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Uncommon ground: Landowner opens green cemetery in co-op's path

HUNTSVILLE — In the piney woods just outside this East Texas prison town lies the grave of a homeless man.

Except for a slight mound of pine needles and a small iron cross, the grave would go unnoticed by the chance passer-by. There's not a hint as to whose remains were placed in a cardboard coffin and slipped into the earth by strangers.

At first glance, it's the perfect setting for a Halloween tale. But dig a little deeper, as it were, and it turns out this simple grave is part of something a bit more, well, complicated.

It is one of two graves in Texas' first green cemetery, according to George Russell, a self-described "militant ecologist and environmentalist" who owns the land.

The idea is to avoid embalming chemicals and the costly materials that make up most modern coffins in favor of simple biodegradable materials and an old-fashioned, ashes-to-ashes, dust-to-dust burial.

"It's been my dream since 1968 to open a green cemetery," Russell said. "Modern cemeteries are a sort of toxic waste dumps. They turn you into a sort of toxic pickle. This way you really become part of nature. It's a form of perpetual life."

The local power company ascribes a different motive to Russell's fledgling 81-acre cemetery. Sam Houston Electric Cooperative had plans to run a transmission line through Russell's land long before he bought it. They see the cemetery as a ploy.

"Mr. Russell is an interesting guy to say the least," said Mark Davis, the cooperative's attorney. "His cemetery is only the last thing he's created to try to stop this line. I've actually had a situation like his before, where somebody buried a body to try to stop a transmission line. It's a nice try."

Or is Russell terribly popular among regular folks in Huntsville, a politically conservative town famous for its execution chamber. It didn't help that he started his own church and named himself prelate.

"It's just hate," Russell said. "It's just nothing more than bigotry, hate and stupidity."

The idea of green cemeteries has been around for a while. They are popular, for example, in the United Kingdom. And while there are no statistics on the practice in the United States, it is generally accepted that the first one opened in South Carolina in 1996. Another followed shortly after in Florida, and the National Funeral Directors Association knows of interest in California and the Chicago area.

Still, industry officials take offense at Russell's "toxic pickle" description.

"It is irreverent to refer to embalming as he did," said Robert Biggins, a spokesman for the funeral directors association. "Embalming is a cleansing process by which bacteria is removed from the body. It is just the opposite of what he described.

"The number of problems that have occurred in cemeteries has been minuscule," Biggins said. "And that's because there are boards of health in every city and county to monitor those issues, and cemeteries are managed by professionals."

In his cemetery, which he launched last year, Russell sells single plots for \$300 and family plots — enough room for 12 people or 24 pets — for \$3,000. However, he'll accept less or nothing for a single plot, depending on what a person can afford. That was the situation in the case of the first burial, in which a funeral home in Willis contacted Russell about a recently deceased transient.

Russell buried the man in January in a wooded area slated years ago to be cleared by the electric cooperative for a transmission line.

Russell claims the project is a costly boondoggle, while the power company says it needs the line to guarantee reliable service to its rural customers. The Public Utility Commission of Texas is currently hearing the case.

There seems to be very little common ground between Russell and the power company. The transmission line would require crews to cut a 40-foot right of way through 2.7 miles of land that Russell has earmarked for a number of preserves and sanctuaries. This route includes nearly a mile of cemetery land.

Russell liberally uses the word "evil" to describe the company and its plans. He's quick to point out that he has bought most of the acreage in the area that hasn't been clear-cut or turned into pasture and sanctified much of the property as part of his church. He thinks the power company should reroute its line through less environmentally and spiritually sensitive land.

Bruce Stulting, preacher at Fish Hatchery Road Church of Christ in Huntsville, also takes a dim view of Russell. Stulting railed against Russell and his church's acceptance of people of an "alternative lifestyle" in a column in the Huntsville Item.

"He's an environmentalist and a religionist, and he's trying to blend the two together," Stulting said. "If he wants to do that he should be a Druid. There is a religion that does that already, but don't drag Christianity into it. When he tries to remold Christianity into something other than what it is supposed to be, that's where I have a problem."

However, the preacher doesn't think Russell's religion, which he said sounds like a "cult," will find fertile ground in the conservative area.

"He has a reputation here of being pretty radical in his efforts," Stulting said. "It is hard to judge this guy. He is independently wealthy and he is used to having his

way. People in this community know this guy."

Russell, 59, is a character, to say the least. He displays a boundless energy — hiking through the forest at a breakneck pace, all the while treating his companions to a running commentary and ecology lesson on the wonders of nature.

Through a variety of land deals, Russell has managed to put together about 2,500 acres in East Texas around the tiny community of Waterwood on Lake Livingston.

Most is wilderness area and longleaf pine country — a stark contrast to the tree farms and pasture most of the area has been turned into. The land was platted for Waterwood in the 1970s, but remained undeveloped when the retirement and resort community failed to take off.

"The forest is gone except for what I have saved," Russell said. "The way East Texas is being liquidated is terrible."

Russell spent his personal fortune on the property and said he has gone more than \$2 million in debt to fund his vision of a wilderness sanctuary. He operates a firm that makes educational videos, but said he made most of his money by buying, turning around and then selling a bankrupt shopping mall.

Russell's preserve contains more than a few oddities. Among them is a roughly 20-foot-tall pyramid constructed as a one-fifth-scale replica of the Pyramid of Cestius in Rome. Russell built the structure two years ago at the request of his father, Kenneth, who had planned to use the building as a tomb after death.

However, Kenneth Russell, now 93 and able to quickly navigate forest trails with the help of two canes, has since opted for a green burial, leaving the structure as a conversation piece.

Another oddity is the 19th century log building converted into Russell's Chapel of the Nativity. Russell stops there twice a day to ask "baby Jesus" for help in preserving the area's natural state for future generations.

It's hard to put a label on Russell's Universal Ethician Church. It accepts people of all faiths, creeds and sexual orientation, but isn't organized in any formal fashion. All Russell asks is that people follow what he calls the "golden rule of the new millennium," which is an expansion of the generally accepted Golden Rule to include all living things.

Russell holds services exactly an hour before sunset on a peninsula that juts into Lake Livingston and is part of his 716-acre Holy Trinity Wilderness Cathedral.

The short, casual service entails the reading of Christian scripture and other inspirational passages of the members' choosing, some quiet time to commune with nature and, occasionally, the anointing of a deacon or priestess with "holy oil" — a mixture of frankincense and myrrh.

Russell has a standing invitation for any of his detractors to attend the service. If they find anything negative or dangerous about the gathering, he said he'd hand them \$100.

Waterwood resident Terri Reed, 53, who has attended several of Russell's church services, is sold on the idea of green burial and has reserved a plot for herself.

"It goes with my philosophy of life," she said. "I was brought up on a farm, and I'm very in touch with the whole cycle of life and death. Funerals seem like a secular type of thing, removed from spirituality. The idea of having a simple burial in a pine box or just wrapped in cloth really appeals to me."

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