burying TRADITION

BY GIG SCHLICH

When wilderness writer, activist and curmudgeon Edward Abbey died in March, 1989, his funeral request was modeled after his approach to life: simple, no frills and giving a resolute middle digit to the standard American concept of funerals. Two close friends wrapped Abbey's body in his old sleeping bag, placed him in the back of a pickup truck and buried him in an unmarked grave, somewhere in the sun-blasted desert of Arizona's Cabeza Prieta Wilderness.

"If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a young juniper tree or the wings of a vulture — that is immortality enough for me," Abbey wrote, "and as much as anyone deserves."

Abbey's cohorts, David Petersen and Doug Peacock, had to break the law to grant the author his final wish — a simple funeral with nothing to spare his body from nature's efficient process.

Sixteen years later, such "green burials" are gaining recognition as an environmentally friendly alternative to the two most widely recognized choices available to Americans: cremation or burial, which often involves embalming, a rot-resistant coffin and a grave liner. Abbey-like interment can be done while respecting the law, though not without some logistical problems.

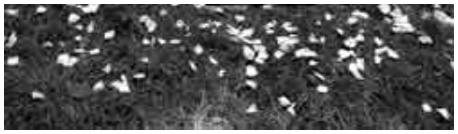
Kimberley Campbell is the vice president of Memorial Eco- systems, a foundation she runs with her husband, Dr. Billy Campbell. The Campbells are pioneers of the green-burial concept in the modern United States, and they allow only eco-friendly funerals at their Ramsey Creek Preserve — a 32-acre parcel of woodlands in rural South Carolina. Established in 1996, Memorial Ecosystems has performed approximately 40 burials in the preserve, all adhering to the requirements that the body not be embalmed, the casket be made from biodegradable materials and no grave liner or vault be used to protect the coffin.

The death of Billy Campbell's father sparked his interest in starting a cemetery that would be an alternative to the golf-course type settings found throughout the country, Kimberley Campbell said.

"The way we bury people at Ramsey Creek is nothing new — we didn't invent it," Campbell said in her melodious British accent. "This is the way people have been buried for thousands of years, in all sorts of cultures, all across the world. Frankly, it's because it's a very efficient and safe way of disposing of
the dead."

The Campbells' idea for the nature reserve and cemetery allowed them to achieve two goals at once: preservation of endangered forestland and creation of a cemetery space where environmentally minded folks could achieve the ultimate in composting.

Campbell said an important benefit of green burial is that they require some planning since they are not a readily available option in most



A typical burial site at Memorial Ecosystems' Ramsey Creek Preserve is situated in a natural setting, rather than a traditional golf-course-like cemetery.

places. Planning requires dialogue within the family about the normally taboo subject of death, thereby easing survivors' worries about what to do when death arrives.

"It gives people a way to feel that they have a bit more control rather than having the professionals come in and take care of the dead," Campbell said.

She noted that funerals at Ramsey Creek have involved family members in opening and closing the grave, building the casket and lowering the body into the earth.

Green burials also forego the generally unnecessary and potentially environmentally harmful practice of embalming, Campbell said, adding that Americans have somehow been fooled into believing that embalming is necessary for sanitation and disease prevention.

"Really, that's a load of codswallop," she said. "There's more danger from a body being embalmed with noxious chemicals, then put in a box within a box, then placed in a cemetery where they use all sorts of fertilizers and herbicides that are washing into the storm drains."

Another plus for the economically minded consumer is that green burials are much less expensive than their traditional counterparts. Cutting out the cost of embalming and a showy casket can save thousands of dollars, according to Lisa Carlson's do-it-yourself book, "Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love."

The average cost of a traditional funeral in 2004 was approximately $6,500, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. Campbell said interment at Ramsey Creek costs $1,950 for the plot, $250 for opening and closing the grave and $25 plus engraving charges if the family wishes to have a rock marker on the grave. The cost of the coffin is left up to the customer, Campbell said. It may be as simple as wrapping the body in a shroud or placing it in a pine box. Babs McDonald is an environmental educator with the U.S. Forest Service in Georgia and lives an hour and a half from the Campbells' green burial ground. She and her husband, Ken Cordell, purchased plots two years ago after reading about alternative burials in a USA Today article. McDonald said the green-burial concept was consistent with her values of how humans should view their environment and planet.

"I have a very strong feeling that we've got to give back to Earth," McDonald said. "It supports and provides for us. The natural way of things is that when we die — when anything dies — our bodies provide nourishment for Earth."

The setting of Ramsey Creek proved to be an important factor in McDonald's choice. Tucked in the foothills of the southern Appalachians, the preserve is located near her work and home and is only 20 minutes from where her husband proposed marriage. The combination of hominess with the natural beauty of the area was irresistible, McDonald said.

