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"Gone but not Forgotten": A Study of Gravestone Imagery and Iconography in Southwest Virginian Cemeteries

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Amanda Marcus essay

As a requirement for the sociology major, sociology students are expected to perform a small research project as a practice of what was learned in the Methods of Social Research class. I chose to work on a qualitative research project focusing on five cemeteries in southwest Virginia, particularly looking at gravestones and markers within these cemeteries. In order to structure my work, I did what any other researcher would do, and I searched for different articles and books relating to the main topic: Google scholar, Jstor, and even Amazon offered me a great starting place. I weeded my way through what was provided for me to find the pieces that would actually be of some use, which was harder than I originally anticipated, mostly because they all sounded interesting. Eventually I managed to eliminate some articles and found a logical place to start. I read and reviewed them, modeling my potential methods off of those of the different authors. I felt prepared to dive into my own fieldwork and traveled to the cemeteries, photographing various markers. Once I felt that I had a significant number I uploaded them to my computer and set to work, making sure that those I chose to use were legible, given the age of some of the cemeteries. I printed those I wanted and catalogued them by hand so that I could become more familiar with my images and their information. My professor advised me to keep a journal for my research, where I recorded different things I had learned, as well as my emotional journey as a new researcher. I visited and revisited my images, finding different details. I soon felt overwhelmed by the information that I had and needed to be restructured. The only thing I could think to do was return to the literature. I even sought new pieces I had not looked at prior, and that helped me reshape my whole look at the data. I came across one piece in particular that focused on periods of time and how cemeteries demonstrated certain trends. My decision was to compare and contrast my data to this piece, as the work of Francoviglia (1971) ended at the beginning of the 1970s. My new thesis became, "What comes next?" I was finally able to really delve into writing about my findings. My paper follows the basic structure of a research paper, starting with an introduction, a literature review, my methods, my findings, and my conclusions. My literature review was tough, as I had to narrow down my 20 articles to those that were the most relevant for the paper. However, my bibliography shows all 20 of the items I looked at and either cited in the body of work or used as a personal reference. By the end of it, I felt accomplished and proud of my work. For once, I was the author of a research article, showing progress as a scholar. I am no longer afraid of research.

“GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN”: A STUDY OF GRAVESTONE IMAGERY AND
ICONOGRAPHY IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIAN CEMETERIES

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Abstract: *Cemeteries hold a strong relationship to our society and appear to mimic trends overtime; they memorialize not only the dead, but also important, broad social theories. Drawing on the work of Francaviglia (1971) and others, I chose to study these multilateral trends in memorialization. For this, I visited five cemeteries in southwest Virginia. Photographing and analyzing 250 stones, I found and examined their relative and cultural shifts over time and how they related to the different eras that coincided with them. Additionally, I note important developments after 1970, the last period studied by Francoviglia.¹*

Cemeteries are not always associated as a form of archive to those outside of the social science realm, but within the field, there is little doubt that cemeteries offer rich, historical data. A primary source of this data is the grave marker, where information about the deceased is recorded for posterity. From what is printed or not printed on the stone, one can gain insight into a given cultural-historical period’s dominant ideas concerning death. As Foster, Hummel and Adamchak point out:

Gravestones can yield social data, including gender, ethnicity (at least as surmised by surname), age, seasonal fertility (conception and natality) and mortality patterns, marital status and other familial relationships, and, occasionally, migration and occupational data (1998: 473)

Francaviglia (1971) found four historical “shifts” in Oregon cemeteries. His research guides my own considerations of five cemeteries in southwestern Virginia. In this paper, I highlight the work of those that inspired my study, the methods I use to conduct my research, as well as my findings. I argue that the periods of time Francaviglia

¹ This research is supported by the Hobby Trust Grant at Hollins University.

verified are found elsewhere in the continental United States, and that there is an unstudied “fifth period”.

The Sociology of Cemeteries

Social scientists have long used the cemetery as a valuable resource for understanding different social patterns, such as opinions on mortality. In this section, I focus on research related to gravestone iconography. One of the earliest of such works is that of Dethlefsen and Deetz (1966), who review imagery displayed on headstones. Their focus is on death’s heads, cherubs, and urn-and-willow motifs, which they note that the first two are “personal representations, while the latter urn-and-willow motif is a depersonalized memorial.” (507)

Stone (1991) notes that the gravestone is a “material culture artifact that is original and little modified, composes a sizable universe and is easily quantified for systematic analysis... (8)” In particular, Stone looks at the choices of the living relatives in relation to different social, economic, political, and cultural factors (8).

