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"The IDAHO BOOKS OF THE DEAD Issue, Part 1"

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by Tamara Shores

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Final Text: The Art of Headstones

by Tamara Shores

When I called over to Boise Valley Monument Company the other day, I wasn't sure exactly what to say I was doing. After all, how would it sound? I was writing a research paper on cemeteries for a book-making class. Even to me, it seemed a little strange.

So I fibbed. Well, not exactly fibbed. At the time my intentions were to look at headstones as books. For my research, it would be necessary to learn the process of making headstones. How people chose headstones and the information and images contained on them were questions that needed to be answered. But instead of saying that, I simply said that I was researching the history of Boise's Dry Creek Cemetery. Somehow, it seemed less morbid.

Boise Valley Monument in Cascade, Idaho



I wondered before dialing what kind of people make headstones. Would they be somber and serious? Or would they be creepy and strange? Would I seem "academic" to them? Would I yet again stick my foot in my mouth and say something silly like, "Have you ever noticed that headstones are the democratization of publishing?"

Instead, my phone call was received by a young-sounding woman named Kari and she was enthusiastic about my coming over.

"I've written lots of research papers on this place myself," she said.

It didn't feel so weird after all. Kari Fouts was my guide and ambassador at Boise Valley Monument Company.

The office and shop sit on the north side of Cascade, Idaho, a small community roughly one hundred and twenty miles north of Boise, the state capitol. Outside, in front of the office, are rows of blank headstones on display. The office building is a modest, cinder block structure with tinted windows and a cedar shingle roof. A horseshoe driveway separates it from Illinois Street, which ascends the nearby hill and leaves town. The shop is a separate building behind the office; it, too, is built of cinder block. Later as I left, I noticed that the mailbox out front is lettered with what can only be described as a "cemetery" typeface: one of those elegant, '40s-esque faces

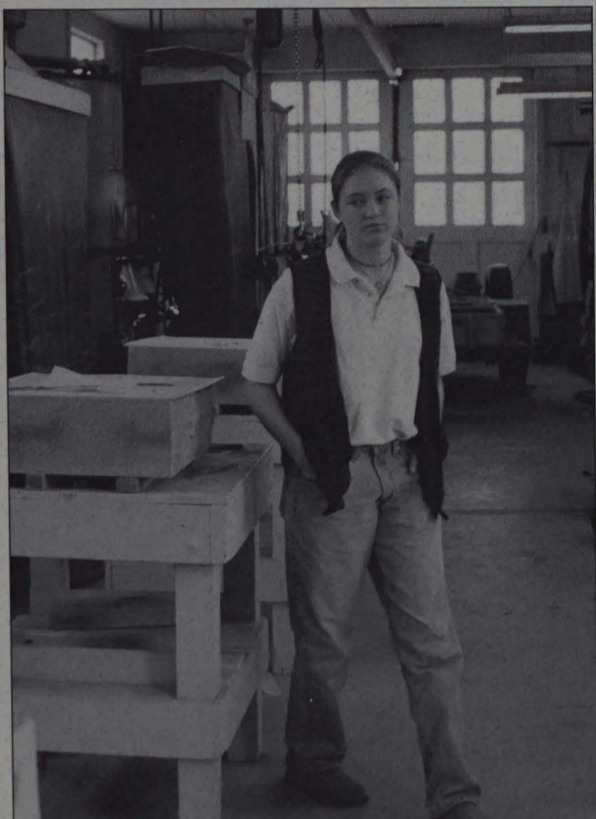
usually seen on older headstones.

Beneath a south-facing window inside the office sat a large jade plant. It was curvy and tangled, and I couldn't help but ask how long they'd had it. Kari laughed, answering the plant was as old as the business. For a moment I doubted her. She had just said that the company was started in 1963; she didn't look old

enough to remember. Then she drew me closer to the plant and pointed to a group of small, creamy flowers on the tip of one of the branches. Kari's grandmother, Mary, to whom the plant belonged, had told her it was the first time since bringing it in when they opened in '63 that the jade had ever flowered.

At age twenty, Kari is taking up the reins as the fourth Fouts generation to work in the headstone business. She and I talked for a while about college. She is struggling with that choice of majors, whether to go the practical route or the passionate route. I recommended the latter, and hope she will follow through with a Fine Arts degree. After all, I realized during the tour that Kari was not only a fourth generation headstone carver, but a fourth generation artist. In that sandy, dusty office and shop are a family-load of artisans, their skills and talents emerging in what many believe to be a taboo and morbid business.

