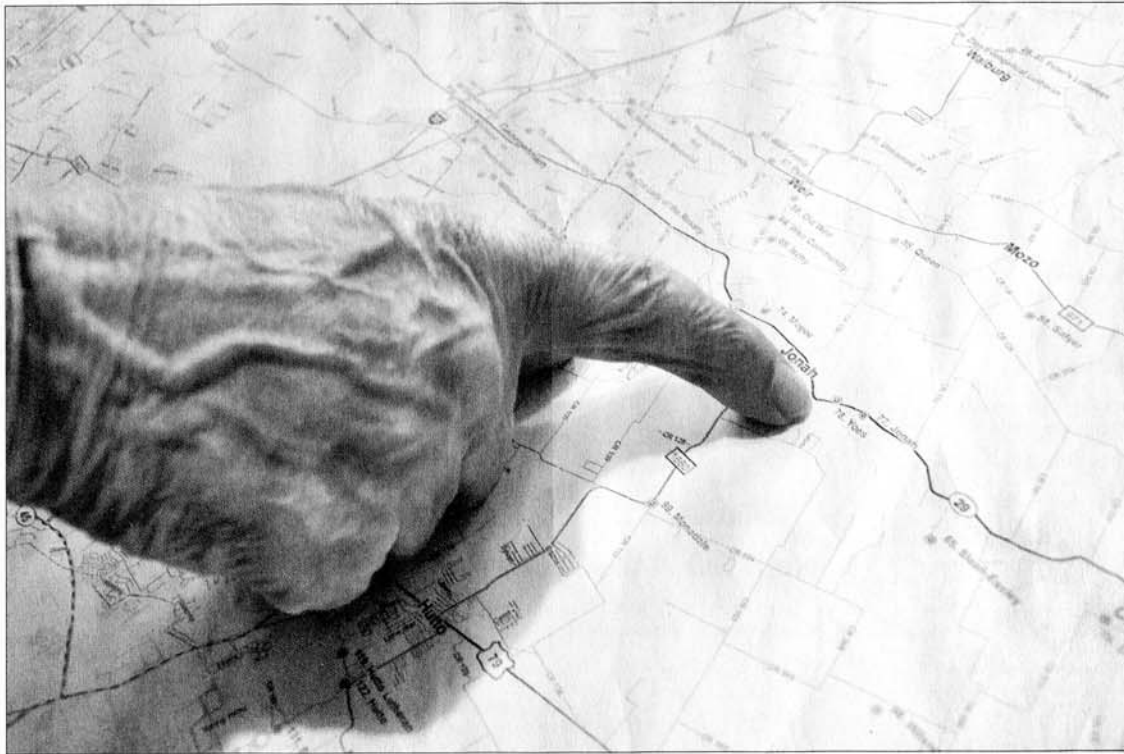


Story by SCOTT FRANZ

TENDING GOD'S ACRES

COUNTY HISTORY



Photos by Scott Franz

Sun City resident John Christeson has been helping the Williamson County Historical Commission locate abandoned cemeteries. The search has been his retirement hobby for nine years.



Mr. Christeson has traveled the county extensively looking for graveyards like the Cooke Cemetery near Weir.

Sun Citian on mission of mercy for forgotten graveyards

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For decades, the rusty iron gates that surround the Cooke family cemetery just outside of Weir were nearly unreachable, and hardly remembered. Overgrown Hackberry trees fused with the metal bars of the cemetery's modest entrance, and rattlesnakes once dug stubbornly into the surrounding woods, effectively sheltering the graveyard's seven headstones that date back to the 1800s from visitors. Today, however the site that marks the union of acres of rich, fertile soil and a wild Oak forest is a little more welcoming. "I made as much noise as I could when I got there to scare the snakes away," Sun City resident John

Turn to GRAVEYARDS, Page 8B

GRAVEYARDS

A search for county's 'movers and shakers'

Continued from Page 1B

Christeson said as he described his visit to the remote site last year.

Mr. Christeson, who calls himself a gravestone enthusiast, has spent the last nine years traveling to the most rugged corners of Williamson County to document and preserve historical cemeteries that have long been abandoned.

"I consider them abandoned, but that doesn't mean people don't know where they are," he said. "They just haven't made an attempt to clean them up."

