



Waking the Sleeping Giant: My Forty-One Years at Cave Hill

Foreword

As Cave Hill Cemetery is working toward its goal of attaining Level III arboretum status, we thought it would be fitting to reach out to former President & CEO, Leroy F. Squires, for a reflective piece on his legacy at Cave Hill Cemetery. After 41 years of dedicated service, Squires left an immeasurable footprint that our operations and horticultural teams have carried forward in exceedingly wonderful ways. Cave Hill Cemetery is a natural, yet manicured landscape that is highly recognized, valued, and embraced by the local community, all of which Squires recognized in 1974 and carried forward throughout his entire career.

-Michael Higgs, Manager, Cave Hill Heritage Foundation, Inc.

By Lee Squires, Past President & CEO, 1974-2015



Lee Squires at his retirement celebration, 2015.

I was hired by the Board of Managers in November 1973 and started my Cave Hill career in January 1974, at twenty-seven years old, with the newly-forged title of Grounds Manager. This was a big step for a young guy five years out of the University of Kentucky with a B.S. degree in Ornamental Horticulture. I had known about Cave Hill my entire life, and the majority of my family members were buried there over a few generations. I also fed the iconic waterfowl as a child, like everyone else in Louisville.

My predecessor, Ira Mitchell, had the title of vice-president and the president was actually the board chair. We had a Secretary-Treasurer, David

Zimmerman; and, he and I were considered the cemetery managers, or agents of the board, if you will. In the 1980's David retired and Derleth Blaine was hired as Secretary-Treasurer; he retired after 15 years or so. The

Board of Managers was faced with a decision. They needed a general manager who knew the cemetery inside and out and chose not to look elsewhere. They revived an old title used by three of the managers before me starting in 1848, Superintendent. The Superintendent title was given to rural garden cemetery general managers for many decades before my hiring; all managers before me were professional horticulturists. The board appointed me to a new position and created a new title, Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer. This was an interesting and all-encompassing job description that never existed before my appointment.

The board soon hired Chris Rowan as our senior accountant. Chris handled all of the accounting responsibilities of the cemetery in a professional manner, and we worked together for many years until I retired in 2015. Chris is currently the Senior Vice President and CFO. Soon after I announced my retirement, the Board launched a nation-wide search, eventually hiring Gwen Mooney as my successor. Gwen is a Licensed Funeral Director and Embalmer, and was President of the Gwen

Mooney Funeral Homes and an Officer of Spring Grove Cemetery, in Cincinnati. Gwen is the sixth leader in the history in the Cemetery, and is the President and CEO.

Reminiscing in History

Youth and a creative mindset provided a great opportunity for me at Cave Hill. In January 1974, while surveying the grounds, I came across 9 or 10 of the maintenance crew guys digging out a giant maple stump. It had a trunk diameter of at least six feet and was cut off at a ten-foot height. They had dug around it down to a depth of four feet with shovels, axes and chain saws. Soon, they attached a chain to the top of the trunk and pulled it over with a front end loader. It was then cut up and hauled to our dump site. The entire process took nearly two weeks of ten men's time to accomplish this difficult task! I thought this was a major time waster and extremely expensive. At the next board meeting, I asked if I could purchase a stump grinder. After some discussion of the pros and cons, the board agreed with me and saw this purchase to be a great maintenance time saver for Cave Hill. It was an expensive purchase for Cave Hill in the 70's.

At the February 1974 board meeting I learned that our lot sales for 1973 were only \$187,000.00. Our payroll was more than this! The only products we sold then were grave spaces and bronze grave markers. We had no sales force and never asked anyone to purchase a lot. The Secretary-Treasurer, Engineer, Sexton and myself sold lots when customers walked into the office looking for a burial space. We would stop what we were doing and take the customer on a lot purchasing tour. About 50% of the customers walked out without purchasing. I could see nothing but financial problems ahead if we did not have a strategy for our lot sales program.

I interject here an interesting story concerning financial worries. In 1976, my company car needed new tires. White wall tires were still in vogue and in much demand to class your car up a bit. Before I went down to the tire shop, Mr. Zimmerman, the Secretary-Treasurer, told me to get black wall tires and not white walls because the white walls were more expensive. At twenty-seven, I agreed and went on down to get some new black wall tires. I told the store manager to put on some black walls. He did and presented me with the bill. He asked me why I didn't get white walls. I told him the reason. He looked perplexed and smiled and said, "Tires are white wall on one side and black wall on the other; all we do is turn the tire to the side requested, they are the same price, white or black." True story!

