

Yorkton Stories

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Cemeteries near a lake of good spirits... or the devil?

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Dick DeRyk

Back in 2008, the RM of Good Lake, situated north of Yorkton around Good Spirit Lake, contracted me to build a new website for them. I was provided with the information that needed to be added, including a set of files with great details about all the cemeteries within the rural municipality.

Having a bit of interest in family histories, I still pick away at my own family tree from time to time, having traced my father's family back to the 1500s in the Netherlands and my mother's to the 1600s in Germany. I read through the documents and came to the conclusion that somebody did a lot of work to provide great detail about all those cemeteries.

That work was done by Joyce and Bill Anaka. I didn't know them then, but came to know them quite well a few years later when we became neighbours in Yorkton. Joyce was Joyce Gunn before she was married, the third generation of the Gunn family, who were very early settlers at the south end of the lake, and who later owned Gunn's Beach and Gunn's Store and operated the Spirit Lake Post Office.

Joyce's grandfather Donald came to the lake in 1887. They were ranchers and there was pasture land to be had at the lake. They were also operating a small trading post to serve the settlers and the indigenous people who came to the area for the fishing and the hunting. Joyce's father John was four years old when the family came to the lake. He joined the army to fight in the Boer War in South Africa, and on his return ran a trading post near Weekes, about 90 miles straight north of the lake, that's 140 kilometers. He then left for the Peace River area of Alberta in 1910 because the Canadian government was giving land to soldiers who had fought in the Boer War. He served in World War I, was taken prisoner of war, and eventually arrived back home at the lake in 1919. He married an English lady by the name of Margaret and joined his father in expanding Gunn's Beach, a prime and extremely popular one-mile stretch of beach that was part of their land and used for camping and fishing by many. They started charging 25 cents per car to come to the beach, but only on Sundays in summer, much to the displeasure of some from nearby Springside who thought that was outrageous. As Joyce recalls, charging for beach access was started in self-defense because the public traveled over the private road and land, parked on their land, and used a private beach, often with little regard for the owners who had to clean up after the visitors.

John Gunn, in a letter to A. C. Stewart, the member of the Legislature for Yorkton and the Minister of Highways, was blunt. "I've known for a year that there were a bunch of agitators in Springside. This is my position. Have given the public free right of way for many years. Many of the cars do not spend a cent. And I would like to ask those complaining about a toll of 25 cents per car for eight or

nine days where they have free access to and through the place for the balance of the year. Who's going to clean up after 500 or a 1000 people? Supply them with tested wells, fuel, bathhouses, and keep bootleggers, home brewers, and roughnecks in their place? And grade three-quarters of a mile of road, which I had done last fall." This from a letter that Joyce has, that her dad had written.

They had also started a little booth selling confectionery to the Sunday visitors, at first under a makeshift tent, then a permanent building put up in 1926. The beach area eventually became part of Good Spirit Provincial Park, which was established in 1931. And their last half section of land was eventually sold to the government, all except the part of the homestead where Joyce and her mother still lived after John's death in 1947. The price was \$28,500.

Meanwhile, Bill Anaka was raised on a farm about four miles east, half a mile north of Horseshoe Lake on the Tiny grid road. Not a tiny road, but it led to the village of Tiny. Bill and Joyce knew each other from their youth and were married in 1971. Bill had taken over the family farm where they raised cattle and grew oats, but had to give up farming when he became allergic to dust. He rented out the land and was hired as a supervisor of work crews at the park, reporting to the conservation officer in Yorkton. But he did keep a garden at the farm where he tended to flowers and vegetables. It was his escape from the park and the people and work, Joyce recalls. Joyce also started working at the park, first as the attendant at the entry gate and later as the interpretive guide, showing park visitors and students who came for tours of the flora and the fauna of the area. Bill retired in 1987 and Joyce a few years later. Several years after that, they moved to Yorkton.

Joyce and Bill did an inventory, a very thorough inventory of 24 cemeteries in the RM of Good Lake, which is where they lived for a good part of their lives. This spring I had a chance to sit down with Joyce to talk about that cemetery project that she and her late husband undertook. Joyce is now 97 years of age and starting to slow down just a touch. Until a couple of years ago, she went to Aquacise at the Gallagher Center's Access Water Park twice a week. And as you will hear, vividly recalls life at Good Spirit Lake and that cemetery project.

Joyce, what was the interest? Why did you decide to take that on? Because it took a good part of a summer back in 1996.

Joyce Anaka

I think it was because we were always interested in cemeteries. I know it sounds weird, but I was married to a man who never took a highway unless he had to. He drove the back roads because they were always more interesting. And he also enjoyed photography, flowers, and had a big interests about birds. But if there was an old cemetery along the way, we would usually stop and have a look at it. So when the Genealogy Society advertised that they were looking for somebody to do Good Lake Municipality, we thought it was a good opportunity to really get to see the cemeteries. So this is why we volunteered that year.

Dick DeRyk

Was it the Saskatchewan Genealogy Society that was looking for somebody?

