

Townsend was a suburb of Centerville, or so I like to think of it that way.

Centerville was founded in 1870 along the Missouri River, long before a dam was even a dream. The name came about because gold mining was booming in both the Elkhorn and Big Belt mountains.

The valley was rich for agriculture and both animals and crops supported the mining boom. It was thought the proximity of Centerville between the two mountain ranges, might be the perfect place for steamships to bring in supplies from Ft. Benton or Great Falls downriver. There were plans for wharves the steamships could unload or load from but it was never built. Even I know this was a bad idea but dreamers will be dreamers and there was the Bedford ferry boat there to cross the wide Missouri.

Centerville was platted and only one street name is known, Ferry Street, but there was an actual town with a blacksmith, two main stores one with a Post Office, two Masonic lodges and a doctor. There were several residences and oh yeah, a cemetery.

But in 1882, the railroad announced its intention to build a train station about a mile south of Centerville. Townsend was officially born in 1883 and platted with more street names than poor Centerville. Slowly, residents of Centerville and other small towns like Bedford, Canton, and Radersburg, to name a few, moved to the new town. As far as I know, only one house and the cemetery are left. I have no idea where Ferry Street was. Anyone know and want to share?

As I continued my education about Centerville and on how to clean headstones, I made a few false starts. I've never done anything like this so I literally put the cart before the horse. I thought I was only going to clean veteran headstones but after I saw what state the cemetery was in, I had a hard time staying focused. I wanted to fix it all. There are unreadable headstones, broken headstones, tilted head and foot stones, and lots of cactus. There are so many unmarked graves or graves with little metal signs that aren't readable. Even the entrance to the cemetery sign needs to be cleaned and resealed. Should you decide to adopt a cemetery or even clean headstones, here are few things I've learned.

Rule #1 about doing this kind of work is to get permission. About that time, I was doing some volunteer work at the Broadwater County Museum and I asked Linda Huth who was responsible for the Centerville Cemetery. The county had taken over since there was no formal association for the maintenance. I contacted one of the county commissioners, Lindsey Richtmyer, and asked for said permission. She took it to the other commissioners and in no time, I got the go ahead.

I was contacted by Bill Malone, the county maintenance supervisor, and I explained what I was going to be doing. He too, was supportive.

Rule #2 is be careful what you wish for. I thought there would just a few veterans out there and it would take no time at all. I was wrong on both counts. There are a bunch, some are marked by headstones and some are not. How do I know this? There is a list at the museum. Wandering around with the list and making check marks between the list and the headstones confirmed this.

Rule #3 is to have a plan of attack and stick to it. In two years, I have not accomplished this successfully. I keep getting distracted. I'm not focused just on veterans anymore but pretty much everybody out there.

Anxious and impatient to clean a veteran's headstone, I picked one and it turned out to be the reason it will take me years to get all the headstones cleaned to my satisfaction. And by that, I mean I learned another thing about myself. I underestimated the amount of work it would take to get this whole cemetery ship shape. Okay, that is not what I learned. What I didn't expect, now that I have two seasons of cleaning under my belt, is how much I care about this lonely place. And the people in it. And I want to do a good job. I have high standards.

My first headstone wasn't in too bad of shape and this is where I once again discovered it is harder to clean bird poop off headstones than anything else. But, scrub away I did, using the biological cleaner I had learned about on YouTube and purchased.

Something important to know about headstone cleaning, regardless of what the stone is made of, is to use nylon brushes and scrapers. No metal. Dawn dish soap is a popular spray to get the initial dirt off. Then comes the biological solution which softens up the various mosses and lichens. The great thing about the solution is that it stays on the stone and continues cleaning it for a few years even if you aren't there. The second year I was out there cleaning, I did a quick dish soap spray on his stone and let it dry. Is it perfect? No. Does it look really white and nice? Yes.

I started with a Civil War veteran, Sanford Wood. I didn't know he was a Civil War veteran until I cleaned his white veteran marker and did a bit of research on him when I got home. He was originally from Vermont but moved to Massachusetts where he enlisted in the Union Army and fought in several battles before being captured in Louisiana. As it was early in the war, captured soldiers were offered parole, meaning they sign something saying they won't fight anymore in order to be set free. Sanford moved west and ended up in the gold mining areas in the Elkhorns around Indian Creek. At some point, he moved to Bedford and lived in a cabin near the warm springs. When he realized he couldn't live by himself anymore, he moved into the Commercial Hotel. He lived as a bachelor until his death at the age of 90.

Okay, is anyone else curious about this man's life more than what I wrote? I would speculate he was quite a character and would love to sit down and talk to him. So many questions. Why didn't you ever marry? What battle were you in when you were captured? How did you get from Massachusetts to Louisiana? How did you get all the way to Montana?

Yeah, this small idea about cleaning headstones has turned into a big rabbit hole of chasing names, history, stories and I will not run out of things to talk about now. Or ever. Help.