

Backyard Burial: What a Way to Go

A Virginia family picks up the shovel and handles the arrangements. R.I.P., just up the hill from the house.

By [David Mudd](#) [1]



**Wisteria, spring 2008,
Blacksburg, Virginia**

Photo: Jennifer Schwanke

When you've reached a certain age and leave a place you've loved, keeping in touch with friends left behind can involve as much heartache as pleasure. Deaths become a depressing staple of the news they pass along. And given that the place I left a little more than three years ago

is Blacksburg, Virginia, there's been awfully much in that category to report, most of it inspiring as much bafflement as heartache.

Even before last spring's massacre at Virginia Tech, there was the still-unfathomable rampage by a young local named William Morva. I didn't know Cho Seung-Hui or any of his victims, but I did know William. Blacksburg's a small town and I was a regular at the same downtown coffee shop he haunted. I talked to him often. He charmed my toddler daughter. He had some strange ways noticeable even to her; she once wondered aloud why she had to put on her shoes before going out to play when had we both witnessed William strolling barefoot in a snowstorm. But harmless eccentricities were all they seemed to be.

Then William went bad crazy. First he got himself locked up in the local jail for attempted burglary. One night a while later he allegedly gunned down a hospital security guard during an escape. The next morning, the first day of Tech's fall semester, he allegedly ambushed and killed a local deputy searching

for him along a nature trail near campus. He cowered in the woods until he was caught hours later, but not before Tech went on lockdown and rumors swirled about a gunman taking hostages in various campus buildings.

Only months later, of course, that very situation would come eerily to pass.

Considering all that, the news in January of the death of my friend Trev Smith's 73-year old mother Dawn came as a kind of relief. It wasn't a happy occasion but it was expected, and peaceful. And if not for a rich vein of self-sufficiency pumping through at least a couple of generations of the Smith family, it might even have been ordinary.

But it wasn't ordinary at all, at least not by modern American standards.

For example, even though I now live only six hours by car from Blacksburg, I could not have attended the funeral--even if I had set out the moment Dawn drew her last breath. Because she was in the ground only five hours later.



**Until the family finds a headstone,
Dawn's gravemarker**

Photo: Jennifer Schwanke

She was put there by Trev and his wife Jenny, his father Dale, his sister Monica and brother Dean, and his teenage children Tyler and Anna. They performed the ceremony, such as it was, themselves, after carrying Dawn's body up the hill a bit from her house, in a coffin Trev made from

birch plywood.

They all slipped and slid in the mud that warmish morning, he told me, but they managed to get the coffin in the grave a friend had dug with a backhoe days earlier without anyone else joining her. And then they took turns shoveling mud and gravel onto the coffin until the hole was filled and mounded. Then they went back down the hill.

It was straightforward and simple, not to mention dirt cheap.

And strange as it seems it's still legal--though Trev said the people who accepted the death certificate from him the next day at the Montgomery County Health Department weren't at all sure of that. They placed three calls

to state headquarters in Richmond before they let him go, trying to be sure he was allowed to do what he and his family had already done.

Turns out it's still possible--more than possible--to stage a homegrown burial in Virginia, and in most other states.

"You could bury someone right in your backyard here in town and no legal authority would have anything to say about it," Isabel Berney told me. She's Executive Director of Blacksburg's chapter of an organization called the Funeral Consumers Alliance, and she provided advice to the Smiths.

"You can't bury more than one, because then you've got a cemetery and are subject to some regulation. But you can bury one, no problem."

She gave a knowing laugh when I expressed surprise. "I know, I know," she said. "Most people think some authority has to be contacted immediately, like a funeral home or the coroner's office, but there are really only five states with laws requiring that funeral homes be involved when someone dies. It's still very open in most places."

The presumed requirement that a cadaver be embalmed? Not actually on the books in most places, says Berney. "You just don't have to do it. A body can take up to three days before decomposition really begins to set in," she said.

She also said it's not carved in stone anywhere that a body needs to be placed "six feet under."

"The actual minimum depth in most regulations is three feet," Berney said. And she suggested that was much better not just for the grave digger's back but for natural processes as well.

"If you accept the 'ashes to ashes' concept it's better to have a body at a level where there are lots of aerobic bacteria to break it down quickly. At six feet you're down where the anaerobic bacteria live, and they take much longer and don't do as good a job."

So you become slime before you become dust.

Again, because Blacksburg is a small town, I know Isabel Berney. She is a petite, gentle woman in her 70s, and it struck me strange to hear her talk so freely about death and its aftermath. And then it got stranger.

When I asked if she'd be content to have her husband Morton bury her three feet beneath the back yard when her time came, she said she wasn't

expecting to leave an intact body to be interred.

