

Western Kentucky University

From the Selected Works of Sue Lynn McDaniel

June 2, 2016

Cemeteries: WKU Professor has Info, Seeks Info

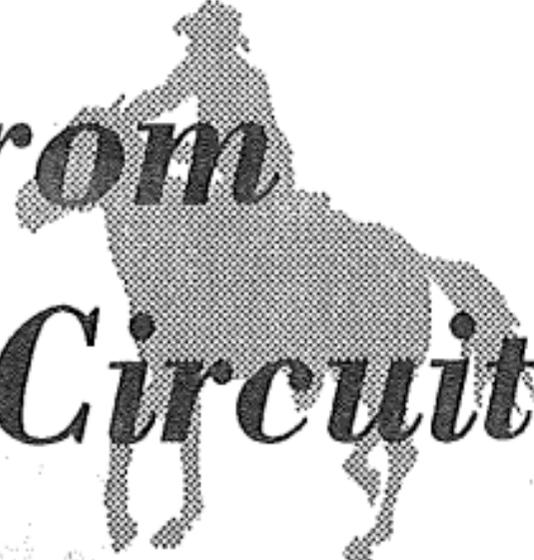
Sue Lynn McDaniel, interviewed for an article, *Western Kentucky University*



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News From

The Circuit Rider

Cemeteries: WKU Professor has Info, Seeks Info

By Rachel Herrington

C-T Staff Writer

"The woman who does death."

That's how Western Kentucky University historian Sue Lynn McDaniel has been described. She loves spending time in cemeteries, but not for the creepy reasons many might assume.

McDaniel earned her nickname because she is passionate about preserving Kentucky's historic cemeteries. And she wants land owners who may have a historic cemetery on their property to understand the importance of protecting them and creating a sense of pride among property owners.

"As an associate professor in Library Special Collections, I tend to tell the students I'm an 'ephemeral librarian,'" McDaniel said.

Prior to that, she served as the university archivist for 10 years.

"I take care of all the paper items that were intended for a temporary use but have a more permanent use, like

greeting cards, social and funeral invitations, invoices, statements," she explained.

"There are a few of us who keep, and those who keep often keep history without realizing it."

McDaniel has a special interest in 19th century etiquette, customs and Victorian symbolism involved with early cemeteries.

"I'm interested in more than names on stones or birth and death years," McDaniel said.

Her fascination with the 19th century revolves around how burial and graveyards became cemeteries, doing away with the skull and crossbones ideas of death.

"That was the time when people quit building those foot squeezer coffins and started using rectangular caskets instead, because a casket is a box in which you keep something that is precious to you," she explained.

By working as a research assistant at WKU, many researchers would come in to

use local history items and locate ancestors and their graves. As a result, McDaniel formed a partnership with Warren County's Planning and Zoning office.

McDaniel estimates Warren County has at least 480 cemeteries although not all of them are located, much less documented.

A specific number for Allen County is uncertain, though the most recent Allen County Historical Society map has at least 190 documented cemeteries.

McDaniel's mission is to first encourage land owners to locate these cemeteries and get them documented.

She added that state laws are in place that govern the upkeep of cemeteries and prohibit destroying historic headstones, although they are seldom enforced.

For instance, if you own a piece of property that has a cemetery on it, you are expected to provide a way to and from it for family members or interested parties to visit, whether it's a gravel

road or even a bush-hogged path.

In the case of farmers who have cattle who graze near a cemetery, a fence is required to be placed around the stones so the animals don't trample or knock over the markers.

Upkeep of the area is another requirement. Weeds and other vines can wreak havoc on the old stones.

"Over time, if too much undergrowth occurs, some stones even end up underground," McDaniel said.

McDaniel is prepared to do the grunt work in helping land owners locate and document cemeteries. She's had special training in cleaning stones and retrieving names and information from them.

Last summer, she visited a Warren County cemetery and had to go through four rows of corn to get to it.

She and the farmer spent hours combing through the area and identifying elements on the grave markers.

"Many property owners

are interested and kind because if it were their family, they would want the right to see and clean the cemetery," she added.

McDaniel's long-term mission is trying to get more people in all counties involved in caring for endangered cemeteries. "Most of these are sitting on people's farms, way off the road where nobody knows that they are."

A cemetery database maintained by the Kentucky Historical Society exists so cemeteries can be reported to them. McDaniel and other volunteer members of the Warren County Cemetery Board are lobbying for Kentucky to look at their qualifications for pioneer cemeteries to make it possible for all counties to qualify for this, not just those in the eastern region of the state.

For a current project she's working on, McDaniel wants to find out where the most beautiful or unusual tombstones are located in

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Cemeteries

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the county. She's also seeking stories of people not being allowed to visit a family grave at an endangered cemetery because it is on private property.

As a new member of the nationwide Association of Gravestones Studies, McDaniel is attending a conference at Xavier University in Cincinnati this month. She'll be speaking in a panel discussion there about protecting endangered cemeteries as a private resident. She hopes to garner interest for this topic to create a sense of pride for property owners.

"It's one of those tasks that you know in a perfect world how it should be, but in reality you know what you're up against," she said of her mission.

Those interested can visit Findagrave.com to locate ancestors and cemeteries. McDaniel has also established a private Facebook page, Friends of Warren County Cemeteries, where people can ask for help in locating a particular family's cemetery or report damage to a cemetery.

"Allen County is fortunate to have a historical society actively working on this issue," she added.

McDaniel will be speaking on the issue at the Historical Society as part of the Delroy Hire lecture series later this year.

Contact McDaniel at (270) 745-3246, sue.lynn.mcdaniel@wku.edu with any questions.

"I'd be more than willing to put on my waders for anyone who wants me to go out and look at a cemetery," she said.