Joyce Anaka

Yes, they were looking, they actually had a project, they were doing all or trying to do as many cemeteries as they could in Saskatchewan before that information got lost.

Dick DeRyk

Do you know were other RMs in the area done as well? Or were you one of the few do you know?

Joyce Anaka

There were a good number of them done because if it seemed as though every time they were advertising the list would be a little shorter. So they had a lot of them done. I don't know about the ones right around us, but we did ours, and I know there are other municipalities that had theirs done.

Dick DeRyk

Were you interested in genealogy in any case? I mean, had you kind of kept track of your forefathers, foremothers, forebearers?

Joyce Anaka

Actually, yes that was in 1996 that we did the cemeteries, and before that I had done a family history of the Gunn family, and I had also done a fair amount of research, and I'd had a cousin that had left me a lot of information that I kind of took over and and looked into more thoroughly. Yes, I've been interested in in genealogy.

Dick DeRyk

Of course, the Gunn family, and as I mentioned earlier, the Gunn family and the Anaka family were both very prominent in that area in the very early years.

Joyce Anaka

Yes, my grandfather had come to the lake with his family in 1887, primarily because he was interested in ranching, and he had tried it down near Fort Qu'Appelle, and they'd had a number of winters of extreme cold, and then they'd had drought. So gradually both he and other families also made the move from that area and moved farther north, and he chose the area at the south end of Good Spirit Lake because there was a creek coming out of the lake, there was a lot of timber, there were a lot of hay meadows, and it was ideal for ranching. So this is what he chose to do.

Dick DeRyk

Of course, that whole west side of the lake is still, I think, used to be community pasture. It was all pasture land.

Joyce Anaka

But yes, it was settled originally by the Ukrainian settlers that came in at the turn of the century, but it was never great farming land. So over the years it was bought up and turned into the community pasture in that area, because most of it is sand and gravel, and the settlers up there had a hard time you know making a living on it.

Dick DeRyk

You did 24 cemeteries by my count, the list that's, because your research is published on the RM of Good Lake website. That is, it is still there. And I think there's 24 of them listed, including, and I was really quite surprised by this, a single grave on a roadside. How did you find all this stuff? Like did somebody give you a list and say go and look at them? Or I'm guessing you must have done some scouting just to find all of these.

Joyce Anaka

Again, it was that prowling the back roads. And we had an extensive bluebird nest box line up in that community pasture area. At one time, it had 100 sites with 200 boxes, so we spent a lot of time up in that area checking our nest box line. And of course, you never just came back on the same road. You always had to go, well, that road looks interesting. Let's have a look! And we actually saw this cross in a ditch and then made inquiries and never did get that much information about it, but apparently there was a grave there.

Dick DeRyk

Tell me about the bluebird nest box, because I mean it's not directly related to the cemeteries.

Joyce Anaka

For us, it tied in with them.

Dick DeRyk

This was Bill's project going back some time and what kind of drove him to do that?

Joyce Anaka

Well, he was always interested in birds from the time he was a youngster, and he kept extensive records and daily records and everything, and then for some reason he became interested after reading about nest box lines, he got interested in creating one. So we started out with just a few around the farm that he had, north of Horseshoe Lake, and then gradually decided to expand it and check with the community pasture, and they had no problems with it.

So he built all these nest boxes and then got information of where the best locations were for a nest box, so set up this nest box line in that area, and then gradually over the years it expanded and expanded. And being the birder that he was, of course, once the birds were nesting, that was when the cemetery project later went on hold while the bluebird line took over because we had to go out about every week and check the boxes because he wanted to know what was nesting in each box and the age of the nestlings and how many were successfully fledged and everything. So that was always a day in itself and it would take about two days of a week to do that in our spare time.

Dick DeRyk

200 nest boxes, you said?

Joyce Anaka

Yes, at a 100 sites. The idea was there was conflict between mountain bluebirds and tree swallows, and the tree swallows were a little more aggressive. So Bill had been told that if you put

up two boxes, just a few fence posts apart, that took care of the situation and the problem because the swallows would nest in one box and that left the other box free for the bluebirds.

Dick DeRyk

What did he do with all the information? I mean, if you're gathering all that information about how many birds and all that, where did that go?

Joyce Anaka

He did an article for The Blue Jay, which is the publication for what they now call Nature Saskatchewan, and he also kept bins of records. And eventually, after he'd given up the line due to his health problems and that, he turned them over to Pearson. There's a place in Alberta that specialize in bluebirds at a farm there, and all the records went with her for research.

Dick DeRyk

That's fascinating. I mean, you know, you hear about people building nests and putting them along on fence posts along highways and that, but this was something very detailed and very specific.

Joyce Anaka

It was very detailed, and he kept track of, for instance, he had one section of the line that a raccoon got in, and the raccoon destroyed the sitting female and whatever else was in the box, and they had either followed the scent of the trail along the fence line and took out that time almost about 10 boxes. So then Bill started experimenting with ways of keeping out raccoons. So the boxes all sort of evolved from a simple box to something that was a little more raccoon-proof.

