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WRITTEN IN CODE

Epitaph a puzzler for over a century

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CROSSHILL — There's a tombstone with a coded epitaph here that's been a puzzler for more than a century.

Ontario historians have been trying for 112 years to figure out why Dr. Samuel G. Bean had the epitaph for his two wives inscribed that way instead of in plain English.

An even tougher riddle — the meaning of Bean's encoded epitaph — took from 1867 until 1947 before anyone finally solved it.

The man who succeeded was the late John Hammond, a Wellesley township official and amateur historian.

Even so, the tombstone in picturesque little Rush's cemetery two miles south of here is still a source of widespread interest — and occasionally of publicity.

Imagine an epitaph reading:
"S V W E T B S 4 H S F M 6 D B ,
E I R T E 2 N D E N S I 0 B E ,
M I A D 1 5 S H T N O A B M 2 , N A Y D E D -
N E N F F S N Y E N E"

That's only a small part of the epitaph and the rest is just as impossible unless you have some expertise in code structure.

John Hammond was 90 when he died in 1961.

He was 76 and had spent much of his life puzzling over the Bean cryptogram when the key to the code finally flashed through his mind.

His son, Edgar, now retired and living in Milverton, says, "I can still remember it vividly. It was a very wet day, I think in the spring of about 1947, when he just sat down and began working it out on paper."

When he was finished, the decoded epitaph read as follows:

"In memory of Henrietta, first wife of S. Bean, and who died the 27th of September, 1865, aged 23 years, two months and 17 days, and Susanna, his second wife, who died the 27th of April, 1867, aged 26 years, 10 months and 15 days.

"Two better wives no man ever had.

"They were gifts from God, but are now in heaven. May God help me, S. Bean, to meet them there."

A line in plain English beneath the cryptogram reads, "Reader Meet Us In Heaven."

The tombstone, which stands at the

south end of the cemetery overlooking a broad expanse of tilled fields, has suffered from weathering.

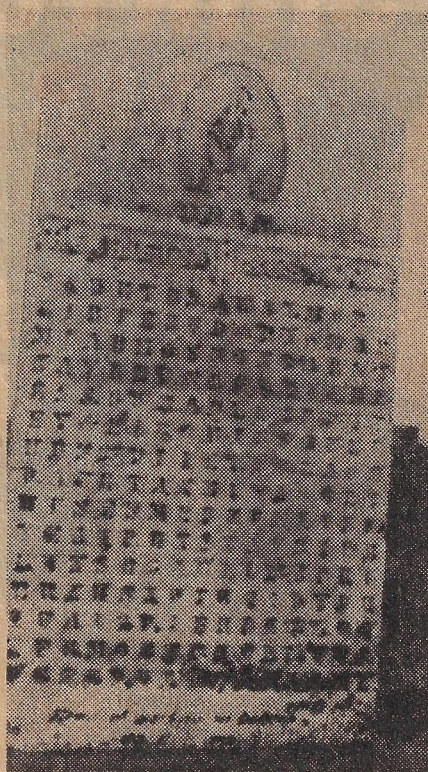
Some letters have been partly worn away and moss has grown over others.

A genealogical record kept by Kitchener genealogist Eldon Weber, 106 Maplewood Place, indicates that almost all of the Beans and Biehns in Waterloo Region are related in some way to the author of the cryptogram.

The Hammond history indicates that Samuel G. Bean, who devised the epitaph, was a medical doctor and a direct descendant of the German-speaking Swiss family of Biehns who came to Pennsylvania in 1745.

He is not buried with his two wives for a simple reason.

He's buried instead in Strasburg cemetery beside his third wife, the former Annie M. Wankmiller.



MYSTERY GRAVE — The years have taken their toll on this Crosshill tombstone, with many of the coded letters worn off and others covered by moss.

Record Photo