

In search of those who died at almshouse in Unity

There's a big mystery surrounding the old graveyard across the road from the Sullivan County Health Care buildings. "Any person who died there during the days of the old almshouse should be in that cemetery but they are not," said Sara Poisson.

Poisson was hired in January as the mental health counselor and substance abuse clinician at the Sullivan County House of Corrections. One of her lifetime sidelines has been the study of old graveyards.

"I've done a lot of tromping through the woods in search of graveyards," she said.

She found one of those old burial grounds, right in plain sight, when she joined the HOC workforce. Poisson wasted little time starting her probe with the help of male inmates housed in the Transitional Housing Unit where her office is located. "It's been a blast but every time I answer a question, three more pop up," she said.

In addition to the historical research, Poisson has found the involvement by the inmates a rewarding experience. "It gives them something to do that is meaningful," she stated. "You need to respect yourself and other people, everybody matters. Even if you're a drug addict, you do matter."

Even with their help, however, the case of the missing bodies remains open. "I've walked all over the woods and can't find another cemetery," Poisson said. Now, after 10 months, her project is at an impasse. Help is needed and Poisson hopes it's on the way.

Walking through the cemetery that has no name, Poisson points out two distinct sections. At the

upper level, many of Unity's prominent residents, including lawyers and doctors, are buried. Most of those old gravestones, despite their years of being battered by all kinds of weather, reveal appropriate information on the deceased.

And then you look down at the lower level and the picture changes completely. There are more than 125 small gravestones, all uniform in size, in several rows. That's the final resting place of the so-called paupers. "These are people who came here and had no one. Most were cast-aways," Poisson said.

The newest stone in the pauper section lists 1940 as the burial date. Poisson said the almshouse at the county complex existed into the 1950's. "Where did those bodies go when they died?" she asked. The annual county reports always listed the residents of the almshouse who died during their stay. Over the years, Poisson has collected a wad of annual county reports from 1875 to 1939. Poisson knows those missing reports will help fill in some of the blanks resulting from gravestones where chiseled names have simply eroded and cannot be read any more.

Some stones have broken over the decades and others are lined up along the wall at the entrance or just leaning against a tree. They probably came out of the ground because of frost, is Poisson's theory. "By cross referencing the records we know who it is so we could put those stones back accurately,"

Poisson said. Poisson said she would love to have a complete set of county reports to cover the years from 1869 to 1940. Over the years, Poisson has picked up many old county reports at yard sales, antique sales, auctions and on eBay. "I've been everywhere."

During her research, Poisson found almshouses were not nice places to stay. "People would rather die," she said. Officials tried to recoup money to run them, that's why they were working farms, she added.

People in almshouses were classified as inmates. Prisoners were locked up in the county jail. Theft of vegetables and public drunkenness were the two most common crimes that resulted in jail sentences. In the 1875 county report, the list of paupers included individual names, places of birth, age and condition. The column on condition featured a breakdown that included lame, helpless, insane at times, very infirm, hernia, cripple, nervous, deaf and dumb, feeble and given to fits.

Most of the people buried in the pauper section were either babies or the elderly "There were a few in their 20's and 30's, but not that many," Poisson revealed,

In the end, Poisson hopes to finish the project she started in January and perhaps come up with some financial help to do some restoration work in the cemetery. For now, however, a row of 18 tall pine trees, perhaps 50 years old, continues to stand guard over that cemetery that includes many of the rich and famous of Unity on the upper level and the paupers of Sullivan County on the lower level.

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