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Grave Concerns

Yankton Woman's Interest In Cemeteries Leads To New Book About Local 'Last Resting Places'

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Maxine Schuurmans Kinsley doesn't limit her cemetery visits to

Memorial Day.

The Yankton woman finds something both interesting and sacred in the final resting places. She traces it back to her childhood in Bon Homme County.

"As a child, I followed the local Tabor Legionnaires to place flowers on veterans' graves on Memorial Day," she said. "My dad was wearing his World War I uniform with his Purple Heart so proudly pinned."

She also feels a strong connection to the two cemeteries — the Catholic one in Tabor, the Presbyterian one located west of town — where dozens of her Czech ancestors are buried.

But she sees those types of connections quickly fading with each passing year.

"My generation has ritually visited and cared for our dead," she said. "My children's generation is doing that in limited fashion, but their children and grandchildren, spread out as they are, don't have that privilege. There's too much history being lost."

Kinsley has worked to preserve that history with her new book, "Pioneer Churches and Cemeteries in Yankton County, South Dakota: An Illustrated Historical Directory."

The book coincidentally comes out at the same time as South Dakota celebrates its 125th anniversary, Kinsley said. In the 66-page book, she has compiled and published an illustrated directory identifying and locating Yankton County's pioneer churches and cemeteries.

BEGINNING THE SEARCH

In compiling the Yankton County book, Kinsley is drawing upon her previous experience with the Bon Homme County Abandoned and Restoration Cemetery Association.

"When I moved to Yankton in 2005, it only seemed natural to check out available historical sources here," she said. "But there just wasn't that kind of record in Yankton County. I recognized the need for that kind of thing."

Kinsley began her labor of love last Memorial Day, traveling around Yankton County and taking photographs with her 35mm camera. She photographed cemeteries throughout 2013.

"I enjoyed driving unfamiliar roads with my camera," she said. "I felt rewarded whenever I could find one of the numerous isolated cemeteries or former church locations that dot the county."

Her research follows the sweeping settlement of Yankton County. The westward movement was encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed free land for immigrants and Easterners alike.

She used the WPA project from 1940-41 that produced a graves registration survey. The listing included all the abandoned cemeteries. "For that survey in 1941, there were still people alive from

territorial days, and local people helped as resources," she said.

She also researched the Yankton Community Library and Yankton County Courthouse. In the end, she located 51 cemeteries, of which 45 were pioneer church congregations.

The first part of her book presents the history of 12 local church denominations, including locations from 1859 through the early 1930s. The book's second part identifies and locates more than 50 pioneer cemeteries, including five located in or adjoining Yankton itself, and public and private family burial grounds located in the county.

THE ARRIVAL OF SETTLERS

Yankton County's cemeteries reflect the wave of ethnic and religious settlements, Kinsley said.

A minimum of 45 pioneer churches functioned at one time in the county. Episcopal, Methodist and Congregational churches in Yankton came first, followed by Catholic and Lutheran.

At one time, 17 Lutheran congregations ministered within their neighborhoods. Of those 17, five remain in existence. The Lutheran churches reflected not only their denomination but also their ethnic roots.

"You had the Norwegian Lutherans, who settled as the largest group in the northern and eastern parts of the county," she said.

By 1869, they had built Vangen Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, "the oldest Lutheran church still standing in the Dakotas." The cemetery remains along the church.

At least 16 rural Norwegian Lutheran churches followed, five of which are still operating: Trondhjem, Faith United, Martinus, Our Savior and Our Redeemer.

In addition, the county saw the arrival of other Scandinavians, Kinsley said.

"You had the Danish Trinity Lutheran Church which stood south of Gayville until 1988, when it became part of Trinity Lutheran Church here in Yankton," she said. "The Danish Trinity Lutheran Cemetery still marks the site where the church once stood."

Swedes also arrived in the area but were more numerous in neighboring Clay County, she said.

Other ethnic groups also settled in Yankton County, she said.

"In the northwest part of the county, you had the Germans from Russia who were part of three Reformed churches and cemeteries. Their homeland is affected by what is going on in the Ukraine," she said, referring to the current unrest in that nation.

Along with a German Congregational Church established in the same area, all three of those Reformed churches closed their doors. Most merged with churches in Bon Homme County.

At least three German Lutheran churches functioned in central Yankton County, Kinsley said. Martinus remains, but a new church building is presently planned on the church grounds.

In 1908, German residents built German Zion Evangelical Church along Walshtown Road. It served until 1944.

