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Cadaver dogs help discover forgotten graves at historic Conroe cemetery

By Meagan Ellsworth, Staff writer Updated 10:20 am CST, Monday, March 2, 2020



IMAGE 1 OF 9

John Meredith looks through a spot that was marked by the K-9 Search and Rescue Texas organization at the Conroe Community Cemetery, Sunday, March 1, 2020.

A 12-year-old yellow lab named Millie jumped up and down, focused, as she confidently barked repeatedly Sunday to draw her certified handler's attention to a 6-foot-long depression within the ground of a historic black cemetery near downtown Conroe.

The canine has undergone extensive training with her K-9 Search and Rescue of Texas handler Mary Jane Boyd, who has assisted agencies with more than 150 searches to recover missing persons in the Southeast Texas area, including cases with Millie's help.

Today, Boyd and the Houston cadaver dog are helping volunteers identify unmarked and forgotten graves in the Conroe Community Cemetery being restored on 10th Street.

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"Right here," said Boyd as she pointed at a large unmarked dip covered in foliage.

It's a new experience for the cadaver dogs, including Millie and her fellow canine teammates: Emmett and Bean. While the dogs are usually tasked with finding one person, such as a lost hunter, missing child or elderly person who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, this mission requires the dogs to search a 3.5-acre cemetery with an estimated 100 graves that are still being discovered.

Finding lost graves

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James C. Pitts, who the state of Texas recognized in 1942 as a leading educator of African American students, was the last known burial at the

cemetery in 1966. But the headstones here date back to at least 1892 with various burial rituals, depths and embalming methods that can throw off the canine's senses, such as by picking up another nearby grave. Many of the graves are marked only with broken pitchers or pottery, pieces of railroad, toppled tombstones or even Gardenia plants.

"The more environments you can work your dog in that is always a good thing for them, especially since there is so much odor out here they are working through that to go through something perhaps that we don't know is there," said Boyd who believes the experience could help the dogs in future searches. "But they are also going through a lot of stuff that we know is a grave."

The Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Board's treasurer, John Meredith, took out a GPS tool as he logged the coordinates of Millie's discovery. Emmett and Bean confirmed the same multiple areas she found, on separate occasions, either by barking or sitting.

Restoration efforts

Meredith said 40 graves are identified by the rights in 1978, of which 30 are known and 10 remain unknown in the once neglected cemetery, which belongs to the heirs of Henry Runge and became overrun after it was sold in the past. Since October, he and other volunteers have worked to contact the heirs, clear the cemetery, identify the graves, and reach out to other resources to learn more about the history, culture, and people buried there.

During another recent visit, Meredith said the dogs found eight graves, including six known and two that were unknown in unsuspected areas.

"This was another one that we had never really identified, that was one of the ones that the dogs got a hit on, and we were thinking that 'well, maybe it is something to search here, I guess,'" Meredith said before digging slightly into the ground to reveal a buried object picked up by the dogs and a metal detector. "There is actually a shovel blade."

While Meredith was skeptical of the dogs at first because of the age of the graves and the uncertainties, he admits he has been encouraged by seeing the dogs in action. He and Boyd suspect that the dogs are getting more hits on older graves or those of poorer people, that may not have used embalming fluids, could not afford a headstone and were either buried in a wooden casket or wrapped in a sheet.

"That is really encouraging because we want to identify everybody that we can out here, whether we know who they are or not, but we want to be able to mark their graves," Meredith said referring to the dogs discovery. "Maybe the next generation will come up with doing a DNA project on this."

Recovery tools

Meredith described the dogs as another tool in the mission to save and reestablish the cemetery, an effort founded by John Eden in 2011. The organization has also reached out to the University of Houston to look into Ground Penetrating Radar that detects density contrast, under certain conditions.

He said the clearing effort has revealed more lineations that elevated isolated depressions to associations that had not been seen before.

"It helps me get a better feel for what I'm looking at and makes me feel more confident that what we are seeing are actually graves and not erosional effects," Meredith said. "I enjoy that too, but what I really enjoy is the community effort that is going on out here. We are seeing more and more people from the community out here."

While clearing, Meredith said he found a large conch seashell at the foot of a grave where rusty piece of railroad and cement headstone was uncovered. It remains a mystery.

"Over and over again we see shells associated with these graves here," Meredith said unsure of the cultural or personal significance to the burial. "It's significant, we want to leave it here and respect it as an object that was near and dear to the person that was buried."

Historical finds

Since the effort began, the group has been able to uncover the graves of several late African Americans hidden within it, including Montgomery County's only confirmed Buffalo Soldier, Luther James Dorsey, significant educators such as Mittie J. Campbell who is credited with opening the first school for black students in Conroe as its principal; and, others like Eliza Evans with the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor.

The volunteers and dogs also recently discovered the headstone of another daughter, Carrie Johnson who lived from 1868 to 1913.

The history of some of the people buried in the once-forgotten cemetery may be forever lost to society. But with the help of Millie, Emmett, and Bean and all of the

volunteers, the group hopes to learn and preserve the memory of as many of the late community members as they can.

"We are a public service so we are just glad that we are able to help with the project and be successful in doing this," Boyd said. "I think it is kind of a win-win. It's good for us, good for them, it's good for the dogs."

Since October, a new fence has been placed. Meredith said Conroe city officials helped fix the culvert and drive at the entrance of the cemetery and are working with the organization to be able to post a new official sign by April. The next clean up is scheduled for March 7. First Vice President Jean Smoorenburg encourages anyone with information about the cemetery and those buried there to reach out.

For more information visit cccrp.org.

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