In a fascinating study, Broce (1996) discusses how the dominant society (Colorado to be more specific) influenced the mortuary patterns of a Slovak community’s cemetery. He states, “There are no inscriptions in the ethnic language, no national symbolism, and no apparent survival of the mortuary practices of the old country” (181). This is interesting as it shows how much influence our American society has on this small ethnic group in Colorado. They have chosen to forgo traditions within their own culture as part of assimilating to ours. He does point out that it is difficult to make

definitive conclusions about the assimilation of the Slovak community based on a small sample cemetery (181).

Such assimilation can be seen within religious communities. Bromberg and Shephard (2006) for example, explore the excavation of a Quaker burial ground. Though the Society of Friends traditionally differed with mainstream conceptions of proper disposal of the dead, Bromberg and Shephard show a clear shift in Quaker funerary practices. They conclude that the influence of secular American society, as well as the influence of other religious groups, had an effect on how this particular group of Quakers chose to dispose of their loved ones.

Social status is likewise a factor that is evident within cemeteries. Scholars have approached this factor from many angles and varied geographical locations within the United States. Little et al (1992) look to both above ground data, such as markers, as well as below ground data, including the caskets and trinkets found during excavation. The main conclusions they form mirror the popular concept of the beautification of death; in particular, their study looks at the graves of the Weir family and posthumous status in society, which they see shown in intricate detailing, such as fancy metal handles on the coffins (410). Moore, Baker, and Smith (1991) focus on characteristics of different markers over time as evidence of social status within a public cemetery in Kansas. In particular, they note that there were “changes in the material, height, and form of gravestones, patterns which are similar to those observed in other cemeteries,” citing Dethlefsen and Francaviglia’s work as their comparisons (76).

Francaviglia’s (1971) research analyzes gravestones within an Oregonian context. He concludes that four periods are prevalent within these cemeteries, and that they are

not limited to Oregon alone (though he draws this conclusion from his own anecdotal evidence). His four periods are:

- 1) *the pioneer period* from 1850 to 1879, which he determined had simple to non-existent ornamentation on what he calls “gothic, tablet and block forms”;
- 2) *the Victorian period* from 1880 to 1905, characterized by large, lavish monuments;
- 3) *the conservative period* from 1906 to 1929, with a trimming of ornamentation and a replacement of lavishness with simple geometric shapes; and
- 4) *the modern period* from 1930 to 1970, showing an even more simplified marker that lays close to the ground (507-508).

He notes that, “Most architectural historians recognize similar changes in motif and style during the last century,” leading me to believe that these periods should be consistent in any part of the country (508).

Collier’s (2003) piece, *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Symbolism of Death*, pulls in yet another important aspect: what comes after the modern period? Her research focuses on what she calls the “postindustrial or postmodern era,” the era after the 1960s, where she has noticed a shift occurring in the cemetery (725). She notes a decrease in visible evidence of affiliations with social institutions and an increase in a more personal, self-centered present.

My interest lies with what comes later, the fifth period. Are there any patterns within southwestern Virginia like Francaviglia noted in Oregon? Is Collier correct in her assessment that there is a decrease in traditional forms and an increase in personalization? And finally, what can this tell us about contemporary society?

Methods

My data in this project came from five cemeteries in southwestern Virginia. In total, I worked with Saint Andrew's Diocesan Cemetery, Old Dominion Memorial Gardens & Mausoleums, Tombstone Cemetery, Blue Ridge Memorial Gardens, and Fairview Cemetery.

Within each cemetery, I documented 50 markers dispersed throughout the cemetery; my particular interest were those that were legible. With the help of a friend, I was able to photograph around 500 markers in total. These photos were taken from different areas in the cemeteries, though most commonly I documented markers towards the front and middle of the cemeteries. To make the data analyzing more manageable, I deleted markers that were still fairly illegible prior to printing. Once I had selected a grouping of legible, diverse markers and had them printed, I taped each photo to a large index card and coded them by cemetery. The next step was to code the basic information along the side of the index cards. This information included: cemetery, assumed sex, script or no script, era (century) of death, and approximate age of the deceased.

