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# Life without an end date

**END DATE**, FROM D-1

the daughter of an Allegheny city (now North Side) carpenter. Both families had roots in Scotland, according to 1870, 1880 and 1890 U.S. census reports.

The 1900 census shows the couple moved to Dayton, Ohio, where they lived through at least 1920. They adopted a daughter. They moved back to Pittsburgh, potentially to care for William's sister, Janet, who died in February 1928.

A legal notice in The Pittsburgh Press named William as executor of his sister's will, just a year before his own death. It was probably about this time that the headstone was placed in the cemetery, Janet's name on one side; William and Florence on the other; and the Westwater surname etched across the top.

Florence remained in Beechview for nine years. Then she moved on: The Dec. 8, 1937, issue of the Fort Lauderdale (Florida) News listed her name first under the "New Arrivals" story about "recent registrations" at the Chamber of Commerce. A month later, she took a cruise to Havana, Cuba, the paper reported as she returned.

The 1940 census shows Florence living in a boarding house with four other adults. The News' social pages contain numerous references to her membership in the Park Temple Quilters, a five-minute walk from the residence. She volunteered with the Broward County chapter of the American Red Cross during World War II.

Florence moved to Evanston, Ill., shortly after the war ended to live with her adopted daughter. She died on Sept. 18, 1951, age 84, according to obituaries in both the Evanston and Fort Lauderdale newspapers. A Northwestern University chaplain presided over her Presbyterian memorial service at a campus chapel.

All of these details about Florence are available online, either for free or nominal access charges. As any genealogist or historian can attest, however, such records often contain conflicting information, raise more questions or fall short of revealing the simplest and most meaningful details about a person.

What was Florence's favorite food, or holiday? What gave her the most joy?

Some might question whether these records should be so easily accessible. In the digital age, it is not only our own details that are widely available, but also those of our ancestors. States do impose some limits, and details from the decennial federal census are withheld for 72 years.

The two newspaper obituaries do not mention Florence's burial place. Mt. Lebanon Cemetery told me that she was not interred beneath the headstone that bears her name. I couldn't find her in a search of Chicago-area cemetery databases.

Florence also is not listed in the online Cook County, Ill., death records, which might provide this detail, only a woman named Anne Westwater, who died four days later and was 17 years younger. My request to the county government for a manual search of their records has not yet been answered.

As for burial markers with incomplete death years, the Association for Gravestone Studies says they are fairly common. The Greenfield, Mass.-based group explores cemetery markers for historical and artistic perspectives.

Vince Dioguardi, co-owner of Rome Monument, based in Rochester, Pa., is a little more skeptical.

"Does it happen? Absolutely," he said. "I don't know that I'd agree that it's all that common."

The issue got extra attention 17 years ago, as pre-engraved headstones with death years beginning in 19 henceforth needed to start with 20. Mr. Dioguardi said he's seen his share of terrible looking "patch and cut" jobs, even a few cases of duct tape and markers. One AGS member in Vermont said she found a marker with the death date, "1999 + 2."

Typically, it costs about $150 to add the last two digits to an incomplete death year, Mr. Dioguardi said, including finishing the earlier work of another monument company.

Gravestones remain incomplete for a number of reasons. The surviving spouse named on a pre-engraved headstone gets remarried and is buried with the new partner. The person moves away, as Florence did. Family feuds, indifference and insufficient funds are also factors.

In death, as in life, things don't always work out as planned.

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