In Search of a Greener Burial

By Carolyn Harvey

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American burial options trace a route that follows the nation's transition from a rural, agrarian people to one based primarily in cities and towns. Until the Great Depression, many Americans were honored with "home funerals" when their loved ones passed away. A home funeral usually consisted of the family's preparation of the body for viewing and burial, along with a home viewing of the decedent, and a simple burial in a church graveyard or nearby municipal cemetery very shortly after death. Burials also occurred on family property. Embalming--the chemical preservation of a body typically done in funerals today--was not necessary in this case. Burials occured on family property. Coffins were simple, made of wood or cardboard, and sometimes eschewed in favor of a simple fabric shroud. When Americans moved en masse to cities, the funeral home industry boomed, since people no longer had the space in city apartments to hold home funerals. The modern funeral parlor, with its stately decor and fine furniture, stepped in as a substitute.

One burial option that harkens back to the home funeral is the green burial. According to the Green Burial Council, a trade and advocacy organization in Placerville, California, there is no official definition of what comprises a green burial, but it's easy to see the difference in contrast with traditional "lawn cemeteries," great expanses of manicured grass, requiring irrigation and maintenance. The term "green burial" generally refers to the burial of a body with as little impact to the environment as possible. This includes not only the preparation of the body for burial, but also the materials used in burial, the transportation and storage of associated materials, and the environment of the burial grounds. Non-toxic and environmentally friendly materials are used whenever possible. Grounds look natural, sometimes even unkempt. In fact, it may not look like a cemetery at all.

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Elaine Bishoff, a tall, middle-aged woman, doesn't look like the type of person you'd see to buy a cemetery plot. Her garb is more ranch hand than funeral director; she wears boot-cut jeans, Ariat ropers, and, depending on the weather, long-sleeve plaid shirts either with or without a fleece jacket. Her boss is the abbot of a monastery. And she'd rather be out riding a horse than stuck behind a desk.

Bishoff is a steward--what other places would call a "sales advisor" or "consultant"--at Honey Creek Woodlands, a private, 2,200-acre green burial ground in rural Rockdale County, Georgia. Although associated with the Monastery of the Holy

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Spirit, Honey Creek Woodlands is open to burials of people of all faiths. In her role, Bishoff helps plan non-traditional burials, where people are laid to rest with as little impact to the earth as possible. And she advises everyone to have a plan about their final wishes. She knows, from personal experience. She learned about Honey Creek Woodlands when her father died, in his sleep, unexpectedly.

“When we buried him, although we all thought this was exactly right, we didn't have his word on it. We all felt very comfortable with it, but all of us were like, we wish he had seen this or we wish we knew that this is what he wanted,” Bishoff advises. “Make sure that there's something written down. ‘I want to be cremated. I don't want to be cremated. This is where I want to be buried.’ Because [otherwise], it leaves people guessing.”

The no-nonsense blonde, who came to work at Honey Creek Woodlands after a career at a family-owned car dealership, knew in her soul that Honey Creek Woodlands was the right place for her father, but that decision was clinched after a conversation with her aunt.

“She said several months before he died, they had had a conversation. My parents used to live over in the Buford Clairmont area, where the [Peachtree-DeKalb] airport is, and planes every now and then just miss, and land in those neighborhoods. Every now and then you see smoke and it’d be a small plane, crashed in the woods,” she relates.

“So, that had happened. And she had called my dad to see if it was anywhere near our house, if everybody was okay. And she said that during the conversation, the subject of death came up. And she said, ‘What do you want to have happen when you die?’ And, ‘Do you want to be cremated? Do you want to be buried? What do you want?’ And he said, ‘I'm hoping when I die, they drag me off into the woods and leave me.’”

At this point, Bishoff bursts out laughing, her stoic persona broken as she recalls the absurdity of her father’s statement, and the coincidence of it actually happening. He’s buried in the Savannah--the third whole body burial at Honey Creek Woodlands--and Bishoff visits him often, always pointing out his grave when giving tours to prospective clients.

“I'm a horse girl if you haven't noticed,” Bishoff says, glancing down at her boots and jeans. “I watched westerns when I was a kid and you know, there would be an old cowboy and he’d be wrapped in a blanket or in a pine box and they'd lower him in the ground with ropes. And I was always like, ‘That's what I want.’”

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For being in the grave-selling business, Bishoff is surprisingly upbeat. “There's nothing eerie or creepy or unsettling,” she says, looking at the graves during the tour, like a teacher looking after her students. “It's happy energy. To me, it's happy souls.” Bishoff derives a lot of satisfaction from her job because she completely believes in the product she sells.

