Parish unravels cemetery mystery

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STANDING AT THE GRAVE of her great-great-aunt Susanna Zirbes Thull in St. Francis Xavier Cemetery, Carol Bares of Belgium held a book she wrote on her mother's family that helped her find the burial site of her long-deceased relative. Photo by Sam Arendt

St. Joseph members track down descendants of those buried there to take ownership of ancient rural Grafton graveyard that had been abandoned

ST. JOSEPH PARISH in Grafton recently became the owner of the long abandoned St. Francis Xavier Cemetery in the Town of Grafton. The cemetery on Pleasant Valley Road has a new life as exemplified by a new sign created as an Eagle Scout project. Photo by Sam Arendt

By
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When Carol Bares began researching a book on her mother's family in 2019, she quickly faced a mystery — where was her great-great-aunt Susanna Thull?

The mystery led her to a long abandoned cemetery in the Town of Grafton, one founded before Wisconsin became a state. The oldest of those buried in the cemetery were born in the late 1700s, not long after the Revolutionary War ended.

But Bares didn't know that when she began her quest, and when she finally found her great-great-aunt's resting place, it was a broken down burial place, St. Francis Xavier Cemetery in the Town of Grafton.

"It was a mess," Bares said, noting the cemetery on Pleasant Valley Road near Maple Road was overgrown, Susanna's headstone was broken and a "huge branch" from a tree had fallen over the top of it.

The Belgium resident said she and her family cleaned the gravesite up the best they could, but then things started looking up.

Debbie Krueger of St. Joseph Parish cemetery committee reached out to Bares, asking her to help the parish take ownership of the cemetery. The parish needed five descendants of people buried in the cemetery to take ownership, then transfer that to the parish.

They achieved that, and in late May St. Joseph Parish became the official owner of St. Francis Xavier Cemetery. The parish is planning a rededication and blessing of the graveyard at 2 p.m. Sunday, July 31.

"I'm so glad," Bares said, noting the people in the cemetery need to be cared for. "They deserve to be remembered and cared for. We need to honor them because we wouldn't be here without them."

Allen Buchholz, whose great-great-grandparents Veit and Anna Beschta and their daughter Katherine are buried at the cemetery, was also pleased that St. Francis Xavier's will once again be cared for.

“It’s a piece of history,” he said. “These headstones are extremely historic. They can tell some extremely interesting stories.”

He’s hoping that more people whose ancestors are interred at the cemetery will visit and discover pieces of their past as well.

“What they (the cemetery committee) are doing is part of an effort to make sure my children and grandchildren know about these people and the sacrifices they made,” Buchholz said, noting the courage of people who left behind everything they owned and everyone they knew to travel to a new country and carve out a life for themselves.

“It just dumbfounds me to think about it,” he said.

St. Francis Xavier Cemetery, which was established in 1846, sat largely forgotten for generations.

It has only about 100 gravesites, with the earliest date of birth for someone buried there being 1792 or 1799, Krueger said.

“For Grafton, that’s old,” she said. “If you were on the East Coast, that wouldn’t be.”

The earliest date of death found was about 1844 — before the cemetery was founded.

“We’re not sure if he was moved there later or what,” Krueger said.

Krueger said it was created on land donated by Johann and Anna Elter to the German Catholic Union Society and served members of St Francis Xavier Church — popularly called Town Ten Church because it was 10 townships north of the Wisconsin-Illinois border.

The original log structure built in 1848 was replaced in 1867 by a stone church with an onion top spire, something rarely found in churches in the U.S. There were four chapels, one at each corner of the 40-acre church property, used for the annual Corpus Christi Day celebration.

By the end of the 1800s, both St. Francis Xavier and St. Joseph parishes were well-established, but through the years membership at St. Francis Xavier declined. Eventually it became a mission church affiliated with St. Joseph Church.

By 1943, as maintenance costs mounted, the church was sold, but the cemetery was still owned by the German Catholic Society. But eventually the society itself faded away.

Then, in 2012, the Town of Cedarburg sent St Joseph’s information indicating it owned the cemetery. It didn’t, but that inspired the parish to see what it could do to take over the cemetery, a task embraced by parish director Brenda Klein. But first, Krueger said, the cemetery committee needed to be reconstituted — and that took time.

Attorney Jon Herreman, a member of the parish, told the committee that it needed to find five descendants of people buried at the cemetery — a daunting task considering the age of the cemetery, but one Krueger and others took on eagerly.

“It was a little detective project,” Krueger said. “People were most willing to help. It took a little work, but you just had to stay with it.”

With the help of the Grafton historical Society and online databases, they came up with the descendants who live between California and Grafton.

The descendants had to sign affidavits affirming their relationships and take the matter to court so they could form a cemetery group that could transfer ownership to the parish.

The process took less than a year, Krueger said.

“There was always this desire to take care of it (the cemetery) even if we didn’t own it,” she added, noting some members of the parish had taken it upon themselves to mow and try to maintain the graveyard and an Eagle Scout erected a sign there.

Now, she said, the cemetery committee will have to decide how to improve the property. Many of the gravestones need cleaning, some need to be righted. Some are so worn that the lettering is difficult to read.

Buchholz said he plans to place a plaque on his great-great-grandparents’ gravestone that will include the information etched on the gravestone, which is made of limestone.

“The words are disappearing,” he said, adding he may include such information as when the family came to the U.S. from Czechoslovakia

The cemetery, Buchholz said, has always been part of his family — something he knew because his family has always been interested in genealogy.

Buchholz, who is a member of the Ozaukee County Historical Society, noted that his father helped move one of the St. Francis Xavier Church chapels to Pioneer Village, where it stands today.

His father also took the keystone from the dilapidated church as payment for some work for the property owners after the church was sold.

“My father pried that stone out of there and brought it home,” Buchholz said. “It sat in our garage for years.”

The family ultimately donated it to the Ozaukee County Historical Society, and today it sits next to the chapel at Pioneer Village.

While Buchholz knew his family was buried at the cemetery, Bares only discovered recently that her great-great-aunt was buried there.

She found that out as she researched a book for her mother about her family in 2019. She knew her mom’s great-great-grandfather Wilhelm Zirbes came to the United States from Germany with his brothers Hubert and Heinrich, sister Susanna and mother Anna in 1846 and they settled in the Dacada area, and she had found the gravesites for everyone but Wilhelm’s sister Susanna, who remained a mystery.

Someone eventually suggested she check the records at St. Francis Xavier Church, and she found Susanna and her husband Nicholas Thull registered as members.

She hadn’t heard of the church before, Bares said, and she still didn’t know where Susanna’s gravesite was. In frustration, Bares vented to her daughter one day about her search for St. Francis Xavier Cemetery.

“She said, ‘Mom, it’s down the road from my house,’” Bares recalled. “I just looked at her like are you kidding me?”

Buchholz said he hopes the news about St. Francis Xavier Cemetery will spur people to learn more about the many small cemeteries in Ozaukee County, estimating there are about 10 the size of St. Francis.

“The bigger cemeteries tend to be taken care of,” he said. “But these smaller ones tend to get lost. They need to be cared for and these people shouldn’t be forgotten.”