Kari's grandfather, Harley Fouts, moved out to Idaho from Nebraska after the second world war. His father had been a stone mason and so it was only natural that Harley took a job with a local stone masonry, the Jeleson Brothers in Boise. Eventually, he struck out on his own, opening the Boise Valley Monument Company in 1963. What began as a business of mostly hand-carving and some sand-



Kari Fouts of Boise Valley Monument Co.



"A typo, being eternal, is an especially bad thing on a headstone."

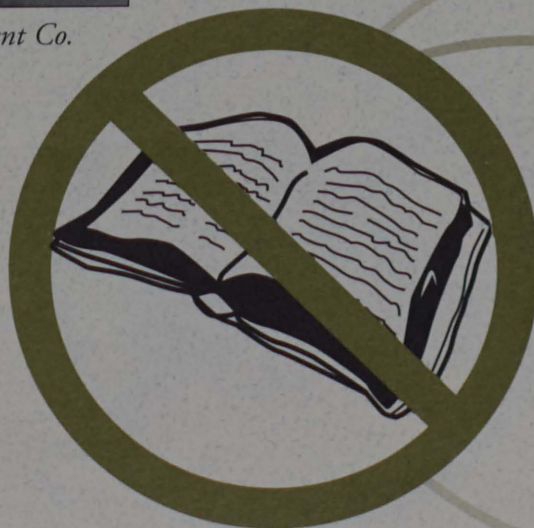
blasting has transformed into a computerized process involving specially designed plotting software and mechanized sandblasters. Now in his seventies, Harley and his wife, Mary, are still in the business, along with their two sons, Steve and Phil, and their granddaughter, Kari.

According to Kari, people who order headstones don't tend to follow any prescribed timing or etiquette. Orders are placed sometimes within the week of a death and sometimes years later. She described how some older couples place their order for a headstone before death. These they call "Pre-Needs." There are generally two routes Pre-Needs requests take: the order is either placed on hold until one of the couple calls, or the work is completed, excepting the death date, and held until needed.

The stones arrive pre-cut from the quarry. Inside the office was a photograph of one of the quarries in Elberton, Georgia. From there come the light gray granites. Royal Melrose, another popular granite and rosy in hue, comes from Coldspring, Minnesota. Kari, and later her father, Steve, were emphatic about working with granite. Not only does it last longer than the traditional marble, the stone accepts an easier and cleaner cut. Granite durability varies though. On display was a speckled kind called Carnelian. When light reflects off its surface, it appears pocked. The pocking is caused by its high mica-content, which in turn causes flaking even when polished.

Sometimes, the edges of the headstones arrive from the quarry chipped. Later, Steve demonstrated hand-cutting the edge to bring back its smoothness. With a chipper and a steel mallet, the cutting looked easy. It isn't. Because granite has a grain like wood, these edgings can sometimes be difficult to make.

Marble is perfect for hand-carving, but it wears over time and seemingly melts. The tools used to hand-cut marble wouldn't work on granite, for granite is too hard. On the other hand, the tools used in sand-blasting granite would nearly disintegrate marble. Also, marble crumbles if cut too deeply, consequently, text must be lightly etched into the stone's surface. Because it isn't very deep and the surface erodes away, text and images fade relatively quickly from a marble headstone. Perhaps it was because of its durability and life-span that granite eventually won out and became the stone of choice.



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Text design and images on a headstone vary. Customers may have pre-existing stones they need matched or designs they have already seen and like. Kari showed me sample books of grave markers and samples of granites in the office. The customer chooses letter styles, images, and special epitaphs for their headstone and then an order is placed. Steve helped with the tour of the business. He described their meticulous process of proofing headstones: a typo, being eternal, is an especially bad thing on a headstone.

In 1992, Boise Valley Monument Company began using a computer. With software called Composition spe-

cially designed for the task of designing headstones and monuments, the layout is created first on-screen and then printed onto paper using a Gerber plotter. This paper version is proofed by the customer before the next stage. Both Kari and Steve were proud of the computer; it has saved them hours of work hand-rendering or creating with letterforms the layout and images that would appear on headstones. Illustrations or pictures brought in by customers can be scanned and placed on the layout without redrawing by hand.

Once the design is approved, sheets of vinyl are fed through the plotter. Instead of printing to paper, the

image is cut into the vinyl to make a stencil for sandblasting. This step, too, eliminates hours of work hand-cutting stencils for the headstones.