After the initial coding process, I reorganized the photos based on the decade of death to find any emerging themes. The decades spanned from 1890 to 2011. Some cemeteries had more representation in these decades than others based on when they were opened. In addition to the thirteen decades, I created supplementary categories for multiple or shared markers, those that had the information for at least two deceased individuals, and unknown markers for those that did not have a death date recorded. I

then coded and categorized the photos with my new groups. This new organization pattern allowed me to take smaller chunks of data to analyze in a more thorough manner. Table 1 shows the division of the number of graves from the cemeteries within each decade.

Once I had accomplished my reorganization pattern, I decided to code for information/imagery on the stones, and found 18 different forms of imagery. However, this too became daunting and I decided to group the forms of imagery and information into more general categories. To do this, I used the guidance of Collier (2003; pp732) to observe six different styles, adapting the meaning to fit what I had seen (Table 2):

1. *Religious*—This was determined based on imagery involving crosses, Stars of David, hands in prayer, angels, etc.
2. *Marital/Familial* (what I call “relational”)— Primarily, relation was determined by statements such as “Beloved Wife and Mother” or “Daughter/Son of.” A surname of large, central proportion was also chosen as an image of relation as the surname was important to whoever had died. All stones in the multiple/shared stone division are marked as relational as there is an assumed connection between the couples.
3. *Military/Patriotic*— Military service was easily viewed by the statement of rank, branch of service, war served in, and/or location of service. Often, this was accompanied by a religious symbol.
4. *Organizational*—There were many different organizational affiliations that were visible on the markers; primarily, affiliation with the Masons was prominent.
5. *Generic funerary*—Images include flowers and other natural elements used in embellishment.
6. *Sub-institutional*—Images include those representing hobbies, such as trains, car logos, and trucks, as well as personalizing elements, such as the image of the deceased, images of an animal such as dog, and even nicknames.

I noticed that there were many different shapes, sizes and styles of grave markers.

I classified them into thirteen different styles, examples of which can be seen in Figure 1:

- 1) the monument, very closely related to obelisks in that they are vertical shafts of marble. Frequently seen with a cross on the top;
- 2) the tablet/block, characterized by a simple shape, generally squared at the top, with variations of rounding;
- 3) the double tablet/block. This varies from the regular tablet/block in that it is larger and contains the information of a couple;
- 4) the scroll, which looks as though an open scroll is laid upon a block, often accompanied by a rose;
- 5) the pulpit, which generally is a block style with an angled top, reminding one of a podium;
- 6) the raised marker, usually of stone material that lies parallel with the ground, the information printed on the top;
- 7) the plaque, a marker at ground level, made of a material other than stone;
- 8) the non-plaque, very similar to the plaque in that it is ground level, but is made of stone;
- 9) the abstract piece, something unusual. In this case, it is characterized by a marble sphere atop a marble lima bean shaped base;
- 10) the stained glass and stone memorial, complete with a religious picture and sizeable stone framing the glass;
- 11) the tomb, a marker that is the length and width of the plot;
- 12) the burial vault, which is an above-ground burial made of marble; and

13) the mausoleum wall, which is a block of a wall designated with the name and dates of the deceased.

During my final round of coding, the work of Francaviglia (1971) has been my

DECADES	<i>Saint Andrew's</i>	<i>Fairview</i>	<i>Tombstone</i>	<i>Old Dominion</i>	<i>Blue Ridge</i>	Total
<i>I</i> : 1890-1899	3	0	0	0	0	3
<i>II</i> : 1900-1909	4	1	3	0	0	8
<i>III</i> : 1910-1919	9	15	2	0	0	26
<i>IV</i> : 1920-1929	3	6	8	0	0	17
<i>V</i> : 1930- 1939	6	1	5	0	0	12
<i>VI</i> : 1940-1949	1	7	6	0	0	14
<i>VII</i> : 1950-1959	2	6	5	0	1	14
<i>VIII</i> : 1960-1969	2	2	2	0	0	6
<i>IX</i> : 1970-1979	2	5	3	0	3	13
<i>X</i> : 1980-1989	2	1	4	0	6	13
<i>XI</i> : 1990-1999	4	0	2	13	6	25

main guide. This last coding round was framed to compare and contrast my data of southwest Virginia to his of Oregon. In the following section, I focus on my findings.

