

‘We Have a Responsibility’: Mapping, Tombstone Transcriptions Helping to Save Lewis County History



Lorie Spogen looks at the details on Felix Koontz's gravestone on her rural Chehalis property. While it was known the grave was on the property, its location had become overgrown and lost when the Spogens purchased the property this year.

By Carrina Stanton / For The Chronicle, Tuesday, November 23, 2021

When Mark and Lorie Spogen considered purchasing a piece of property in rural Chehalis earlier this year, their interest was purely business.

They didn't know they would gain something even more precious: the rediscovery of a piece of Lewis County history.

The Spogens purchased the 16-acre property for their family business, Jorgensen Timber, for the purpose of logging the timber on the land and replanting it. It was so severely overgrown, they bought it without setting foot on it, but they learned through a small note on the tax sale form the potential location of a historic cemetery.

Lorie Spogen said they were also contacted by the state Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation as well as Richard Curtis, kin to one of the interred, who provided them with information showing that the property was once part of the 2,000-acre holdings of the Matilda Koontz Jackson family.

Curtis gave the Spogens a list of the known burials there, which included Chehalis founder Schuyler Saunders and Matilda Koontz Jackson's sons Felix, who died in 1855, and Henry, who died in 1857.

The property had been logged in the past but not replanted properly, so it was overgrown with trees and brush. It was also full of garbage.

After clearing invasive growth and removing trash, Lorie Spogen said they began to look around for the historic burial sites. With the help of her grandkids and a lot of careful looking, she was finally successful.

"(My grandkids) spent quite a lot of time there and were eventually able to find the two gravestones of Matilda Jackson's sons," Lorie Spogen said. "So, when we went to log, we left a very large area around them that we didn't touch so none of it was disturbed."

When historic burials are located on private property, there is a delicate balance between property owners' rights and the right of the community to its history. Property owners can be understandably reluctant to allow strangers onto their property. But having physical access to a headstone can sometimes tell you historical information that paper records may not, said Lewis County Genealogical Society (LCGS) President Margaret Iverson.

For instance, Iverson said a headstone might include an actual date of death, while official records might only record a year. Historic headstones also might include icons such as a crutch, which may indicate the person lived with a disability, or symbols for fraternal memberships or religious beliefs.

"It's not just genealogy. It's local history," Iverson said.

And then there are the anecdotes about what happens when cemeteries aren't preserved, including stories about headstones being removed and used for building materials. Property owners have bulldozed over and buried grave sites. Vandals have

removed markers from remote sites and thrown them away. Then there are property owners who simply allow nature to reclaim the space.

“One of the sad things is their stories are lost,” Iverson said, referring to graves that are lost or destroyed. “That is one of the things we talk about is if we can find their graves, we can find their stories.”

There are about three dozen recorded historic burial sites in Lewis County, a designation that goes to any site containing human remains buried prior to Nov. 11, 1889. Their locations are recorded through a database maintained by the Washington State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation to alert permitting agencies to the existence of burials, which are protected under Washington law.

Members of the Lewis County Genealogical Society have also been involved for several years in transcribing and recording tombstones through the national USGenWeb Tombstone Project. Jenny Tenlen, who has managed the Lewis and Cowlitz portions of the national project for the past 25 years, said her first tombstone inscription project was the St. Yves cemetery in Harmony after her grandfather was buried there. They are an important way to preserve local history, she said.

“Cemeteries provide an important link between the present and the past,” Tenlen said. “Every time I drive down to Harmony to visit my grandparents’ graves, and see their former neighbors buried around them, it brings back memories from my childhood. Cemetery transcriptions provide a way to preserve those memories for generations to come.”

Tenlen said she has no doubt there are still grave sites in Lewis County that have yet to be discovered. She gave the example of a burial in the former town of Windom east of Toledo called Homestead Cemetery. It contains three marked graves. Tenlen said given the size of the families in that community, she would suspect there are more graves there that are either overgrown or the markers have been damaged.

“Without the LCGS and associated volunteers’ efforts, we probably wouldn’t know about as many of these family burials as we do,” Tenlen said. “I also keep hearing over the years from researchers who have documentation that an ancestor was buried in a particular cemetery (such as from obituaries or death certificates) and yet no record or marker of that burial exists.”

On the Spogens’ property, the gravestones of Felix and Henry Koontz are the only markers still standing. Lorie Spogen said they have found several bases with no headstones as well as partial pieces of headstones scattered near the remaining memorials. After logging the area surrounding it, Lorie Spogen said they also began to have a better understanding of what the historic cemetery might have originally looked like.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “There’s a whole row of old oak trees around it and once you see that, it kind of leads you to believe that this was kind of an important place to somebody.”

The Spogens plan to build a fence around the cemetery area to delineate it from the rest of the property and to mark the space for maintenance. There are believed to be a total of eight burials on the property, but the Spogens have no idea if they will ever find any more of the missing headstones. Spogen said there is no record of if and how the cemetery was protected the last time the property was logged.

Spogen said she has also considered allowing limited public access to the cemetery because she understands the importance of the people interred there to the history of Lewis County. But the graves are not located next to the road, where the public could drive by and view them while remaining off their private property. She worries that opening the property to the general public could lead to vandalism or misuse of the area. She said she instead has thought it might be more appropriate to welcome visitors as part of a special event, but said she has not made up her mind how or when that could happen.

For now, she said her family has great reverence for those whose final resting places are in their care. As previously planned, the Spogens will be replanting the trees they logged from the property, so eventually the gravestones will again lay among a lush forest. She noted that the next crop of trees on the property will not be logged for another 50 years and she vows the next people on the property will not have to go looking for the historical graves but will instead know exactly where they are.

“They’ll still be here in another 50 years, only who knows what that area will look like then. They might be in the middle of town,” Spogen said, noting many new developments in the nearby Mary’s Corner area. “When you go there, you feel weight of how long that place has been there. It is kind of cool. We have a responsibility of keeping it up and I feel there’s a responsibility to protect it, too.”

More Information

For more information or to access the USGenWeb project, go to Wagenweb.org. More information about the Lewis County Genealogical Society is available at WALCGS.org.