

# Long Grove History

LONG GROVE LIVING  
MAGAZINE  
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## Tombstones

*Two stories from this year's ghost walk research file: a rogue Stempel tombstone that turned up by the bridge in the 1960's, and the small iron loop that gives away a "safety coffin."*

By **Aaron Underwood** · Long Grove Historical Society

**T**his time of year, the Historical Society is busy preparing for our annual Ghost Walk — where we combine some genuinely creepy real history with liberal embellishments to make a fun family event. One of last year's skits featured an old oral history about the discovery, and subsequent disappearance, of a pioneer tombstone.

The stone was barely legible. It was uncovered in the 1960's, buried in the ground by the covered bridge. It was "on display" at Mel's gas station for a few weeks before someone made off with it in the middle of the night. Inscribed on it: the name **Charles Stempel** — the man who opened the first general store in Long Grove in 1855. While some of his family is buried in the Long Grove Cemetery, Charles and his wife are not. Were they laid to rest in some long-forgotten grave by the bridge?



**RECOVERED STONE · C. 1960S**

Briefly displayed at Mel's gas station after being dug up near the covered bridge — then it vanished overnight. The carved date on the stone disagrees, by five days, with the date on the matching monument in the Long Grove Cemetery.



*The wrong date on the right stone.*

In the intervening year, our crack research department at the Society located an old photo and some related records that add a few facts to the story. Charles Stempel, the shopkeeper, passed away on **April 6, 1914**, and is buried in Arlington Heights — not Long Grove. So why would there be a rogue tombstone in town with his name on it?

Closer inspection of the old photo reveals it wasn't him at all. It was for **Charles Albert Stempel** — the shopkeeper's infant son, born January 10, 1866, who died in infancy that same April. *That* child is buried in the Long Grove Cemetery, complete with a nice monument.

Which raises a question: why would two tombstones be floating around for the same small child? The answer is in a closer reading of the inscription on the unearthed stone — it reads **January 15, 1866**. Five days off.

THE CASE OF THE REJECTED STONE

CHILD	Charles Albert Stempel — son of the shopkeeper.
ACTUAL BIRTH	January 10, 1866
ON REJECTED STONE	January 15, 1866 · off by five days
REAL GRAVE	Long Grove Cemetery — with a noticeably larger, more ornate replacement monument.
THE REJECTED STONE	Buried by the bridge. Surfaced 1960's. Last seen at Mel's gas station. Whereabouts — unknown.
BEST THEORY	A free upgrade on the part of an embarrassed chiseler.

Notice that the second stone — the one in the cemetery — is considerably larger and more ornate than the rejected one. Maybe a free upgrade on the part of an embarrassed chiseler.

### *The little iron loop.*

Have you ever noticed a metal eyelet, or some other provision for a rope or wire to be attached near a tombstone? That's a telltale sign of a *safety coffin*.

In the early 1800's, during epidemics, there was such a rush to bury the dead and prevent the spread of disease that the occasional sick-but-not-quite-dead person got put in the ground too soon. Out of that came a very real, very widespread fear of being buried alive — and an industry of contraptions to head it off.



THE DELUXE SAFETY COFFIN • IN THREE EASY STAGES

*i.*  
**THE STRING**

A cord, tied to the apparently deceased's hand, fed up through a brass pipe to the surface and attached to a small bell. Pull, ring, hope.

*ii.*  
**THE FALSE ALARMS**

The genuinely dead occasionally yanked the string anyway during the natural process of decomposition. Cemetery keepers grew, understandably, jaded.

*iii.*  
**THE OPTICAL TUBE**

An observation tube allowed a discreet look down into the coffin to check on mortality status — without the trouble of digging anyone up.

**SAFETY-COFFIN EYELET • LONG GROVE CEMETERY**

The tell. The cord ran from the apparent deceased's hand, up through this loop, to a small bell at the surface. Pull it — and someone might come dig you up.



**GHOST WALK / FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30**

Long Grove's Lurid Legends & Twisted Tales. Reservations required, space limited — details at [LONGGROVEHISTORY.ORG](http://LONGGROVEHISTORY.ORG) or on our Facebook page.