<i>XII: 2000-1009</i>	7	4	2	29	6	48
<i>XIII: 2010-2011</i>	0	0	0	6	1	7
<i>MULTI</i>	5	1	6	0	23	35
<i>UNKNOWN</i>	0	1	2	2	4	9
Total	50	50	50	50	50	250

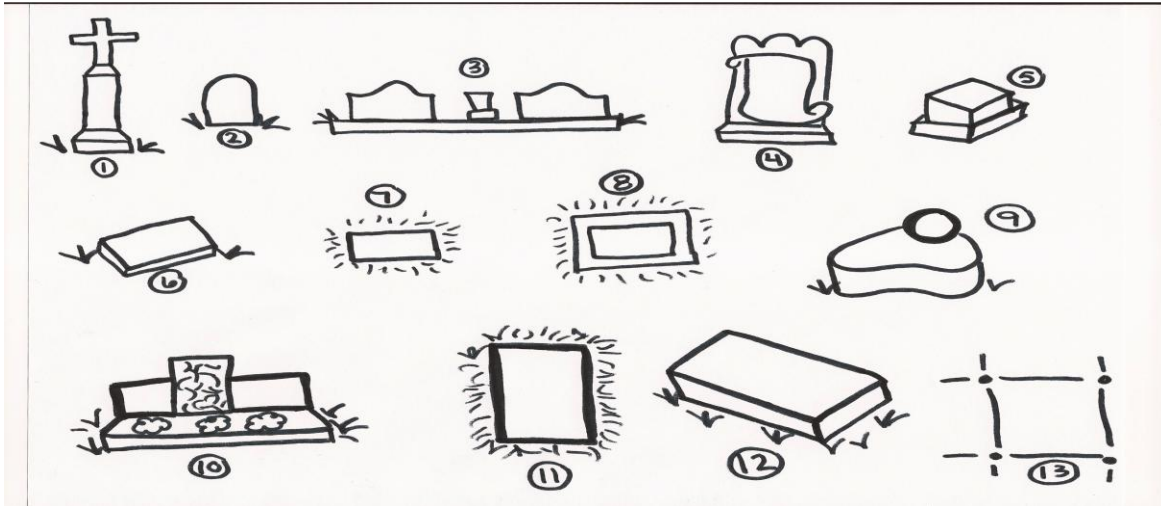


Figure 1

Types of Imagery per Decade (multiple counts per stone in some cases)

Table 2

DECADE	<i>Religious</i>	<i>Familial</i>	<i>Military/Patriotic</i>	<i>Organizational</i>	<i>Generic</i>	<i>Sub-institutional</i>	Total
<i>I: 1890-1899</i>	1	1	0	0	2	0	4
<i>II: 1900-1909</i>	2	6	0	0	3	0	11
<i>III: 1910-1919</i>	6	13	0	1	3	0	23
<i>IV: 1920-1929</i>	4	1	1	0	1	0	7
<i>V: 1930-1939</i>	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
<i>VI: 1940-1949</i>	4	4	1	0	1	0	10
<i>VII: 1950-1959</i>	2	1	0	0	1	0	4
<i>VIII: 1960-1969</i>	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
<i>IX: 1970-1979</i>	3	3	2	1	4	1	14
<i>X: 1980-1989</i>	8	3	5	0	4	0	20
<i>XI: 1990-1999</i>	17	10	6	1	10	5	49
<i>XII: 2000-2009</i>	25	11	11	0	14	15	76
<i>XIII: 2010-2011</i>	5	1	1	0	2	1	10
<i>MULTI</i>	20	35	3	2	28	1	89
<i>UNKNOWN</i>	7	4	0	2	4	0	17
Total	106	95	30	7	78	23	339

Findings

I contrast my data from southwest Virginia to that of Francaviglia's (1971) study of Oregon cemeteries to see if there were any similarities. For this, I used his four periods as framework: 1) the pioneer period (1850-1879); 2) the Victorian period (1880-1905); 3) the conservative period (1906-1929); and 4) the modern period (1930-1970).

