was southbound in his pickup truck across the intersection when a westbound semi-trailer ran a red light. The semi not only broadsided the pickup at high speed, it pushed it into another semi southbound in the lane beside Newhook. The

driver of the second semi said he thought he was going to die as he lay in the wreckage after. As for Newhook, there was no chance for him. His cross is still there as of 2004 but will disappear in the next few years as the intersection is upgraded from a level crossing to an interchange.

Innocent Victims: The Square Dancers.

They were a typical set of suburban couples driving home from a square dance session in the evening of October 19, 1995. In their fifties, three of them never got any older when a Camaro travelling at high speed broadsided their car in the intersection of Macleod Trail and 58 Avenue SE. Their car was slammed against a light pole in the median and cut in half.

A year later, I saw the memorial, put up on the anniversary of their death. On a corner pole was a cardboard sign with newspaper clippings and obituaries pasted to it. The photos were of ordinary people, at an age where the men were counting the few remaining years to retirement and the women doting on the grandchildren. In the median, a bouquet of flowers was taped to the pole against which they been crushed to death. A traffic sign on the pole, just below the flowers, still had scrape marks on it. The drunk driver who killed them may or may not have had scrape marks on his soul; only he will ever know. The memorials were gone within another year.

Dumb Kids.

Alcohol was probably involved on that Calgary night in July 1996 on 90 Avenue SW near Paliswood Road. A small white wooden cross marked the spot where a young man fell off the back of a pickup truck onto the road. Handprinted with a felt pen on the horizontal bar of the cross was "*Rest in peace, Brad. / We love you.*". A peace sign was traced in the middle of the cross. The boulevard was regularly mowed, being in a residential neighbourhood, and the Parks crew had carefully trimmed around the memorial. Clustered around the cross were jam jars filled with flowers. This was a short-lived memorial, gone the next season.

Almost identical circumstances apply to a white wooden cross at the intersection of Nose Hill Drive and 87 Street NW, where the road sweeps down into the Bow River valley of western Calgary and around a long curve at the base of the escarpment. The cross is marked "*Robert William Boughton / April 6, 1978 / December 23, 1997*". The dates tell a story bad enough of a death just before Christmas, but the newspaper saddens with additional details. Boughton was standing on the back of a pickup truck as it raced another vehicle down the curve. The truck swerved as the driver had trouble keeping control, and Boughton was pitched out onto the road. The truck was subsequently discovered to be stolen. Another young lad fallen into the wrong company. This memorial was gone the following summer.

Innocent Victims: Kids.

I don't know the details, but it happened sometime in early February 1999, as I drive by the location once every few days or so and hadn't seen the memorial the previous week. A crosswalk at the intersection of 14 Street SW and 25 Avenue, in the Mount Royal district of Calgary. On the east side, a wreath of flowers taped to a lightpole, and numerous plush toys piled around it, indicating the death of a child in the crosswalk. A card of sympathy taped to the flowers from a beauty salon nearby. When the accident happened, a bystander would have run into the shop to call 9-1-1. A short-lived memorial, gone the following spring.

In the Thorncliffe district of Calgary, four days before his 12th birthday, Calvin Corcoran was on his way to the swimming pool. The date was 2000-01-31 and he didn't live to see the rest of the new century. A car ran through the pedestrian crosswalk and hit him so hard he was thrown out of his shoes a distance of 27 metres. He died shortly in hospital and was buried on his birthday. The driver, an 18-year-old who lived nearby, panicked and left the scene. He later deliberately drove his car into a lightpole in the town of Okotoks, a half-hour drive south of Calgary. The Okotoks Mounties were suspicious of his accident report and had reason to believe he was trying to cover up the damage. He was charged with dangerous driving causing death and leaving the scene of an accident. A wooden cross and flowers

appeared the next day at the crosswalk.

on 4 Street NW, not far from Corcoran's home (Figure 2). They were left by his schoolmates. His parents had to drive to and from home by the place where the driver left the boy to die. The memorial lasted two years before disappearing.

