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Appreciating poets — past and present

Coffin makes Dead Poet Guy's 'Top 15' graves list

BY JT LEONARD Times Record Staff



BRUNSWICK

As usually happens for poets and artists, Robert P. Tristram Coffin's latest bit of fame has arrived posthumously.

The Brunswick poet and former Bowdoin College professor's burial plot in Cundy's Harbor has made the Top 15 U.S. Poets' Graves list compiled by Walter Skold, a Freeport poet and generally colorful local character.

Though deceased for, lo, these many years (58, actually), Coffin remains in good company, in both subterranean and literary senses. Interred with his wife, Ruth, and daughter Margaret "Peggy" Coffin Halvosa at Cranberry Horn Hill Cemetery, the plot is adorned by three carved slate stones.

Naturally, each of the markers bears an engraved poem.

"What I've found in my research is that some poets' graves don't have anything on them. But at least 50 percent of the ones I've visited are somehow different or unique from others in the same cemetery," Skold said.

"They're either larger or have epitaphs of their poetry, or a lyre or some symbol that is somehow different and separates them from the others, is somehow indicative of their art."

Skold's inclusion of Coffin's grave was based on its elegant simplicity, rural surroundings and solemn dignity.

"You have to love the irony of a poet's grave with the word 'coffin' on it, in big letters, chiseled into the slate," Skold said.

Others in the Top 15 include wordplay heavyweights John Updike, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Kenneth Rexroth, Carl Sandburg and, of course, Edgar Allan Poe.

All of them are unique, Skold said, and exhibit huge variation in style.

"Gravestones are a fascinating journey of discovery," Skold said. "There are so many poets out there who aren't Poes, Frosts and Whitmans, but their graves also are really, really fascinating and exquisite.

To assemble his Top 15 list Skold, a.k.a "The Dead Poet Guy," has visited 259 graves in more than 25 states, and conferred with nine different poets laureate along the way.

Naturally, Skold, 52, is a huge fan of Edgar Allan Poe. He drives a white Dodge van he calls "Dedgar the Poe Mobile," which usually is bedecked with witticisms such as "We DIG Dead Poets."

He's also working on a documentary called "Finding Frost," which tells the backstory of poets revered as well as forgotten.

There are three Frost graves. However, only one of them belongs to the quiet, stoic, taciturn fellow who came up with "Mending Wall" and two roads diverging in a wood.

One is his daughter Margery, whom first was buried in Montana. Skold hopes to visit her original grave this summer.



WALTER SKOLD reads the bottom line of a poem on the tombstone of Margaret "Peggy" Coffin Halvosa, daughter of poet Robert P.T. Coffin, at the Cranberry Horn Hill Cemetery in Cundy's Harbor. Coffin Elementary School in Brunswick is named for the poet, who died Jan. 20, 1955. At top are the tombstones of Coffin, his wife, Ruth Phillip Coffin who died April 5, 1947, and daughter Margaret, who died April 1, 1973. Each grave is hand-carved "poet's slate," as Skold says. On each is a poem. Coffin's and wife's include a Coffin poem, while their daughter's tombstone includes a poem she wrote. RACHEL SHELLY / THE TIMES RECORD

"Few people know that her book of poetry was published by her parents after she died," Skold said. "Her remains were later moved to the Frost family's grave plots in Vermont."

Another is Elizabeth Frost in Rochester, N.Y., who bears no relation to the Vermont Frosts.

"It's just an example of two more people who had this wonderful gift of the muses that we know nothing about," he added.

Then there are the American poets buried in Europe: Sylvia Plath, W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot and — for readers old enough to remember the 1970s — Jim Morrison.

"Even if I don't like their poetry," Skold said, regarding the latter, "I respect the passion they had in their heart to go out and make it happen."

He describes grave searching as "cultural archaeology."

"So many have just that one wonderful word on it, 'poet,' it's probably the one word that is most common on these graves," Skold said. "ee cummings — his grave is very simple, nothing on it but his name."

"Maybe our culture expects poets' graves to be different, maybe we expect them to have something profound or evocative to say on their tombstone that will speak to us from the afterlife," Skold said. "More modern poets' graves are harder to locate, so maybe people are getting away from the 19th century idea that poets had more to offer us."

Poets can be found in the most unlikely of places. One, who is buried in Kansas City, Mo., had a fairly successful day job as a professional baseball player.

"Dan Quisenberry and Walter Cronkite are buried in the same cemetery," Skold said. "Quisenberry, who was a pitcher for the Kansas City Royals, wrote two volumes of poetry. After the second was published, he was diagnosed with cancer."

Quisenberry, who died in 1998, was known as much for his quick wit and the postgame one-liners he delivered to sportswriters as for his unconventional "submarinestyle" pitching motion.

In addition to being the Mid-coast's cemetery connoisseur, Skold is the ringleader of the Dead Poets Society of America, an effort of which another colorful local character, Gulf of Maine bookstore co-owner Gary Lawless, also is a member. Among their goals is to organize the fourth annual Dead Poets Remembrance Day on Oct. 5-6. It's the weekend before Oct. 7, which is the anniversary of Poe's death and the concurrent birth of James Whitcomb Riley in 1849.

Riley would go on to become the "Hoosier Poet" of Indianapolis. When he died in 1916, more than 100,000 mourners were said to have attended his funeral.

(By comparison, only 25,000 attended the 2009 Los Angeles funeral service for Michael Jackson.)

"We're planning to have readings at graves of poets in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts," Skold said.

"There's always new dead poets being born," Skold said. "I'll be a future Dead Poet at some point, and maybe there's some kid in Harriet Beecher Stowe Elementary School that will grow up to be U.S. Poet Laureate some day."

Meanwhile, back in Brunswick, another grave has been added to Skold's list.

Herb Coursen, also a former Bowdoin College professor and poet who died in 2011, was an expert on the works of William Shakespeare and authored a book called "Graves of the Poets."

Fittingly, the search is on for Coursen's place of eternal rest, as well.

Stay tuned.

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