

OPP team may help solve cemetery mystery of the 300 buried paupers

Desmond Devoy
desmond.devoy@metroland.com

The OPP may help solve a mystery of just how many people are buried in a mass “paupers’ grave” at the Elmwood Cemetery.

Eric Halpin, president of the non-profit Perth Cemetery Company, recently sent a letter to Insp. Derek Needham, detachment commander for the Lanark County OPP, seeking his assistance in finding out more about any of the undocumented residents of the nearby House of Industry, better known as a “poor house,” who worked nearby, when the building was in operation from 1903 to 1965. (The cemetery opened in 1872).

Halpin has been able to find records for the 102 people buried between 1935 and 1965. For the years between 1903 and 1935, however, “I don’t know,” he said as he awaited the start of the Perth police services board meeting at town hall on Thursday, Dec. 17.

In a later email to this newspaper, however, he stated that he had been able to identify “an astounding 300 of these graves from 1903 to 1965 in a mass, unmarked plot. In fact, I believe there are an additional 100 (graves) dating from 1872 to 1903, also with no records either.”

“Many burials had occurred in the paupers section, but the records from the early days were minimal,” wrote Halpin. “The impoverished deceased were simply buried and forgotten.”

Most of those buried do not have a headstone, and were buried in what used to be known as the pauper’s section of the graveyard.

proached Halpin with some tentative good news.

“They may do that,” said Needham of Halpin’s request that the OPP use some of its equipment used to find bodies at the graveyard to determine just how many bodies are buried in that section. “They have to do some training with that every year,” said Needham of the unit, which is based in Caledon, Ont., northwest of Toronto. However, he cautioned that while the unit uses its equipment to, say, search for people after a building collapse, “it’s not as scientific as we hope. It may give you some general stuff.” But, he added that, “we’ll see if we can get them here for a day.”

In a later email to this newspaper, Halpin added that once the OPP has completed their work, “I thought it might be an appropriate time (the town’s 200th anniversary) to somehow mark the general paupers’ grave aread with a plaque or similar sign,” like a tablet marker or bench, “so that future custodians of Elmwood will always be able to understand why this open green space exists within our cemetery.”

He has consulted the original register book from the House of Industry, which is currently stored in the vault at Lanark Lodge. Using these records, he has prepared an alphabetical listing of all of the House of Industry residents that were buried at Elmwood from 1930 to 1965.

“Copies of this listing will be provided to numerous local repositories of historical documents,” he added.

If you have any questions or comments on the site, you can contact Halpin at 613-264-9693 or via email at ehalpin@rinnet.com



Submitted photo and Desmond Devoy/METROLAND
Above, Eric Halpin, president of the non-profit Perth Cemetery Company, points to the green expanse of grass where he is certain the “paupers” mass grave is located in the Elmwood Cemetery on the edge of town. At right, Halpin speaks with Stephanie Gray, head of the Lanark County Situation Table, before the start of the Perth police services board meeting on Dec. 17, about an article she had written about the history of the cemetery, as part of his ongoing research.

