

RETIREE RACES AGAINST TIME TO SAVE GRAVE HOUSES

By Morgan Simmons

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — John Waggoner Jr. is a cemetery hunter. He drives a Ford Explorer with two GPS instruments on board, and the vehicle's four-wheel drive comes in handy in the rain and snow.

A retired wholesale gas distributor, Waggoner lives in Carthage. Ten years ago, he started locating old cemeteries around his home, often as a favor to the surviving family members. So far, he has found 630



obscure burial grounds in Smith County, most of them on farms, where families typically buried their dead prior to World War II.

Lately, Waggoner has focused his efforts on grave houses. He's located just more than 100 of the structures in seven states throughout the South. Some of the grave houses are built of logs, while others resemble miniature farmhouses. Virtually all the grave houses that Waggoner has located were built in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and, in many cases, there's not much left.

Waggoner has found more grave houses in the hills of Appalachia than anywhere else. Recently, he and his wife, Retta, drove to Hancock County to visit a grave house just a few miles from the Tennessee-Virginia line that they had learned about on the Internet.

The cemetery was located beneath some trees on a hillside on the outskirts of a cattle farm. A number of the head stones were anonymous, the epitaphs having worn away over time. A disproportionate number of the death date inscriptions read 1918, the year the influenza epidemic killed 50 million people worldwide and afflicted 25 percent of the U.S. population.

The grave house was constructed of overlapping milled lumber and painted white. It had a door in the front, a window in the back and a tin roof. There was a dirt floor, and the walls and ceiling were made of 2-inch tongue-and-groove wooden slats.

It covered a white marble head stone shaped like an obelisk. The epitaph read: "Flossie Akers, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Vig Minter. Born 1893, died 1915. Sheltered and Safe from Sorrow."

"These structures are disappearing fast," Waggoner said. "That's why I'm trying to record as many as I can."

The nearest house belonged to 74-year-old Laura Surber, whose relatives -- including her husband -- are buried in the cemetery. Surber said there were two other grave houses in the cemetery until 1974 when a tornado destroyed them both. She said that when she was a little girl, the families would decorate the grave houses with photographs, coal lamps, and tables set with the last dinner plate used by the deceased.

"We used to walk by the cemetery on the way to the grocery store," Surber said. "I remember one evening it came a big thunderstorm, and we went inside one of the grave houses. Mom read to us from a Bible that was in there."

While there are various theories regarding the origin of grave houses, most agree their main purpose was to protect the burial ground from the elements, or from the hooves of livestock.

While some grave houses were built of brick and stone, most were constructed of untreated lumber. On several occasions, Waggoner has read about a grave house only to visit the cemetery and find nothing left but a stone foundation and some rotting wood.

Donald Ball is a retired archaeologist for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who has written several articles on grave houses in Tennessee. According to Ball, the general heyday for grave houses was from after the Civil War to World War I.

"A lot of people think a grave house is a miniature mausoleum. It is not," Ball said. "It is not a crypt either, because that would be below ground. They are in that netherworld in between."

Ball believes grave houses may be the upland South's version of the box and table tombs used in England in the early 1700s. The earliest reference to a grave house he has found dates to the 1830s in Middle Tennessee, which leads him to believe that the tradition was brought over by settlers heading west from the eastern U.S.

Ball said he knows of modern grave houses made of sheet metal and angle iron.

"I think it's a dying practice, but I wouldn't say it's dead," Ball said. "A sealed coffin within a poured concrete vault is impervious to the elements, so in contemporary society, the notion of a grave house keeping rain off the deceased is purely a matter of sentiment."

While at that first cemetery, Waggoner learned of another grave house located just a few miles away in Claiborne County. A dirt road led to the home of 85-year-old Onalee Smith. Located on a hillside above the house was the family cemetery, which contained a 6-by-4-foot wood grave house resting on a poured concrete foundation.

Smith said the grave house was there when she and her husband got married and moved into the house 64 years ago.

Bouquets of plastic flowers covered the dirt floor. The grave stone inside read: "Walter, son of Arch and Ivory Smith. Born 1910, died 1923. Walter came to raise our hearts to Heaven. He goes to call us there."

Waggoner took photographs of the grave house and used his GPS to map the cemetery's location. He had left that morning hoping to add one grave house to his list and ended up adding two.

"Just when I think I'll never get another day like this, they always come around," he said.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>