After this event, Mr. Zimmerman told me that Cave Hill needed more income to manage and maintain the nearly 300-acre cemetery, but that the board was reluctant to delve into many sales opportunities. After all, Cave Hill is a cemetery and should only sell lots. Historically, cemeteries just sold lots and maintained the grounds. Many cemeteries were having a hard time creating income to cover expenses as I learned by attending cemetery association meetings across the country. Cave Hill was not alone. David wrote his thesis at U of L on cemetery management in the 1960's. During a discussion one day, he said, "Lee, Cave Hill is the sleeping giant of cemeteries, so many possibilities for increasing income are possible: monument sales, mausoleum construction, cremation business opportunities, burial vault sales and hiring a sales force; we need to start looking into these sales opportunities." "This is a new era for Cave Hill," he said.

In 1978, our board decided to hire a sales manager and sales staff to increase our income. This was a very important decision and required a lot of thought and personnel management for all of us. In

1979, we had a sales manager and 9 or 10 sales staff. Several years down the road, we reduced the total number of sales staff, and the Secretary-Treasurer became the defacto sales manager.

When I was appointed Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer in 1997, a very influential board member told me at the meeting that I needed to focus on ways to make money for the cemetery and increase our income so that we can maintain Cave Hill forever. This was a wake- up call for all of us and the board gave me the latitude to look into income producing ideas for the cemetery.

Without getting into a lot of detail, from 1997 until I retired in 2015: we concentrated on lot sales and made good efforts to offer what the public wanted. Here is just of the few of the many accomplishments that I am proudest of:

- We took the Cave Hill story to the public, giving many slide show talks to groups outside of the cemetery
- We started giving tours on a regular basis
- We opened the Cave Hill Monument Co. and built a memorial engraving shop
- We started selling memorials and offered engraving services to our lot holders
- We converted the Grinstead Waiting Room building into a first class Columbarium
- We placed cremation memorials all over the cemetery in plant reserve areas that did not damage tree roots and increased our burial space by thousands of inurnments
- We opened the Twin Lakes Scattering Garden on a steep wooded hillside complete with community memorials that serve our cremation scattering clients
- We converted unusable hillsides into mausoleum space and built a couple of stylish mausoleums for entombments
- We started the Cave Hill Heritage Foundation

By the way, Cave Hill is currently working on a Level III Arboretum Accreditation and is asking for donations to the project. A donation to the CHHF would be well received I am sure.

Another interesting advantage of being the Secretary-Treasurer (besides transcribing the minutes of all board meetings for the Cemetery Co., the Investment Co. and the Foundation) was that I was exempt from jury service. An act of the Kentucky Legislature in the late 1800's made the Cave Hill Secretary-Treasurer exempt from jury service due to the fact that he had to sign off on all interments and accept all monies presented. Office staff was minimal and the Secretary-Treasurer was required to be in the office at all times. I did use this one time and the judge dismissed me from jury service. He was amazed that this act existed.

Horticultural Legacy

In addition to all of my duties as “agent of the board”, I was responsible for all of the horticultural activities on the grounds. We have always had staff that is truly committed to making Cave Hill a great arboretum as well as the best cemetery in the U.S. It was a blessing to follow in the footsteps of four great horticulturists.

Trees have been labeled for over 70 years, and replacing them is a continual process. We had well over 600 trees labeled at my retirement. The labels were perfect for leaf collectors. However, the management prior to my hiring did not permit leaf collecting. This seemed absurd and cruel to me to deny a 7th grader from picking a few leaves when we had over 500,000 million, billion leaves on the property. In 1975 I made leaf collecting “legal” in Cave Hill. The science teachers loved me!

Trees are planted on the dividing lines between the lots unless they are in a reserve designated for planting. When a tree is young, a burial can be made close to the tree without damaging the roots. As the tree grows and puts out roots into the grave space, digging a grave most generally removes half of the root system. Five to ten years after a burial the tree may die.

