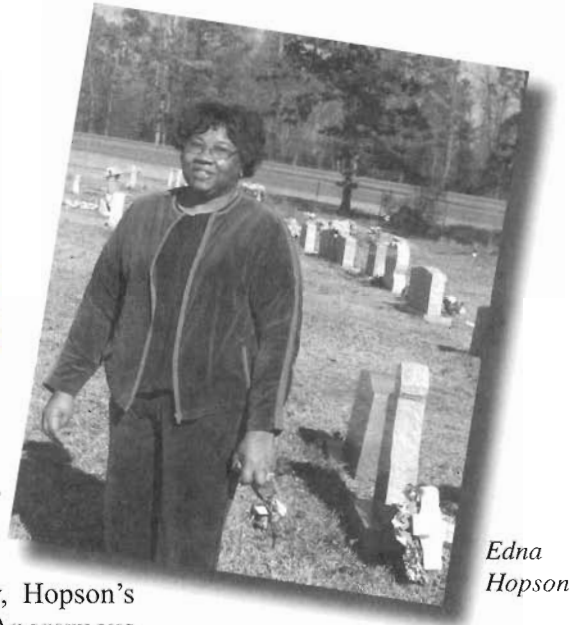


Preserving local history by

Saving the Cemeteries

by Jeff Root, AHC Board Chair



Edna Hopson

A clear day in Waldo is likely to find Earnest Hills and Edna Hopson in Cedar Grove Cemetery, each devoted to saving a piece of history in a town where the future is in doubt.

With its schools consolidated with those in nearby Magnolia and many of its young people leaving town, Waldo struggles to find a path to a viable future. Its history, too, is in danger.

For Hills and Hopson, that history is wrapped up in Cedar Grove Cemetery, where at least 169 residents completed their chapters in the community's story. Just as competition choked out much of the Waldo business district, the cemetery is in danger of being choked out by the surrounding piney woods. Hills does his part with a lawn mower and trimmer, using his own gas, his own equipment and his own unpaid effort. A retired elementary school principal, Hills can protect the gravesites for now, but he doesn't know who will come forward when his time is done.

Hopson, also a retired educator, is doing everything within her power to create a long-term plan to save the cemetery and mine the local history it has to offer. With assistance

from the Arkansas Humanities Council and the Arkansas Archeological Survey, Hopson's organization, Angels Anonymous Cemetery Association, is restoring and preserving three African-American cemeteries: Cedar Grove in Waldo, Laneburg Cemetery and Cravens Cemetery in Prescott.

Edna Hopson quickly enlisted her husband, Homer, in Angels Anonymous. In addition to Hills, other leaders in the effort soon included Homer's brother, Herman, and his wife, Juanita. Edna, as project director, landed a \$1,000 AHC planning grant in 2005 and an AHC major grant for \$6,829.55 in 2006.

The immediate work includes compiling cemetery documentation, mapping and photographing the sites, and fencing the known boundaries. Locating boundaries now lost in the woods, repair to individual grave sites, remote sensing to find unmarked graves and the placement of footstones where no headstone is present will follow.

Both Edna and Juanita became motivated when they saw major differences in where loved ones were buried. Juanita

lost a son 14 years ago. A veteran, he was buried in a beautiful military cemetery in Riverside, California.

"At that time I was living in California, and I would come home during the summer and go see my grandparents," Juanita said. "Their cemetery wasn't up to par. I would go out there and pull weeds. Then when I moved down here I read about the humanities council . . . we filled out applications to get in here and improve our cemetery.

"It's just a shame we put someone in the ground . . . even though we know their soul is not there, but that's the last place you put their body. Honor that. That's what we're trying to do," Juanita Hopson said.

Edna Hopson, who has started more than one non-profit community organization since her retirement as an elementary teacher, attended an AHC meeting in 2004 to learn more about cemetery preservation. It was led by Jama Best, program officer for AHC, and featured Dr. Ann Early,

state archeologist of the Arkansas Archeological Survey, and Tamela Tenpenny-Lewis, who has much experience preserving historic African-American cemeteries. Edna went to work immediately.

"Jama came down and gave us all the information we needed to get started," Edna said. "She did assessments of the cemeteries. She has provided assistance by e-mail. Lavona [Wilson, senior program officer with the AHC] helped also. We had never written a grant before. They were so kind about helping.

They put you on the right track. They will give you technical help. When you get stuck on research, you



call them and they'll steer you in the right direction.

"I haven't seen an organization like AHC. If you're organized and want to do something, they'll jump in and help you do it. If they can't give you assistance, they can show you where to get it. They educate you."

