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## Article Title: The Geography of Saunders County Rural Cemeteries from 1859

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Article Summary: Saunders County has 43 rural cemeteries and 19 population center cemeteries. This is a study of how these cemeteries fit into what is called the "cultural landscape." The relationship between population increases, transportation, vegetation, and economic and social activities of surrounding areas are addressed. The study uses a classification system: undifferentiated, small family-plots, small rural-activity, and large rural-activity categories and divides the study into time periods. A listing of the 62 studied cemeteries with the date of their founding is included.

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Photographs / Images: Diagram of Culture groups in Saunders County; Map of Cemeteries of Saunders County; Indian Mound Cemetery, Ithaca; German tombstone inscription, last name Kruse

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF SAUNDERS COUNTY RURAL CEMETERIES FROM 1859<sup>1</sup>

*By Gordon M. Riedesel*

One method geographers and anthropologists have used to study the cultural life of the prairie is to investigate the cultural manifestations of cemeteries—who used them, how tombstones change, levels and patterns of use, and even how cemeteries have been perceived. Geographers are particularly interested in how cemeteries fit into what is called the “cultural landscape,” forms created on the land by man from which interpretations of culture can be made. Rural cemeteries are of special importance to its study of landscapes because they are relatively permanent monuments to the past.

Cemetery studies have been conducted in New England, southern Illinois, and in parts of Oregon. This study of cemeteries in rural Saunders County is in the same vein. Richard Francaviglia has termed the cemetery a “microcosm of the real world.”<sup>2</sup> The following brief settlement history will set the stage for a discussion of rural cemeteries.

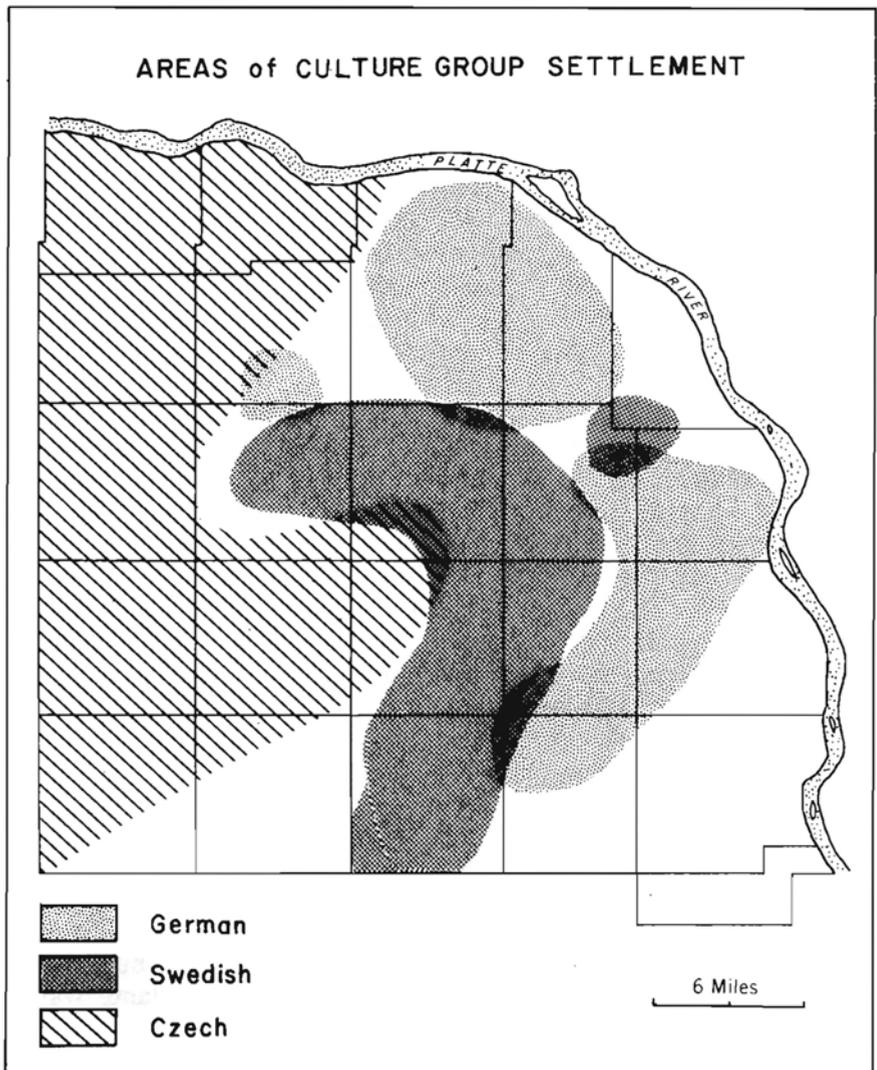
Saunders County drew a significant proportion of its settlers from western and central Europe. Like other Midwestern states, Nebraska had distinct pockets of culture-group settlements, which accounted for acculturation of the first and succeeding generations of immigrants: Three European culture groups came to Saunders County in large numbers between 1860 and 1889. The largest element came from Czechoslovakia (primarily from Bohemia), the second largest from southern Sweden, and the third largest from the German states. Other foreign-born immigrants included French, Irish, English, Norwegians, Scots, Austrians, and Canadians. American-born immigrants to the county came from eastern states above the Mason-Dixon line. The first settlers in Saunders County were Pennsylvanians who came to the Midwest in 1857. This handful of settlers homesteaded near the present site of Ashland in the