"It's wonderful to walk around there," McDonald said. "It's peaceful. Ramsey Creek is lovely. There are trails all over. It's such a different feeling than walking through a normal cemetery."

It appears that the idea of green burials is spreading. Soon after Campbell's woodland cemetery was established, the Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve in Florida's panhandle and the Ethician Family Cemetery in Eastern Texas followed suit. California's first green cemetery — Forever Fernwood in Mill Valley — has yet to open.

In Washington, Dennis McPhee, the program manager for the state's Funeral and Cemetery Office, said no state laws prohibit green burials — the same is true in most other states.

"Once a cemetery is licensed by the state, they can set aside a section of the cemetery for green burials," McPhee said. "The concept is not as new as you might think. I think a lot of cemeteries probably permit burial of

human remains right now without caskets. And no cemetery requires embalming."

He emphasizes, however, that any burials within the state must take place within a designated cemetery. Unauthorized disposal of human remains — including the scattering of cremation ashes — outside an approved cemetery is a misdemeanor in Washington, punishable by up to 90 days in jail, a $1,000 fine or both. And, in order to get the body, one probably would have to steal it from a hospital or morgue — creating another misdemeanor and potentially doubling the perpetrator's jail time and fine.

No one in Washington has yet requested to set up this type of cemetery, McPhee said, and he is unaware of any mortuaries that are actively offering green burials as an alternative to traditional burial or cremation.

"It will be a little bit hard to sell the public on it," he said. "But there are probably a fair number of people out there that it would appeal to."

Ellen Leslie is the executive director of Vancouver's Memorial Society of British Columbia, a nonprofit organization founded in 1956 to provide access to low-cost, simple and dignified funeral services for members. The society has been investigating the concept of green burials for the past four years. Although the society's members have expressed interest in the idea, no green burials have taken place in British Columbia. Leslie attributes this to the fact that, like in Washington, all burials must take place within a cemetery.

"Virtually all cemeteries accept unembalmed remains and biodegradable coffins," Leslie said. "But most insist on grave liners to facilitate lawn maintenance."

A grave liner is a large concrete box around the coffin to keep the ground from caving in after the coffin and remains have decomposed. Such sinkholes would create lawn-care difficulties and present a slightly macabre eyesore for visitors, Leslie said.

Since the society's minimum definition of green burial prohibits the use of grave liners, Leslie said it is looking for alternatives to traditional cemeteries.

"There is substantial interest in green burials," she said. "The more discussion that takes place, the more people will request green burials, and the more likely they will be made available."

John Moles is the owner of Jones-Moles Funeral Home & Cremation Service, a mortuary company with funeral homes in Bellingham, Ferndale and Lynden. He runs the only privately owned cemetery in the county, Ferndale's Greenacres Memorial Park, and is the fourth generation of his family to run the business. His great-grandfather, John Wesley Moles, started the funeral home in 1890 on the same site it occupies today.

Chris Nicholson's loved ones gather at the Ramsey Creek Preserve to commemorate his life before he is buried in a biodegradable casket without chemicals or a grave liner.

Moles is a brisk, handsome 30-something, lively and talkative. He said he has heard some buzz about green burials but has yet to have a request for one.

"If we did receive a request, we would make it happen," Moles said. "We pay attention to what the families want."

He has space at Greenacres that he could turn into a woodland reserve and cemetery if he saw a demand for green burials.

"We've got hundreds and hundreds of years of space," he said. "There's a public misconception that there isn't enough burial space, and that's driving a feeling that we need to conserve. There's also a misconception that it's better for the environment to choose cremation over burial. Cremation, I believe, has more of a negative impact on the environment."

Moles cites the carbon released from the burning body and casket as pollution sources, as well as the amount of natural gas used in the three- to four-hour process.

The number of people choosing cremation over burial is increasing, too, Moles said. More than half of his customers now choose the convenience and generally lower costs of cremation over burial. That trend is not just a local phenomenon. According to the National Funeral Directors Association Web site, the nationwide percentage of cremations is expected to rise from 28 percent now to 36 percent in the next ten years. By 2025, that number is forecast to increase to 46 percent.

“The majority of families that come to us and express concern over the environment typically select cremation,” Moles said. “If I were to create an option for these families, I would tend to want to do green burials.”

He said he envisions having a few acres of land set aside for green burials in the future, with native plants creating a woodland setting and unobtrusive natural markers for the graves. Some maintenance of the land would be necessary to ensure access and aesthetics, but it would not be on the scale of work required to keep up acres of well-manicured grass.

Moles said he believes people might embrace the idea of green burials, but there is a lack of awareness.

“Our industry can only change so fast because it’s based almost entirely on cultural norms,” he said. “We’re not there yet, but I think in my lifetime I could see this being something that may happen in our county.”

Senior Gig Schlich studies environmental journalism.
He has been published in Klipsun, The Western Front and The Planet.

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