The Arkansas Archeological Survey also provided significant assistance, from the original presentation the Hopsons heard from Dr. Early to cemetery visits from David Jeane, assistant with the AAS research station at Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia.

The Laneburg cemetery is perhaps the most mysterious of the three. Its proper name is unknown. The land is privately owned, but the cemetery originally was associated with a local Baptist church. The association

ended when the church moved to Prescott 50 years ago.

At Cravens Cemetery, Angels Anonymous faces the rather daunting challenge of clearing a line of trees and underbrush in order to locate both marked and unmarked graves. On a recent venture into the brush, Edna found markers for people she knew.

"My former neighbors are out there on the edge of the woods," Edna said. "We didn't put a fence up on that side because we know there are graves out there. We're

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JUANITA HOPSON

going to try to clean it up and get their names on record."

Finding unmarked graves can be achieved through remote sensing, but determining the identities of those who either don't have a headstone or have an unreadable one is quite another challenge. For this reason, the Hopsons are conducting oral histories.

"I was interviewing and videotaping one of the trustees, and he was telling me where people were buried who did not have headstones, so we could get footstones," Edna said. "The oral history will substantiate what we're finding in obituaries. It is first-hand information that allows us to be sure what we're finding is true.

"We're trying to validate what we're doing. When you know you have the truth, then you don't

mind sharing it with other people. With oral history, we're getting names and they're showing us places where people are buried. We want to preserve it and share the information with the public."

Sharing the information, whether with genealogical researchers or collectors of local history, includes the final goal for the group – finding the next generation of citizens interested in protecting the cemeteries. Juanita hopes people will see the logic of becoming involved.

"With our younger kids . . . if we can just get them interested in it, so they can keep it up," Juanita said. "We're all

going here someday . . . whether it's here or another cemetery, we'll all going. I would like to think that someone out there is taking care of the final resting place for my physical body."

Edna agrees and believes she's finally seeing positive signs.

"The greatest reaction we've seen so far has been in Prescott, because the church where I attend is associated with one of the cemeteries," Edna said. "They've always tried to keep it presentable, but since we've been involved more people have been trying to help. We've had more participation.

"The beauty shop is where I tell a lot of people about this. It's been hard getting started, but if you let it [the cemeteries] go down, they'll never [preserve it]. This is something that is very important. We need this."

REFLECTIONS

The Newsletter of the Arkansas Humanities Council

Vol. 31, number 1

Winter 2007

Council Awards \$133,052 in Major Grants

Special Features:

Cemetery Documentation and Preservation

The centerspread of this publication tells the story of endangered African-American cemeteries in Waldo, Lanesburg, and Prescott. Pages 6-8

Emancipation Proclamation

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The Arkansas Humanities Council board of directors met in November and approved 11 projects for a total of \$133,052 in grants. Cost-share for the projects will total \$707,534.

Major grant application deadlines are February 15 and September 15, and decisions are made in April and November, respectively.

The projects represent a variety of humanities disciplines and formats. Descriptions of the approved projects, categorized geographically, are listed below.

Northwest Arkansas

Arkansas Historical Association Annual Conference 2007. Sponsor: Arkansas Historical Association, Fayetteville. Project Director: Jeannie Wayne. Award: \$3,368.

The theme of the association's annual conference is "Not Just Black and White: The Fight for Civil Rights in Arkansas."

Land of Opportunity: Documenting the Civil Rights Story in Arkansas. Sponsor: University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Project Director: Tom Dillard. Award: \$6,065.

Original documents, illustrations and recordings on the history of Civil Rights in Arkansas will be identified and digitized.

The Buffalo Flows.

Sponsor: University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Project Director: Larry Foley. Award: \$24,642.

The history and heritage of the Buffalo River will be told through narratives and photography.

A Digital Legacy of World War II and the Arkansas River Valley. Sponsor: Arkansas Tech University, Russellville. Project Director: H. Micheal Tarver. Award: \$11,498.

Interviews of World War II veterans will be converted to digital format and mini-documentaries will be created.

Exhibit and Programs: Native American Rock Art and the Creation of the Sacred and Secular Spaces. Sponsor: ATU Museum of Prehistory and History, Russellville. Project Director: Judith Stewart-Abernathy. Award: \$12,681.

An exhibit on Native American rock art will be fabricated.

North Central Arkansas

As Long As I Remember: American Veterans. Sponsor: Ozark Foothills FilmFest, Locust Grove. Project Director: Bob Pest. Award: 2,180.

The personal legacies and experiences of Vietnam veterans are

Continued on page 2.