southeastern section of the county. Although American-born immigrants settled throughout the county, their greatest concentration was in the southeast. European settlers were drawn to Nebraska because of drought in northern Europe, debilitating economic conditions, and encouraging reports from earlier immigrants. Vast areas of good farm land were available for homesteading through the Act of 1862, especially during the 1860s and 1870s. The magnitude of immigration and settlement is reflected in population figures for this period. After having reached nearly 4,000 inhabitants in 1870, Saunders County population soared to 16,000 in 1880, and to its zenith of 22,000 in 1890.

The first cemetery in Saunders County was established in 1859 just north of Ashland. Eight more cemeteries in areas of both high and low population density had been started before 1870 by new settlements. Between 1870 and 1875, during the years of greatest population increase, 28 additional cemeteries were established, quadrupling the existing number. Between 1857-1880, by which latter date Saunders County had 70 percent of its greatest population, over 70 percent of its cemeteries were established. Many cemeteries before 1875 were established by Swedes, Czechs, and Germans along religious and national lines. Within culture-group areas geographic "pairing" of religious and ethnic group cemeteries began in 1873. Swedish settlers in Saunders County were Lutheran, Baptist, or Swedish Mission Covenant. Czechs were Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or secular free thinkers. Most German settlers were Lutheran or Presbyterian, although a few were Roman Catholic. American-born settlers were principally Methodist, Disciples of Christ (Christian), Baptist, and Roman Catholic. Rural cemeteries in Saunders County reflect the religious and cultural identities of their founders.

Because of the differences in rural cemeteries, a classification system aids a discussion of them. Rural cemeteries range in size from one burial to over 400. The classification system used here is a slight modification of the one developed by Larry W. Price in a study of cemeteries in southern Illinois.<sup>3</sup>

Saunders County has 43 rural cemeteries and 19 population-center cemeteries, the latter serving a town or village.<sup>4</sup> They may have fewer burials than rural cemeteries yet are considered population-center cemeteries because they primarily serve a



*Culture groups in Saunders County settled in distinct areas.*

town. Rural cemeteries may be divided into four groups: undifferentiated, small family-plots, small rural-activity, and large rural-activity. Undifferentiated cemeteries of one or two burials are often unmarked and are difficult to find; many are long forgotten. Small family plots are usually limited to a single family, although two families may have used the same burying ground. As a rule these cemeteries have up to 20 graves. Small rural-activity cemeteries, with fewer than 100 burials but averaging about 60, usually cover less than half an acre. Large rural-activity cemeteries range upwards from 100 burials to over 400 and can exceed two acres. Within this organizational structure religious and cultural manifestations of cemeteries can be illuminated.

