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ARCHIVE

LOCAL NEWS

PRESERVING THE PAST

Volunteers are working to clean up and catalog historic cemeteries

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The Civil War's first shot would not be fired for another 7½ years, Oregon was yet to become a state and Allen and Rachel Bond were fighting their way through the Cascades, along with 14 others in their wagon-train party, on their way to a federal 320-acre donation land claim where the Eugene Airport sits today.

This explains why their great-great-great-granddaughter, Kristin Meador of Springfield, is sitting by their graves 156 years later; and why this tale is being told this Memorial Day weekend.

"I have a very small (immediate) family, so it's kind of nice to have an actual piece of my heritage that I can go back and see and research," says the 29-year-old Meador, standing in the forgotten 2.5-acre Luper Cemetery north of the Eugene city limits, between River and Prairie roads and north of Beacon Drive West. "There's some sort of connection because I was pretty young when my grandparents died."

Meador's grandfather was Ray Bond, who died in 1984 and ran a "century farm" — one that was in the same family for at least 100 years — off Airport Road. Ray Bond's father was Sam C. Bond, a one-time Eugene city councilor who owned an auto repair shop at West Fourth Avenue and Blair Boulevard where today sits the

bohemian bar Sam Bond's Garage, that honors his name. Sam Bond's father was Samuel Lincoln Bond, one of 11 children born to Allen and Rachel Bond — who began their journey to the Oregon Territory from Oaktown, Ind., in March 1853.

The Bond family history not only provides a glimpse into the history of Oregon and its pioneer spirit, it also helps explain why the Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries has a list of old graveyards that now tops 700.

Many of them began as family burial plots for pioneers. And many, like the Luper Cemetery, are long neglected. Or they've disappeared altogether, only to be discovered accidentally, as happened a year ago this month when a backhoe operator at the new Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend discovered skeletal remains while removing topsoil. That turned out to be pioneer William Stevens' family burial plot, now listed as the "RiverBend" cemetery on the state commission list, even though the remains were removed.

Abandoned and uncared-for cemeteries are "actually pretty common" in Oregon, said Kuri Gill, coordinator of the state cemetery commission that was established in 1999 by concerned citizens and is a program of the state Parks and Recreation Department. Caretakers and descendents die or move away and cemeteries fall into disrepair "until somebody decides to do something about it," Gill said.

Who owns these cemeteries, or the land they sit on, is often a mystery, Gill said. Many, like the Luper Cemetery, sit on properties that were donation land claims in the mid-19th century, and then were passed on to their communities.

Cleanup takes time, money

The Luper Cemetery, one of 29 "historic cemeteries" in Lane County on the state commission's list, was established on the donation land claim of Thomas and Elizabeth Baker in an area once known as Irving, according to the Lane County Historical Society and other records. It also has been known as the Irving Cemetery or the Baker Cemetery over the years.

The Luper Cemetery's name comes from James Luper, a pioneer from Illinois who came to Oregon in 1852, Lane County Historical Society Director Bob Hart said. Other records show that Luper, or his heirs, later owned the land, thus explaining its present-day name.

A 1970 survey provided by the Oregon Genealogical Society in Eugene lists 118 people buried there, most of them from pioneer families. There are at least two graves in the cemetery from as recently as the mid-1990s, however, although they are hidden and hard to find.

The first grave on the list is that of a Laura Butler, age 3, who died on June 27, 1857. Most records say the cemetery was established in 1859, the year the first adult on the list, 22-year-old Elizar Baker, wife of William Baker, was buried there.

Trying to decipher exactly who is buried in the cemetery is difficult. Many of the graves are overgrown with brush, and vandals have knocked over tombstones, broken them or even tried to exhume remains.

“I’d like to get it cleaned up and catalog it,” said Meador, 29, who has established a Web site, www.lupercemetery.com. “That’s what our goal is, because I know there are a lot of people around town who have had relatives here for many years and many generations. Obviously, it’s too big of a project for just 10 people. I’d like to get more word out there and to get some funding.”

Volunteer cleanup efforts have taken place at the cemetery over the decades, and two occurred this spring. In addition to clearing brush, volunteers filled a hole at one gravesite someone dug down to the coffin — that of James McClure, part of the same wagon party of Allen and Rachel Bond. But to completely restore the cemetery would take money and more manpower.

About \$75,000 in grant money from Oregon Lottery funds came out of the 2007 legislative session to provide for new markers, restoration, tours and the like around the state, said Gill, who took part in a recent cemetery cleanup. The state cemetery commission is waiting to see what the Legislature will provide this July, she said.

