

Oak Grove Cemetery sexton retires after 40 years

BY VICKI GERDES
Detroit Lakes Tribune

This past Wednesday, July 31, Oak Grove Cemetery in Detroit Lakes welcomed a new sexton (i.e., caretaker) for the first time in 40 years.

The man who's held that job for the past four decades, Steve Earley, likes to say he pretty much knows where every body is buried at the cemetery, because he's buried a great many of them himself.

A lifelong Detroit Lakes resident, Earley has been the sexton at Oak Grove since 1985, and he admits that he has practically every square foot of it mapped out in his head. But on Wednesday, Earley finally handed over the keys to the cemetery's maintenance building to Premier Vault's Matt Gaeden, who had already begun handling some of the burials at the cemetery in recent years.

"Age," Earley said in response to a question about his reasons for calling it quits. "My body says, 'enough is enough.'"

A small ceremony was held in his honor that morning, with most of the cemetery's board of trustees in attendance alongside his friends and family.

Many of those friends and family have aided Earley in keeping the cemetery shipshape over the years. "It's kind of been a family business," he said, adding that his wife Deborah, his son Ryan, his father, his brother, and even his grandsons have worked alongside him from time to time, along with a few friends.

"It's going to be different," he said. "I have no idea what I'm going to do ... maybe do some more work around the house."

Two of those friends, Keith and Kathy Krueger, who have been the cemetery's most dedicated longtime volunteers, decided to hang up their rakes alongside Earley on Wednesday. The sexton duties at Oak Grove have officially been passed on to Gaeden.

"I'm a little nervous," Gaeden said on Wednesday. "I have a high bar to meet (i.e., maintaining Earley's standards at Oak Grove). But I'm excited to be doing it. I plan to spend a lot of time here for the next couple of months and get trained in all the duties."

Gaeden added that he is committed to ensuring the maintenance standard at the cemetery "stays the same or better" under his guidance. "I've been doing grave work for 19 years," he said.

Mark Hagen, treasurer for the Oak Grove Cemetery Association, said that they also continue to welcome anyone who wants to volunteer their time assisting Gaeden and his crew at Oak Grove. Anyone who would like to do so can contact the cemetery at 218-847-6462, or call Gaeden directly at 218-371-0410.

The cemetery's phone line will also continue to ring through to Earley's cellphone, at least for the time being, as Hagen noted in his remarks during Wednesday's retirement ceremony for Earley that he will continue selling cemetery plots at Oak Grove for as long as he wants to, on a part-time basis.

The ceremony also marked the unveiling of Earley's honorary bench outside one of the cemetery's maintenance buildings. Constructed out of granite, the bench "magically appeared" at the cemetery sometime Wednesday morning, as Earley joked during his remarks, stating that when he arrived at the cemetery early that morning, it wasn't there



Photos by Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

Steve Earley, at left, the sexton at Oak Grove Cemetery since 1985, officially handed over the keys to the maintenance building to his successor, Matt Gaeden, on Wednesday. The Oak Grove Cemetery Association and Ness Granite Works gifted Earley with a granite bench at the cemetery to serve as a permanent memorial to his 40 years of service.



Steve Earley, left, who retired as sexton of Oak Grove Cemetery on Wednesday, has received a lot of help from his wife, Deborah, and son, Ryan, in keeping the 79-acre cemetery in pristine condition over the past four decades.



Oak Grove Cemetery gets patriotic with its annual Avenue of Flags display during Memorial Day weekend.

— and then suddenly, it was.

"I'll have to come sit on it once in a while," he joked.

When Earley started as Oak Grove sexton in 1985, "I never knew I'd be here 40 years — not a clue," he said on Wednesday.

Earley's first job wasn't as a sexton, however, but mowing the lawn at Lakeview Cemetery, a small graveyard in Lakeview Township. A short time later, he added gravedigging to his duties — though he'd never done it before.

"Did I know anything about digging graves? No," Earley admitted in a 2015 feature on Oak Grove Cemetery for the Detroit Lakes Tribune. "They just told me how deep and how wide and how long to dig, and that's what I went by."

Dahlen, his predecessor, was impressed enough with his work to offer him a job in 1984. "I dug four graves at Oak Grove and he asked me if I wanted a job," Earley recalled.

Eventually, his work grew to encompass gravedigging at all the cemeteries within a 30-mile radius of Detroit Lakes. "I used to go to 52 different cemeteries," he said, but added that he started scaling those duties back in 2018.

Earley has likened his work at Oak Grove to a hobby rather than a career. "It doesn't feel like

work," he said in that 2015 interview for the Tribune. But at the same time, no job is perfect.

"There's days for anyone that, you know, you probably don't like your job," he said on Wednesday. "There were a few frustrating moments, but if you enjoy what you're doing, it's a whole lot easier (to get through those moments)."

