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## Chicago's Smallest Cemetery Andreas Von Zirngibl Gravesite.

The smallest cemetery in the City of Chicago measures little more than 100 square feet and is located in the middle of a scrapyard at 9331 S. Ewing Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. It has one permanent resident, Andreas Von Zirngibl. Zirngibl was born in Bavaria in 1797. At 18, Von Zirngibl joined Marshal Gebhard Von Blucher's Prussian forces. He fought in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, helping defeat Napoleon but losing an arm in the process.



In Bavaria, he made a living on the Danube River as a fisherman before immigrating to America in 1853. With his wife and five children, he arrived in Chicago in the summer of 1854, when it was a town of 50,000 people. Later that year, his descendants have said, he bought about 40 acres of marshy land near the mouth of the Calumet River for \$160. He built a shanty on the land and fished Lake Michigan for sturgeon, herring, perch and



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Northern pike, he was reported to have caught some fish weighing in at over 100-pounds, even though he only had one arm.

On Aug. 21, 1855, Von Zirngibl died of a fever. It is said that he made one final request: to be buried on his homestead. Although his family moved to the North Side shortly after his death, Von Zirngibl's widow and children saw that his grave was kept clean. They fashioned a wooden marker for the site, built a white picket fence around it and made regular visits for dozens of years.



Most of this story is told through the claims made by Von Zirngibl's descendants -- 40 years after his death -- in the case of Zirngibl vs. Calumet and Chicago Canal and Dock Co. In this 1895 Illinois Supreme Court case, the Zirngibls, who had apparently dropped the "Von," argued that the company had usurped their land and their ancestor's grave site. The family said its deed for property had been destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.



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A story of big business cheating an immigrant family out of its land teemed with populist appeal, and the late Mike Royko even included the story in a 1967 column about industrialization in the Chicago Daily News. The problem is that parts of the tale -- and no one can tell which parts -- may be fabricated, according to Rod Sellers, a Washington High School social studies teacher and South Side history buff.

"It may have been a scam," he says. "My reading of it is that he (Von Zirngibl) was probably a squatter."

Justice David J. Baker, who wrote the court's opinion, cast a jaundiced eye at the Zirngibls' claims. For instance, he accused George Zirngibl, a son of Andreas Von Zirngibl, of lying on the stand. "We fear that his cupidity has unduly jogged his memory," he wrote. The judge also noted the tardiness of the Zirngibls' claim.

"It is remarkable," Baker wrote, "that during the years that they saw the forty acres change from an almost valueless swamp to a tract of land worth a million of dollars, they made no attempt to profit from it."

Perhaps most damaging to the Zirngibls' claim of ownership was evidence that scores of other bodies were buried on the land. One witness, albeit 40 years after the fact, testified that Von Zirngibl had actually died in Whiting, Indiana and that his sons took him to the mouth of the Calumet to be buried.

Nonetheless, Baker did recognize the Zirngibls' dedication to the one-armed soldier's grave site. In the end, the court ruled that the land belonged to Calumet and Chicago Canal and Dock, but awarded "to the widow and heirs the grave and the ground within the fence that encloses it, with the right of access to and egress from it." The ruling ensured that any future owner of the land would have a property that was part cemetery.

Scrap Processing, owned by Cozzi Iron & Metal Inc., is only the latest in a long line of industrial operations that have owned the site. For most of this century, concrete mixers, dump trucks and all sorts of industrial machinery have rumbled past Von Zirngibl's grave.

In 1987 the Southeast Historical Society, with the help of Henry Zirngibl, a descendant of Andreas Von Zirngibl,





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raised money to repair the rundown grave. The group placed a large concrete slab over the site and added a new granite headstone with an inscription that read, in part, "A Veteran of 1816 Battle of Waterloo," even though the battle took place in 1815. Around the grave site, the Southeast Historical Society placed four massive concrete blocks to protect and mark the gravesite.