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History and Hobby Blended

By Nancy Bacchus | Photos by Shelley Montgomery



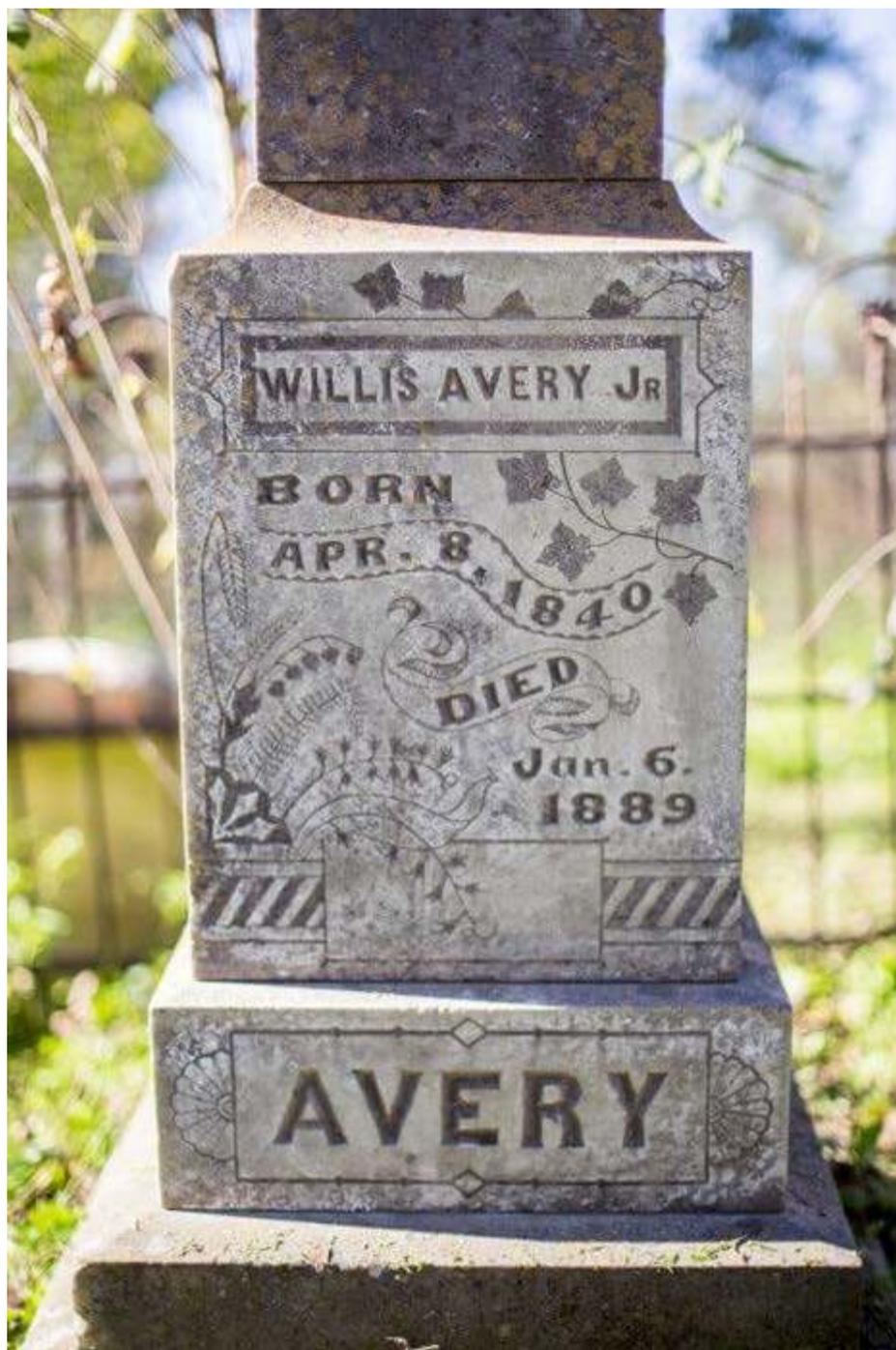
John Christeson has a mission: locating and documenting county gravesites



Hobbies are funny things. They demand mental and physical energies, take time and money, expand over time or simply lie in the dust of memory, and offer unique insights into their practitioners. Some hobbies are strictly selfish. John Christeson, a self-described “graveyard enthusiast,” has a hobby that serves Williamson County history and descendants of local residents as well as his own interests. It’s hard work, even on perfect days. But he’s followed his passion for fourteen years.

John’s first local project, photographing Georgetown’s public cemeteries, dovetailed with major digital advances. He began by photographing all (at that time) 5,500 headstones in the International Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery (IOOF). Earlier, film cameras limited output; 36 frames per roll had to be developed, printed, and scanned into a computer, a process both expensive and time-consuming. Now, John marvels at the ever-expanding memory of digital cameras. Often, he takes nearly 700 photos in a day, downloads them at home, enhance the images as needed for clarity, and then uploads them to findagrave.com, a process requiring about three days.





