

Tom and Gigi Oakley found a tombstone on their Brookside Drive property — and then the situation got weird.

The grave marker, split in half, bears the name Luman Willard, who died in Hayesville in 1849.

Records and a visit to the Hayesville-Vermillion Cemetery over eight miles away indicate Luman Willard is buried there — with another marker in place.

And finally, some quick web sleuthing indicates Luman Willard is likely the grandfather of Jess Willard, an American world heavyweight boxing champion from the early 20th century.

So, how did the grandfather of a boxing legend end up with two gravestones? And why is one in the Oakleys' backyard?

### **Tombstones uncovered**

Tom Oakley first found the mysterious marker while making a brush pile in his backyard in early June.

The Oakley's property runs about halfway up a steep hill behind their house. And the bottom of the hill, two sheds sit about 10 feet apart.

Oakley first thought the large stone, which he found face down next to one of the sheds, was a paver.

When he picked it up and turned it over, he saw the inscription: "Luman Willard, Sept. 17, 1849."

"I've been back there 100 times, and I've never seen it before," Tom Oakley said.

Tom Oakley has lived at the address for five years and his wife, Gigi, has been there 10 years longer.

Several feet away, behind the second shed, Tom Oakley found another slab. He realized this was the bottom half of the tombstone.

Along with Luman Willard's age of 38 years, the bottom half bears a verse from a hymn, "Dear As Thou Wast and Justly Dear."

"I texted Gigi and said, 'Hey, guess what I found?'" Tom Oakley said. "And first her response was, 'Is there a body back there?'"

Like any homeowner who finds a tombstone in the yard, Tom Oakley took photos of the marker and posted them on Facebook.

"Immediately we got, 'Oh my God, is there a body there?'" Tom Oakley said, laughing.

Tom Oakley's search for a base of the stone, which might indicate a grave, came up empty.

## **Historical records provide clues**

The Ashland County chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society has a compilation of tombstone transcriptions for the Vermillion Cemetery in Hayesville.

The document indicates a Luman Willard, who had died in Hayesville in 1849, is buried in the rural cemetery on Ohio Route 60.

Hayesville Fiscal Officer Amy Pickering, who has maintained a spreadsheet of the cemetery's records since 1999, was able to locate his plot, with a weathered stone marking the spot.

The inscription is faded, but with a green crayon and white paper, Pickering was able to make a tombstone rubbing.

The name "Luman Willard" emerged.

"After you know what you're looking for, then you can make it out," Pickering said.

Aside from the name, Luman Willard's headstone in the Vermillion Cemetery bears no resemblance to the marker found in the Oakleys' backyard.

The gravestone in the cemetery is an obelisk, while the other is flat and rectangular and the inscription is clear.

"The front of that stone is beautiful," Gigi Oakley said. "The back is very weathered, so if the bottom of that stone is sticking up somewhere and was exposed, it's probably going to be really hard to find, unless you find that actual plot."

Tom Oakley believes the stone was laying face down for a long time, keeping the front in good condition.

## **Famous connection**

Type "Luman Willard" into a Google search and up pops a biography on heavyweight champion Jess Willard.

Jess Willard had a grandfather named Luman Willard who died in Hayesville, according to "Jess Willard: Heavyweight Champion of the World (1915-1919)," a biography penned by Arly Allen and published by McFarland & Company Publishers in 2017. According to the book, Luman Willard was a sea captain.

The book indicates Luman Willard and his wife, Emily, had a son named Myron Willard in 1844, who would serve in the Union Army during the Civil War.

Myron Willard was discharged in Kansas in 1865, and his son Jess Willard, was born Dec. 29, 1881.

At 33, Jess Willard — known as the Pottawatomie Giant — famously knocked out reigning champion Jack Johnson in April 1915 for the heavyweight title.

According to Ancestry.com, Luman Willard was born in August 1811 in Madison, New York.

A last will and testament on Ancestry.com for Luman Willard, witnessed Sept. 15, 1849, corroborates the information from the biography.

"Being weak in body, but of sound mind," Luman Willard bequeathed his property, money and effects to his widow and their children, which included a son named Myron.

### **Mystery solved?**

Finding a random gravestone might seem spooky to most, but it's relatively common during ancestry research, according to Marleen Applegate, president of the Ashland County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society.

Genealogists often come across duplicate markers, which usually means the original stone was replaced, possibly due to damage. The discarded gravestones were typically made available to the public and would get new lives as pavers, Applegate said.

"Why there's a double, I don't know," Applegate said. "It's probably somebody had one made, and they found out there was one there or somebody replaced one at one point in time. And the cemetery found out they had a double, and it was probably a free-for-all. That stuff happened quite often."

Tom Oakley's first assumption that he had found two pavers might have been dead on. At the end of the day, the Oakleys just want to return Luman Willard's stone to its owner.

"I need to get it back where it belongs," Tom Oakley said. "That's my whole effort here, just to get it back where it belongs."