





*Coles County Map & Tour Guide* says that forty to fifty families once lived there.

A church and schoolhouse still stood on the land, owned by the Barnes family, in 1893, but nothing remains of either of the buildings. St. Omer disappeared in the 1880s, around the same time both Caroline, the alleged witch, and Marcus (her husband) died. The small town of Hitesville, formerly located a few miles south east of Ashmore, suffered a similar fate, as was common for small communities in the late 1800s that weren't located near a railroad.

Historically, Marcus and Caroline's deaths are something of a mystery. According to Carolyn Stephens, a local historian, Marcus Barnes is said to have died in a sawmill accident in December of 1881. Caroline Barnes, only twenty-three years old, died two months later of pneumonia on either February 26<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup>, depending on what document you look at. In yet another strange turn of events, Caroline's birth family, the Prathers, came to own the large plot of land directly south of what used to be St. Omer several years after her death.

Legends of witch's graves are not foreign to Central Illinois. The small community of Chesterville, a few miles west of Arcola, has its own witch's grave, but contrary to the St. Omer story, the Chesterville Witch actually has some evidence to back it up. There is no established story supporting the idea that Caroline Barnes was accused of witchcraft, let alone put to death for it. Many people died young of a wide variety of what we would now consider treatable illnesses in the harsh world of rural life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such a death might be less romantic for believers in the myth, but it is more than likely what actually happened.

Whatever you believe, no one can deny that the fascinating story of St. Omer Cemetery and its long-vanished village has captured the imaginations of generations of Coles County residents. Offerings in the form of flowers or coins make regular appearances at the grave, and the tiny cemetery has found its way into nationally-published books and local newspapers.

If nothing else, Caroline Barnes and her family's unique monument have inadvertently kept the memory, and perhaps the cemetery itself, alive for many future generations.