Volunteers from SOLV, the Oregon nonprofit organization that focuses on cleanup and beautification projects, participated in a May 2 event at Luper Cemetery, said Sharon Olson, of the city of Eugene Public Works Department’s wastewater division. SOLV also contributed \$100 for the cleanup, and Lane Forest Products provided a Dumpster, she said.

Olson has known about the cemetery for years, and has joined with other employees in the wastewater division to try to do something about its condition.

The cemetery is outside the city limits, but wastewater division workers use a gravel road to get to an industrial wastewater lagoon run by the Metropolitan Wastewater Management Commission. The road winds and curves before leading into the cemetery, which sits behind a barbed-wire, chain-link fence with a gate. The commission has an easement to the cemetery property, which county land records list as being privately owned. The property's owners did not return phone calls, but Olson said they have told her they own property around the cemetery, but not the cemetery land itself.

Olson said another wastewater division staff member, Chris Jensen, was the first city employee to rally others to do something. She and Olson organized the May 2 cleanup, Olson said, and they plan to deliver flowers to the graves Monday.

Meador said she first took part in a cleanup at the cemetery in the mid-1980s when she was about 5, an effort organized by her uncle John Bond, who now lives in Rogue River.

Meador got in touch with Olson and Jensen after becoming interested in the cemetery again earlier this year. She Googled "Luper Cemetery" and found Jensen's name, she said.

All three are hoping some grant money will come from the state cemetery commission this summer. A specialist is needed to help with re-erecting graves, restoring and preserving them, said Meador, who soon will begin work as a career transition specialist with Job Corps in Eugene.

"It'll probably take all summer, but I think we'll get it cleaned up," Olson said.

The last known extensive cleanup effort at the Luper Cemetery was in 1992, according to the genealogical society's records.

"I think it's unfortunately the way things go," said Meador's mother, Sue O'Neal of Bend, whose father was Ray Bond, about the lack of care at the Luper Cemetery. "People get busy with their lives. If I lived (in Eugene), I think I'd be more involved with it."

O'Neal has participated in previous cleanups, possibly the one in '92, she recalled. And, of course, she took her daughters, Meador and her older sister, Carrie Marstall of Portland, along for the one in the mid-1980s.

Olson has been busy trying to find a plot map, contacting the likes of the Oregon Genealogical Society, the Lane County Historical Society and the Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board in Portland.

“There are a lot we haven’t found,” Meador said of graves, with twigs and branches cracking under her feet. “My guess is there’s a bunch out there.”

Meador’s interest is in restoring dignity to the final resting spot of her ancestors as well as the other pioneers and descendants buried in the cemetery.

She has memories of being shown where Allen and Rachel Bond’s log cabin once stood on the family property near Airport Road.

Book documents journey

The couple built a 10-by-12-foot log cabin out of fir from the banks of the Willamette River two miles to the east, according to the 1938 book, “Allen and Rachel: An Overland Honeymoon in 1853,” written by Walter McIntosh — second husband of Helen Bond, one of Allen and Rachel Bond’s 11 children.

The small book with the purple cover sits in O’Neal’s Bend home. It tells the story — based on tales Allen and Rachel Bond told up until their deaths at the turn of the 20th century — of how they married the day before leaving Indiana in March 1853 to venture along the Overland Trail to Oregon. How there were five oxen-led wagons in their party. How they went through St. Joseph, Mo., along the Platte River in what is now Nebraska, up through the Rocky Mountains, into Salt Lake City and on to Fort Boise and the crossing of the Snake River. How they passed the Three Sisters before Allen Bond and the other men hauled out their axes and helped clear the forest to finish the journey into what is now Eugene.

“The town, a few straggling houses, it is true, scattered about the hills, and near the river’s bank, seemed very wonderful to them,” McIntosh wrote of the pioneers’ first glimpse. “And here were new and strange people to talk to, and more than all else here were homes!”

A favorite family tale

O’Neal remembers hearing the tales, while growing up on Airport Road, from her grandfather Sam Bond. He was the family archivist and “kept everything,” said O’Neal, 60, and a 1967 graduate of Willamette High School.

One of the most-often-told stories, included in the book, was how the wagon that included most of 20-year-old Rachel Bond's belongings overturned while crossing the Platte River. She thought all was lost, including a bundle that included pieces of patchwork she intended to sew into a quilt. Two men in the party were able to dive in and save it.

And Rachel Bond completed her "tulip quilt" by candlelight in that log cabin, O'Neal said. Today, the stained quilt with the red-and-tan patchwork and the green tulips is in her home.

"I think it kind of took her back home (to Indiana)," O'Neal said.

Today she and Allen rest just north of Eugene, their tale told once more.