The vinyl sheet is then taken out to the shop where it is transferred to a headstone. The backside of the vinyl sheet is coated with adhesive that is applied to the face of the stone. Inside the shop were several waist-high tables on which the headstones are placed horizontally. CM Lodestar pulleys hung from the ceiling for lifting the stones. Once the stencil is carefully measured (t-squares and rulers were abundant here) and applied, the sandblasting can begin.

- to be continued next newsletter

Diane Angoni, Keeper of Story and Place

by Karena Youtz

I managed to stay out of cemeteries until I was nineteen years old. Then, my best friend, who had rented a house on Boise's Bench near Morris Hill Cemetery, took me to Morris Hill to help her decorate a lonely grave she had adopted. I walked with her through the rows of graves with the unburdened realization that graveyards were places charmed by death, places where death functioned rightly and necessarily. Death peopled them.

Morris Hill was named for the Morris family, original owners of the property. The widow, Lavinia Morris, sold part of the cemetery's land to Boise Mayor James Pinney in January 1882. Kept and groomed, it still appears as calmly lovely as it did that day I first walked through it. Huge trees and green lawns give it a park-like feel. I go there now because I buried my daughter under one of the crooked cedar trees five years ago. When I had to choose her grave, I met Diane Angoni.

Diane holds the title of Senior Department Specialist. Her department is the Boise Park Department. She manages Morris Hill Cemetery, Pioneer Cemetery, and Fort Boise Military Reserve Cemetery from a small, 1960's style brick building on the south side of Morris Hill's main entrance. I met her there to purchase my daughter's grave. Few people do that, she told me recently. Most let the funeral home take care of it. To me, choosing my daughter's grave was a parental obligation like choosing a school or a doctor.

Diane walked me out to the infant section, section "I." She showed me the next available grave in the row. Unlike the rest of the cemetery, and for good reason, children's smaller lots are never sold pre-need. A dead child takes her place in line. I said no. The grave was too close to the road, stuck out a little there on the edge, and seemed unprotected. I looked around the section. There were many blank spaces. Thinking no headstone meant no body, I requested one of those graves, more central and sheltered.

Diane did not bother to explain, just asked me to go with her. We walked back to the office where she retrieved a large, ledger-like book with a decades-old, green cloth cover. Section book number seventeen. Its pages include those buried in sections "M" and "I" of Morris Hill. There are twenty-six section books in all.

As Diane carried the open section book seventeen, we returned to section "I," founded in 1936, to start our search. I found places without markers. They were graves. Diane told me who was buried in them. Many were unnamed children called Baby Boy or Infant Girl. Some with beautiful names, like Violet or Franklin, probably had parents who could not afford a granite or marble memorial. Finally, at section "I," block number thirty-eight, lot five, the seemingly untouched earth corresponded with a blank in the book.

We went back to the office where I paid for the grave. This transaction was noted in another book, the deed book, one of thirteen. Then my daughter's name was filed in the space in the section book. As she recorded these matters, Diane reassured me that I had found the right place, that this was not only an ending, but also was the beginning of a different relationship with my daughter.

For years, I held the knowledge of Morris Hill's ubiqity and its mysterious books with their amazing keeper privately. I visited my daughter's grave often. Sometimes I visited Diane, too. She had regular office hours and could be counted on for words of encouragement when grief seemed endless in its taking. Later, I relied on her for stories unique to the place and information about new burials. Then one day I mentioned her and the books to my English class. Thus, this article comes into existence, as does my making sense of something magical.

Diane Angoni tells the collective story of everyone buried at Morris Hill Cemetery. Her method of telling is

systematic, cross-referenced, and respectful. When I spoke with her, she continually utilized the cemetery's books as well as her computer programs to aid her impressive memory. Many entries in the books set off strings of stories. Tales attach to each other in a sensible tangle. She tells the stories in a way connected integrally to those books.

With each sentence she speaks it is obvious that she withholds a little something, yet not out of secrecy. It is a form of generosity. She believes she has given sufficient explanation, adequate to understanding and exploration. Perhaps because those discoveries meant so much to her, she allows them to be made by others again and again.

She pulls the books out from under the counter in her office as a magician retrieves infinite scarves. These

associate these jobs with the four main kinds of books with which she works and the computer programs she created. These include plat, deed, burial index, and section books, and the computer's section and burial files.

