

## **One Headstone Three Children**

By Frances Harrington

I was taking pictures in Oakwood Cemetery the other day to fulfill as many of the 300 requests for headstone pictures, as I could, off the Find A Grave website. Some of the requests dated back to 2013 so I decided to tackle it and get as many as I could before the weather got too bad. I already did the Evergreen Cemetery requests and the ones for Restlawn Cemetery, also. I left Oakwood for last because the Cemetery is so large (over 30,000 graves) and the task seem overwhelming.

While I was there, I noticed a headstone that had 3 children listed on it. I thought maybe they all died from diphtheria or something like that because I noticed they all died the same year and then I noticed they died the same day! I decided to do some research on them to find out what happened.

In the fall of 1887, the Howd family lived at 38 Park Street in Muskegon. Mrs. Howd had gone to a temperance meeting at 7:30 p.m. while Mr. Howd was home with the children. He put them to bed in their upstairs bedroom and left a lamp burning in their room. After they had fallen to sleep, he left the house to pick up his wife from the meeting around 9:30 p.m. and stayed for a little while. Shortly after he left, a neighbor, William Burns, noticed a fire in the upstairs of the house and set off the alarm. He then worked hard to get into the home, and once he did, he headed for the upstairs to see if the children were there, but didn't get far because of the heat and smoke. Meanwhile, the other neighbors had started moving out what belongings they could from the downstairs of the home. It didn't take long for the fireman to put the blaze out once they got there. When the Fire Chief started checking the upper floor, he was overwhelmed by the site of the three children, still in their beds, covered with ash and debris, dead from the smoke and flames. The parents came home just as they were removing their children's bodies and of course, were besides themselves with grief. They had heard the alarm but had no idea it was for a fire at their own home.

At the inquest, the jury ruled that the lamp had probably exploded, setting the room on fire and suffocating the children, before they were burned. It turns out, the lamp had already been repaired once before. They didn't find the parents were to blame for the accident, although, some of the people from town voiced their opinions otherwise, because the children were home alone when this happened. It was also stated in the Chronicle that, "never in the history of Muskegon has a sadder affair of this kind occurred". In fact, the incident was reported throughout the country.

These are the names and ages of the three young victims: Osborne was 5 years, Cora was almost 3 years, and Walter, the youngest, was almost a year old when this tragic accident happened. The next day, all the children in little Osborne's kindergarten class were allowed to leave school to attend the funeral. Every one of his class mates attended, each bringing a flower.

Francis A. and Lida (Cooley) Howd were married on 14 August 1880, in Montcalm County, Michigan. Mr. Howd had been a school teacher but with a wife and children, he probably

needed to make more money than a teacher's salary, so he started working as a sawmaker for Barcus Brothers (manufacturer of circular saws) in Muskegon.

Not long after the fire, the couple left Muskegon. I wonder if it might have been because of people blaming them, and bad mouthing them, because of the fire. We all know how cruel and "holier than thou" people can be. In 1888, their son, Cloise, was born in Iowa. By 1900, they are living in Pacific County, Washington, where Francis is working in a saw mill. Besides Cloise, they go on to have 5 more children: Hazel, Otis, Eugene, Alice, and Irma. They live out the rest of their lives in Pacific County. Lida (Cooley)Howd died in 1908 and Francis A. Howd died in 1926.

