

Mystery of the backyard cemetery solved



Only one marker in the **Backyard** Cemetery has fake flowers on the stone, that of John Doe. The stones are lined up in rows with names, dates of birth and death, and numbers indicating their place in the row.



Terry Herbig / Staff

Joline Bennett gestures to areas of **Backyard** Cemetery where markers are lined with names and numbers of people who were buried there from the East Moline State Hospital. Ms. Bennett, of LeClaire, said hundreds of tombstones from the cemetery were given away in the late 1950s and replaced by headstones. She grew up in an East Moline home, the site where several of the tombstones were recently discovered.

Tombstones from mental hospital were given away in 1950s

By Stephen Elliott
selelli@qzone.com

A plastic bouquet of flowers marks a flat stone surrounded by grass in **Backyard** Cemetery.

The stone has the number 18 engraved on it along with the name "John Doe" and "1900." Someone didn't forget John Doe.

A soft summer rain

caresses the quiet cemetery grounds, surrounded by pine trees and a white wooden fence. The sign out front says "No Trespassing — State Property."

Joline Bennett of LeClaire knows this cemetery well.

She also knows the mystery behind hundreds of tombstones buried about a mile west

in the backyard at 333 23rd St., East Moline. Ms. Bennett grew up in that home, where tombstones now make a backyard patio and surround parts of the home's foundation.

Since a story ran in The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus a few weeks ago about the house, there have been questions from readers

about where the tombstones came from. Ms. Bennett said they came from **Backyard** Cemetery in the late 1950s. Both she and her brother, Harry Turrell, remember when they were made available to the public.

"When my parents purchased the home in the early 1950s, that was when this was the state

mental hospital and the state farm was here," Mr. Turrell said. "My dad and I actually got the tombstones."

His sister said an employee of the mental hospital made the tombstones available to anyone.

"I'm old enough to remember the stones

Tombstones

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being put in the car and the trunk sagging," Ms. Bennett said. "They were replaced by headstones that were put into the ground for easier maintenance."

East Moline Correctional Center Warden Gene Jungwirth said records are limited at the prison, which replaced the mental hospital in 1980. He said the Illinois Department of Corrections maintains **Southview Cemetery**.

The hundreds of tombstones made available to the public in the late 1950s are likely a part of others backyards and patios in the Quad-Cities. The replacement stones at the cemetery are flat and simple — a name, date of birth, date of

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death, and a number indicating where it stands in the row.

Growing up in the neighborhood, Ms. Bennett and her brother remember the odd things that became part of their life near the state hospital.

"The escapees either came down in front of my parent's home or they would go the other way (north) toward the river," Mr. Turrell said. "I went to school with a number of kids whose parents worked up there."

When they were children, Harry and Joanne met some of the escapees who wandered down the hill.

"Old Florence, she would escape," Mr. Turrell said of one patient. "My mother would see her come down and yell at her to come into the house. This was back in the days when no one locked their doors."

"While Florence would wander up toward the house, Mom would get on the phone and call security. Then, mom would give her a cup of coffee and a cookie."

Mr. Jungwirth spent 30 years on the Rock Island County Sheriff's Department. He remembers coming out to pick

up patients who had left the grounds of the state hospital.

It happened often, he said.

"It was kind of scary," Warden Jungwirth said. "It was also the sheriff's duty to haul them to other institutions. It was kind of a long ride."

Judy Belan, who is the author of "East Moline: A Centennial History 1900-2000," said the graves also signify another aspect of people who lived at the mental hospital.

The area was formerly known as Watertown. She said the village merged with East Moline in 1914. The state hospital opened in Watertown in 1880.

"Many of those (residents) who were put up there that were perhaps not really mentally ill," Ms. Belan said. "They were alcoholics or even just some kind of mild developmental problem we would treat today. You could go there if you were eccentric. One could go before a judge and have a spouse committed."

Ms. Belan said the East Moline mental hospital was known as a progressive facility for its time.

"It was quite large, with at least a couple of thousand people there at one time," she said.

Janet Meyer, who has done extensive research on the cemeteries in that area, said there was a second **Southview Cemetery** on the backside of the correctional center. Those tombstones were apparently removed by inmates at the state prison in 1911 for landscaping purposes.