Though Earley has officially retired as sexton, that doesn't mean he won't still be around to assist as needed. "I'm not going anywhere," he said.

But now he'll have more time to spend with his wife, Deborah, and their family, which includes a son, Ryan, and daughter, Jennifer. Ryan lives in Detroit Lakes, while Jennifer makes her home in Port Angeles, Washington — now, they'll have more opportunities to visit.

In his remarks on Wednesday, Earley thanked his wife for her patience in dealing with a husband whose job often entailed working on holidays and weekends, even when they had made plans to be somewhere else.

"Because being in the burial business and working out here and working in different cemeteries ... you never know when you're going to be needed," he said. "You can plan something and it always gets disarrayed, or you're scrambling to get

done (i.e., with a burial) and then go. But most of the time it always worked out."

More about Oak Grove Cemetery

Detroit Lakes' Oak Grove Cemetery can trace its roots in the community as far back as April 24, 1874, when a cemetery committee was appointed by the town board of what was then known as Detroit, Minnesota. The committee determined that a 10-acre tract should be purchased for burials, and by 1882, it had become apparent that an organization was needed to handle the cemetery's operations.

The Oak Grove Cemetery Association was formed that spring and seven trustees were elected at its first annual meeting.

Currently, the association is a nonprofit organization that exists solely for the maintenance and development of the cemetery property, which today encompasses 79 acres. Its current board includes Jon Pratt, president; Todd Simison, vice president; Mark Hagen, treasurer; Joe Evans, secretary; and trustees Fred Floan, Joan Buchhop and Larry Hynding. Anyone interested in donating to the cemetery can do so via the donation box at the main entrance, or they can call Mark Hagen at 218-849-2294.

BUSINESS ANNOUCEMENTS

Anderson-Chase promoted at Midwest Bank

Midwest Bank of Detroit Lakes has promoted Dawn Anderson-Chase to the Retail Operations Support position. She most recently served as a Personal Banker/Teller at the Detroit Lakes Walmart branch.

Anderson-Chase lives in Detroit Lakes with her spouse, Sonny.

Midwest Bank is a locally owned, independent community bank with offices located in the West Central Minnesota communities of Detroit Lakes, Callaway, Waubun, Barnesville, Parkers Prairie, and Dalton.



Essentia Health-South University Clinic welcomes behavioral health specialist Mercedes Marvig

Mercedes Marvig, an advanced practice registered nurse and certified nurse practitioner specializing in behavioral health, is excited to join the Essentia Health-South University Clinic.

"My personal and professional values align very closely with the values of Essentia Health," said the Twin Cities native of her decision to join Essentia.

Marvig received her education from Rasmussen University in Moorhead. She is certified by the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

"I realized I wanted to become a PMHNP (psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner) after caring for mental health patients while working in the emergency department," explained Marvig, who worked as a sexual assault nurse examiner for nearly eight years. "I experienced how rewarding caring for these patients can be and will spend the rest of my career doing so!"

To schedule an appointment with Marvig, please call (701) 364-1000. To see her full profile, visit EssentiaHealth.org and click on "Find a Doctor."



BRIEF

Klobuchar, Smith recommend Minnesota's National Loon Center for federal funding

CROSSLAKE — Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Sen. Tina Smith have each requested the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, designate \$1,700,000 in congressionally directed spending to the city of Crosslake for construction of the National Loon Center.

The National Loon Center will be a facility that will celebrate Minnesota's outdoor heritage as it educates visitors on the importance of conserving clean lakes and protecting loon habitat. The subcommittee will select projects for funding by mid-summer.

"Senators Klobuchar and Smith have shown their commitment to protecting loons and freshwater ecosystems while also supporting a significant economic asset in the Brainerd Lakes Area that will educate and engage visitors and residents alike," said National Loon Center Executive Director Jon Mobeck in a news release.

When completed, the facility will create dozens of jobs, stimulate the local and regional economy, and position Minnesota as a national leader in loon and freshwater

conservation, National Loon Center officials stated. The center is already actively advancing nationally significant loon and freshwater research and education as it prepares for a scheduled opening in about 18 months. Officials also said the National Loon Center will provide needed commerce in the off-season and winter months, making it essential to the development and retention of a talented workforce and support the bottom-lines of dozens of small businesses in the Brainerd lakes area.

The National Loon Center is expected to welcome 200,000 guests annually. The National Loon Center will connect and amplify loon and freshwater research and conservation efforts occurring across the nation. The high-tech facility will incorporate an exciting array of immersive and interactive educational exhibits to engage diverse audiences, while promoting and celebrating responsible recreation and enduring stewardship of lakes.

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