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News

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Keeping watch where local history sleeps



Glinda Harbison opens the gate at the North Elm Cemetery, founded in 1870 when North Elm was a larger community, complete with a church and school house. Jeffrey Benzing/The Cameron Herald

By Jeffrey Benzing, Staff Writer

For Glinda Harbison, history isn't just something locked behind glass in a museum. It's also underground, marked off in a rectangular plot with a headstone.

The Temple resident, now 57, dedicates her time to the North Elm Cemetery, where she not only oversees the grounds but also compiles genealogy and family history for those buried there.

"My heart is to put history to the names so it's more than just headstones," she said. "I look around here and I see people that were leaders in Cameron and Rogers and Yarrellton, people that had voices and made changes in the way we did things."

The cemetery, located about seven miles north of Cameron off F.M. 485, has about 900 gravesites and was founded in 1870, originally as part of a larger community complete with a church and school house.

By 1941, the church was abandoned. Soon after, it was torn apart by lightning. The school became lumber, and the cemetery was left unattended.

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However, in the summer of 1958, residents with family buried at the cemetery founded the North Elm Cemetery Association. Their mission was to restore the grounds and keep North Elm from being forgotten.

Harbison has been president of the association since 1997; elections are yearly and she says she would like to do the job as long as her health allows and the association elects her. In all, the association has three volunteer officer positions. Bettye Ermis of Cameron is currently the vice president, and Anna Rea of Temple is the secretary and treasurer.

As president, Harbison is responsible for fundraising, cemetery upkeep, meeting with families, arranging plots, organizing burials, leading meetings, managing public relations and a host of other duties.

"This is really Glinda's passion," Ermis said. "It's important to her that the cemetery continues, and it's important to me because my people are buried out there."

Gayle Fuller Boggess, who grew up in Rockdale and now lives in Katy, has been a member of the association for about 10 years. She said Harbison's skills as a fundraiser have greatly benefited the association. The cemetery is dependent entirely on donations, and the association spends about \$500 a month on maintenance. The cost is considerable given the small size of the community.

For the 2006 fundraiser, Harbison had the idea of compiling a cookbook. Recipes were gathered from association members and their families, including old-fashioned recipes passed down by those buried at North Elm.

This year, the association is compiling a book on the cemetery's history and the history of those buried there.

"I know it's difficult to understand how someone can be passionate about a cemetery, but Glinda is so passionate," Boggess said. "We can never praise her enough."

That passion, Harbison said, comes from her father. She's the third of four children, all of whom inherited his love of history. For him, cemeteries were always a part of that.

"Whenever we were on vacation and we passed a historic cemetery, we were going through it," she said.

Growing up, Harbison said she has fond memories of attending association meetings, but after she turned 17, she quit going.

About 12 years ago, it was her father who urged her to start attending again. "I didn't want to go," she said. "But how do you say no to your father who has cancer?"

He then volunteered her as a candidate for secretary and treasurer. When she was elected, she was given an old shoe box with a tattered notebook inside.

"It was the whole history of the cemetery in one spiral notebook," she said. "That just broke my heart."

Harbison began reorganizing and expanding the history. She drove to Waco to research the lives of two Texas Rangers who are buried at North Elm. In addition, there are 17 soldiers from the Civil War, the son of a Revolutionary War hero, and a niece of Charles Goodnight, all resting at North Elm.

Carol Gibbs, who lives in Baytown, helped with the research and has compiled a book of clippings from The Cameron Herald about the North Elm and Yarrellton communities.

Gibbs said Harbison has successfully juggled her various duties as president. "I know there's a lot of responsibility involved because every time someone is buried there, she has to meet with the family," Gibbs said. "That can happen at the most inconvenient time-it can't be scheduled for two weeks later."

Harbison also works fulltime as a hospitality minister at Immanuel Baptist Church in Temple. She said her pastor understands when she has to take care of cemetery business. Once, when she got a call during vacation Bible school, she started the opening assembly, hurried to North Elm to meet a family, and then hurried back to the church.

She counts herself lucky that she's never been called home from a vacation.

The hard work, Gibbs said, goes above and beyond the expectations of the association. Aside from the daily stress of juggling work, family and all her responsibilities at North Elm, Harbison has also persevered through serious illness and heart trouble.

She had her first heart attack four years ago, the day after the annual association meeting. She said it probably actually started during the meeting. She felt symptoms, but, since it was a particularly hot day, she thought the weather was just getting to her.

Then in 2006, she ran the annual meeting with a collapsed lung. This was the spring after Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Immanuel Baptist Church provided housing for storm evacuees, and, as Harbison and other volunteers were preparing the houses beforehand, she came into contact with black mold.

Mold began to grow in her chest, and she lost part of her lung in emergency surgery. But before she could get to the hospital, she had work to do.

"I really should have been in the hospital earlier, but I thought I should be there to run the meeting," she said.

Through all this, she keeps good humor. She laughs when she says she's on her third pacemaker, and, as she recounts her history of heart trouble, she says plainly, "Maybe that's one of the things I love about the cemetery. I know I'll lay there one day."

She relates this all back to history, pointing out that plenty of people in the cemetery had the same ailments but didn't have modern medicine to treat them.

history is also personal to Harbison. She has numerous relatives buried at North Elm, including her father, who died in 1996. Her mother, who is still living, has a plot there, and a plot has already been set aside for Harbison and her husband.

Their daughter, who teaches school in Temple, also grew up with the cemetery-she even spent the night there occasionally while her uncle prepared and cooked barbecue before association meetings. She isn't currently active in the association, but Harbison said that's normal.

"I didn't go back until I was in my 40s," she said. "It's part of growing up-when the time's right, you get involved."

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