

In memory of 'Wee Souls'

Thousands of stillborn or miscarried infants acknowledged with permanent memorial

By: [Brenda Suderman](#)
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Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press

Margaret Steele, cemetery manager (right), and her assistant Rosalie Gill stand at the Wee Souls memorial at St. James Cemetery.

Their tiny graves still lie unmarked and unknown, but now the thousands of stillborn or miscarried infants interred at a church-run cemetery are publicly acknowledged with a permanent memorial.

Recently, St. James Cemetery, located just across from CF Polo Park Shopping Centre, installed a black granite bench and memorial stone to commemorate the more than 2,000 infants buried in the cemetery since 1880.

"I would like people coming (to the cemetery) to feel close to wherever in the cemetery their wee soul is buried," says cemetery manager Margaret Steele of the memorial to the infants, dubbed "Wee Souls."

The \$8,400 memorial site, paid for by donations, is located near large trees along the fence line at the south end of cemetery, far from the noise of Portage Avenue, and with a clear view of the historic log St. James Anglican Church, constructed in 1853.

Inscribed with the words "God Bless the Wee Souls," the park bench also bears the names of Edward and Joy Gerlitz, who left a donation to the cemetery in their will, says Steele.

"(They) had a fondness for St. James (cemetery) because of a friend who was buried there," she says of the bequest, which has been invested so interest earned can cover cemetery costs for in the future.

The memorial also includes a sandblasted granite headstone with a drawing of Jesus Christ holding a lamb and inscribed with the words "Safe in the Arms of Jesus."

A recording of dedication service for the Wee Souls memorial, held last week with only a small group due to restrictions on gathering size, is posted on the church website at <http://www.stjamesanglicanchurch.ca/>.

Nearly two years ago, Steele discovered a missing registry book in the church safe listing more than 2,000 infants buried in unknown and unmarked graves at the cemetery surrounding the historic church.

Previously, the long-time cemetery manager had worked from an incomplete list and she was not aware of the missing register that recorded burials from 1908 to 1976. The information included the infant's surname, cause of death, doctor's name and referring agency and sometimes the parents' names. The register does not indicate where the infants were buried.

Steele said the institutional memory about these infant burials has been lost, but she guesses that parents were told the remains would be sent to a funeral home and then on to the cemetery for burial. She believes St. James received all Protestant infants from Winnipeg hospitals, and several of the infants' families lived in northern Manitoba.

After the discovery and subsequent stories in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Steele and her assistant Rosalie Gill fielded inquiries from dozens of families about whether their infants were buried there.

"I find it very satisfying to be able to show people where their babies are (on the list). There are some we can't find, though," says Gill, 77, who has spent hours going through the registry to compile a list of 2,284 infants.

"It's heartwarming to help people that way."

It's also heartwarming to complete the public memorial site to acknowledge the losses of families over many decades, says Steele, 80.

"Hopefully, they can find peace and connection that their wee soul is safe in the arms of Jesus," says Steele.

The memorial brings some closure for Osborne Village resident Adele Presonka, who visits the cemetery annually to commemorate her infant son David, stillborn on Sept. 29, 1972.

For 22 years she didn't know where her son was buried, eventually discovering he was interred in an unmarked grave at St. James.

She says the new memorial commemorating her son and other infants will enrich the cemetery by providing family members a place to visit and remember.

"It's the final part of the story," she said.

For Steele, the memorial and the interest in the wee souls has also brought attention to the final resting place of thousands of early Winnipeggers, and some much-needed funds to maintain the cemetery.

"This dying cemetery has suddenly gotten new life," says Steele.

"The Wee Souls will keep it alive."

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