

Gone But Not Forgotten

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When I picture a cemetery, I don't see cracking headstones, leaves blowing underfoot, or a wolf howling into the moon. I don't feel scared, like I've been transported into a Halloween movie with a graveyard scene. Instead, I picture solid white headstones, beautiful blooming flowers, and American flags snapping in the wind placed on freshly mowed, bright green grass. The sun is shining and three people are there, puttingter about on John Deere lawnmowers: Tom Walker, Roger Lewis, and Ernie Goodrich. These three men are the Town of Shelburne cemetery groundskeepers. Though in their sixties and eighties, they keep the Shelburne Cemetery looking fresh and clean Tuesday through Thursday. It's these guys whom I have to thank for a positive image when I think of cemeteries.

The groundskeepers work hard to achieve their goals. The season runs from April 15th through October 31st, since snow prevents maintenance of the grounds in the winter. People tend to visit the cemetery in the summer, and when they do they find it looking pruned to perfection. Whether the day is sweltering hot or briskly cool, Tom, Roger, and Ernie will be outside working. "We mow, and we trim, and we prune shrubs and trees, and we do road maintenance and machinery maintenance," says Ernie. "The hardest part is the trim. Trimming around all the gravestones and the trees is the toughest."

The three men work seven hours a day, totaling a 21-hour workweek, usually going home to have lunch at their houses in Shelburne with their families. "Tuesday," says Ernie, "we mow all the big areas of the Village and St. Catherine's cemeteries, around the stones. It takes all day." Wednesday, they go to the Spear Street Cemetery and mow during the morning, trimming around the gravestones in the afternoon. And Thursday, the men trim all day back at the Shelburne Village Cemetery, finishing up any areas that didn't get mowed on Tuesday. On a

rainy (or prematurely snowy) day, the groundskeepers can be found in the shed—changing oil or filters, sharpening blades, or cleaning up the decks. The constant mowing of over 14 acres and trimming around thousands of headstones is a lot for three retired men.

All three pursue this part-time retirement job following strong business careers. Roger Lewis worked at General Electric for 30 years, and has continued to demonstrate his hard work ethic for the past 24 years at the Shelburne Cemeteries. At 86, this is no small feat. Tom Walker pursued a 40-year career with the Vermont Air National Guard before commencing work for the Town of Shelburne 11 years ago. Ernie Goodrich has followed his 36 years at IBM with eight years working as a groundskeeper. As the newbie to the group, Ernie was recruited because there was a spot that needed filling. “They were knocking on my door, asking me to fill the empty spot. I didn’t know if I’d be doing it at the satisfactory level, but they were busting at my chops, so I decided I’ll do it.” This decision has paid off, as the three have passed the barrier from coworkers into friends, and Ernie has exceeded his expectations, going from “satisfactory” to “outstanding.”

Shelburne has three town cemeteries, two of which are still used for burials—the Shelburne Village Cemetery and the Spear Street Cemetery. The Spear Street Cemetery dates back to the Civil War period, with tombstones containing names of soldiers in the 12th Vermont Cavalry and one man from the 8th Illinois Cavalry. In all three cemeteries, including the Webb Estate Cemetery at Shelburne Farms, there are 265 veterans. Such rich history is well preserved even in a town as small as Shelburne and a state as small as Vermont, all thanks to the three caretakers.

The Village Cemetery includes a cremation garden, cared for by Phyllis McEntee from its creation until her retirement. The garden was envisioned by the late Phil Smardon (1915-2001), a Shelburne Cemetery Commissioner for 24 years, who wanted to transform the side hill of the

cemetery which was unusable for conventional burials. Red and white geraniums, begonias, and petunias surround this square of land which faces south. A flag standing serenely between two square bushes pays its respects to the souls lying there. The work that the men do at this garden are the cremation burials—"we dig and bury" says Ernie.

Not only do the groundskeepers preserve a beautiful place where people can visit their loved ones or ancestors, but they are also active in the community. Once a year, they supervise a day when members of a work-release program come to work for service hours. These people, both men and women, have committed minor crimes and can pay their dues by doing community service, such as "springtime raking" after the snow has melted. The weeping willows continuously shed leaves, so it gives the three men a break from constant raking. Both parties benefit from this day because Ernie, Tom, and Roger are kind and accepting men, looking to help, not hinder. They give to their community every day by sprucing up the cemeteries, and are simply showing these people how they can benefit from the work as well.

Ernie Goodrich doesn't work at just the cemetery mowing lawns. On his days off, he mows his own sprawling double lot. His yard has belonged to him since he and his wife got married 44 years ago. Ernie makes sure both his lawn and the cemetery's grounds look great, because both are close to his heart. His yard shows the present, but the cemetery shows the past. It holds his parents' and his wife's parents' graves. "I visit my parents every morning," he tells me. And next to Ralph and Lois Cox, and Thomas and Eleanor Goodrich, lie two empty plots, someday to be the resting place of him and his wife.

The Shelburne Cemeteries are meaningful to my grandfather and me, and they also hold meaning to the Town of Shelburne. Not only are all the grounds groomed by the three men aesthetically pleasing, but they also hold influential people. Former Governor Richard Snelling is buried in the Shelburne Village Cemetery, and former Governor John Barstow—one of

Vermont's first governors—is also buried there. John Pennington, the former Vermont Railway President, also lies in the Village Cemetery.

Ernie, Roger, and Tom all care about their work so much that it becomes not just manual labor; it becomes a part of who they are. All three men are retired. But they really aren't. This is more than community service that they do. It is a job, for three long, tiring days of the week, and these men are honorable in showing up every day to get tasks completed with accuracy and efficiency—not to mention perfection. With everything they have to do, it is surprising that they aren't working late into the night. I am sure that if they could do that, they would. Maintaining three cemeteries is quite a job for three aging men, but they do it with a humble air, taking compliments on the beauty of their work but not basking in the glory of such a peaceful landscape. Ernie acknowledges, “The most rewarding part of this is hearing the overwhelming comments about how well the cemetery is kept—from people both in and out of state.”

Cemeteries should not look old and abandoned. They should honor the people who are laid to rest there instead of ingloriously leaving them to decay. This is the philosophy of the Shelburne Cemetery groundskeepers. They pride themselves in providing a place where the buried can lie peacefully and the living can come visit them. Ernie knows visitors come to lay flowers next to gravestones, but it's these three working men that make the grounds the best possible place to pay respects. “I have great pride, and we all work our hardest to make it look the best. I'm proud to be part of the crew that loves what they do.” With that kind of outlook, it's hard to envision any other cemetery but one with a beautiful landscape.

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