John explains that cemeteries fall into categories of public or private, active or retired. For a while, his Williamson County work focused on public cemeteries that are generally well-maintained. He photographed the county's largest cemetery in Taylor, which contains more than 12,000 graves. He profiled very old marked burials in Old Georgetown Cemetery on a bluff just southwest of Blue Hole. John spotted one public site, Citizens Memorial Cemetery, from a tour bus window when land across from Wolf Ranch was being cleared for development.

Some public sites reflect the years of segregation. Some show tragic patterns left by diphtheria epidemics or the Jarrell tornado in 1997. Some burial areas changed radically with events like building the Granger Lake dam. The U.S. Corps of Engineers transferred gravesites from seven

small cemeteries to one combined area before filling the lake, placing dividers to show the original cemetery names. John took pictures of many, many markers in public cemeteries so that genealogists around the country can trace their Wilco roots with a quick click at findagrave.com. He says, “Relatives deserve the information,” and he shares freely.

Although all the photography work provides a valuable database for public gravesites, John felt he could do more to locate and preserve undocumented graves that lie beyond public view on private land. His *real* adventures began, across county backroads, along water courses, through thickets and cacti, over ranches and farms.



John learns of gravesites off the beaten path through his friend Wayne Ware, cemetery chairman for the Williamson County Historical Commission (WCHC). Other times, rural residents contact the men to ask if either has heard about “that grave on so-and-so’s land.” John learned of some through the late Ralph Dixon Love, historian and Georgetown Library volunteer. Sometimes, John strikes up conversations in country stores or cafes with folks who share tips. John says that “part of the adventure is asking around.” He and Wayne then rely on GPS technology and a large county map that’s rarely far from John’s reach.

These far-flung gravesites aren’t necessarily lost or forgotten to memory, but they are not maintained. Even low fences to deter grazing cattle or other animals have often tumbled down in disrepair. Fallen limbs, stubborn hackberry growth, grapevines, nettles, waist-high weeds,

and tall prairie grass obscure many sites. Snakes pose a definite threat. Old wooden markers have rotted away, and porous limestone headstones lie broken by nature's forces. There may be one grave or several, hundreds of yards behind a locked gate, on land no longer owned by anyone connected to those buried there. It's often a challenge for John to find the right person who can grant permission and access for his projects. Occasionally, the current owners say no.



When John receives permission to work a site, he's ready to go, weather permitting, and he definitely needs more than a camera. The trunk of his car stays loaded: Weed-eaters. Chain saws. Shovels. Rakes. Blowers. He carries pumice-like "scrubbers" to clean dirt and scale from headstones and epoxy to repair damages. John uses chalk over-rubs to help discern weatherworn lettering. Only after considerable hard work does the camera finally document lives long gone.

John gives full credit to his band of helpers. Besides Wayne Ware, members of his Sun City bowling leagues have helped over the years, as have various Boy Scouts fulfilling requirements toward Eagle Scout rank. Bowling buddies Glen Smiley and Lee Forster have been especially faithful in traveling over hill and dale with John, although Lee's health now limits his participation. John says that using tools, lifting heavy objects, bending, and just being outdoors keeps him physically fit. Even so, he would welcome new recruits for future work.

Graves give rise to stories (or maybe legends). A woman driving by in a wagon asked a kind-

hearted farmer if she could bury her husband on the farmer's land. Later, a neighbor's child was buried there as well. Elsewhere, a family of three was buried near Mankin's Crossing on Highway 29 because the wife once worked for the property owner. A "grave douser," using a divining rod, purported to locate several other graves in the same vicinity.



While John finds the stories interesting, his restoration work for family cemeteries is more important to him. He mentions sites like Cooke cemetery in Weir, Whitley-Lumford and Magee off Highway 29, and Hargis cemetery near Taylor. He loves hearing from people, far from Williamson County, who discover where grandparents and great-grandparents are buried through his posts to findagrave.com. John says, "It makes you feel good to have done

something memorable.”

Long before moving to Sun City in 2002, John became interested in history of his native Barron County, Wisconsin. He researched microfilm of old newspapers and obituaries, plus military service data in the National Archives, to glean information about Civil War veterans from Barron County. Then, he estimates, he wrote about 650 profiles for the local library. Today, a hefty two-volume set of *The History of Barron County, WI* sits within easy reach of John’s desk. More personal connections to the past came from letters and journals from his grandmother’s first cousin, a captain in the 106th New York Infantry Regiment, honing John’s interest further.

Somewhere along the way, John Christeson’s hobby became his work and legacy. Quiet places and nearly-forgotten names see the light of day once more. Genealogists and county historians benefit. His dedication fosters interesting and valuable connections, locally and well beyond Williamson County.

Current count: John has taken 139,911 cemetery photos and posted 65,384 memorials to findagrave.com!



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