

The Last One To Let You Down

by Jon Vara

North Carolina is one of the nation's fastest-growing states. But as development encroaches on wooded land once occupied by small farms, builders often encounter an unwelcome surprise — one of the state's estimated 30,000 abandoned graveyards, many of them dating from before the Civil War. When they do, they often call on Phillip Ellen, of Southern Pines, N.C., to sort things out. Ellen is the ultimate excavation subcontractor: For nearly 40 years, his company, Phillip Ellen & Associates, has specialized in relocating graves.

Most site preparation involves paperwork, and moving graves is no exception. Before Ellen can begin moving dirt, the developer must advertise the intended relocation in the legal section of the local paper for four consecutive weeks, to give any surviving relatives a chance to be heard. It's also up to the developer to find a new burial site for the remains. In most cases, that means buying the required number of burial plots at a local perpetual-care cemetery. A lower-cost option for the builder with a suitable patch of land on the same property as the original graveyard — such as a leftover parcel too small for a building lot — is to rebury the remains on the site and fence them off from the surrounding development.

"When we start digging, we like to use a backhoe with a 36-inch-wide bucket," Ellen says. "You can always tell where the grave is, because the soil is a different color than the soil around it and it's not as hard." Once the backhoe has removed most of the soil, Ellen

explains, a worker with a shovel carefully digs to the bottom, which is easily recognized as undisturbed soil. What, if anything, is found there depends on the age of the grave, the climate, local soil conditions, and other factors.

"There might be a full skeleton," he says, "but generally there's not a whole lot left. Sometimes there's nothing but casket handles or nails or screws. You might find a hair comb or a brooch or a button that tells you if it's a woman or a man." The remains are collected in a new pine box, measuring 18 inches wide, 36 inches long, and 12 inches deep. These boxes are carefully numbered so that each set of remains can be



Phillip Ellen, master graveyard excavator, evaluates another job site.

reburied next to its original neighbors.

Ellen refutes one burial myth. "That saying '6 feet under' is just a saying," he says. Most graves, he observes, are between 3½ and 5 feet deep, and tend to be fairly consistent within a given graveyard. But he tells of working in one old burial ground where the depth varied, seemingly at random, between 3 and 7 feet.

"There was an older gentleman who came every day and watched us work," says Ellen. "He told us he dug most of the graves, and I asked him why they were so different. 'Well,' he said, 'we dug till the liquor run out.' If there were eight or ten out digging, a jar of liquor didn't last long, so they didn't get much of a hole. If there were just two of them, a jar of liquor would last them all day."

Digging graves today is much easier, and certainly drier. Ellen generally digs one or more trenches with the backhoe, arranges the boxed remains on 4-foot centers, and packs the soil over them. "It's the same as digging individual graves," he says, "except that you take out the dirt between them." Besides being faster, he notes, that provides a nicer-looking finished product. "If you try to pack individual graves with the bucket, the surface goes up and down so it looks like the ocean," he says.

Existing grave markers, if any, are reinstalled, or new ones provided. One recent project, Ellen recalls, involved relocating 256 graves to make room for an airport runway expansion. "There were only 31 graves with markers, but the FAA was administering the contract, and it specified that every grave

would have a commercial marker." Ellen dutifully ordered a quantity of gravestones from a local granite company, inscribed "Unknown Number 1" through "Unknown Number 225."

Although Ellen works mostly in North Carolina, he's done large jobs all over the country, usually in advance of dam or highway projects. "We've been as far as Medford, Oregon," he says.

"Our biggest job was 2,100 graves up in Delaware, Ohio, but we've had several above the 500 mark."

An experienced five-man crew can move anywhere from 25 to 50 graves per day, depending on the site and whether there are gravestones or burial vaults to deal with. Prices also vary, but a typical bid, according to Ellen, falls between \$250 and \$750 per grave.

Compared to the cost of a conventional funeral, in fact, Phillip Ellen's services are an excellent bargain, if he says so himself.

"Every state has a local funeral director or two that moves graves, but it's very, very seldom that they'll underbid me," he says. "When they give you a price, they act like you died yesterday."