The development of Saunders County cemeteries can be divided into several periods. The early periods are characterized by rapid expansion of all types: secular, religious, and culture-group. The middle periods indicate the growth of undifferentiated and family-plot cemeteries, and later periods find lowered usage and abandonment of small rural cemeteries.

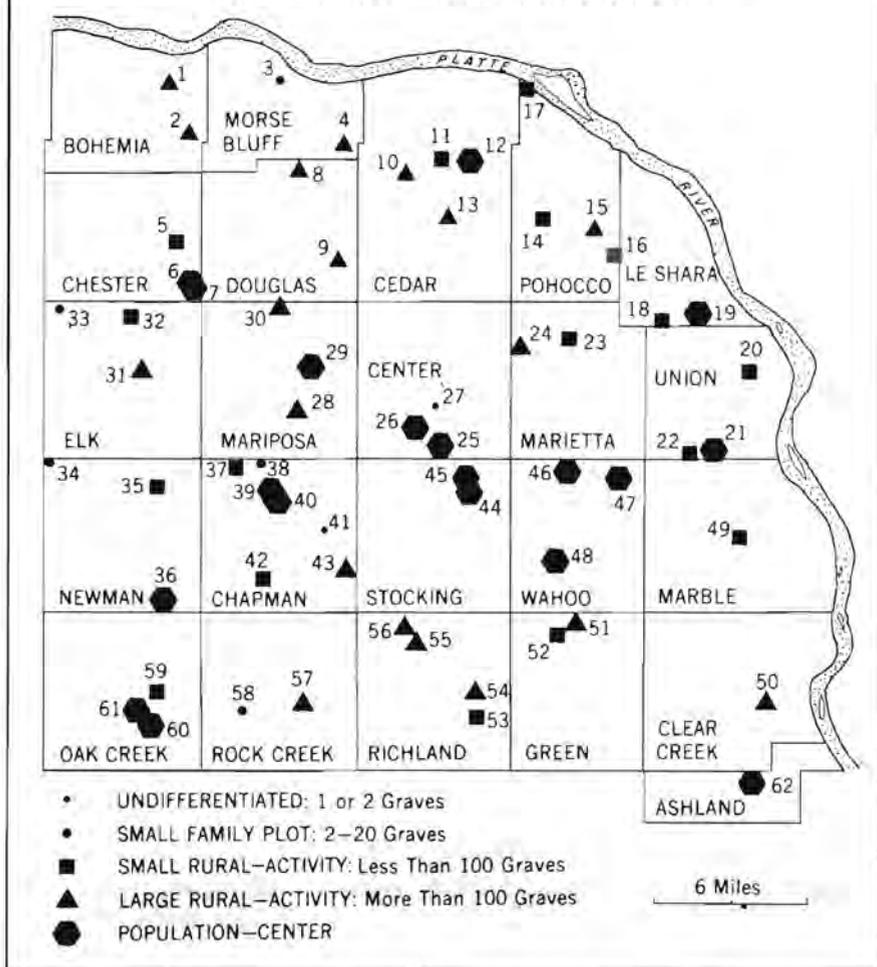
*1859-1869:* Six out of nine cemeteries established during this decade were located relatively close to population centers. While five cemeteries were near town, not all developed into that community's primary cemetery. Located on the outskirts of towns, Jensen Cemetery and Clear Creek Cemetery remained in use after establishment of new cemeteries, though burials in the older cemeteries declined.

The oldest cemeteries are located on relatively high ground overlooking valleys. High ground was desirable, for it provided good drainage, a pleasant view, and was usually poorer agricultural land.

Choice locations were available in the earlier years but later developing cemeteries had to be located where land was available regardless of its sometimes lower aesthetic value.

