

# CHANNING PARK

## "Old Cem"

Once upon a time . . . there was no grammar school on this property. And no tennis courts. And no soccer field. Once upon a time, this whole area was covered with gravestones. This was Elgin Cemetery until 1943, where some of Elgin's prestigious citizens were laid to rest.

James Gifford owned the land bounded by Channing and DuPage Streets, and he donated it in 1844 and laid out the cemetery. Lots were sold for \$1 and \$2, and after Gifford died in 1850, the remaining lots were donated to the city with the stipulation that, should the land ever be used for anything but a cemetery, it would revert back to any living heirs at that time.

Elgin Cemetery once had scenic walks and drives, interspersed with mature and ornamental trees, and was considered to be "a beautiful resting place for the departed." However, when it began to fill to capacity and it became obvious more space would be needed, the city founded Bluff City Cemetery, a 108-acre graveyard, in 1889. Many graves were transferred there, and "Old Cem" was soon forgotten and neglected and fell prey to weeds and vandalism.

When it was decided in the early 1940s to turn "Old Cem" into Channing Park, a playground for public schools, the long process of contacting

every heir of James Gifford began. This was finally accomplished in 1947!

In 1968, Channing Memorial Elementary School was erected, the grammar school which now serves most students in Elgin's Historic District.

There are many stories about "ghosts" at Channing School, and the graves that were left behind. There is one visible grave marker left, in the far southeast corner of the park. This is the grave of William Hackmann, a watch factory employee who died on February 28, 1885. He was on a delayed honeymoon, on a train bound for the Black Hills when he accidentally swallowed a date pit. He became so ill that

they were forced to return home, where his condition worsened and he died. A post mortem revealed that he had indeed died from the "pit."

Why his grave was left behind is unknown. Theories are that it was hidden by a large lilac bush and therefore overlooked, or that it is so far out of the way, and the gravestone sunk so far into the ground that it wasn't worth the effort. Whatever the reason, the Elgin Area Historical Society contacted surviving relations of Mr. Hackmann. A memorial service was held in 1973, and a small fence now surrounds the grave.