A picture in a July 18, 1961, article of The Dispatch shows the tombstones stacked up.

Warden Jungwirth doesn't know what happened to those hundreds of tombstones that were removed.

"Our records are very limited on this," the warden said. "What happened, nobody knows for sure. It's too bad the history gets lost."

Greg Vogele, who heads the Rock Island County Historical Society, said records of the burials at **Southview Cemetery** are available at the county historical society.

He said it's important they're not forgotten.

"We weren't as enlightened back then," Mr. Vogele said. "Some of these people were tucked away, an embarrassment to their families and forgotten. It would be a real tragedy if no one knew what happened."

Graveyard undecorated and mostly unnoticed

But genealogical society has tracked those buried at Resthaven Cemetery

It matters not the season. It has no flowers. It has no wreaths.

The stones that mark the graves at Resthaven Cemetery are worn and pressed flat into the earth, so much so the grass grows thick around their edges and threatens to swallow them.

Some stones date back to the turn of the century, when the cemetery was a repository for the remains of those who died at the Illinois Western Hospital for the Insane. They ended up here when family couldn't be found or couldn't afford to bury them elsewhere.

The cemetery sits across a busy street from Northeast Park in East Moline, where children play soccer, baseball and softball. It has no parking lots. Visitors are not expected. A state sign warns against trespassing. Apparently, visitors are not welcome, either.

Resthaven Cemetery is a lonely place, but it won't



— Todd Welvaert —

be forgotten.

"I think the society has managed to record almost every cemetery in Rock Island County, regardless of how small or how old," said Dorothy Darland of Rock Island, Blackhawk Genealogical Society member for 20 years.

The Blackhawk Genealogical Society of Rock Island and Mercer Counties was founded in 1972 to help members research their family trees and to save ancestral records.

Its members tracked down the official handwritten entries of the peo-

► On record

► The Blackhawk Genealogical Society meets the fourth Tuesday of the month at 7 p.m. January through October at South Park Presbyterian Church, 1501 30th St., Rock Island.

► **Contact:** www.rootsweb.com/~ilbgsrim/ or club president Lorraine Hathaway at (309) 787-1826.

ple buried at Resthaven and transferred them, published them in their quarterly and placed the list in the Rock Island County Historical Society, 822 11th Ave., Moline.

"I suppose the state would have the information somewhere, but I don't know how a person would go about getting it released," Mrs. Darland said.

Society members Zelma Stufflebeam and Eudalia Garrett canvassed the cemetery to ensure the list

was as accurate as possible. Mrs. Darland said the group's research, like its documentation of those buried at Resthaven, is very important to people outside the area looking for their ancestors.

The society has cataloged cemeteries from all over Rock Island and Mercer counties. Several older, smaller cemeteries have been abandoned and despoiled. The society wants to make sure the cemeteries are not forgotten. It happens.

Resthaven Cemetery records went through the numerous hands before the society copied them. Founded in 1896 by the state, the hospital was supervised by the Board of State Commissioners of Public Charities. It opened in May 1896 with patients from the Illinois Central Hospital for the Insane at Jacksonville.

That board was abolished in 1909, when control of all state charitable institutions passed to the

new Board of Administration. The institution became Watertown State Hospital.

The Civil Administrative Code of 1917 transferred hospital jurisdiction to the Department of Public Welfare. When that agency closed in 1961, the Department of Mental Health took responsibility. In 1975, the then East Moline State Hospital was renamed the East Moline Mental Health Center.

Eventually, it became the East Moline Correctional Center, whose staff inherited the handwritten records of those buried in Resthaven. Members of the Blackhawk Genealogical Society of Rock Island and Mercer counties found and copied them.

Resthaven Cemetery is a lonely place, but it's not forgotten.

Todd Welvaert can be reached at (309) 786-6441, ext. 249, or at twelvaert@qonline.com.



photos / Gary Nrambeck / staff

A few upright grave markers are at the Resthaven Cemetery in East Moline, but most are flat, ground-level markers. **Inset:** The Resthaven sign at the entrance to the cemetery.