Evidence from early cemeteries in Saunders County suggests the absence of church influence on location but the presence of strong family ties. Although family plots are difficult to find, it appears that the older rural-activity cemeteries evolved from family plots. A handful of small family plots is known, but it is likely that many are lost. A few larger cemeteries such as Jensen, Critten, and Bethel probably originated as family cemeteries. A common feature in older rural cemeteries is a core

## CEMETERIES OF SAUNDERS COUNTY



*Sixty-two cemeteries dot the Saunders County landscape. Forty-three are rural cemeteries ranging from one burial to over 450. See Appendix for key.*

of first burials bearing a single family name. Occasionally different surnames intrude but census reports and land deeds often show the differing surname to have resulted through marriage.

*1870-1875:* Substantial increases in Saunders County population between 1870 and 1875 had a considerable effect on rural cemeteries. The number of population-center cemeteries doubled, while the number of rural cemeteries increased six times, from four to 24.

Cemeteries that evolved were varied in type and included large and small rural-activity cemeteries, population-center cemeteries, and in all likelihood family plots no longer in evidence. Most new rural cemeteries were located in the northern portion of the county where new settlement was greater. Cemeteries were established mainly by immigrant Czechs, Swedes, and Germans. Population-center cemeteries were established along the Union Pacific branch line from Leshara through Wahoo to Valparaiso as towns increased in size.

*1876-1880:* A comparatively small number of cemeteries were established. The major lineaments of settlement had been laid down, population centers established, and a sufficient number of cemeteries started for the first generation of settlers. Eight of nine cemeteries started in the late 1870s were rural, indicating that settlement was expanding. Located primarily in the western half of the county, all were culture-group cemeteries started by recent immigrant groups. By 1880 three-fourths of the rural cemeteries in Saunders County had been established.

*1881-1885:* Cemeteries that developed between 1881 and 1885 were primarily clustered in western Saunders County, with church and culture groups founding the largest proportion of multi-family cemeteries. However, five small family plots were established. Contagious diseases such as smallpox, typhoid fever, and diphtheria took a heavy toll in the early 1880s, sometimes killing entire families. Childhood fatalities in this period, as reflected on tombstones throughout the county, doubtless account for the establishment of family plots, which was greatest during this period.

*1886-1899:* Cemetery establishment was greatest near growing towns. Three of four population-center cemeteries were located in Prague, Wahoo, and Mead. The only rural cemetery established was Zion Lutheran (German) in Green Precinct. The design of settlement in Saunders County was now virtually com-

plete, and few additional cemeteries were needed. Indeed, by 1899 two cemeteries had been abandoned and usage of many small rural cemeteries was in decline. However, large cemeteries, such as Swedish Covenant Mission, were accepting greater numbers of burials as the population aged.

*1900s:* In the early decades of this century additional Catholic cemeteries were the single largest type of cemetery established: Prague (1901), Touhy (1903), and Valparaiso (1917). Another rural cemetery, Estina, believed to have been established after 1900, carries no tombstone inscribed before 1914. A colony of Swedish Baptists is known to have settled in the area in the early 1870s, casting some doubt on its origin.

Cultural landscapes developed over the decades. The cemeteries of Saunders County, their relative locations, their cultural manifestations, and periods of use reflect this evolution. The combination of rapid settlement and concentrations of religious and ethnic groups has helped create a characteristic cultural landscape with clearly evident cultural distinctions. Cemeteries are good measures of population growth and decline, population concentrations and dispersals, changing patterns of interaction, and changing cultural preferences. These factors, here called "external relations" of rural cemeteries, influence the look of rural cemeteries today and reflect the changing nature of society.

*Population:* As the population of Saunders County swelled in the 1870s and 1880s, an equally rapid increase in the number and activity of cemeteries occurred. After the county reached its peak population of 22,000 in 1900, the use of several rural cemeteries declined and those not in active use thereafter had less than 100 burials. Culture group cemeteries, many with over 250 burials, continued to be active, and the overall activity of rural cemeteries continued to increase until 1920. Since then use of most rural cemeteries has declined. At the end of the 1930s, eight cemeteries, all small rural-activity cemeteries, stood abandoned. Between 1920 and 1940 the population and number of active cemeteries decreased almost 15 percent. Following World War II, as population stabilized, the number of cemeteries in use has remained the same as in 1940.

