

MAN STUMBLES UPON FAMILY TREE

Wilford Freeman (Skip) Lee Jr., left, and his distant cousin, Bill Lee, inspect the condition of the newly restored Hop T. Lee cemetery on Martin's Creek Road. The cemetery will be the sight of a decoration service at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 10. For more information, call Lee at 423-376-5368.



* H-C Photo: Ty Kernea

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Lee cemetery on Martin's Creek Road. The cemetery will be the sight of a decoration service at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 10. For more information, call Lee at 423-376-5368. * H-C Photo: Ty Kernea

A Kingston man literally stumbled over part of his family tree here in Cookeville last October. And ever since then, Wilford Freeman (Skip) Lee Jr. has worked to restore the old, overgrown family cemetery many of his relatives had almost forgotten about. Lee's wife discovered the cemetery, known for its most prosperous resident, Hop T. Lee, he said, when the couple brought Lee's father to Putnam County to visit the places familiar to him from childhood. "My father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and he wanted to visit the places he knew as a child while he still had a fairly good memory of them," Lee said. After the family visited a couple of old homesteads, Lee's father said he remembered a house on Martin's Creek Road that was accessible only by crossing over a bridge. The family learned the location of the old house from a nearby relative, Dona Mae Lee, and drove out to see it. "We found out that the original house, which was probably built in the early to middle 1800s, burned in 1946, but it had been rebuilt just behind where the original had stood," Lee said.

John Milton Lee, who was murdered during the Civil War for not revealing where his money was hidden, built the original house.

The house now standing at that location, however, had long been abandoned and was in disrepair.

"There were weeds and trees growing up all around the house," Lee said. "While we were all out wading through those weeds, my wife just happened to stumble over a headstone. Before then, we had no idea that a cemetery was even there."

After his wife stumbled over the overgrown cemetery, however, Lee became curious about how many people were buried there and who they all were, so he decided to get the cemetery back in working order, he said.

"I had no idea that there would be so many of my Lee relatives buried in that cemetery," he said.

After all the weeds and intruding trees were removed from the plot, and after a grave stone was purchased for his great grandmother who'd never had one, Lee counted a total of 21 marked graves.

The oldest known grave in the cemetery belongs to John Milton Lee, who was killed in 1863, Lee said, and the most recent grave dates back to 1984.

"The largest grave marker belongs to Hop T. Lee, the most affluent occupant in the cemetery, who was a whiskey maker and had a retail outlet in Nashville," he said.

Two graves, however, were marked simply with blank stones.

"I suspect they may be the graves of a couple of family slaves who were buried there," Lee said.

And Lee suspects that there may be other graves at the cemetery that are unmarked altogether, he said.

"While my son and I were cutting out the trees that had grown up in the cemetery, we discovered that two small markers of infant graves had been completely swallowed up by the trunks of some of those trees," he said.

When he began restoring the cemetery, Lee also gained an appreciation of genealogy, he said.

"I had to learn how to use the census data to trace back and find out how I was even related to some of the people buried at the cemetery," Lee said. "I began going to the Upper Cumberland Genealogical Association meetings here on Tuesdays, and George Johnson, Maureen Patton and other association members really helped me out."

Lee said he realized as he researched his genealogy that he felt it was important to document his lineage and preserve the family cemetery for the benefit of future generations.

"So many private family cemeteries are destroyed because the landowner finds it inconvenient," Lee said. "After all, the landowner would have much more use for a pasture to graze his cows than for a cemetery. So all that information is often lost to future generations for the sake of a pretty pasture or yard."

That's what he hoped to prevent by restoring the Hop T. Lee cemetery, he said.

"The Lee family has been wonderful about donating money for the restoration. We've really done a lot at the cemetery," Lee said. "But my ultimate goal for the cemetery's

maintenance is to put a fence around it, and I still don't have enough funds for that just now."

With much of that restoration now complete, however, the Lee family is preparing for its first decoration of the Hop T. Lee Cemetery at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 10.

All Lee friends and family are welcome, Lee said.

For more information about the cemetery, call Skip Lee at 423-376-5368.

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