



What's Happening in JEFFERSON COUNTY

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Cemeteries: Where geography and sentiment collide

By Bret Lian

I enjoy walking through cemeteries. Names of the past seldom used anymore and symbols of fraternal organizations long gone adorn old headstones. My local cemetery, the Jefferson City Cemetery, is the kind I enjoy most: unmaintained, overgrown, seldom visited, and with a good view. There is beauty to monuments returning to earth as have those they memorialize, and in the way granite weathers in Montana when no one is left to mourn those who are gone. There's a lot of character there.

Jefferson County has roughly a dozen cemeteries; some active, some maintained and some neither. One of our most well-known cemeteries is Elkhorn Cemetery. It is on top of a fine hill, and along with the signs of elk, has many graves of children from a diphtheria epidemic in 1889. A more powerful reminder of how easy we have it nowadays is hard to find.

I often walk it, and look out at the Elkhorns and wonder what the view was like when they first decided this was where their cemetery would be. The trees that obscure the hills around it are younger than the cemetery itself. Even the views of yesteryear expire on earth, usually without any memorials to remember them.

Jefferson County's largest cemetery in terms of memorials is the Whitehall Town Cemetery, a newer location than the Old Whitehall Cemetery, which is on private land and maintained by Tomahawk Ranch. In fact, there are numerous cemeteries on private land in our county. Some, like Fish Creek Cemetery, which is managed by a cemetery board, are still active. Others are no longer used, containing graves sunken and imperceptible.

Something you may not have known, is that small private cemeteries are an attainable thing for many residents of Jefferson County. County Resolution 23-2005 dictates the criteria that must be met to have one, and if you own more than an acre, aren't prohibited by covenants, and have the will to jump through some hoops, you could bury folks on your own private property - assuming they are deceased.

A large chunk of Jefferson County that seems to lack a cemetery is Elk Park. Talking to a few locals, I learned that most folks who lived there were buried in Butte, though there is at least one small family cemetery where the lodgepole and the park meet.

Not long ago I read the phrase on a headstone, "Hope Whispers We Again May Meet." Geography and sentiment collide at these places. It's memories, and wishes departed, and views of reverence. and they are worth visiting.

Jefferson County has "something for everyone". This column will appear the first issue of each month with a schedule of What's Happening in Jefferson County. Countywide events can also be found on the Jefferson County tourism/recreation website discoverjeffersonmt.org. Send your request to post event information on the website or in this column to Bruce Binkowski, Events Coordinator at bbinkowski@jeffersoncounty-mt.gov.