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Pioneer cemeteries point out mystery in Oregon's history

■ Many graves contain pioneer families with an unknown history, and the state is trying to track down descendants

EUGENE — A small cemetery at the bottom of the long Willamette Valley is keeping family tradition alive for descendants of some of the earliest Oregon pioneers, who the state is finally trying to find.

The graves of John and Mary Gay Cogswell are in just one of the hundreds of pioneer cemeteries across the state, ranging from one to dozens of graves.

No one knows how many ancestors rest in small family plots. But the Oregon Legislature has ordered the state to find out, even though officials aren't sure how to start looking.

The key to documenting pioneer history may rest with descendants such as Emery Ingham, a Portland antique dealer who belongs to the fourth generation of a family that crossed the Oregon Trail more than a century and a half ago.

Ingham, 66, made a trip to the family cemetery west of Creswell over the weekend to bury a portion of the ashes of a cousin, Doris Norton of Long Island,

N.Y., who died last fall in her 70s.

Norton's family spread most of the remains in her favorite places back East. But Ingham will perform the final honor — making sure she becomes part of Oregon history.

Gathering at the cemetery has become a family ritual, and dozens of descendants show up every Memorial Day to trim the grounds, set new flags, eat a potluck picnic, tell stories and watch children of the family's fifth and sixth generations play among the headstones.

"This was a Garden of Eden to them, you know," Ingham said of the farm set in the long valley that is now home to most of the people in Oregon.

"Everything they planted grew," Ingham said. "Seeds, hopes, dreams — everything."

The family cemetery began in 1857, when John and Mary Gay Cogswell lost their first two children, daughters Mary Anne, 4, and Florilla, 1, to scarlet fever.

John Cogswell was born in 1814 in New York, helped herd horses to California in 1845 and worked his way north the next year. He was nearly shipwrecked heading back to California for the gold rush of 1849, but was lucky enough to survive and strike it rich.

He carried as much gold as he could to Pennsylvania, had it minted and bought a herd of cattle, horses and sheep. In 1851, he drove them to Oregon to build a ranch.

One day, while scouting ahead of the herd, Cogswell came upon a wagon train with one of the prettiest women he'd ever seen. Family lore says 19-year-old Mary Francis Gay had already quickened men's hearts from Missouri to Oregon, and the love-struck Cogswell hurried back to his cattle. He urged his cowhands to "hurry up — I've just seen the woman I'm going to marry."

Theirs was the first marriage license recorded in Lane County, and to her death in 1887, Mary said she always "had all I needed."

The Associated Press

Memorial Day

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"This day is sacred with almost a visible presence of those who have gone before us," he said.

Potter said many people tend to forget what Memorial Day is

all about, and he said he hopes that as the number of those veterans able to attend Memorial Day services decreases, the annual memorial service at Pioneer Cemetery reaches out to younger people.

"We're trying to pass on to the generations coming on the sacrifices that people made," he said.

And those sacrifices, Potter said, were not only for Americans, but also for the thousands of immigrants who come looking for a promising future in the United States every day.

"The gates are open to this country," he said. "That's freedom, and that's what it is all about."

Paul Gilbertson, a member of the American Legion and president of the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery Association board, said he was pleased to see so many people come to the memorial service.

"It was good," he said. "I look at the people each year."

But Gilbertson also said he feels that some tend to forget the meaning of the holiday.

"So many people have lost reality of these days that have a special significance," he said.

Past commander of American Legion Post 3, Al Reeves, said

many younger people look at Memorial Day as nothing more than a long weekend and an opportunity to go camping.

"We will soon be forgotten," he said.

But he also said he noticed that some young people are starting to show an interest in learning about history, wars and veterans.

Some of those young people — a choir from Shasta Middle School in Eugene — sang at the memorial service.

Choir director David Fitch said he tries to prepare his students for more than just concerts, and performing at the annual memorial service gives them a chance to learn about veterans and the wars they fought. Coming to the service year after year, he said he has watched many of his students understand what the holiday is all about.

"The experience for me was really moving," Fitch said.

Fitch was not the only one at the memorial service who enjoyed seeing his students react to the service.

"It really is wonderful to see the young people out here," said Ruth Holmes, secretary treasurer of the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery Association. "I thought it was beautiful."



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