

'Decorations' Old Tradition  
by Cameron Judd  
Herald – Citizen  
79<sup>th</sup> Year – No. 127  
Cookeville, Tennessee  
Sunday, May 31, 1981



Last Sunday they gathered at Putnam County's Smellage Cemetery and carried on a tradition that is now 81–years–old and going strong – the annual decoration.

Decorations are one of the surviving traditions of the Upper Cumberland's early days, dating from before scientific undertaking techniques and machine-dug

graves, back in the days when bodies had to be buried quickly, sometimes before the funeral, and when mantelpiece shrines to departed loved ones were not uncommon.

Decorations are basically services of remembrance, during which families gather to honor the memory of their deceased friends and relatives. Since the placement of flowers on the graves is the primary way this is done, the term "decoration" came to be used.

Memorial Day weekend is of course the logical time for memorials, thus many decorations have traditionally fallen in that time period.

At the end of the Civil War an early Upper Cumberland resident with the colorful name of Jephthah Smellage donated 1.3 acres for public burial. In early 1865, a Henley girl baby became the first person buried there. The girl was Margaret Elizabeth Henley.

In March of the same year, (*26 March 1865*), the donor of the land himself died and was buried, soon to be followed by his wife, Eleanor. The couple was, incidentally, the grandparents of John Barlow Smellage, current Boma resident.

In 1900 the annual Smellage decoration began, with the fourth Sunday in May becoming the scheduled date for the event. In those first days, long before superhighways shortened distances and florists offered convenient plastic flowers, Upper Cumberland residents would pick fresh flowers from their yards

and gardens and ride by train or wagon to the cemetery to place a fast-fading tribute to their loved ones on the graves.

Before long, some began making longer lasting paraffin-coated “flowers” from colored paper on hatpin and broom-straw stems. Today, commercially-made artificial flowers are most often used.

The cemetery is not far from the railroad tracks that connect Baxter and Boma, and in the early days the Tennessee Central Railroad used to put on an extra coach to haul the crowds of people from outlying areas such as Buffalo Valley on to a point near the cemetery.

Loaded with baskets of chicken, ham, pies, cakes and other foods that housewives had cooked in wood stoves, groups of families would trudge from the railroad to the cemetery, or perhaps ride in wagons or buggies, until they reached it.

Finding shade trees, families would spread a table cloth in some cool, grassy spot and bring out the food. Later, a cold drink from the spring on the nearby property of George Kinnaird quenched their thirsts.

The event was more than a chance to honor those already gone...it was a reunion for those still living, who perhaps lived not many miles apart but who saw each other infrequently because of the slow transportation of the day.

Dressed in their “Sunday finest,” those present would mingle, one hand gripping a cold drumstick, the other shaking the hand of a friend who had come home from Nashville, or even Detroit or Dayton, just to be at the decoration.

The cemetery’s “tabernacle” (still standing) would draw the crowds in the afternoon as ministers like Rev. Lonzo Harris, Rev. J.R. Clayton or Rev. J.F. Neville preached the gospel in that old-fashioned style perfected in woodframe churches and campground revivals.

There was music, too, led by men like Grover Carr and Arie Nabors. The songs were the old standards, the kind people knew by heart from decorations gone by.

In 1911 more land was purchased by the cemetery trustees from George Kinnaird. Divided into plots, which sold for a dollar each, the new three-quarter acres of land conveniently expanded the cemetery.

Those early trustees were James W. Anderson, J.Y. Shanks and Alvin L. Smellage...and all three are today buried in the cemetery they supervised.

The annual decorations took on a patriotic touch in the years following the world wars, with members of the VFW placing flags on veteran’s graves.

The cemetery has been expanded further through the years, and today has about 1,200 graves, some containing the rough hand-made coffins of earlier days, others with modern vaults and marble tombstones.

Today's trustees are Hara Lea Anderson, Fred Anderson, Julius Jared, Solon Lowe, Fred Shanks and John Barlow Smellage.

Upkeep is provided today largely through the work of Ted Huddleston, and is funded through a special fund overseen by Mrs. Erma Shanks Denney. Mrs. Vinnie Gentry is the secretary-treasurer of the annual Decoration Day fund.

*\*Note: The information used in the above article came from a history of the Smellage Cemetery compiled by Reba Smellage of Oak Ridge and read by her at the 1980 Decoration Day.*



Founder of Smellage Cemetery  
 Jephthah Smellage  
 b. 11 August 18 - d. 26 March 1865, TN  
 md Eleanor, their son Alvin Smellage married Catherine  
 Maxwell, d/o Gordon C. Maxwell  
 l & Josephine Shanks. Their son was John Barlow Smellage  
 who married Oda Anderson  
 \*See Chapter 2 for complete family listing.



