



Bryce Hospital's deceased are not forgotten

By Tom Gordon -- The Birmingham News

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These tombstones are in one of the four burial sites near Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. An estimated 5,000 people are buried at the four sites, and many of the graves are unmarked. (Birmingham News / Tamika Moore)

TUSCALOOSA -- MaryLou Stover Smith arrived at the Alabama Insane Hospital in June 1922.

The red-haired, blue-eyed wife of a Boaz farmer had given birth to four children in quick succession. She had pellagra, some dementia and she died in November 1923, of pulmonary tuberculosis.

By the time her husband received the telegram with the news of her death, three days had passed, and Smith already had been buried in a cemetery northeast of the hospital, her marker a concrete slab bearing the number 81.

Smith is one of an estimated 5,000 people buried in four sites near the campus of what is now Bryce Hospital. Like most of them, she was buried with a marker that bore a number, not a name.

Because of vandalism, theft and some relocation work due to highway projects in the 1950s and 1960s, about 60 percent of the Bryce graves are no longer marked. Missing records make it almost impossible to trace the burial sites of individuals who were laid to rest from 1861 -- the year the hospital opened as a state of the art mental health facility -- to 1922.

At a 2 p.m. ceremony on Sunday, state mental health officials will pay tribute to those buried in the four sites and seek to give comfort to their survivors. They will unveil historical markers at each of the burial sites as well as a plan to raise funds for a memorial garden at one of the cemeteries, near a site where nine infants born to Bryce patients are believed to be buried. Angel statues once marked the spot, but are gone.

Tom Hobbs, chairman of the Bryce Historical Committee appointed by Alabama Mental Health Commissioner John Houston, said the memorial and the markers will be worthy and long overdue tributes to those who lie in the cemeteries.

"I think they paid the way for us to understand mental illness better," said Hobbs, the executive director of Western Mental Health Center in Birmingham. "They didn't do it purposefully, but through their lives, unwittingly, they did that for us. Now they stand on the brink of just being forgotten and nameless and we just need to do better than that."

An effort to help

Bryce historian Steve Davis still periodically helps visitors find relatives at the cemeteries. He says the satisfaction and sense of closure that those visitors feel is not something a memorial can bring to others who want to find their loved one's resting place but cannot.

"You can never duplicate that with a memorial," Davis said. "But that's all I know that we can do at this point in time with the people who are buried here."

Davis made the remarks last week while standing in Bryce Cemetery No. 1, less than a mile northeast of the white-domed Bryce Hospital building and on the north side of Jack Warner Parkway, just west of the U.S. 82 bypass.

An estimated 1,700 people are buried in No. 1; the last burial took place in 1968, just two years before the filing of a lawsuit, *Wyatt v. Stickney*, that led to "baseline care and treatment requirements for the institutionalized mentally disabled," according to the Encyclopedia of Alabama.

Many of those first laid to rest there were put in the ground without a casket and with wooden markers bearing their patient numbers. Davis said black patients and white patients were buried alongside each other. By the late 19th century, shamrock-shaped iron crosses engraved with the patient numbers began appearing above the graves and were followed by concrete slabs.

As late as 1985, according to accounts written at the time, rows of the iron crosses still dotted the rolling grounds of the original cemetery, Davis said, but few remain. Many were stolen, he said. Some have been sold on eBay.

"It became very popular for university students and other local youth to steal a marker from the Bryce Cemetery," Davis said. "We did have one occasion where we believe one of the workers ran over them with a bush hog."

The second cemetery, called 1A, is the site of about 1,300 burials, the last one in 1921. Lee Anne Wofford, cemetery program coordinator for the Alabama Historical Commission, said the burial site may have been part of the original Bryce cemetery until the area was bisected by Jack Warner Parkway.

Cemeteries No. 2 and No. 3 are north of the Bryce campus and separated by a patch of swampy bottom land, and feature both clearings and woodland that has overgrown some of the grave sites. More than 1,500 burials took place in No. 2 from 1922 to around 1954, when No. 3 was opened. More than 500 burials have taken place at No. 3, the latest in January. Unlike those buried in years past, those laid to rest in recent years at No. 3 have marble slabs with their names.

Sunday's ceremony will be at the Bryant-Jordan Chapel on the Bryce campus, and the public is invited.



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