“I'm very passionate about green burial. I think that the difference between what happens here versus the modern burial scenario is night and day. This is a healing process,” she declares. “It's a participatory process. It doesn't have to be, but it usually is. And the difference when [a customer] comes here [to check it out] versus when they leave is palpable. If you just got dropped here, you wouldn't just say, ‘Oh, look, a cemetery.’ It just wouldn't even occur to you. But what you are seeing are burials. There's one right in front of us.”

She also finds great joy in making people’s final wishes come true. She shows me a photo of a noble team of black mules walking down the dirt path usually traversed by the site’s electric golf carts, the early morning light glinting off plaited manes. I notice an elegant black wagon and its somber cargo: a pine casket.

“This is one of my proudest accomplishments, and it just happened about a month or so ago. I met a gentleman back in August 2019, and he had ALS. He was an attorney out of Alabama. Very smart, and very funny. We really connected,” she remembers, smiling. “He was in a motorized wheelchair. His wife and daughter were with him, saw the place. He was very much into the zero carbon footprint, the whole nine yards.”

“His wife and daughter had left the room so that he and I could talk and he said, ‘I think I will die next year, in 2020. I want you to make me a promise that when I die, you’ll take me out to the burial area pulled by mules.’” By this time, Bishoff’s face is animated, excited. “So up until then he didn't know I'm a horse girl, so I said, ‘You have no idea who you're talking to.”

Bishoff knew where to find a team of mules. Her brother-in-law raises them nearby. Sourcing a wagon--the right style of wagon to carry a casket--was more of a chore, but she was determined to find one. And when she did, it was a wagon that was not just black, but dark red and black--perfect for the lawyer from Alabama, a graduate of the University of Alabama. “I didn’t even have to put an Alabama sticker on it,” she jokes.

“Once they got to the [burial] area, his family took him off the wagon, lowered him into the ground, and then they did all the covering themselves and they were like, this is the greatest thing we've ever done. They just loved it. It was so him. To me, that was an awesome thing to be able to pull off.”

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The land that Honey Creek Woodlands sits on was once cattle pasture for a prominent Rockdale County family. Walter Susong, a native of Tennessee, attended Georgia Tech, served in the Navy during World War II, and earned a law degree from Atlanta Law School. He retired from The Coca-Cola Company and died on his Conyers cattle ranch in 1996. The Trappist monks who established the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in the 1940s moved from Kentucky to pursue a quiet life of prayer and farming. When the neighboring Susong family offered the land to the monks--who recognized that in order to preserve their austere, rustic way of life, they would need to purchase surrounding parcels before commercial developers did--the monastery took them up on the offer of about 170 acres in the 2000s.

The Trappist monks, known for their vows of chastity, poverty, and silence, live simple lives and rely on traditional industries like farming and baking for income. Honey Creek Woodlands complements these industries because it cares for the land as well as peoples' spiritual needs. The only tie the monastery has to the natural burial ground is through the abbot, the leader of the monastery, who oversees the operations of the two organizations. Honey Creek Woodlands is run separately, by a lay staff.

Honey Creek Woodlands is part of the Georgia Piedmont Land Trust, an independent conservation association that certifies the land on a regular basis. The GPLT ensures that the land stays as unchanged as possible to support the natural wildlife and plant life. But that means that rules have to be followed--rules that differentiate Honey Creek from traditional cemeteries, a point that families of the deceased sometimes don't understand.

"People want to memorialize a spot, and because of the fact that we're a natural burial area, we don't allow people to bring in statuary, wind chimes, or solar lights," explains Bishoff, as she tours me around the grounds on a misty March morning. "What you are allowed to do is bring things that are biodegradable." She points out numerous burial mounds decorated with gourds and pumpkins, which retain their shape and color weeks after being placed, especially in the cooler months. Caretakers embellish plots with pine straw and pine cones, along with the occasional found bird feather or pretty rock, to keep things neat and tidy, but not too manicured.

"You can plant things that are native," relates Bishoff. "So you can't plant roses. You can't plant a crepe myrtle," she continues. "You can't plant palm trees or magnolia trees, even though magnolias are from Georgia, they're not from this part of Georgia. So [one of] the things that you can plant are redbud trees." She stops the golf cart and points ahead to a clearing. "One of my favorite redbud trees is right there and it's gonna bloom in the spring with the big heart shaped leaves and the purple flowers. They're very hardy. They do really well here," she says, as we continue on, slowly. "We always

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encourage the redbuds, but you can put any kind of hardwood in the pine forest. We are trying to introduce hardwoods here because the pines won't last forever."

Other rules must be followed, too: Caskets must be cardboard, wicker, or simple pine boxes. Fresh flowers are allowed. Bishoff shows me photos of burials where families have woven hundreds of fresh flowers, greenery, and ribbons into wicker caskets, making the coffin look like a sepulchral flower girl's basket. She also shows me sample cardboard containers from craft stores, perfect, she says, for ashes to be buried in--and very inexpensive.