Two of the book types, the plat and deed books, like civilization's earliest records on wood, leaves, or clay, contain real estate information and transactions. The twenty-four-inch wide by eighteen-inch high plat map book holds engineers' drawings of Morris Hill's platted sections and its mausoleum as well as a plat map of Pioneer Cemetery. These look like the mechanical drawings of subdivisions one finds at City Hall. Newer plat maps are blueprint pages. One would not suspect that these maps, like historic neighborhoods, contain such things as subdivisions, but this is what they are called, even at Morris Hill.

This is real estate. The real estate. The deed has the name of its dead owner on it. You can take something with you, after all. The deeds are listed in deed books, currently numbering thirteen. The first page of book one is dated August 22, 1883. The lot cost \$1.75. When any lot is sold, the City of Boise issues a deed. The owner holds the original. Deed books remain vital records for obvious reasons.

Diane is a real estate agent. When people buy pre-need, one of her favorite lines is, "Tell your friends you bought a couple of lots on the Bench today." However, she lacks the professional obsequiousness of a real estate agent. This is not just because she does not work on commission. One gets the sense that she cares. "You need a place," she says. She is sincere, not thinking really of you or herself, but the generations after us who might come looking for their history, or to put flowers on the grave of a great-great someone known only by name.

Most of those names can be found in the burial index books. There are five of these, printed and embossed for Morris Hill by the now expired organizations Capital News Publishing and Syms-York Company, formerly of Boise. The first burial index book starts March 29, 1882. It looks just like it should. It is tall and narrow. The coffee brown leather spine is molded with ridges that make it look like a skeletal human spine. The pasted down end papers are richly colored and marbled emerald, rose and gold. The first entry, dated March 29, 1882, reads "William R. Lindsay, male, white, D.O.D. March 28, 1882, Scrofula, fifteen years five months, Lebanon, OR." This is the only index book that notes along with name, sex, race, date and cause of death, the deceased's age, occupation, nativity, and sometimes, doctor. It is good history, a handwritten death record which also tells about lives, tells about people who drowned, burned, or died from teething.

Names were copied into new directories, so the books' dates sometimes overlap each other. The first index book lists the dead from 1882-1907. There is also one from 1882-1941, one from 1890-1942, and one from 1941-1954. The last one lists burials from 1942-1995. One can see from the overlap that different people at different times tried to put the list together in semblance of order so the search for a relation could be simplified.

- to be continued next newsletter

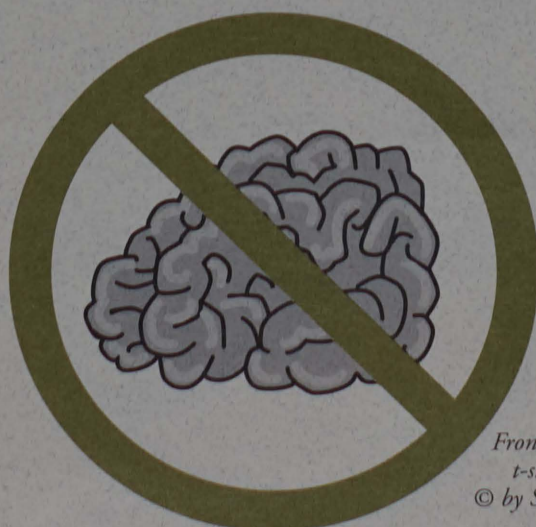


Diane Angoni, the Morris Hill Cemetery "Keeper."

volumes never leave Morris Hill. All are unique. Her job requires her to interact with them and with the people who need their information. She translates and tells, has the information people need when they come to her. She directs people to graves, tells them what they can put inside caskets (anything that fits), comforts mourners, and offers words of counsel.

When she talks with those in the business, men from the funeral homes and monument companies, she chats a little. They are friends. I overheard her at the end of a telephone conversation with one of them. She told him one of her dreams. In the dream she realized she was dying. It occurred to her that if she were dying she would not have to worry about money anymore. Then she laughed.

She has been with the department of Parks and Recreation for seven years, six of which she has held her current position of Senior Department Specialist. Previously, for eleven years, she worried about other people's money as a junior trader then institutional broker at Merrill Lynch in New York. Before that she helped people stay comfortable on transoceanic charter flights as a stewardess for Seaboard World Airlines. Prior to stewardessing, she acted as corporate secretary for San Francisco's Golden Gate Casket Company. She said she has had other jobs, too, but likes the one she now has. She is in charge of the three cemeteries' information, a job which is many jobs. I



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