None of the graves documented in this study were dated from the pre-established time frame of "pioneer period." This could be attributed to the general fact that most of Virginia was settled by this time period. We could also take into account the Civil War playing a key role in the burials during this time frame. Many soldiers' bodies may not have been recovered or returned to their family, and possibly been buried in unmarked territory.

Very few of the graves I studied were from the Victorian period (6 out of 250), though I did see similarities in the description of lavishness. Most of the grave markers were extravagant monuments, though there were others. I came across a scroll with a rose on top (Figure 2), as well as an ornately decorated tablet/block. Figure 2 in particular was the grave of an infant daughter; her name and middle initial, the initials and surname of her parents, and a small epitaph stating "Safe on his gentle breast" are all that is offered of her details.

Francaviglia (1971) talks of the conservative period showing a decrease in ornamentation. I found a similar period in southwestern Virginia as well. Early in the period, traces of the ornate imagery and artwork of the Victorian period mix with the simplicity of raised markers with nothing but words. Most of the imagery is rather

generic, with simple floral designs. Crosses are visible as well. However, a few of my most ornate pieces are from this period, including one for a young girl that is topped with a stone representation of a wooden cross and a dead dove (Figure 3). This is reminiscent of the Victorian child monuments, which were typically grandiose as the Victorians had a fascination with the tragedy and memorialization of a lost child (Smith 1987; Snyder 1989). This monument belongs to another Helen, though not an infant. In fact, the only difference between Helen of Figure 2's and Helen of Figure 3's graves is that Figure 3 shows the years that Helen was alive, with no epitaph; otherwise both fit the traditional Victorian theme.



Figure 2



Figure 3

As with Francoviglia's Oregon cemeteries, I found the modern period to be evident in southwest Virginian grave markers, characterized by simplicity in style, imagery, and information. The stones that fell into this category showed no evident

change in shape or style. Information was very minimal, if any was offered, though military plaques were introduced.

What is of more interest to me is the *late-modern period*, the period that came after 1970 until the present, which was not studied by Francaviglia. Towards the beginning of the period, 1971- 2011, the themes from the modern period persisted. Gradually, plaques and non-plaques became visible, replacing raised markers. More elaborate pieces began to return as well, often abstract or very personal, though the primary marker of choice remains the plaque.

The plaque offers more of a chance for design and personalization that has not really been seen before. In the periods prior to the *late-modern*, most imagery was generic and simple. Other imagery reflected religious and/or military affiliation. Not much was visible of the deceased's personality. During the *late-modern period*, we see more individualization appearing on the stones. We continue to see religious and military affiliation, different organizations, and generic floral designs, but we also see trains, forests, dogs, and even photographs of the deceased. Nicknames appear frequently when they did not appear before.

Sanders (2009) notes a trend in the funeral industry towards a more individualized, even carnivalesque movement in the memorialization of loved ones. Sanders suggests "entertainment and fun make death palatable and more affable in order that it might also be consumable" (455). To demonstrate the degrees of entertainment, he describes different "designer funerals" and other ways to materially cope with death. For example, you can have the cremains (cremated remains) of a loved one blended with other minerals to create the grave marker; urns can be purchased in various shapes

including busts of the deceased; cremains can be launched into orbit, compressed into gems to wear, or mixed with gunpowder in fireworks to send your loved one off with a literal bang. It is thus suggested that the funeral has become a novelty.

While I did not find extreme novelty in the grave markers of Roanoke, individualization is clearly present. This is especially powerful for the markers of those who are not yet dead. Anecdotally, I have passed Blue Ridge Memorial Park and noticed various sales offering two-for-one specials on plots, demonstrating the growth of pre-planned funerals. In documenting the markers for the not-yet-dead, many featured just one deceased individual (if it was a couple). It could essentially save the family time and money having the plaque prepared with everything but the death date, which can be added later.

