

## DEATH & DOWSING RODS

Cemetery supervisor has new outlook on death and our customs of burial

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Two-and-a-half years ago, Rick Garrison left his job as a dump-truck driver to take on a superintendent position at Cookeville City Cemetery. He'd always enjoyed landscaping work, so he was looking forward to hopping on a riding mower and touching up the sprawling cemetery grounds. He didn't anticipate that the job would thrust him headlong into the lore and oddities of the death business.

"Most people don't know why everybody buried in Putnam County have their feet pointed toward the east," he said, giving one example of his newly acquired knowledge. "It's because in the South they believe the Lord is gonna come from the east, and they want to be ready."

The messier aspects of the job have also changed his perspective on his own burial.

"I used to think I wanted a coffin burial," he said. "But after some of the things I've seen here, digging up old coffins full of mud and water, I want to be cremated."

(Coffins buried by themselves will often cave in during winter; a cement vault -- an additional expense -- should prevent that.)

City Cemetery has somewhere around 9,000 headstones. Garrison said that the cemetery has an additional 300-or-so unmarked graves, dating from the early part of the century, when people would just drive by, bury a loved one, and drive off. He said that his "worst fear" is that grave diggers will punch into one of these old graves one day. To hedge against that possibility, cemetery staff use Dowsing Rods, two metal rods coated with wax that are said to cross and uncross when they pass over an area where the earth has been disturbed.

"When we use the rods, people will look at us like we're witches or something," he said.

Garrison said that one of the most harrowing parts of his job is dealing with people who come in with deeds dating back to the 1800s. A family might have purchased a grave plot in, say, 1890, for \$20. The deed has been passed down through the generations, and finally in the year 2006 a relative of the original buyer shows up at Garrison's office to make a claim on the plot.

"An old deed might say 15 steps from the north of the hickory tree, but there's no hickory tree there anymore," Garrison said.

Garrison has been surprised to learn how people's finickiness can extend even beyond this life. Some people who come in as "pre-need" buyers - making arrangements for their own funeral - are determined to have their final resting place under a shade tree; others want to be on top of a hill.

"We'll show them the spots we're selling in and get them as close as we can to the area they want," he said. "A lot of them don't want to be beside a busy road. Everybody has their own thoughts about what's proper and what's not."

He said that working in the cemetery for so long has gradually inured him to the creepy aspect of death and its rituals.

"At first I had a scared feeling being here," he said. "But when you're mowing every day, walking over the graves, you start not to think about it."

He watches the high-school and college kids who work at the cemetery seasonally go through the same process of desensitization that he went through.

"At first they tiptoe in the cemetery. They're real quiet, it freaks them out. But after a month, they totally change."

The cemetery averages 100 burials a year. There isn't a "busy season"; the deaths don't seem to conform to any pattern. Garrison said they can go three weeks without anything, then do five burials in a single week. He said that dealing with all those people has given him the opportunity to witness every possible attitude toward death.

"Everybody believes something different," he said. "Some people think when you're dead you're gone. One man comes here all the time with a sandwich to eat lunch with his deceased wife. Some people can't let go and some people accept it. I believe that once you're buried out there, your soul is somewhere else. All we got is metal and rock out there."

*Published March 14, 2006 11:24 AM CST : Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN*

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Herald-Citizen Photo/Camille Fliess:

Cookeville City Cemetery Superintendent Rick Garrison directs the digging of a grave Monday. Garrison is not just a landscaper; he has become an expert in the lore and oddities of the cemetery business.