*Transportation and Towns:* Although population decline affected the number of cemeteries used, other factors, primarily technological, were also involved. Changing transportation

systems, the growing importance of larger towns and the decline of crossroads villages as economic centers, and changing trends in cemetery use also affect the levels of activity in rural cemeteries.

The development of the automobile, which compressed distances, greatly affected the use of rural cemeteries. The town or village as the trading center has always been a focal point of rural life, but settlers made trips to town much less frequently when dependent on draft animals for transportation. Today, however, the larger towns with their greater range of goods and services have become increasingly accessible. Saunders County rural dwellers are no more than 15 minutes from the nearest town and no more than 25 from the county seat in Wahoo. The automobile and truck traveling over good roads take the rural dweller as easily to the larger town as the smaller for his groceries, hardware, schools, and postal service. Some small villages persist, but more and more they become satellite communities tributary to the towns.<sup>5</sup> As relative distances between town and farm decreased, farm family members entered everyday social life of their town and claimed the town cemetery as their cemetery.

As economic and social activities concentrated in towns, town cemeteries received an increasing proportion of burials. Town cemeteries are not specifically studied here; however, the increasingly larger number of interments in them (now 5,000 in the Ashland Cemetery, over 3,000 in the Sunrise Cemetery in Wahoo, and proportionally larger numbers in other population-center cemeteries) indicates that burials that once would have occurred in rural cemeteries are now taking place in town cemeteries. The shift toward a greater use of town cemeteries has been enhanced by their better care. Rural cemetery associations often cannot afford to mow and weed the cemetery lawn and maintain grave markers. Undertakers, too, prefer town cemeteries over those located in rural settings which are less accessible and often are poorly maintained. This is especially true in inclement weather. Indeed, the desirability of having a family member buried in a town cemetery is so great that moving a body from a rural to a town cemetery is not unusual.

The net result has been that rural cemeteries have been declining since the early part of this century. Nevertheless, cemeteries,

even in disuse or unkempt, are a permanent form of land use with the mark of time etched in their landscapes.

Rural cemeteries vary in general appearance, but are all distinct from the land surrounding them: They vary in such physical forms such as fences, types of vegetation, kinds of tombstones, as well as the symbols, inscriptions, epitaphs, and motifs on the stones.

Cemetery fences separate one environment from another, the sacred from the profane. Although cemetery fencing is often a continuation of the agricultural fencing of the area, the cemetery may have an elaborate cast-iron enclosure, at least along the front. The main gate may also have an arched entryway with the cemetery name inscribed on it.

Horticulture in cemeteries is traditional. The evergreen motif, carried out through the holly and yew tree of European cemeteries, was continued in the cedars and pines of Midwestern cemeteries. The presence of these imported trees in prairie areas of the Midwest and Great Plains is a cultural phenomenon. Tiger lilies, bridal wreath, and lilac were popular domestic plants in 19th-century Saunders County cemeteries. Peonies and iris became popular in the 20th century. The peony's popularity may be explained by the fact that it blooms around Memorial Day, perhaps the most important day of the year at a cemetery.

The yucca plant, a member of the lily family, is also an alien species to eastern Nebraska, yet it is found in large numbers in rural Saunders cemeteries. The plant is native to the Nebraska Sandhills. It is remarkable that this spiny, flowering plant has been introduced into cemeteries as far east as New England. The yucca, like the cedar and pine, is an evergreen.

Other common forms of vegetation in rural cemeteries include grasses (both native and introduced), sumac, clover, wild asparagus, ferns, berries, ash, oak, maple, mulberry—and occasional patches of marijuana, which was cultivated in the Midwest in 19th-century Nebraska for rope fiber. Since rural cemeteries have most often been havens from the plow, an ecological nook exists for preserving native plant species as well as providing one of the few places where virgin soil profiles can be found.

