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Groups focus on preserving old grave sites

Volunteers driven by sense of history, respect for dead

by Jordan Gass-Poor; For the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette | August 24, 2015 at 3:07 a.m.

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Without records or maps, a young Theresa Lundberg, her mother and siblings would routinely search for the burial site of her maternal grandfather.

All the Lundbergs knew was that he was somewhere in a Catholic cemetery in the small town of Pomfret, Md., where his wife and many other family members are buried.

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"It kind of became a game for my sisters and I," said Lundberg, a Bella Vista resident.

Although they never found his grave, the mystery instilled a passion in Lundberg for documenting gravestones that led her to become involved with the Arkansas Gravestones Project, a nonprofit organization that photographs and archives gravestones online.

Lundberg, who said she has not given up the search for her grandfather's grave, does not want others to wonder where their ancestors are buried. So she travels throughout the country in her minivan, taking photos of cemeteries.

She's hit various parts of Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Oklahoma and her home state of Maryland, she said.

"My van just kind of knows where cemeteries are," said Lundberg, vice president and an area coordinator of the Arkansas Gravestones Project.

Much like Lundberg, Arkansas Gravestones Project founder and state coordinator Ira Sharp "Tootie" Dennis began photographing gravestones in 2007 to unearth family history, she said.

Sharp County is named for Dennis' great-great-grandfather, Ephraim Sharp, she said. Work done by Arkansas Gravestones Project volunteers throughout the state pays homage to the Sharp family.

"So many, many people are kin to me in that area," she said, adding that some of the organization's volunteers are even related to her.

Dennis' father was born on "Sharp land" before he moved to Texas, where she continues to live.

For eight weeks a year, though, Dennis, 73, is in Arkansas "graving" -- the term volunteers and others use to refer to their cemetery work, which includes preservation and community education.

By 2007, several organizations similar to the Arkansas Gravestones Project were established in other states, Dennis said.

Arkansas Gravestones Project volunteers have since photographed more than 1 million gravestones in the state, Dennis said.

"It's something you have to love because it takes a lot of your life," Dennis said.

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She attributed the organization's success to the number of Arkansans who understand that the state's history is in its cemeteries.

"They lived once; they lived, they loved, they died," Dennis said of those buried in Arkansas cemeteries.

Many historic cemeteries in Arkansas have been neglected for decades, however.

Those that have disintegrated the most are the rural community and private family sites, according to the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program's manual, "Grave Concerns."

The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program attributes the plight of these sites to abandonment, apathy, encroachment, environmental factors, vandalism and theft.

For three years, Leroy Blair of the White County Historical Society was the caretaker of Oak Grove Cemetery near his home in Conway, where there are believed to be thousands of unmarked graves.

Blair photographed about 20,000 gravestones there and at other White County cemeteries.

But Blair, 75, no longer goes graving because of his arthritis.

Instead, he is working on indexing those photos in the White County Historical Society office and helping people purchase markers for those once unmarked graves.

Nancy Feroe's cemetery preservation efforts began when the granddaughter of an indigent farmer who died from tuberculosis contacted her 12 years ago because she wanted to get into the Benton County Poor Farm Cemetery to put flowers on his unmarked grave.

A small number of unmarked graves in the cemetery are distinguishable by fieldstones and the depressions they have made in the ground. The cemetery contains an unknown number of graves.

Arkansas law requires there to be reasonable automobile access to cemeteries that have at least six gravestones and are not private family burial plots. This does not apply to cemeteries that have not had road access for at least 30 years. County judges maintain these roads.

Under state law, destruction or removal of cemetery markers is a Class C felony.

Feroe, president of the Benton County Cemetery Preservation Group, said she keeps a thin fiberglass rod in her car to find stones that may have sunken into the ground.

Benton County purchased about 200 acres in 1858 to establish a poor farm and, about two years later, a cemetery to bury the indigent, Feroe said.

With the rise of federal assistance programs, such as Social Security, came the demise of the Benton County Poor Farm and its cemetery. Instead, the county began burying the poor in the pauper's section of the Bentonville Cemetery.

Benton County still owns the cemetery property, and jail inmates help maintain the land, Feroe said. But now, a residential subdivision has cropped up around it.

The 1-acre cemetery is clearly defined in the land survey, Feroe said.

A portion of the poor farm's rock wall remains. It is the only tangible remnant of the poor farm and helped get the cemetery listed in 2008 on the National Register of Historic Places.

When Feroe first visited the Benton County Poor Farm cemetery, the cockleburs were so tall that she could not walk inside.

So, Feroe said, she, a friend and their two children cleaned the cemetery on Wednesdays in the summer of 2004.

Restoration efforts began in 2000 and were completed about four years later by the subdivision's developer, Feroe said.

"They don't have any real fabulous stories at all," Feroe said of those buried in the cemetery.

"They're just the unknown and the forgotten. That's what they are. They can't say 'thank you.' They can't do anything. Those are the ones we try to remember and take care of."

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RLP AUGUST 24, 2015 AT 8:34 A.M.

I read your article with interest as I have spent many hours photographing grave sites around Pulaski County and posting the results on findagrave dot com. I chose that site as it appears to have a nationwide following and is well respected by thousands who are researching their genealogical roots. I did some work early on for a statewide organization but I found the nationwide findagrave to be more useful. Maybe you could research them and publish something that would introduce them to an Arkansas audience.

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