"I've arranged to have my body used for research," she said. "I expect they'll take any usable organs for transplanting, take my head for plastic surgery practice, and sell my arms and legs to the Army."

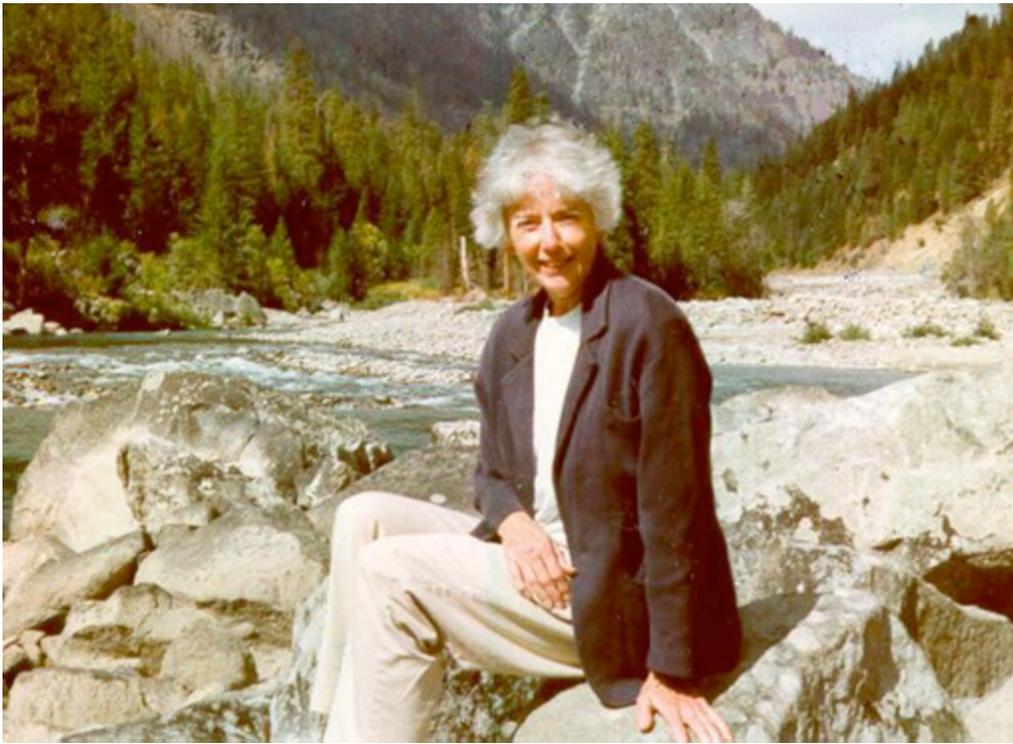
When I asked what the Army could possibly want with cadavers' limbs she said they're used to help devise effective armor and sharpen surgical techniques.

"Essentially they have machines that 'walk' real human limbs through minefields and blow them up, or they shoot them, and then they study the effects."

She agreed it sounded gruesome to contemplate, but said she takes comfort in thinking the savaging of her no-longer-needed limbs might help spare or speed the recovery of those who'd like to keep theirs.

For those who can't stomach the thought of having themselves cut up--to paraphrase the old John Prine song--and passed all around, Isabel suggests burial along the lines of Dawn Smith's, or cremation.

"There are even fewer regulations about where you can scatter ashes. You can release them almost anywhere as long as you don't get caught trespassing or littering," she said. Anything--short of felony--she seemed to suggest, to get away from what her organization sees as a needlessly expensive and burdensome funeral industry in the U.S., where the average cost now tops \$6500



Dawn Smith by the Skykomish River, Washington state, 1996

Photo: Courtesy of Jennifer Schwanke

By the time she died, Alzheimer's Disease had robbed Dawn Smith of the ability to speak. And in her last years not even Dale could be sure she recognized him, much less anyone else. She was vigorous--bedridden only in her last week--but vacant.

Trev said that condition combined with its longevity certainly helped shape the family's plans for her burial.

"We don't really know what she would have wanted, because she was just in her late fifties when we started to notice the first signs of Alzheimer's. Up until then she'd never expressed any wishes one way or another about the kind of funeral she might want to have, and once the disease really came on it wasn't an issue. And I guess my father was more concerned about taking care of her each day than about where she'd be buried, or how."

He said he believes she'd be satisfied, though. "She was a very practical woman," he said, "and it's a lovely spot."



View from Dawn's graveside, Happy Hollow, Virginia

Photo: Jennifer Schwanke

He's right about that. The Smiths own about 60 wooded acres in a little place called Happy Hollow, just east of Blacksburg in the lee of the Blue Ridge Mountain range. The grave is nestled in a glade of hemlocks and pines. The only thing missing is a headstone.

And that takes us to the uber-practical Smith family member, the widower Dale.

