

A Kind of Change

Is there a better way to bury people?

by Kate Sweeney

To get to Ramsey Creek Preserve, the first green-burial cemetery in the nation, you have to find your way to Westminster, South Carolina, a settlement tucked unobtrusively into the Appalachian foothills where the corners of North and South Carolina meet. And to find Westminster, you have to drive down a series of two-lane roads that dip and curve for signless miles through farmland and forest. The nearest interstate, I-85, doesn't even acknowledge the existence of Westminster; the MapQuest directions to Ramsey Creek are baffling. It's easier just to ask for directions from someone who lives somewhere along the way.

Better yet, follow Kimberley Campbell, Ramsey Creek's co-founder, as she drives to the preserve (though you better pay attention because she takes curves fast), eventually turning off Long Creek Highway onto a smaller road that winds through the woods, past a few RVs, and finally narrows into a small gravel driveway flanked by sandstone boulders.

A "green" burial means interment without embalming fluids or anything else that isn't biodegradable. It's likely that your great-great grandparents buried their loved ones in much the same way; and burial without embalming is a long-standing tradition in Jewish burial, too. But despite these cultural and historical ties, Ramsey Creek raised the eyebrows of a number of its neighbors when it opened in 1996.

"I mean, 'Are they throwing bodies in the woods?'" Kimberley intones with put-on foreboding. "There was some of that."

Then there's the fact that Billy Campbell, Kimberley's husband and Ramsey Creek's owner, is also Westminster's town physician. A patient of Dr. Campbell's once jokingly

compared him to the proverbial vet who's also a taxidermist, whose sign reads, EITHER WAY, YOU GET YOUR DOG BACK.

Instead of resembling anything grisly or ghastly, however, Ramsey Creek is actually rather tranquil. Try to get creeped-out, and you'll only be sidetracked by a stand of orchids or a tunnel of mountain laurel. As you walk through the grounds, tall grasses rustle, pines sway, and cardinals and wrens twitter and chirp. Underneath all of it is the murmur of the creek itself.

Ministers who are used to leading families across tidy, manicured cemetery lawns are often a little wary of the dirt paths that curve down and around the forested hills here. But then, says Kimberley, "A kind of *change* comes over them. I mean, the comments usually are, 'This is so peaceful. This is so calming. It seems right. It makes sense.'"

I actually like cemeteries—historic ones, at any rate. But most cemeteries today lack the grandeur of historic graveyards. Instead, they resemble golf courses, and are often located in commercial districts, sharing the block with, say, a Taco Bell. Little country churches are being replaced, slowly, by massive, vinyl-sided mega-churches. And the little church graveyards are being replaced by nothing.

Michael St. Pierre, president of the National Funeral Directors Association, says that as churches die, their parochial cemeteries are abandoned, and modern developments often just build right over the burial grounds. The graves find new homes in modern cemeteries, while the old church cemeteries simply disappear. "The biggest cost in operating the cemetery is the perpetual maintenance," says St. Pierre. "It's darned if you do, darned if you don't."

Meanwhile, the fastest-growing trend in the funeral industry is cremation, predicted by one recent study to outpace conventional burial by 2025. Most of the ashes produced each year across the country end up not in cemeteries or memorial parks, but in urns on the fireplace mantels and bureaus of widows, sons, and daughters. Understandably, cemetery operators are now making a big push for the columbarium, a massive shelving facility capable of housing anywhere from several dozen to several hundred urns under one roof.

The columbarium is about as far you can get from Ramsey Creek. Instead of vertical tombstones, the spots where bodies and ashes are interred are marked by flat, hornblendic rocks from the creek. (*Hornblendic*, a word Billy Campbell throws around a bit, refers to a dark brown, black, or green mineral that you'll find in many igneous and metamorphic rocks.) In about a hundred years, the names of the deceased won't be visible on these rocks at all. Other graves remain unmarked altogether. And green-burial cemeteries are less densely packed than conventional cemeteries: About a hundred people are buried in Ramsey Creek's thirty-four acres, which can accept about fifteen hundred burials, all told; conventional cemeteries average about two thousand burials per acre.

