

Sunday, August 15, 1999

IT'S 2007.
AND YOU'RE STILL
COVERED FOR
ANOTHER YEAR.USA
TODAY

BoilerStation

In The News

Marketplace

CareerPath

Growth sparring with respect for the dead

Legislature listening to cemetery preservationists

By Jeff Parrott, Journal and Courier

There's much to admire about Richard and Ellen Fisher's well-kept Tippecanoe County home, with its massive old trees, expansive lawn and garden, circular driveway with a basketball goal and attractive brick ranch overlooking the Wildcat Creek.

So much, apparently, that Richard Fisher doesn't mind the estimated 125 people who are buried underneath.

He said he knew when he bought the property in 1978 that Cedar Bluff Cemetery existed there, but by then its tombstones had long disappeared. Its boundaries hadn't. They were clearly described in the property deed, but Fisher said he didn't think twice about his purchase.

"It doesn't bother me," he said. "We can't dig or do anything like that out there. We maintain it so ... I keep it mowed and cleaned up."

Such indifference regarding cemeteries is commonplace in Indiana, where progress has long been equated with development -- of new housing subdivisions, new strip malls, new roads, new farm fields.

But as Indiana's suburban and rural areas continue giving way to new development and growth, impassioned advocates for preserving cemeteries -- especially those where pioneers lie -- are giving the dead a new voice. It's a voice that's coming from historical associations, grassroots groups and individuals, and it's getting too loud for lawmakers in Indianapolis to ignore.

This year, for the first time ever, 10 bills dealing with cemetery preservation were introduced in the General Assembly. One that tightens the penalties that can be imposed against those who disturb or deface cemetery monuments passed and became law July 1.

Perhaps most significantly, the new law removes an exemption that has allowed farmers to legally destroy all visible signs of a cemetery if they deemed it necessary to their business.

"It's a pretty strong law -- maybe a little stronger than people expected," said Criss Helmkamp, a Purdue University anthropology assistant professor who heads the school's Cultural Resource Management Programs. "I think legislators are recognizing how widespread the concern is."

'A moral and ethical issue'

Helmkamp predicted awareness of the issue will only grow as people continue to move outside city limits.

Historically, most Hoosiers have assumed that farmers and developers in rural areas have shown the dead the respect they deserve. But in many places, people are seeing that cemetery desecration is not



such a "rare and foreign occurrence," Helmkamp said.

"There's a very alarming frequency at which these things are happening," he said. "We like to live in the same places people (in the 1800s) liked to live and bury their dead, and we're running into them more and more. It's really a moral and ethical issue. From our perspective, it's a matter of public education -- making them aware this is happening and informing them of what the laws are."

As a leading expert in bio-archaeology, the study of the remains of living things, Helmkamp is often sought when development stumbles upon old cemeteries.

He was contacted in December when a water company's excavation crews, moving ground for the construction of a retention pond in Shelby County, suddenly realized their bulldozers were crushing human bones and casket parts. The cemetery's headstones had reportedly been cleared away in the 1930s by a farmer, and the ground had been farmed ever since.

At the state's request, Helmkamp said he and his students gathered and catalogued all the bones they could find, identifying the remains of at least 20 people believed to have been buried from the 1830s to the 1880s.

The remains now sit in boxes on a shelf in Helmkamp's campus lab, awaiting the cemetery's planned restoration. Where possible, they will be reburied in their original plots, but many will have to be lumped together in a common grave. The ground will be restored to its original contour and marked with a monument to the cemetery.

Helmkamp said a group of Shelbyville residents he later addressed were angered by what had happened to some of their community's early settlers.

"They were appalled there was no respect for them. They were just in the way."

Little done, so far

Marlene Mattox-Brown, a technician at the Tippecanoe Area Plan Commission who also happens to be a professional genealogist, has become the area's unofficial cemetery expert.

Her boss, James Hawley, had her survey all cemeteries in the county in 1988 after Lafayette Police Department officer Quentin Robinson reported finding the grave of his great-great grandmother, Tippecanoe County pioneer Mary Lucas, buried underneath the Tippe-Canunck Estates subdivision.

Mattox-Brown is frustrated that 10 years later, the county has done little to improve the condition of what pioneers believed would be their final resting places. But if you really want to get her blood boiling, ask her about the Cedar Bluff Cemetery.

"Cedar Bluff is probably my pet peeve of all of them," she said. "This one is one that was verified, had a deed record on it, it was on the county plat books, and it still got destroyed."

At one time it was a grist mill, a meeting house and a cemetery. The meeting house burned down after the Civil War and the grist mill went out of business at the turn of the century. Sometime in the mid-1950s, a fact confirmed by Fisher, someone bulldozed the tombstones into the Wildcat Creek and built a house on it.

Robert W. Vermilya, who sold the property to the Fishers in 1978, bought it in 1953 from F. Earl Staley. County records indicate the cemetery, established in 1830, was on the east side of County Road 675 East, just south of County Road 50 South, which is about a half-mile south of Indiana 26. A deed filed July 23, 1953, conveyed from Staley to Vermilya, stipulates that a specific area must be forever preserved as a cemetery.

Fisher said he has seen two surveys of his property, only one of which indicates his house stands over the cemetery's boundaries. But according to the cemetery deed, the graveyard's perimeter overlaps that

of Fisher's house and covers much of its front lawn.

Mattox-Brown isn't the first person to mourn Cedar Bluff Cemetery's disappearance, which reportedly began gradually, decades before the stones were ever cleared away for the home's construction.

In his book, *Grist Mills of Tippecanoe County, Indiana*, late historian William Reser writes, "This burial ground is now (1927) practically abandoned, being in an unkempt condition with the fences gone or in ruins and the grave markers, for the most part, destroyed or scattered here and there.

"Even some of the graves that were located near the edge of the cliff have been undermined, causing their contents to go rattling down the hillside."

[Back To IN THE NEWS](#)

Copyright © 1999, Federated Publications Inc. A Gannett Site.

[Concerns? Comments? Questions?](#)