While plants symbolize life and resurrection, tombstones symbolize constancy. For centuries stones have marked special



*Rural cemeteries, such as Indian Mound Cemetery, Ithaca, include many forms of vegetation and styles of tombstones, often reflecting cultural preferences.*



*German settlers helped maintain cultural identity with German tombstone inscriptions: "Here lies in God Dorothea Kruse, wife of Peter Kruse, born 25 April 1840, died 3 September 1875, at the age of 35 years 4 months and 3 days."*

places and events. The rural cemeteries of Saunders County exhibit a succession of styles through relatively distinct periods—from the white marble tablet used by settlers through the marble or granite Victorian obelisk of the 1880s and 1890s, the polished granite block popular about 1910 and after, and the groundstone and bronze plaque of today. Other unique styles occur, such as concrete tree stumps, hand-fashioned crosses, and homemade markers. Tombstone orientation and use of inscriptions and epitaphs is equally important to styles and periods of their popularity.

All rural cemeteries in Saunders County are oriented to the cardinal directions and are laid out on a grid pattern. Internal development of rural cemeteries occurs concentrically from cores, in linear patterns, and in scattered sites. Cores develop around a hill top or from a corner. Linear patterns occur along fence lines where growth has been regimented or where burial sites along the fence have a desirable setting.

Grave location in small rural-activity cemeteries often appears haphazard, yet each one fits into a grid system. One reason for scattered burial sites in a cemetery is the availability of several locations. Even in death personal space seems important.

It is the family plot, not the individual grave, that forms the basic cemetery layout of Saunders County cemeteries. Family plots consist of at least two graves of family members, often more, extending through three or four generations. Family plots in rural cemeteries are often marked by stone borders, small fences, and 5 x 5-inch initialed stone markers in the corners of the plot; there may be only a clustering of family members' graves. Most rural cemeteries in Saunders County have evolved from the family plot. Some necrogeographers, who study geographic elements of death, including tombstones and cemeteries, believe family plots are expressions of attitudes towards death. The family plot makes the statement that the family, not the individual, is important.

The use of epitaphs shows that attitudes towards death have changed within the last 100 years. The relative abundance of epitaphs in the late 19th century and their disappearance in the 20th support this view. That death was considered a more natural part of life from colonial times to the late 19th century can be seen in the familiar stone inscriptions. The following

epitaph, dating from 17th-century New England yet found on tombstones in Saunders County, clearly makes the point that no one is immortal:

Remember me as you pass by,  
As you are now so once was I,  
As I am now so will you be,  
Prepare for death and follow me.

Other epitaphs found in Saunders County simply recognize the permanence of death, state the circumstance of a person's demise, or give the bereaved a chance to express sorrow in a few words. The epitaph of a 21-year-old on a marker in 1881 states, "Drown in Platte River." Another epitaph of this type from a Swedish cemetery reads: "Here lies the remains of Margaret Johnson and her infant daughter, Miss Katie Long." The following is quite succinct: "Heaven smiles, nature blooms, death reaps all."

The rejection of death as extolled by Christianity is found in such epitaphs: "Budded on Earth to Bloom in Heaven," "Gone to a Better Land," or "Called Higher" indicate a separation between life and death. The rejection of death was carried on into quasi-religious forms of the 20th century in short epitaphs like, "Just Resting," "Asleep," and "Sweet be thy rest." Contemporary epitaphs are scarce. However, ones used today are usually short and may contain popular Bible verses.

Culture-group cemeteries are characterized by tombstone inscriptions in the foreign language of the element using them; there are also characteristic religious inscriptions. These are obvious keys to a cemetery's character. Religious preference is also indicated by cemetery name.

Czech cemeteries display the greatest variation of all culture-group cemeteries in Saunders County. Because cemeteries in Czechoslovakia have a garden-like tradition, Czech cemeteries in Saunders County have been similarly maintained. Czechs in Nebraska use the slab tombstones extensively, about 25 percent of their graves in Saunders County being so marked. Characteristically, Czechs also use from two to four markers per grave. People who served in the military often have another marker. Another major cultural landscape feature of Czech cemeteries is that they occasionally face south rather than east or west. Four cemeteries in Saunders County face south, all of them Czech. This tendency is probably linked to variations from

western European theological views in the Czech homeland.