Older kids, adults really, were the Calgary couple Nathan Beyeler and Jodi Anne Shephard, 18 and 17 years of age respectively, who met their deaths on the north side of town at John Laurie Boulevard and 53 Street NW. Another car ran a red light at high speed on a Monday evening 1999-11-23. A mundane way to die, being broadsided in an intersection. Two crosses and flowers appeared on the northeast corner of the intersection the next day, supplied by the high school friends who mourned them, but were short-lived. The following spring, Nathan's father Fred Beyeler began construction of a park bench on the park slope overlooking the intersection. I met him in May 2000 to mark the location. Over the next few weekends, I often saw his solitary figure digging out the pad, pouring the concrete, and laying the monument. The bench is still there but because of its exposed, windblown location I have never seen anyone using it, despite the fact that I drive by frequently at all times of the day and week.

Children should outlive their parents. What might have been when young people die? We mourn older people but know they at least had their lives to live as they would make them. The

parents and siblings of children will carry on as they must, but will be thinking every so often about what might have been. An aged mother thinks about the grandchildren that never were because her son died thirty years ago in a broadside accident. A successful middle-aged businessman, hustling down a city sidewalk to a meeting, sees a young mum with her toddler, and thinks of his sister, dead all these years and forever young.

The Motorcyclist.

I have never cared to ride a motorbike, not because I am particularly prejudiced against them but because they are so unsafe in an accident. What might be a fender-bender in a car will be an injury accident on a motorcycle, and what would be an injury accident in a car will be a fatal motorcycle accident. It doesn't matter how safely the motorcyclist rides if the car driver isn't paying attention.

Anderson Road just west of Deerfoot Trail is a 4-lane freeway with very wide grassy medians. A post-and-cable fence runs down the median to stop drivers making unsafe U-turns. Four posts were down after the car-motorcycle accident on August 24, 1998, that killed the bike rider. Where the fence was run down, there appeared a line of bouquets and funeral wreaths, bookended by flower pots of dracaenas and petunias. The flower pots obviously came out of a homeowner's garden, no doubt friend or

family of the victim. Parks Dept. mowers cut around them, the crews trimmed carefully past them, and the fence was left down until the flowers were gone.

There was another memorial for a motorcyclist, at westbound Memorial Drive just before Deerfoot Trail interchange. At 03h00 he was riding too fast on a slight curve in the road. He lost control, hit a guardrail, and suffered fatal injuries. The tragedy was compounded when the ambulance arrived. One of the paramedics was his mother. A police constable later testified at the Medical Examiner's Enquiry that her screams when she discovered the victim was her son would haunt him forever. A second ambulance had to be called to take care of her. There was no way the ambulance dispatcher could have known, since the identity of the motorcyclist wouldn't have been determined when the 9-1-1 call first came in.

Death On The Old Trans-Canada Highway.

When I drive out to the mountains, I like to take the old Trans-Canada Highway, now called Crowchild Trail inside Calgary city limits and Highway 1A out in the country. The new Trans-Canada, Highway 1, is a four-lane divided highway that cuts straight across the plains to the mountains. The old Trans-Canada is a narrow two-lane road with no shoulders, usually a steep ditch,

and often trees growing right up to the asphalt. The new highway is safe and boring. The old highway is scenic and nerve-wracking when the oncoming traffic is a logging truck or motorhome.

Coming back from Banff one day in September 1999, I noticed a small cross on a side road entrance, where Highway 1A travels through the Nacoda tribal Reserve. The cross was made of rebar, had no signage, and was supported by a pile of small boulders. Further down the highway, a large directional sign for the Chief Goodstoney Rodeo Centre had a bumper sticker plastered across it: "Make 1A Safe". I had to agree. This was a short-lived cross.

Just east of the Ghost Reservoir natural gas extraction plant, to be more precise, on the southwest corner of Highway 1A and Range Road 53, is a cairn built of local boulders. Not highway deaths, but the two plaques on the cairn explain its purpose. The first one reads: "*In this valley, two members of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Sergeant Pilot Alfred Reginbal, Lafleche, Saskatchewan, and his American comrade, Leading Air Craftsman Quentin Burl Chace, Wichita, Kansas, were stayed by the hand of death February 17, 1941.*" (The second plaque commemorates the Americans who joined the RCAF prior to the USA becoming involved in the war after Pearl Harbour.) Newspaper reports of the time say that the two were on a training flight when the plane hit the river, then bounced over the water and landed upside down on the river bank.

