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DOT GOLDMAN



CAROL ROBIDOUX

Dot Goldman has adopted Forest Hill Cemetery as her home away from home. She is a volunteer researcher, helping fill in the historical blanks of the town cemetery.

THE GUARDIAN OF DERRY'S DEAD

By CAROL ROBIDOUX
Union Leader Correspondent

Dot Goldman jokes about pitching a tent at Forest Hill Cemetery. It only makes sense, given how much time she spends there. Since raising her hand and volunteering her genealogical services two years ago, she has served as the town's chief graveyard detective, raising stories of the dead while preserving history.

"The first settlers are well documented. It's the common folk who have a story to tell — and some of those stories are very interesting," said Goldman, who sleeps in Salem but lives among the dead in Derry.



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Dot Goldman calls this "the family tree." She has not been able to find the father's headstone, but suspects it should be where the tree stands. The roots are slowly pulling the others into the ground.

Her mission — to update, computerize and photograph every headstone in the older section of the town cemetery

— is a labor of love, emphasis on the labor.

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Derry correspondent Carol Robidoux will be making the rounds every week to find new voices for *The Derry Soapbox*, a chance for residents to speak their minds about the

Soapbox

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Not only is it a tedious job, but at 67, Goldman's health is on the decline. This particular day she loads two tanks of oxygen into her rolling cart, hangs her Kodak camera around her neck, adjusts her "Find A Grave" baseball cap and slowly rolls along a grassy stretch that leads to one of the cemetery's many sacred spots.

"I worked 40 years in the medical field, but this is what I love to do," Goldman said, reaching for a small twig stuck in her wheel.

The project is daunting — even with the help of fairly accurate records dating back to the late 1800s, Goldman has many more headstones to chronicle. It's a slow process, she said. For one thing, sometimes she gets sidetracked, stopping at a library to research a name or try to connect diseases or crimes to cryptic headstone inscriptions.

She also transfers the information to her computer — something that's never been done here before — and will eventually turn over the files, complete with photographs, to the town history museum.

Sometimes the grave-stones have other puzzles to solve. Like discovering the four Todd children, who died within weeks of each other in the 1700s.

"It really bothers me that I can't find the disease that went through town during that time — I'm still hunting for it," she said.

Just thinking about what the parents went through, watching their four children suffer and die, stirs something in her.

"All of our town's settlers, if not for their fortitude, crossing the ocean and enduring the struggles of ~~starting a new life~~ — I don't know where we'd be," Goldman said.

She stops next to a tree that has become a sacred spot to Goldman. Tangled in its roots are three headstones. She has yet to unravel the mystery of the fourth headstone, belonging to the father and missing from this particular family plot. Did it become enveloped in the tree roots, just as the other three seem to be?

"I don't know, but I wonder sometimes if the father isn't somehow part of that tree, and he's absorbing his family into the roots," Goldman said with a Mona Lisa smile. "Do the stones talk to me? People will think I'm crazy to admit it, but yes, I believe when you are here

you connect with something from the past."

Once, while checking headstones against the most accurate historic record, the Spinney Index, so named for the Derry Eagle Scout who mapped out the cemetery 26 years ago on paper, Goldman spotted an edge of marble jutting from the dirt.

"It was just a small glint in a patch of light by my toe, so I started clearing by hand and I found a gravestone for Andrew McKinney. It had been covered up since the 1900s. No one knew it was here. As I cleared the dirt away, something told me "go left," so I did, and look what I found: his brother, William McKinney," Gold-

man said, pointing to the side-by-side headstones she personally cleaned.

She founded Friends of Forest Hill Cemetery, which has given her plenty of helpers.

"I know at some point I'm not going to be able to do this. I need to pass this along to the next generation. We had standing room only at our first meeting, which felt really good," Goldman said.

Local Girl Scout troops have come many times to clean headstones, and teens from the Upper Room will learn the ropes of headstone maintenance from Goldman on June 24.

When dealing with the older stones, there's much to know, Goldman said.

For example, marble stones start to "sugar," a process which eventually renders the carving invisible. That's one reason she planned a gravestone cleaning workshop — open to everyone — tomorrow, bringing in an expert from Connecticut to provide tips

and techniques. She's hoping people from other towns will come and take the information back to their own hometown graveyards.

"We are getting away from the idea of a 'family plot.' Families are all scattered, and our generation likes to memorialize their loved ones in different ways," Goldman said. "It's important to preserve them while we can. Once a stone is gone, or broken, it's gone forever, along with the history of the person."

To link to Goldman's virtual collection of gravesites at Forest Hill, go to www.tinyurl.com/e4wfe. For more information about Friends of Forest Hill Cemetery, visit <http://forest-hill-1721.webs.com>.