Shroud burials--where a body is buried wrapped in a simple linen, muslin, or burlap shroud--are also permitted at Honey Creek Woodlands. "I had never seen [a shroud burial] until I did one and they've become one of my favorite things," says Bishoff. "I love a shroud burial. There's such a purity to it...People choose it for one of several reasons. One is it's how the monks are buried, or how Jesus was buried. They are also less expensive. You have eliminated the casket, but some people are really into the green aspects of the shroud and they don't want the casket to have been made by the factory and shipped here."

Burial sites are marked with simple native fieldstones carved with the deceased's name and birth and death dates. Because there's no grid layout, GPS is used to keep track of the individual sites. Golf carts and walking trails can be used to access the gravesites for visits.

The office, housed in the converted Susong residence, looks more like a camp lodge than a business office. Natural artifacts collected from the grounds like fallen wasp's and bird's nests, large bird feathers, turtle shells, and other specimens fill low bookshelves, and color posters showing wildlife of Georgia line the walls. Conservation really is a way of life at Honey Creek Woodlands. Bishoff, the self-proclaimed "nature girl," is proud of this fact. "The monastery in general is interested in conservation and wildlife. The former abbott was very involved in conservation. This would be impossible to unwind because he did everything he could to lock this into permanent preservation."

During the tour, Bishoff points out graves that are mounded up with red clay a few feet above the ground. These burials, she says, are recent, and haven't been reclaimed by the earth quite yet--and that can be unsettling for some people to see, when they're used to seeing perfectly manicured lawn cemeteries.

"This one is from 2018, so this one hasn't settled as much. He was buried in a pine box, but you're seeing growth"--there's scraggly pine and oak volunteers surrounding the plot--"and that's what's wonderful about this, but it's what some people struggle with. Some people see this kind of thing and they go, 'That looks terrible. It looks neglected! Where's the Roundup?' For us, this is all about the bodies being reclaimed by the earth. There'll be wild flowers, there'll be butterflies. It's part of the

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natural process and that's where some people really, really struggle. But, people who choose this really get it."

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Most Americans would think of a traditional funeral as taking place in a funeral home, also known as a mortuary. These one-stop-shops offer viewings, burials, cremations, services, and even keepsake jewelry of the deceased, along with all of the trappings like caskets, vaults, and urns. Funeral directors--people who sell caskets, keep bodies, prepare certificates and file for permits, and coordinate with clergy, cemeteries, vault companies, and other organizations as required by the deceased's family--must be licensed by the state. Because a traditional funeral can range into the tens of thousands of dollars, states want to ensure that families have recourse against dealers who do not act in their best interest.

But Honey Creek Woodlands isn't a funeral home--it's just a burial ground--so it isn't required to be licensed. Due to its association with the monastery, it is also exempt from state licensing as an independent cemetery--all that is needed is the right land use permitting from the county to operate as a burial ground.

Part of the attraction of green burial for many people, according to Bishoff, is the simplicity. Costs at Honey Creek Woodlands are lower than a traditional cemetery, which leads to a lower-cost funeral overall. This is due to a number of reasons. Plots are competitively priced and can be purchased on installments. Embalming, the process of replacing all natural body fluids with preservatives, is not allowed in burials at Honey Creek Woodlands, as it introduces dangerous chemicals into the earth. (Embalming also adds thousands of dollars onto the cost of a funeral.) The overall maintenance costs of the green burial ground--eschewing the heavy lawn pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers for the natural landscape--are lower than a traditional cemetery. The inexpensive materials used for caskets and cremated remains--simple pine, wicker, or even cardboard--cost drastically less than mainstream caskets, which are more like pieces of furniture with gaskets and latches and vaults that carry intrusion and leak guarantees. In green burial, intrusion--and the subsequent reclamation of the body into the earth--is the name of the game.

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It looks like we are running out of traditional cemetery space. The American urban migration has, just a few generations later, filled up the grand lawn cemeteries that hold many of our distant relatives. And it turns out that people really don't like to dig up already buried graves to move them around in order to accommodate new tenants. Green burials, and other non-traditional burials like burials at sea, may become more

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common as people realize that the old adage “Buy land, they’re not making it anymore” doesn’t apply only to the living. Cremation is also becoming more common as people move away from their ancestral home towns and don’t want to be tied down to one traditional resting place. No matter what draws people to green burial--the thought of resting for eternity in nature, or the low cost of a fuss-free funeral, or the simplicity of a low-impact burial--the purity of the idea appeals to many. What was once a radical environmentalist idea is now mainstream.

“I think there is a little bit of a shift because young people think about things differently,” says Bishoff. “I think of [green burial] as the ultimate recycling. That's what I've always referred to, that you're recycling your body. You're not preserving it for eternity...I love the fact that every time I see my dad, his area looks different. The world is a dynamic, changing place.”

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