

Unearthing Secrets of St. Michael's Cemetery

by Rosemary C. Buffington

One day in 2016, **Ken Bratsch** wandered around St. Michael's Cemetery searching for the burial place of his great-great-grandfather, **John B. Bratsch**, a Civil War veteran. Using the only partial cemetery map in existence configured by **William Sinnott** in the 1930s—Bratsch located the general area and found nothing but sod. After he first obtained permission from **Rev. Andy Gehringer** at Holy Infancy Parish, Bratsch spent the next few weeks collecting tools to probe the sod. Persistence paid off . . . under nine inches of dirt, the Union Army memorial stone of John Bratsch began to emerge.

Having served in the Army and Navy, and retired from the Allentown Fire Depart., Ken Bratsch was well-versed on the right and wrong way of doing things and educated himself on all things tombstone—including a visit to the Arlington National Cemetery to learn of their preferred cleaning products.

Back at St. Michael's, Bratsch spent the next two



With help of a two-ton engine hoist, the preserved Thompson / McGovern headstone was reclaimed after years buried below the sod at St. Michael's Cemetery.

Courtesy of Deborah Snyder

and added them to the virtual St. Michael's Cemetery on the public website, Findagrave.com.

To save his tired muscles, this year Bratsch has the benefit of a two-ton engine hoist that was recently donated to the cause. One of the first resurrections earlier this season was a beautiful c.1881 stone, made for **Ellen Thompson** and her granddaughter, **Mary Ellen McGovern**—incidentally a distant relative of **Marcella McGovern**. Many McGovern's came from County Cavan in Ireland; but Ellen was almost certainly related in some way. The Thompson and McGovern families were Irish members of Holy Infancy parish. The beautiful carving on this marble stone benefitted from being hidden under the sod, unlike Ellen's husband's matching stone, which layed flat with its carvings exposed to pollution and harsh weather conditions.

years looking for the headstone of John's wife, **Eliza Matilda**—but found nothing. Four years later, without finding the headstone of Eliza Matilda, Bratsch did a great service to St. Michael's . . . his backbreaking work revealed over 500 hidden headstones otherwise lost. During his explorations, he didn't disturb the burial sites, just probed for stones that he could resurrect.

Most stones in St. Michael's had poor foundations on the steep hill, and primitive burials made erosion and subsidence an issue. Though he couldn't reconstruct 500 new foundations, Bratsch left the stones in a safe position to minimize the chance of being lost again. He photographed the discovered stones and sent the photos to **Rosemary Buffington**—she in turn researched the names

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Advertisement from South Bethlehem Semi-Centennial, 1915.

In 1900, **Frank McGovern** ran the Eagle Hotel, located on the corner of Taylor and E. Third Sts. in South Bethlehem. He lived next door at 302 E. Third. The building next to his was the funeral home of **Marcella (Rodgers) McGovern**, who succeeded her late husband, **Thomas F. McGovern**. Marcella earned her embalmer's license in 1890.

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