



HISTORY AND A RURAL TOWN COME TO LIFE

Dick Watts recognized for work with historic cemeteries

by Karen Bonaudi

He started by clearing brush in the Slovak cemetery in Roslyn, Washington, where his wife's family was buried, but Dick Watts' energy, vision and pure love of all it represented grew and captivated the rural community of about 1,000 people. And in May he was named the 2010 Humanities Washington Award recipient for his work and advocacy for Roslyn's historic cemeteries.

"It was a complete surprise to me," says Watts, who didn't know he had even been nominated until Humanities Washington Executive Director Julie Ziegler called to inform him of his award.

The Humanities Washington Award is presented annually to an individual or organization whose time and talents enlarge the meaning of the humanities and has demonstrated outstanding achievement in the public humanities in Washington State. In addition to a reception in his honor at the Masto Conference Center at Big Bend Community College on June 3, Watts also had the opportunity to direct a \$1000 grant to a humanities project.

Watts' choice was the Roslyn Cemetery Commission through the non-profit Roslyn Cemetery Beneficial Association, which his work and vision inspired. In his nomination, Lea Beardsley, president of the Association, noted that Watts "has shown imaginative leadership and has been an inspiration, a driving force, and a workhorse in maintaining and generating interest in Roslyn's historic cemeteries."

More than two dozen ethnicities and nationalities are represented in the cemeteries, the largest grouping of old city, ethnic and fraternal lodge cemeteries in the Northwest, with roughly 5,000

gravesites dating back to the 1800s.

"My father-in-law Albert Bendzak took care of Slovak cemetery from 1925 until he died in 2004," says Dick Watts. Albert's father was a coal miner who died in 1925 of black lung disease while his lungs were being drained in his kitchen. Albert was 11 years old.

During the building of the Northern Pacific Railroad, coal was discovered in upper Kittitas County and the cities of Roslyn and Cle Elum were founded. Soon coal miners from more than 20 ethnicities came west to take up the treacherous work. The last coal mine didn't close until 1963.

"People joined lodges because they shared a common culture and language, but mainly because there was no insurance to take care of injured miners or the widows and orphans of those who died," says Watts. Lodges, in effect, became extended families during their lives and developed individual plots to bury their dead.

The Roslyn Historical Cemetery is actually 27 contiguous cemeteries enclosed in 15 acres of wooded hills above town. Lodges represented fraternal, ethnic, religious and other organizations, among them the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF); Knights of Pythias Lodge; Soloka Lodge; Wanapum Tribe 28, Improved Order of Redmen; Cacciatori D'Africa (literally Hunters of Africa – an Italian Lodge), Croatian Fraternal Union Lodge No. 56, SNF Lodge No. 79 (Croatian); Saint Barbara Lodge No. 39 (Greek Catholic); and Dr. David Starceovich Lodge No. 56 (Croatian), according to Wikipedia. There are even 3-4 graves in

a pauper cemetery, says Watts.

Watts' wife was originally from nearby Ronald and in 1975 the Sammamish couple bought a second home in Roslyn so their children could experience a small town and their grandparents.

And Dick took an interest in the cemeteries.

"The volunteer work has been doing on for years, starting with the lodges taking care of their own gravesites at their own expense," he says. "But as family and lodge members died off, the graves and cemeteries as a whole fell into disrepair and vegetation began to reclaim the open space." And Hazelnut brush, he says, can grow 10-12 feet high.

First leading by example, Watts raised community interest and commitment and was eventually persuaded to join Roslyn's Cemetery Commission. He became chairman of the group in 2008. Since that time he has led the group in organizing work parties, spearheading a \$16,000 parking lot upgrade, rebuilding roads, thinning trees, building fences to keep out livestock and developing walking trails.

"What we did was reorganize, so that all the cemeteries could be looked after," says Watts. "Today an amazing number of volunteers – Rotarians, Kiwanis, the high school and local contractors – have helped restore damage done by nature and vandals, and preserve the ethnic artifacts and monuments, each individual to its own culture."

He is given credit for strengthening the Commission by working with others to draft a mission statement that highlights the cultural significance of the cemetery. He also works tirelessly to promote the importance of the cemetery to others outside of the

Roslyn area. "Busloads of tourists come over from the Westside, especially from universities," he says.

Presently, a hospitality tent welcomes visitors with cookies and drinks as well as a guest registry for on-site events like a Catholic mass on Memorial Day weekend, All Souls Day services and activities that pertain to individual cultures. The Roslyn Cemetery Beneficial Association has established a website so others can support the work of the Commission.

What's left?

"There's a ton of work to do," says Watts. "We need to build a larger kiosk to house and distribute educational materials." Another goal is to educate people in cemetery etiquette and how to respect the hallowed ground.

The group wants to build monuments for each of the 27 cemeteries and is now appealing to different ethnic groups to share photos, historical records and advice on what's important to search out and maintain. For example, there are three Italian cemeteries, one named Druid, with stories to tell. All are visible reminders of the diverse cultural mix of settlers who lived and worked in the area as unskilled laborers in Roslyn's coal mines.

"Our mission is to protect cemeteries and share the culture they represent," says Dick Watts. "We want people to be able to see the monuments, be inspired and appreciate our history."

"There is life in the cemetery."

Visit the site of the Cle Elum – Roslyn Chamber of Commerce, <http://www.cleelumroslyn.org/>. The Events Calendar alone is worth the trip.

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