

# For Ilwaco Cemetery caretaker, a labor of life

## Huitt retires after 60 years of digging graves

By **PATRICK WEBB**  
For EO Media Group

CHINOOK, Wash. — Hundreds of families on the Long Beach Peninsula have Bob Huitt to thank — but only a few know it.

Huitt has taken care of the Ilwaco Cemetery since 1996. And for the past 60 years, he has dug graves at almost a dozen southwest Washington cemeteries.

Now 79, Huitt is retiring and the Ilwaco Cemetery Association plans to honor him with a public open house at Penttila's Chapel-by-the-Sea in Long Beach July 9.

Ron Hylton, owner of Penttila's, serves as one of five board members for the association. He is full of admiration for Huitt's reliability. "His sense of dedication and loyalty in doing what needs to be done is second to none," Hylton said. "He is amazing — he has never let us down."

### Community connections

Huitt was born in Centralia, Washington, just before World War II and attended schools in Cathlamet. Family difficulties meant he was raised during his teenage years by older relatives, Eldred and Dorothy Penttila of Naselle. He grew up around the funeral home they operated, so grave digging was a natural extension of that environment.

"My uncle took me out to the cemetery and showed me how to lay the planks," he recalled, when asked about his first. Graves must be 4 1/2 feet deep, 36 inches wide and 8 feet long. "I will be back to help," he said. But he never returned, of course."

Digging graves began as an after-work activity, because he



Patrick Webb/For EO Media Group  
**Bob Huitt has taken care of Ilwaco Cemetery since 1996.**



Patrick Webb/For EO Media Group  
**Bob Huitt checks out the meticulous records of all the graves in the Ilwaco Cemetery that he has compiled. He also has filed labeled photos of every headstone.**

had other jobs. "I have done a little bit of everything," he said.

Huitt's late-1950s service in the U.S. Air Force took him to Lincoln, Nebraska, where the Strategic Air Command was shuffling nuclear warheads around when the Cold War heated up. He recalls his discharge date easily: Christmas Day, 1960.

Returning to the Long Beach Peninsula, he built logging roads and worked other jobs, including stints in fish canneries. He served 29 years with the Pacific County Road Department.

Along the way, Huitt married twice, had four children, which he mainly raised alone on his ranch, and has seven grandchildren and three great grandchildren. He has been on his own for about 40 years.

### Digging by hand

Throughout the years, Huitt dug graves using only a shovel and a pickax. "It was always done by hand," he said. "I have gone through about four picks."

The Ilwaco hill site includes tracts of solid clay, which means a five to six-hour job for each gravesite. "Most of the cemetery is pretty tough digging. For someone new, it

would be eight hours. Some cemeteries are harder than others. In Naselle, it's pretty solid river rock."

He has lost count of exactly how many he has dug. At one point, Huitt was digging graves at 11 area cemeteries stretching inland to Grays River. However, the trend toward cremation has meant fewer burials. "Now it's one every two months, but in the 'bad old days,' it was 90 to 100 a year," he said.

Brawn is not enough. "Maybe people think there's nothing to digging a grave, but you have to have the right dimensions," he said. "You just don't go out there and dig a hole."

Planks help set the correct shape.

"You have to have straight sides and ends because it must be straight up and down," he said. "It has got to be perfectly straight. It's got to be square because the liner is a square box. If it is not square, it is not going to go in the hole."

Huitt keeps "set-ups" at three local cemeteries which consist of planks to place at each end of the grave, grass to drape over the open hole, a lowering device for the coffin, and a tent with chairs for mourners.

### OPEN HOUSE

The Ilwaco Cemetery Association will hold an open house to honor Bob Huitt's retirement at Penttila's Chapel-by-the-Sea, 1515 Pacific Ave., Long Beach, Washington, 2 to 4 p.m., July 9.

takes to 'weed-eat' it — it's a never-ending project!"

Because the grounds include a half-dozen additions, Huitt spreads the mowing over four days. When asked if he has a riding lawn mower, he laughs. "If it wasn't, you would never get it done."

A couple of years ago, he cleaned every headstone.

"It's like taking care of your own yard. I wanted to keep it looking nice," he said, reflecting on having to yield to a younger successor. "I don't like the idea of not being able to do it any more."

### Preserving memories

Huitt spent three years compiling a 4-inch thick ring binder crammed with peninsula burial

names and plot locations that date back to the 1800s. "I will give this copy to the museum one of these days," he mused. On his computer, he has photos of every headstone; all are meticulously labeled.

His son, Stanley Huitt, a fisherman who died of hypothermia in 1996, is buried in the Ilwaco Cemetery. While he did not dig his son's grave, he did perform that duty for his late sister, Bonnie Vaughn.

Reliving his career at his Chinook home, Huitt's thoughts are practical rather than philosophical. When pressed, he shrugs. "I grew up in the funeral home, so I went to many funerals. They're a part of my life. ... Life and death. I think about it, but I'm not really a religious person. I believe in religion, though."

When his time comes, someone else will do the honors.

"I bought 10 plots," Huitt said. His final resting place? "One of those 10, I suppose."

## Community input on new city manager

By **BRENNA VISSER**  
The Daily Astorian

CANNON BEACH — The process to replace Cannon Beach City Manager Brant Kucera is now in full swing, starting with feedback from the community.

Kucera announced his departure earlier this month to take another city manager job in Sisters, citing the need for a "change of pace."

Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn will act as interim city manager starting in July.

Jensen Strategies, the recruitment firm hired by the city to conduct a nationwide search, has four months to develop a job profile with input from the community, staff and city councilors, advertise and conduct interviews. Schermerhorn can only act as interim city manager for four months, otherwise the city will violate its charter.

Interviews with city councilors and staff will be closed meetings, but a community forum will be held 5:30 p.m. Thursday at City Hall for anyone who would like to offer suggestions of what qualities the recruiters should look for in the next city manager.

"We want to find someone who fits the community," Eric Jensen, from Jensen Strategies, said.

The job posting from when Kucera was hired in 2014 listed experience with disaster preparedness, finance, news media, an appreciation for the arts and five years in public administration as preferable qualities in a candidate.

After collecting input from the community, the City Council will vote whether or not to adopt the job description at the Aug. 1 council meeting. Final candidates will hold meet-and-greet forums later in the fall.

When Kucera was hired, he was chosen from a pool of 47 applicants. Jensen said he anticipated the city will get a similar applicant pool this year, as well.

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3pm: Warrenton 4th of July Parade Route follows South Main Avenue from the post office to SW 9th Street  
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