

On The Road

[Union City, Michigan]

A Meteor Is Just One of Many Stories at Riverside Cemetery

Not many cemeteries can say they have a meteor in it. Riverside Cemetery in Union City, Michigan, can make that claim. It's known as the Gaw Meteor, and its legend comes from a 1987 book "Meteor" written by Union City resident and children's author Patricia Polacco. *Stan Goldstein reports*

Polacco's book explains how one night a meteor crash-landed on the Gaw farm in Union City. Following the crash, word spreads quickly and soon there is a carnival full of people with a band, a circus, a hot air balloon and more on the farm. At the end of the story, we learn how the meteor is now the family headstone in the village cemetery where her grandparents are buried.

Whether the actual story of the meteor is fact or fiction can be debated, but there it is at the Gaw family plot.

"People come from all over the United States to see the meteor. They will pull up and ask 'Where's the meteor?'" said Bobbie Mathis, president of the Union City Society for Historical Preservation. "The rock is in the cemetery. It's cool and little kids come from all over to see this rock and to touch it.

"I think there's a lot of artistic license in the book, but it is a cute story about our whole town and the meteor," Mathis added. "We tell people to come see it and decide if it's from outer space."

Finding different stories like this throughout the Riverside Cemetery is what Mathis, 48, enjoys. She is also a part of a group that is committed to the preservation and restoration of the headstones in the cemetery.



The Gaw Meteor in Riverside Cemetery, mentioned in the book "Meteor" by Patricia Polacco. (Photo credit: Bobbie Mathis)

"I was born and raised in Union City, a small town with about 1,600 residents, and I know a lot of the residents here," said Mathis, who is an art teacher at Lakeview High School in Battle Creek, Michigan.

"I am a genealogist and love doing research through Ancestry and Newspapers.com. I started to look up all the Union City articles I could find and found some fascinating

historical stories. In 2016, I joined the historical society and got involved with them."

Mathis has always had an interest in cemeteries. "My mom would take me to cemeteries when I was younger to visit my relatives," she said. "It was instilled early on in me for an appreciation and reverence. I always liked to go to different ones and look around."



The tombstone of Sophia Bingham Moseley, top, the first American missionary child born in Oahu, Hawaii. (Photo credit: Bobbie Mathis)

Stories Abound

The oldest burial on record at Riverside Cemetery was in 1837. It's still an active cemetery with about 6,500 permanent residents and is separated over two counties, Branch and Calhoun.

"Back in the day, people would have arguments about which county they wanted to be buried in," Mathis said.

John Zimmerman is one of the Union City natives who Mathis has done research on buried at Riverside

"Zimmerman was a deeply religious abolitionist who was a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. He was the conductor and organizer of the Underground Railroad in Union City and guided many slaves to freedom," she said.

"Going through the historical society and burial records, I found that he doesn't have a headstone. My goal is to get the funds raised to get him one," she added.

Another person buried at Riverside Mathis found information on is Sophia Bingham Mosley, the first American missionary child born in Oahu, Hawaii. She died in 1887.

"Her parents were missionaries, and they sailed to Hawaii in 1820 to do missionary work there. Her father was a Protestant clergyman and leader of the first group of American missionaries to introduce Christianity in the Hawaiian Islands," she said. "They sent her back to school here in Union City to get a proper education."

Then there's Ralph Arbogast (1877-1932) who worked with Thomas Edison. "He was a chemist and worked with Edison in the early 1900s. He was one of his right-hand men," Mathis said. "He later moved here to Union City

and became a farmer. He used his chemist and scientific background to update agricultural methods. He learned how to farm more proficiently."

Headstone Maintenance

In addition to learning the stories behind the people in the cemetery, Mathis also is involved with the cleaning and upkeep of headstones. She runs a Facebook group with over 500 members committed to the preservation and restoration of headstones at Riverside.

"I've done two workshops at the cemetery on the basics of cleaning headstones and repairing them," she said. "I had a third one scheduled for June but had to cancel that due to the pandemic.

"I tell people the proper way to clean an older stone. There's a lot of bad information out there and a tombstone can deteriorate if you use the wrong cleaning liquids," she added. "Plus some stones are tipping and I show the people how to level them correctly. Then there are a lot of safety things to go over. We have a lot of young people who want to learn how to do it."

And if you visit the cemetery, you will most likely find Mathis practicing what she teaches.

"I will probably clean or fix about 10 stones a day when I am there. During the summer I can get there three or four times a week and can do as many as 40 to 50 stones. Altogether I try to do 300 a year.

Mathis' interest in repairing the headstones came after vandals damaged several in Riverside in 2017.



Bobbie Mathis, right, says this headstone from 1871 at Riverside Cemetery was one of the more challenging repairs and restorations she has made. (Photo credit: Chris Mathis, right, and Bobbie Mathis, above)



“That really upset me greatly. I thought, what can I do about this? Those that were vandalized were my focus. I wanted to fix them and get them back up,” she said. “From there, I went and looked at ones in the cemetery that I thought were doable to fix up. I have a group of a few volunteers who are real dedicated and they have helped me.”

Among those who have assisted Mathis with the repairs are Sandy Eis, Jennifer Baffi and Amy Hayes. “There’s been a lot of interest in it. I’m pretty hardcore about it and we’ve even had some students come in to help us,” Mathis said.

“I always know the next section of the cemetery I want to work on. Some of the smaller sections you can knock out in one season. Our big window of opportunity starts in May and the

season ends in September. There are certain temperatures you don’t want to touch anything,” she added. “My goal is to fix everything I can.”

Not Slowed By Pandemic

Being outdoors, their work has continued through the pandemic.

“Of course we are outdoors and we don’t hover over each other. We social distance at all times,” she said. “People have been in the cemetery because there’s not much else to do. It’s like part history and art museum,” she said.

“Nothing has slowed me down. It’s like the perfect COVID-19 hobby. It’s outdoors, and we work with a small group.”

Mathis has also been part of historical tours of the cemetery. This year’s tour was postponed due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, but she hopes they continue next year.

“One of the things the pandemic did hurt was not having a cemetery tour or our repairs workshop this year,” she said. “Tours have been going on since 2001 and have focused on the beauty of the cemetery, and we have had portrayals by actors of some of Union City’s notable citizens of the past. The next tour I would like to have an abolitionist theme and focus on John Zimmerman. It would be great to have an unveiling of his headstone. I would like to do a ghost tour, too.”

“My goal overall is improving the cemetery so everyone can enjoy it and find out about the stories of the people buried here,” Mathis added. “Plus, we even have a meteor.” •