

Finding Forgotten Souls at St. Michael's

by Rosemary Bortolotto Buffington

Some years ago, I returned home to search for my roots in South Bethlehem. Now, many years later, I am searching for the roots of everyone with ancestors in early South Bethlehem.

Yes, I have other things to do. It's just that I never realized the richness of this



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place until I saw the world. And much of the earliest history of South Bethlehem has been in hiding until recently. It's fascinating, tragic, and a gift of wisdom from the past that resides in our DNA.

Historians, who masterfully chronicled the saga of the iron and steel industry in the Lehigh Valley, relied on records written by people who could read and write. But how were we to know about the immigrants who signed with an "X?" In 1880, how was the census enumerator to communicate with the foreign woman who answered the door and pointed to her many children, reciting names whose pronunciation strained phonetics?

Until I began this search, my own family knowledge came from stories my grandparents told me about their own lives. Those stories gave me insight going back to the early 1900s, but South Bethlehem existed 50 years before that. Why did my grandparents never talk to me about their grandparents? Was I uninterested, did they never get around to it, or was there just nothing they wanted me to know?

Fast forward to the present. *Every minute*, more documents are digitized and available online. Sophisticated software helps me re-connect families whose names were spelled every which way. It's painstaking, but I can piece together pictures of folks who lived before photography was widely available, or who couldn't even afford to get themselves photographed. I can picture people by assembling their census records, naturalization forms, death certificates, and newspaper articles, such as weddings and obituaries. I can learn how young they were when they began working, (very), what kind of work they did, (hard), and how and why they died. Ancestry.com family trees made public by others give me in-

formation I can find nowhere else. Brief, heartbreaking lines in the newspaper tell the stories of infants and children who were lost. For me, it's as if those children are reaching out to help me join them with their parents and siblings.

One focus of my research is finding people buried in St. Michael's Cemetery, the first place where South Bethlehem immigrants were interred. Little exists in the way of burial records. When you consider that families staked out areas for their own burials, and provided their own "perpetual care," lack of records may not be so surprising. My mother remembers visiting St. Michael's Cemetery as a child and cleaning out the prickly wild roses strangling the family graves in the 1930s. She also remembers hearing of folks, who quietly buried their dead there in the night without benefit of services or permission.

The free website Findagrave.com is now the central repository for information on folks buried in St. Michael's Cemetery. We've linked nearly 8,000 people to St. Michael's using some sort of document or family knowledge. More are added every week. You can add, too. Until recently, I would have said that most folks buried in St. Michael's had no memorial stone. Perhaps they were too poor, and wooden crosses would be long rotted. But given the work of **Ken Bratsch** and the "Friends of St. Michael's Cemetery, Bethlehem, PA" volunteers, we are finding stones that have lain beneath the sod for decades—many more than I would have imagined. While these people seemed nearly invisible in life, the words chiseled in their headstones give evidence they didn't want to be forgotten.

So check your family Bible. Look for old photos. Send images, stories, or thoughts to Findagrave.com, to me at rcbuffington@bellsouth.net, or to the "Friends of St. Michael's Cemetery, Bethlehem, PA" Facebook page. Crowd-sourcing didn't exist until recently, but it's a very powerful resource—and your ancestors will thank you.

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—Rosemary Bortolotto Buffington, a resident of Stuart, Florida and SBHS supporting member, voluntarily adds interments in St. Michael's Cemetery to Findagrave.com.