Most of the cemeteries he travels to are on private property, and their memorials had been claimed by the untamed wilderness that surrounds them. The sites range in scope from a subtle plot under a large, isolated oak tree to larger, fenced cemeteries in open fields. Because of their age, the land the graves reside on has passed through several owners, most of whom have no connection to the graves' inhabitants. Some of them are difficult to find.

"You can't find some of the cemeteries until you almost get on your hands and knees because they've been overtaken by trees and brush," Mr. Christeson said. "Others you can't see until you nearly trip over a headstone walking

through tall grass."

Like the Cooke cemetery, the plots he searches for are mainly single-family cemeteries, some with just a single limestone memorial. Others in the county that were marked with wooden crosses may be impossible to find because their memorials have decomposed after a century of exposure. But with the help of his bowling league, and other community members, Mr. Christeson is dedicated to preserving the sites.

He and his son Eric arrived at the Cooke cemetery in November with a chainsaw and shears, and began methodically slaying the Hackberry trees that had threatened the limestone memorials for years. With three feet of brush surrounding the site now cleared, the plot is now visible from the surrounding farmland.

"We gave it some room to breathe again," Mr. Christeson said.

Uncommon hobby

Long before an oversized map showing hundreds of cemetery sites in Williamson and its surrounding counties became a fixture on his dining room table, Mr. Christeson was passionate about the history of the places he has called home. When he lived in Barron County Wisconsin, he searched through the pension and service records of local Civil War veterans listed in the national archives, and wrote profiles of them to submit to a local library.

When he moved to Georgetown in 2003, Mr. Christeson

began profiling the city's public cemeteries, and he started by photographing the International Order of Odd Fellow's cemetery's 5,500 headstones.

It wasn't until a relative told him about findagrave.com, a website that allows users to post photos of gravesites so that they can be used to solidify genealogical records, that Mr. Christeson hit the county roads to find undocumented cemeteries.

The simple drive to preserve history has now become his retirement hobby.

"You get tired of doing jigsaw puzzles after a while," he said. "I like to think I'm preserving small bits of Texas history by finding these sites and photographing them. It keeps me out of the house and it keeps me active."

In muggy summer mornings, and cold winter afternoons, Mr. Christeson isn't afraid to treat his KIA sedan like an Army Jeep and venture off the road to find a gravesite. An average of three days a week, he will search for the historical graveyards, what he calls the final resting places of the county's "movers and shakers."

"The people in these cemeteries were instrumental in the politics of this county," he said. "I've learned a lot by reading their obituaries."

Mr. Christeson has been working with Wayne Ware with the Williamson County Historical Commission to find the cemeteries and document them online.

"We've found quite a number of obscure grave sites in

the last couple of years, probably about 35 total," Mr. Ware said. "But we're on the lookout for more. We need to identify them so the state doesn't build a road on them accidentally."

Mr. Ware said it's a race against time as gravestones slowly disintegrate, or are the victims of vandalism or theft.

Thrill of the Hunt

The trunk of Mr. Christeson's car is always stocked with cemetery cleaning supplies, ready to be taken to a remote site at a moment's notice. The search begins after he receives a GPS coordinate from Mr. Ware, or he overhears an obscure anecdote told in a sleepy roadside diner.

"I've found that the best tips come from old timers in small restaurants on lonely county roads," Mr. Christeson said. "People would tell me 'Oh yeah, there's a gravestone in the woods near so and so's house,' but I had no idea who 'so and so' was. So it took a little bit of investigating, and some cold calls and knocking on doors to follow the leads to the cemeteries."

Sometimes the sites take weeks to find, and it's up to private property owners to give Mr. Christeson the opportunity to photograph or clean up the site.

"I'm on a little bit of a high when I find a cemetery I've been looking for a while," Mr.

Christeson said.

Mr. Ware said the commission is currently searching for 20 more graveyards in the county.

"These are ones we think we can find, but there must be a lot more nobody even knows about yet," he said.

As Mr. Christeson continues to upload pictures of the sites to findagrave.com, he's still anxiously waiting for the next phone call that will lead him and his team of volunteers back into the woods.

"Even if it's just one gravestone in the middle of nowhere, I want to know about it," he said. "That's history too."