

Whispers Of The Past

My search for the beginnings of the Centerville Cemetery reached a new low when I acted on what I thought was a brilliant idea. In my effort to figure out how the Centerville Cemetery came to be, I went to the Montana Historical Society website and accessed the public newspaper portal. I typed in 'Centerville Cemetery', hit search, and got 132 entries. Surely one of those would have something about who started it.

I've made it through about 60 or so newspapers going back as far as the early 1900s and this is what I've learned. A quit claim deed from the city of Townsend to Broadwater County was done in 1945 and an association was formed by Mrs. Roy Noble, Mrs. Shirley VanVoast, and Barbara Doggett. Before that, 1938, a notice was put in the paper to have a meeting to create an association to take care of the cemetery. No other information on the results of the meeting or if one even took place.

For many years there were various organizations or people doing cleanup and improvements, the associations, Boy Scouts, Memorial Day groups, or families. Reports of vandalism, something I will never understand, and subsequent repairs were done over the years. Zeal VanVoast was the most persistent advocate for the cemetery and her daughter, Gretchen, provided the cemetery sign in 1966. I've removed one of those signs to get it cleaned up, painted and sealed so if you go out there, right now it just says 'Centerville'.

I will continue my search once I figure out how to search for the original deed from the landowner, my money is on George McFadden, to the city of Townsend. In the meantime, I'll just plan on spending a lot of time at the courthouse this winter, checking land records and deeds. Nothing says fun like staring blankly at giant heavy books from the past when it's cold outside.

In other exciting news, I recently attended one of the day-long presentations at the Montana Historical Society conference about cemetery restoration. My brain is on fire! Since Broadwater County wasn't established until 1897, I may have to spend some time in the courthouses of Meagher and Jefferson counties. Oh darn. And the state museum in Helena will finally be opening in December. I wonder if they'll let me bring my sleeping bag and pillow.

I've also decided to postpone headstone repair until next year. For that, I will need help because those stones are very heavy and I'm old. I've talked to a couple people about helping me and know we can get this done. And I've talked to Adam Six about a possible mapping project with the kids from STOKE using whatever technology we can come up with to find where all the unmarked graves actually are. A group in Helena at the Forestvale Cemetery used cadaver dogs to map the Chinese part of the cemetery there. There are other ways, but we can let the kids come up with how to do that.



As I make my way down the list of possible Centerville Cemetery residents with no headstone, I recently came across a guy named Albert Austin. His obituary said he

worked for the Shelley Ranch in Deep Creek, was originally from Missouri and died on January 28, 1922, from a brain blood clot and senility at the age of 75.

What caught my eye was the way the newspaper said he was an inmate of the county poor farm. An inmate? Sounds like the place was a prison. I wonder what those places were like. Any ideas? Senility at 75? I'm getting close to that age. Should I be worried?

This is what happens when you take on a project like this. It's really interesting but I find myself thinking about what the lives of these people were like, how they found their way here, why they left their home states, and a bunch of other ponderings I'll never have the answer for. But, if you know anything about Centerville or the people, please send me a message at rangebabe56@gmail.com.