Another interesting trend I found is that of the child marker. Smith (1987) and Snyder (1989) have both noted that Victorian children's markers tend to be lavish and mark the tragedy of such an early demise. It could be assumed that after the Victorian funerary ideals had long passed out of style, the markers of children would eventually blend in with those of the surrounding dead. I found this not to be the case. Children's markers have stood out more so in the *late-modern period* based on the shape and design of the plaque, as well as mementos left at the graveside. Plaques for adults tend to be the same rectangular shapes whereas infant plaques are also seen in the shape of hearts. Also, the imagery on children's markers tends to be rather stereotypical to what we associate with children: pacifiers, teddy bears, baby angels, and toy blocks.

The pain of the families becomes more obvious as we look at the epitaphs and other information on and around the stones. These often state "Our angel", "Our beloved

son/daughter”, “Lil’ man”, etc. Prior to this period, I noted no real evidence of attachment visibly portrayed on markers for infants and young children, other than the occasional reference that they were the infant or son/daughter of the parents. Many times, all that was provided was just the name and dates. Toys also surround the graves of children in the *late-modern period* (Figure 4). Generally these are seen next to infant graves and are highly gendered: if the infant was male, there were toys such as little trucks, stuffed dogs, and plastic dinosaurs; if the infant was a female, flowers were more prevalent.

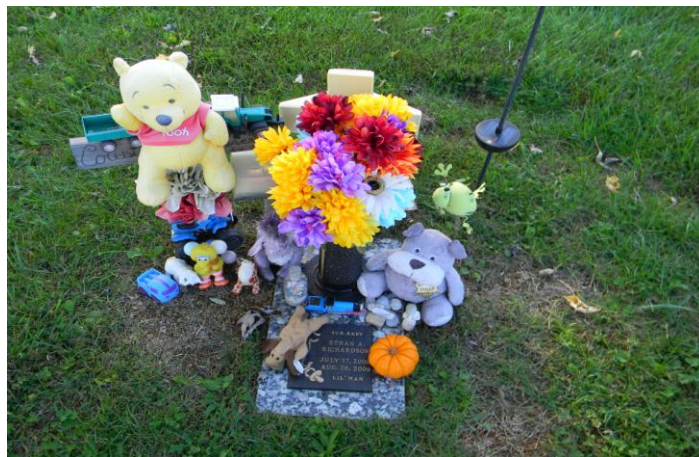


Figure 4

If anything, I would say that it appears that the *late-modern period* shows a shift in tradition. We are not losing tradition, but finding ways to adapt on our own. I discuss the implications of my findings in detail in the final section of this paper.

Conclusion

Sanders (2009) notes that, “...death and its properties appear to be antithetical to the work of doing capitalism... Yet we know it is a social (if not wholly physical) fact that the two do coexist...” (447-448). Sanders also highlights that the funeral industry has been suffering more as of late, especially from advanced medical technologies, and so has had to fight to stay afloat in our ever demanding society, finding new and unique

ways to memorialize the dead (452). As our society has historically been materialistic, and extremely capitalistic, it should be no surprise that grave markers are representing this trend of materialism through personalized memories.

An acceptable form of memorializing your loved one is in the choice of grave marker you select for them, what images if any are put on it, and what quotes if any will be added. There is no end to creativity for grave markers, and this is prevalent in cemeteries over time, especially in the Victorian and *late-modern* periods.

My work has limitations. For the most part, I photographed and visited these cemeteries alone, so there was only one person covering a small area of each cemetery. I did not fully map out the cemeteries I visited, and stayed in one area for most of the time I was there. All information was coded by hand and added to the computer as I worked, leaving room for basic human error. I went into my work with an open mind to what I could find, when perhaps a more structured plan would have guided me better.

Though my sample is small, you can see that southwestern Virginia is no different than any other locale when it comes to following the latest trends. Even in funerary trends, you can see the patterns typical of any style that is “in fashion” at the time: It starts on the East Coast and works its way across the country, spreading out and varying a little over time. With this study, I empirically verify Francaviglia’s findings beyond an Oregonian context. Further, I expand upon his original findings by noting *late-modern* trends in funerary imagery.

Future research should be done in other areas across the country to add to what has been documented by both Francaviglia and myself. Future researchers should have a preset concept of what they are looking for specifically while in the cemetery, such as the

data on the stones. For instance, why are children's graves consistently treated differently than those of adults? Does region truly play a key role in variations of funerary trends? Are we returning to an older concept of the beautification of death in how we consume in the funeral industry today? These and many more have yet to be answered.

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