The land at Ramsey Creek, though, is about much more than just graves. For instance, the Campbells reserve the right to move someone's intended burial site if the spot interferes with a sensitive colony of plants. And when the Campbells dig up the soil, they set aside the plant-containing layer to be replaced once the grave has been covered over. Not being able to recognize Ramsey Creek as a cemetery right away has a lot to do with the fact that

many of the graves have disappeared into the woods.

This isn't true for every grave, however. As the grassy meadow Kimberley and I cross turns to forest, and the gravel walkway becomes a dirt path, shafts of light break through the trees here and there, and Kimberley begins pointing out the little hollows she and Billy have dug out beneath the flat stones, as dwelling places for ants. She tells me ants are responsible for distributing between eighty to ninety percent of all wildflower seeds.

She points to a lumpy spot to the left of the dirt trail and says it could be confused for a pit-mound disturbance, a spot where a tree has been uprooted, resulting in an upheaval of soil and an explosion of new organic activity, a common occurrence in forestland. "As you can see with the graves," she says, breezily pointing to the spot, "we dig them about three feet deep. But then we don't take any of the soil away. It all goes back." Which means you end up with a mound, and by the time all is said and done the body rests at about six feet under. In about two years' time, the body decomposes and the dirt settles again.

She does call it a body, by the way—not an "expired individual" or a "person who's passed." When Billy Campbell talks about shoveling dirt onto a casket, he doesn't call it "closing the grave site," he calls it a "burial." This doesn't seem unusual until you talk with conventional funeral-home types, for whom digging a grave becomes "opening an interment space," who refer to ashes as "cremains"

and someone's mother who's just died as "the decedent" (a term pilfered from the legal world). There's an entire idiom created with the aim of shielding a grief-stricken clientele, a palliative language meant to create a distance between the living and the experience of death.

On our walk through the preserve, Kimberley takes a couple of cellphone calls from prospective clients. She talks one person through her options: Go with a funeral home for a service before burying the body here, or simply use the funeral home for storage until the family is ready for a service at Ramsey Creek. She also gives some pointers on holding a service at home.

"Lots of dry ice," she says. It's the torso you need to concentrate on, since that's the space that holds the organs, which break down quickly. She has a matter-of-fact tone that makes her advice seem almost too casual, too easy. "Well, you know," she says after giving a good long listen, "the funeral directors have a license to embalm. That's basically what their license is for. And, you know, *that's it*."

People are surprised to learn that the law doesn't prohibit families from holding funerals at home, one of many misconceptions about the rules for processing the dead. Another fallacy is that if a body is not cremated, it is required by law to be embalmed. Yet another is that burial vaults are also required by law. (Actually, they're used by most cemeteries so that the ground doesn't sink.) Most of these misconceptions revolve around the idea that a dead body becomes something con-

tagious rather quickly, that it becomes dangerous. Kimberley says, "That is just not the truth. We're far more contagious alive. Dead men don't sneeze." It's an understandable fear, she says, bred by unfamiliarity and the horror of death. People wonder if they can really hold a home funeral; they want to know how soon the body begins to stink, how soon the skin changes, how soon our loved ones stop being our loved ones and turn into something else.

It's a concern that has helped the funeral business grow into a twenty-billion-dollar-a-year industry, one that profits mostly from a host of expenses that have nothing to do with a hole in the ground. Most profits come from casket sales and service fees. At a successful funeral home in Wilmington, North Carolina, operated by one of the biggest funeral chains in the country, most people end up paying around \$2,000 for a casket. A bronze model with fourteen-karat-gold-plated hardware and velvet interior goes for more than \$10,000, while a vault for a cremation box runs between \$895 and \$10,000. Then there's transportation—hearses for the deceased (\$195) and limos for the living (\$295)—the service fee for the funeral director and staff (\$2,495), and, on top of that, the rental of the little machine that lowers the casket into the ground, cards for the guests, the funeral register book, and that piece of bright green AstroTurf that surrounds the grave on the day of the funeral. Add all these details up and the most bare-boned, basic funeral usually runs between \$8,000