In the fall, we would remove all dead trees and over winter, the stumps would be ground out. In spring, planting would commence. In most cases, we planted a tree back in the same location where the dead one was removed.

Many people would tell me that Cave Hill looks so natural. This did not happen by chance. I called Cave Hill “a controlled, natural landscape”. We planted in a relaxed, natural way with informal formality but, at the same time, controlled and maintained the plantings with mulch, trimming, fertilization and weed control. This is how a rural garden cemetery should look- manicured but natural. All plantings look natural and well maintained but the public has little idea that man had a hand in it.

Unusual trees and mature trees over 100 years old have always been Cave Hill’s forte and drawing card. Cave Hill has been a well- respected arboretum within a cemetery ever since 1848. I have always said that, “Cave Hill is a cemetery first and an arboretum second”. This is as true today as it was in 1848.

In 1969, I met my good friend Theodore Klein, owner of Yew Dell Nursery. We both had a great fondness for unusual, weird, dwarf and weeping trees. Theodore had a bunch of them that he had propagated. I bought many specimens from Theodore and he gave me quite a few too. I, in turn,



The Contorted Beech was planted in 1978 and had a four-foot branch spread. A horizontal branch touched the ground and grew a separate root system which can be seen near the roadway.



The 'Amazing Grace' Weeping Katsura was planted in 1978 and had a 6" trunk diameter.

would give Theodore unusual plants that I had bought out of state. Two of the great ones that Theodore gave to me come to mind. In 1978, Theodore gave me the Weeping Katsura planted in Section 10 and the Contorted Beech planted on the Main Rd. south of the Front Circle Reserve. They are both extraordinary and beautiful. You all should visit those trees. The Katsura, one of the best in the world, is so amazing that Bob Hill, iconic CJ columnist and fellow plant geek, named it ‘Amazing Grace’. The original tree

was found in Jess Elliott's nursery, in Indiana, by Theodore growing amongst some regular Katsura trees. It was a "chance seedling", and Theodore started propagating it. This contorted Beech is one of the gnarliest trees on the planet and a favorite of mine; a giant bonsai.

It was difficult to get unusual trees locally, so I branched out to the west coast to a grower that specialized in unusual trees. I could buy 10 of any plant in a bare-root state, 3-8 feet tall; and, they could be easily shipped to Kentucky. We would pot these trees and let them grow in our nursery until they were well rooted and able to be planted on the grounds. Container planting is better than balled and burlapped trees since you don't lose any roots when planting. We lost around 50 trees every year for various reasons, but planted around 100 trees and shrubs every year to replace the dead ones and added new varieties to our collection in new developments.

Maintaining these trees could be difficult at times with different pests and diseases but our crew persevered. We lived through the Dutch Elm Disease pandemic in the 70's and other tree maintenance issues. Next, the dreaded Emerald Ash Borer reared its ugly head. We started treating for EAB in 2013. We treated 147 of the ash trees on the grounds and let the others, that were not good specimens, fend for themselves. This was a major job but we only treated the best trees. This cost over \$14,000.00 in insecticide alone. Treatment is still ongoing. I did one brilliant thing during my 41-year tenure; out of the thousands of trees that I purchased, I only bought and planted 10 ash trees. Mainly, ash is one of my least favorite trees so we dodged the bullet on EAB with new trees in the future.



I have over 50 bonsai trees in my collection. This is a 40+ year old juniper.

Reflections in Retirement

In retirement I stay pretty busy most days. I am still involved with bonsai and have over 50 trees in my collection. I am helping the Waterfront Botanical Gardens get their donated bonsai collection acclimated to botanical garden life. My wife, Linda, and I have a cabin on the Cumberland River and try to get down there and trout fish as much as we can.



Lee with a Rainbow Trout.

My forty-one years at Cave Hill was extremely interesting and rewarding. I am very grateful and was honored to have been the 5th Superintendent in Cave Hill's 173-year history. I learned a lot and the cemetery was changed and greatly improved during those forty-one years. The weed eater was invented, the FAX machine revolutionized communication, computers came into wide use, email replaced a lot of letter writing and then the cell phone with its great technology took over. What else can I say? Many thanks to the board and all of the employees for helping me, "wake the sleeping giant."

P.S. If you would like to communicate, drop me a line: bonsaiman@twc.com