The two died instantly from the impact. After a memorial service the next day, their bodies were shipped to their respective hometowns [3,4]. The cairn is decorated every Remembrance Day with poppies. I also saw it decorated on June 6, 2004, the 60th anniversary of D-Day.

Incertae Sedis

In 1999, I spotted a white cross half-hidden in shrubbery as I was looping through the intersection at 14 Street SW and Bow Trail at work one day, at the western edge of the downtown core. I made a note of the location, and a few days later walked to the site on my day off work. The area was in a shrub bed between an underground pedestrian crossing beneath 14 Street and the westbound lanes of Bow Trail. Nothing indicated the dates or cause of death, so I'm not sure if the victim was mugged in the underpass or died in a traffic accident somewhere on the adjacent roads. Two crosses were planted in the shrubs, a white one, and a smaller unpainted wood cross not visible from a distance. A boulder about the size of a breadbox was placed in front of the white cross. Engraved on it was "*BRAD WELTON / Always In Our Hearts*". With no date, I couldn't check the Calgary newspapers, neither of which are indexed unfortunately. I revisited the site in June 2004 and it was completely overgrown by shrubs. The unpainted cross was barely visible deep inside the shrubbery, and of the rest there was no trace.

Another one I saw in 1999, almost hidden by a clump of roadside spruces, was on the west side of 52 Street NE by Rundelhorn Crescent. A small unpainted wooden cross, a plastic wreath, and a couple of glass jars of plastic plants. On the vertical bar of the cross was the name 'Sheldon', but no date. A jaywalker? Car accident? A young boy? A father? No way of telling.

Death In The Kananaskis Valley.

Perpendicular to the Bow River valley is the Kananaskis River valley. In 1999, going south into the valley up Highway 40 to the headwaters, I saw a wishing well on the east side of the road just south of Barrier Lake. I stopped to look at it, not so much for the well but for the pretty waterfall tumbling down off the mountainside. O'Shaughnessy Falls it was, and where it came out into the road there were two white wooden crosses. Both were dedicated to the memory of Lyle Kachmarski, deceased 1997-08-14 at age 35. One cross from his daughter Tara, the other from son Dan. I later checked the CALGARY HERALD and there was no report of a car accident but his obituary was in the classifieds. I am guessing cancer or some other medical problem took him. As to why the crosses were there, the obituary mentioned his love of the wilderness and his involvement with conservation organizations. The crosses had disappeared by 2004 but I did not note the date as at that time I was not specifically researching roadside memorials.

Taking Notice Of Roadside Memorials.

Since 1999, a Colorado couple have issued private postcards for the annual National Postcard Week [2]. The postcards are titled "Roadside Requiem" and show a different roadside cross each year. Each year's postcard has a line from the Roadside Requiem poem as follow.

1999: *"Little white crosses / They flash past the window / a glimpse of a name, a few wilted flowers, a gaggle of ribbons "*

2000: *"But how could it happen? ... on this stretch of road, / On this gentle curve, at this quiet crossing. How can a soul have been lost?"*

2001: *"The curb is not scarred, the shoulder not rent, / The grasses not broken nor bent."*

2002: *"Who cried in alarm at a knock on the door? / What mother, what father, what lover, what child, / Wept at this spot by the side of the road?"*

2003: *"Who fashioned the cross? / Who scribbled the name? / Who sharpened the point? / Who lifted the sledge to drive it all home, / At this very site, where life left one body, / Grief entered untold?"*

2004: *"Who drives past here now, eyes drawn to the place, / Where their hope, their promise, their future resides, / In a little white cross by the side of the road?"*

Summary.

The vast majority of roadside crosses are short-lived and are usually gone within a year or so. Roadside memorials are illegal in most jurisdictions but if the memorial seems well maintained, then maintenance crews will leave them alone. It is often difficult to trace the story behind a memorial if no exact date is given or the accident was never published in a newspaper.

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