

First Forum, First Lutheran Church, St. Peter -- March 13, 2022
“Forty Plus Years Tending Resurrection Cemetery, “
by Jim Stenson

Question: “How many cemeteries serve St. Peter and their names?”

Audience: “Woodlawn,” “Green Hill,” “Calvary,” and “Resurrection.”

Question: “When was the name changed from “Swedish” to “Resurrection?”

Jim: Probably some time in the 1920s when “First” changed its name.

Question: Why did they call it “Resurrection?”

Jim: The third article of our creed speaks of the “resurrection.”

How did Jim come to take on the management of Resurrection Cemetery? In 1977 Pr. Dennis Johnson asked Jim, who was a FLC member, to do so. In 1978 a Cemetery Committee was formed consisting of Windy Block, John Malmberg, Arne Langsjoen, and Jim Stenson. They formulated rules and policies, hired people to do the necessary work at the cemetery, and generally, Jim dates his cemetery management from this time.

Today the Cemetery Committee consists of five members of FLC, plus the pastor, plus an FLC Council representative, namely, Barb Wilkinson, chm., Paul Haukoos, Carol Solberg, Tom Nelsen, Pr. Chris, Bill Kautt and Gordon Long. Laurie Dietrich is treasurer. Paul Aasen and Barb Haack are advisors and Nita Aasen is historian. Jim Stenson and Tom Thorkelson, Managers. This Committee has been very active in effecting a number of improvements, including Barb and Dale Haack’s sponsorship of the attractive sign at the entrance of the cemetery.

The Cemetery dates back to the 1860s--a history described in our current Cemetery brochure. Access to the cemetery used to be from the north, off what was then highway 99 (currently Jefferson Ave.) The cemetery property was adjacent to St. Peter State Hospital property. In 1952 highway 99 was moved to its present location, cutting through state owned property. This presented the cemetery with some unresolved issues. The highway construction leveling moved some earth to a creek bed running through the cemetery, making drainage a problem. Further, it left the old state hospital cemetery adjacent to our own cemetery property, but separated from the state hospital by the highway. It also meant a new

driveway needed to be built to come into the cemetery from the south off the new highway. A grassy field also needed mowing and in the '50s Jim remembers his uncle Shorty Gustafson cut and baled the hay there--a practice continued with various area farmers to this day, the cemetery offering the hay free for the work done.

By the time Jim began in the '70s, three sections of the cemetery were in place, identified by section corners marked by stately trees. The state hospital cemetery, dating up to c. 1910, is in the southeast portion, marked with a large white cross. Interestingly, among those buried in that section lies Jim's wife Diane's, great-grandfather, who, due to a traumatic brain injury caused by an accident with his horse, ended up as a patient at the state hospital. His is one of the few markers in that portion with a name designation. The problem is a prairie fire swept through that area in the early years destroying wooden grave markers. Currently grave stones with numbers up to c. 400 plus may be identified with records retained by the state hospital.

With the new highway separating the state hospital cemetery and grazing land from the state hospital itself, Representative Carl Johnson, local farmer elected to the Minnesota Legislature, negotiated the sale of state lands north of the highway and adjacent to the cemetery, to Resurrection Cemetery for \$100, in return for which Resurrection Cemetery would maintain and care for the state hospital cemetery. Area farmers continue to mow and bale the grazing land included in this transfer to Resurrection Cemetery.

One new issue the cemetery faces is recent changes in burial customs. Cremations have become much more common and this is no issue--two cremains may be interred in one cemetery lot. A greater problem is what are called "green burials." Our initial experience was the very moving practice of missionaries Stan and Marie Benson, wishing their burials to be in the custom of those with whom they had carried out their ministry in Africa--no vault, no embalming, a simple metal-free casket or shroud, with an additional price assessed for future grave maintenance for earth settling. More recently, liberties have been taken with the definition of "green burial"--details of which await resolution between the cemetery and funeral directors and families.

Rules are in place describing the dimensions and locations of monuments. The cemetery is currently on sound financial footing, although current low interest rate returns on bank Certificate of Deposits present a challenge when compared with the high returns from CDs in the 1980s.

The tornado of 1998 destroyed much of St. Peter, wreaking havoc on the cemetery, especially. A local newspaper article (brought by Carol Solberg for the FLC archives) described the damage to the cemetery. The shed was ruined. Trees were down, breaking grave stones and uprooting a vault. It was a total mess. Having to deal with the destruction of his own downtown business, Jim told Pr. Mark Solyst that it was all just too much for him to handle, so Pr. Solyst took on this immediate responsibility, formed a salvage operating group which went to work on the tedious job of removing debris and rebuilding roads in as careful and delicate a manner possible so as to avoid causing further damage to the cemetery. One consequent change in policy is that no longer are trees permitted to be planted by individual graves, thereby preventing similar future destruction.

Nita Aasen, especially since the tragic death of her and Paul's sons, has taken on the important task of researching and keeping current grave records, including names, dates and precise locations, with the help of the website organization, Find a grave-- www.findagrave.com Paul Aasen has also been very involved with the cemetery committee over the years.

Jim's current role as manager of the cemetery is shared with Tom Thorkelson. They meet with people seeking to buy a cemetery lot or lots, identify specific locations, conduct the sale, and encourage, where applicable, that people plan their monument ahead of time, saving survivors that task.

Richard and Judy Noyd bear special mention as volunteers. Although not First Lutheran members, in honor of their daughter who is buried at Resurrection, they do close mowing and grass trimming around graves after the larger mower has done its work, as well as clearing the drive of snow during the winter months--a significant contribution, indeed.

Postscript:

Jim has now been involved with Resurrection Cemetery for over forty years, taking over that duty from Harold Overn, former FLC member and County Auditor. Every Spring and Fall, the Stenson brothers and a cadre of volunteers would gather for a Cemetery Cleanup Day, with over-the-top refreshments served by Diane, Jim's wife. In that cemetery are buried the Thorns, the Gustafsons, the Stenson parents, and soon to be interred remains of Tom--four generations of Gustafson-Stensons. No wonder when Jim saw the tornado destruction, the newspaper quoted him as saying, "I was so overwhelmed and saddened, I didn't even want to see the detail." Since that time, the sadness of countless bereaved families has been assuaged by the well ordered beauty of Resurrection Cemetery, in no small part due to the stewardship of Jim Stenson.

(notes by Gordon Long)