Memorial to Erma Shanks Denney  
 Almost fifteen years ago Erma Shanks Denney had an idea to establish a fund that would insure the care of the Smellage Cemetery long after she and her contemporaries were gone, having grown up in this community. She knew and loved many of those person buried in this cemetery and that is what urged her on in her efforts to establish a trust fund to provide for perpetual care although she had not lived in the community for many years her heart longed to return, on May 17, 1991 that wish was fulfilled when she came home to rest beside her parents she would be the first to tell you that the need for additional donations will be needed for the perpetual care fund after her death.

Erma Shanks Denney  
 was married to William Mervin Denney. Their son was George Goree Denney who married Lydia Cheek. George Goree Denney was the son of Martha Denney. Martha Denney was the daughter of Charles W. Denney & Martha Patricia Everett. Charles W. Denney was the son of John B. Denney & Sarah "Sally" Winfree

**Ota Theresa Anderson** – b. 14 August 1904 – d. 21 October 1947, TN  
d/o **William Thomas Anderson & Nota “Notie” Florence Kinnard**  
md 19 September 1924, **John Barlow Smellage** -

b. 21 August 1900 – d. 16 June 1989

Both Buried: + Smellage Cemetery, Boma, Putnam Co., TN

‘All things we love and cherish, like ourselves must fade and perish.’

**John Barlow Smellage** was the s/o **Alvin Smellage** –

b. 22 January 1856 – d. 7 September 1927 – who was the

**s/o Jephthah Smellage** – b. 11 August 18 - d. 26 March 1865, TN &

& his wife **Eleanor** – Both Buried Smellage Cemetery, Boma, TN

**Jephthah Smellage was the founder of Smellage Cemetery, Boma, TN**

**Alvin Smellage** – b. 22 January 1856 – d. 7 September 1927 -

md **Catherine Hughes Maxwell** – b. 10 December 1860 – d. 10 July 1926

Both Buried: Smellage Cemetery, Boma, Putnam Co., TN

**d/o Gordon C. Maxwell** - b. 23 February 1825 – d. 5 May 1886 &

Josephine Shanks – b. 28 July 1824 – d. 23 May 1906 -

Both Buried: Gordon Maxwell Family Graveyard, Maddux Hollow,

on the Blanchard Duke farm now owned by Jerry Tucker, Putnam Co., TN.

\*See William Simon Shanks Family.

\*See Chapter 2: [ajlambert.com](http://ajlambert.com)

US. Census Putnam Co., TN Civil Dist. 17

Dwl: 22 Family: 32

**John Smellage** Head M W January 1856 44 Married (23 yrs. md) Farmer TN TN TN

**Catherine Smellage** Wife F W December 1861 38 Married (23 yrs. md) (4 children born, 4 children living) TN TN TN

**Cordelia Smellage** Dau F W September 1881 18 Single TN TN TN

**Martelia Smellage** Dau F W August 1890 9 Single TN TN TN

**Ida Frances Smellage** Dau F W November 1892 7 Single TN TN TN

**William Smellage** Son M W May 1896 4 Single TN TN TN

**Source:** Putnam County Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

**SMELLAGE, CORDELIA:** This community was shocked Saturday morning by the death of Miss Cordelia Smellage. She has many friends that will be grieved to learn of her death. She was buried at the Smellage graveyard Sunday. The bereaved family have our sympathy. [Date 2/8/1905, Vol. III, No. 1, Page 4]

**Cordelia M. Smellage** – b. 20 April 1881 – d. 4 February 1905

Buried: Smellage Cemetery, Boma, Putnam Co., TN

**Ida F. Smellage** – b. 27 November 1892 – d. 1 December 1919

Buried: Smellage Cemetery, Boma, Putnam Co., TN

**Willie Cloyd Smellage** – b. 24 May 1896 – d. 5 May 1925 – Pvt. 1<sup>st</sup> Base Hosp \_#72

<http://www.ajlambert.com>

Decorations on Graves  
Fresh Flowers - Silk & Plastic Flowers  
Memorial Flags and Ribbons  
Grave Blankets - Wreaths & Candle Lanterns



Decorations and Memorials – In Memory of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center, NY Attack – Decorations left at the grave of Jim Morrison in Paris



National Memorial, Oklahoma City, OK – Grave of President John Fitzgerald, Washington D. C. , flame memorial – Decorations left at the graves of people's pets in Mt. Clemens, MI.