Swedish and German cemeteries are less elaborate. Tombstones are smaller and less profusely used. In cemeteries of conservative religious groups such as Presbyterians or the Swedish Covenant Mission, very little decoration is found. Mixed culture-group cemeteries such as those of American-born settlers are distinguished by religious symbols, if at all, but by little else.

### APPENDIX—CEMETERIES

- |                                  |                                   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 Killian (Czech National), 1870 | 32 Evangelical Presbyterian, 1883 |
| 2 Sacred Heart Cedar Hill, 1873  | 33 Vavak Family, 1883             |
| 3 Odvody Family, ca. 1880        | 34 Talbot Family, 1882            |
| 4 St. Marys, 1870                | 35 Bohemian National, 1877        |
| 5 Willow Creek, 1874             | 36 St. Vitus, 1903                |
| 6 St. Johns, 1901                | 37 Bethel, 1866                   |
| 7 Bohemian National, 1888        | 38 Ockander Family, ca. 1880      |
| 8 Fleming, 1871                  | 39 Weston, 1873                   |
| 9 Holy Rosary, 1862              | 40 St. Johns, 1885                |
| 10 Johannes, 1876                | 41 Pokorny, 1877                  |
| 11 Weigand, 1872                 | 42 Znojmesky (Znami), 1884        |
| 12 Maple Grove, 1866             | 43 Czech Presbyterian, 1879       |
| 13 Union, 1875                   | 44 St. Francis, 1894              |
| 14 Platteville, 1875             | 45 Sunrise, 1860                  |
| 15 Pohocco Lutheran, 1884        | 46 Alma Lutheran, 1870            |
| 16 Little Flower of Jesus, 1873* | 47 Morningside, 1896              |
| 17 Critten, 1869                 | 48 Indian Mound, 1862             |
| 18 Estina, 1914?                 | 49 Parmenter, 1875                |
| 19 Pleasant View, 1874           | 50 Clear Creek (Carr), 1859       |
| 20 Bender, 1871                  | 51 Zion Lutheran, 1891            |
| 21 Hollst Lawn, 1873             | 52 Zion Evangelical, 1876         |
| 22 St. James, 1871               | 53 Old Pleasant Hill, 1873        |
| 23 Greenmound, 1871              | 54 New Pleasant Hill, 1873        |
| 24 Marietta Presbyterian, 1881   | 55 Fridhem, 1873                  |
| 25 Greenwood, 1870               | 56 Swedish Covenant Mission, 1873 |
| 26 St. Wenceslaus, 1879          | 57 Rock Creek (Mt. Zion), 1872    |
| 27 Poor Farm, ?                  | 58 Ingram, 1870                   |
| 28 Edensburg Lutheran, 1874      | 59 Jensen, 1869                   |
| 29 Bethesda, 1872                | 60 St. Marys, 1917                |
| 30 St. Johns, 1877               | 61 Valparaiso, 1875               |
| 31 Plasi (Cuda), 1872            | 62 Ashland, 1865                  |

\*Formerly Our Lady of Sorrows

## NOTES

1. See Riedesel's "The Cultural Geography of Rural Cemeteries: Saunders County, Nebraska" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1979).
2. Richard V. Francaviglia "The Cemetery as an Evolving Cultural Landscape," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 61 (1973), 501.
3. Larry W. Price, "Some Results and Implications of a Cemetery Study," *The Professional Geographer*, 42 (1966), 201-207.
4. Although rural cemeteries make up nearly 70 percent of all cemeteries in the county, only 30 percent of the buried population is interred in them.
5. Glen T. Trewartha, "The Unincorporated Hamlet: One Element of American Settlement Fabric," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 33 (1943), 32-81, studied this process in southeastern Nebraska.