He has told the others to be on the lookout in their rambles on the property for a rock of promising dimensions. When they find one, he says he'll extract it, shape it up, etch the standard information on the best side, and set it in place.

Not that he's a stonemason, you understand. Just as his son isn't a coffin maker. It's just that the Smiths take care of things themselves.

Dale didn't know much about nursing an Alzheimer's sufferer either, but he was his wife's sole caregiver until the last week of her fifteen-year illness, when Hospice took over.

"Soon after I moved the two of us down here to live next to Trev and his

family I tried her in a day care facility over at Virginia Tech, but she just didn't fit in. She wasn't like a lot of other Alzheimer's patients, and that made some of the others there very uncomfortable. She was always laughing even though she didn't talk, and she liked to touch people. That was unusual. The others were really serious and didn't seem to like any contact. So I took her out."

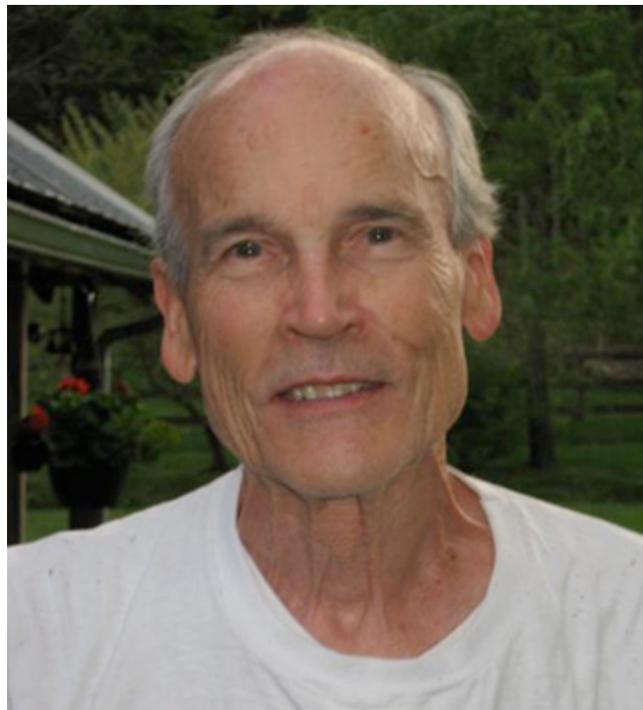
But he didn't let round-the-clock care cramp his retirement plans, which have included endless hours toiling outside, transforming what was once a rough sheep pasture alongside Trev's yard into sculptured meadow, with a meandering stone-paved walkway, a stacked stone footbridge, and limestone outcrops he exposed and polished with a power washer. Through much of it, Dawn wandered the fenced field, content by all appearances just to be outside and active.

Dale Smith

Photo: Jennifer Schwanke

"She loved to walk," he said. And that added some drama more than once to his other primary retirement pursuit: travel. He drove himself and Dawn across the country to visit relatives in California, Nevada and Utah several times during her illness, and she walked away from interstate rest stops, grocery stores, and campsites.

"She's been tracked down by state troopers, security guards, even a guy in an airplane once," he said. "And one time she slipped away from me in a Walmart and didn't see her again for about five hours. A woman who had noticed her in the store recognized her walking near her house about five miles away, and drove her back."



He's got a firm watch on her now, though.

He can see the still-mounded grave and wooden cross from his bedroom window, and the 76-year old said it gives him comfort to think he'll lie in that spot too, when his time comes. (Outside the city limits, the Smiths are free to bury more than one.)

Given the years he spent as an executive with Bechtel, the multinational

engineering corporation--a career that put him in a very comfortable financial situation according to Trev--I asked Dale if it weren't all just a little too spare. Had he ever imagined himself interred in a traditional cemetery, I wondered, with a carved marble headstone and maybe an eternal flame or a paved approach so someone could pull a car up close if they wanted to bring flowers or have a good cry over him?"

But he dismissed all that. "This is perfect!" he declared, referring to the scene outside his window, adding with an enthusiasm seemingly out of synch with what he was actually saying, "I don't believe in any kind of afterlife. We just die like animals, and it's just fine to be buried without a lot of ceremony and nonsense."

"I don't look forward to it," he told me. "But when it happens there won't be any better place to be than right here."



Dawn Smith's backyard burial place, with wisteria, April 2008

Photo: Jennifer Schwanke

I did a lot of hiking in the mountains around Blacksburg, and came across more than a few forgotten family cemeteries over the years. To a one, they were weedy, ivy-choked, with slanting, broken stones and legends worn away by the elements over untold decades. I figured they were relics of another time, testimony to ways long past.

But now there's a brand new one, established by the Smiths for no more compelling reason than that it made a lot of sense; a strangely hopeful turn in a place that's known so much senseless death in recent times.

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