Catholic immigrants also ar-



RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D

Yankton resident Maxine Schuurmans Kinsley holds a copy of her 66-page book, "Pioneer Churches and Cemeteries in Yankton County, South Dakota: An Illustrated Historical Directory." She provides a listing and photos of the burial sites maintained by churches and other parties in Yankton County, part of her passion for cemeteries.

rived in large numbers, and their descendants continue to exert a strong presence, Kinsley said.

St. Agnes Catholic Church at Sigel, started by German settlers, continues to serve a parish today. However, that role is changing with the current reorganization of churches in the Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls.

A Polish cluster of Catholics founded Immaculate Conception Catholic Church between Tabor and Lesterville. A cluster of Bohemians, led by Frantisek Nedved, built the first St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Ziskov Township that year as well. That church has been restored and is displayed in the Anton Vancura Memorial Park (Czech Heritage Park) in Tabor. A cemetery remains near the original site.

In 1884, Czechs and Germans cooperated to build the second St. John the Baptist

Catholic Church from chalkrock they had hauled from the Missouri River. It stands today as the result of a massive restoration project conducted 30 years ago by friends and neighbors.

Irish immigrants established two rural Catholic churches, St. Brigid and St. Columba, both along Walshtown Road. The latter remains, north of Mayfield, but its future is also changing with the Catholic parish mergers and linkages.

In a twist of history, a Catholic church that started outside Yankton County has relocated here, Kinsley said. St. Cyril and Methodius (Vodnany) of rural Scotland was moved to the grounds of the Broom Tree retreat center near Irene.

Another religious and ethnic group — the Hutterites — hold a unique history in terms of their Yankton County settlement, Kinsley said. She learned

TELLING A STORY

Besides the cemeteries' affiliation, Kinsley remains fascinated by the graves' locations.

"It's so interesting to see how these people buried their dead," she said. "What was the location of their cemeteries, the final resting place?"

She found one site with only two graves. "That cemetery is by Turner County. A great-grandmother and little boy died, and the cemetery was fenced," she said.

She also remains intrigued by the graves themselves.

"Some (graves) were in neat rows and precise, others were scattered," she said. "Some (tombstones) were ornate, others very simple. Some (cemeteries) had little crosses, plain white crosses. At Lakeport, you had the traditional tombstones."

And in some cases, Kinsley came across unmarked graves with no way of identifying the person.

The cemeteries are a testament to the respect given the burial grounds, Kinsley said. They also show the determination to maintain the final resting places, even where a church no longer exists.

"Families take care of their cemeteries, and neighbors look out for neighbors," she said.

Kinsley worked with the Bon Homme County organization and outside funding during her prior project. This time, she pursued the Yankton County research on her own and self-published the book.

"I could have gone on a cruise for the time and money that I spent on this project," she said jokingly. "But I enjoy it so much. It's a hobby I enjoy doing."

Kinsley has also touched other lives with the project.

"I have received such wonderful feedback," she said. "I'll have people say, 'Oh, that's where my family is buried!' or 'My grandmother is buried there! I have also had people say, 'I'm pleased you noticed that cemetery.'"

For Kinsley, the Yankton County project continues the passion dating back to her childhood cemetery visits on Memorial Day.

"I have always just loved cemeteries," she said. "I feel strongly that we must protect and honor the rich heritage of those who came before us. I hope that parents read (my book) and realize the need for visiting cemeteries (with their children) and do something about it."

For more information, contact Kinsley at (605) 664-2015.

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at twitter.com/RDockendorf. Discuss this story at www.yankton.net.

A Royal Perch



KELLY HERTZ/P&D

Will Bentley of Bow Creek Metal works on welding the sculpture "River King" on the pedestal in front of the Press & Dakotan offices at 319 Walnut last week, as part of the installation of the new pieces for the 2014 Downtown Yankton RiverWalk. "River King" was created by William Hugh Jennings of Buffalo, Wyoming. Today, the Press & Dakotan debuts a series of articles spotlighting the various pieces in this year's RiverWalk. For more, see page 2B.

YCTC Auditions For 'Tom Sawyer' Start Tonight

Yankton Children's Theatre Company (YCTC) will hold auditions for its next production "Tom Sawyer," at 6 p.m. tonight (Friday) and 4 p.m. Saturday, May 17, at 407 Walnut (above Czechers) in Yankton.

The play will be directed by Olivia Hudson and assisted by Jacob Smith. Hudson is a

senior at Yankton High School and Smith is a junior at YHS. But have been active in local productions for both the YCTC and the Lewis and Clark Theatre Company, as well as at YHS.

"Tom Sawyer" will open June 26 at the Dakota Theatre in Yankton.

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