Dick DeRyk

So the summer of 1996, you not only examined all the cemeteries and literally recorded, you know, every name and dates that you found on all of the headstones, but you were also recording every bird, every bluebird that was in that in that area. That must have been a busy summer.

Joyce Anaka

That was a very busy summer. It was enjoyable. We enjoyed it, and we started, I think in April and did part of or did one small cemetery and part of another, and then we worked in May on it, and then between gardening and everything else, and the cemetery project got put off to the side while the the bluebirds took over, and then in the fall we got back to cemeteries again, and then finally completed them because some of the cemeteries would take hours to do, and our day consisted of, you had breakfast at home, and then you packed a lunch with you, and you took off and you did the cemetery. You did the cemetery or the bluebird line, and you spent the day at it.

Dick DeRyk

Did you ever keep track of how many miles you put on doing all of this?

Joyce Anaka

Not the cemeteries. Bill at one time I think did keep track of, just for the vehicle's records of how many we'd put on, and it was always a good amount of mileage there every time.

Dick DeRyk

It's a good thing gasoline was cheaper then than it is now.

Joyce Anaka

And at the time we started out just using a vehicle, and then the best thing we did, we had bought a used camper van. So that was very handy because you could just sit in and eat your lunch. It took more fuel, but it was much more comfortable.

Dick DeRyk

Most of the cemeteries on the list are associated with churches. There's a lot of those. And there are some family cemeteries, and there's a few kind of village or community cemeteries. Were there people around that you could contact? I'm assuming for the churches, there were still some contacts who could assist you, but for some of the family cemeteries, were there still people around who could provide you with some background and information?

Joyce Anaka

Yes, and we found that people, once they knew what you were doing, they were more than willing to help, and they would either give you some information or give you a name of somebody that you could contact that might know a little more about the cemetery. So that way, it made the job a lot easier. And in some cases, some of the cemeteries were not marked, like we didn't know actually where some of those small family ones were until we did contact a family member.

Dick DeRyk

Did you find any other than the grave, the single grave in the ditch? Did you find any that had been abandoned or kind of got lost in over the years?

Joyce Anaka

There were a couple of actually interesting ones. There was a Roman Catholic one, in what was mostly a French part of the municipality at that time. And it had been used as a cemetery, but in later years, all the bodies had been removed and moved to other cemeteries, and then that was abandoned. And then there was one in the middle of a field that was just a family one where I think it was four young children in the family had died, and the family had just buried them on their land, and then in later years had just put up a marker that it was there, but the whole field was cultivated around it, and it was just this little patch where the graves were.

Dick DeRyk

Were most of them well maintained?

Joyce Anaka

Some were. Most of them were, some were overgrown, and not only that, but I guess in the 1930s and that with the drought through there, a lot of the soil from the fields had drifted into the edges of the cemetery, and some of the headstones were partially buried. It was a case of having to scrape away that excess soil and to be able to read the names. And then in a lot of the other cemeteries, it was just a natural growth around the headstone.

Dick DeRyk

Yeah, yeah, prairie grasses would have taken over.

Joyce Anaka

So it was a case of getting down on your hands and knees and you know removing that from the base of the headstone to be able to read it. That was Bill's job because a lot of them were still done in Ukrainian or Slavic language, and some of them, they were just almost hand-done, probably with a cement and then a nail or something to write it, and the name would actually, or the phrase would get would overlap into the next line. Bill, when he was a child, spent time with his grandparents who lived in the same yard, and they kind of babysat him while his parents were busy farming. So he learned to read Ukrainian, but not well, and then over the years he forgot it. So he'd be down on his hands and knees trying to decipher those words on the headstones. So that was what was a lot of times was time consuming.

Dick DeRyk

Yeah. Some of the headstones when I look at the whole list, obviously the lettering had worn away over time, and because there are some where it's basically unknown. You knew there was a headstone there.

Joyce Anaka

You knew there was a headstone, and some of them were, we found in a lot of cases the headstones had crumbled, so there might be part of a headstone left. And in those days, a lot of them had used wooden crosses, so those had deteriorated, and some you could still tell there was a grave, but there was no headstone, so that had to go with an unnamed grave. So many of our lists of cemeteries, they will have so many named graves, so many unnamed ones as well.

Dick DeRyk

I don't see it here, but I thought I had seen one, a cemetery, because some of them were organized or named after school districts. And there used to be, and I found this interesting, there used to be a school district called Devil's Lake. I remember when I first came to Yorkton, my father-in-law from Rhein telling me the story about how they used to play ball in what was now the center of the lake, because it was dry at the time and it was just a puddle in the middle, and they would play ball on the sand. And he always referred to the lake as Devil's Lake. And back in the 60s and 70s, that was a common name for the lake. And I got to wondering how did that come about? Because there's quite a difference between Good Spirit and Devil. What do you remember? Was it common that it was called Devil's Lake by the local people at the time?

Joyce Anaka

It was known by all the people in the surrounding towns and that, it was Devil's Lake. They weren't going to Good Spirit, they're going out to Devil's Lake. And it was still that for years. In the early days, one of the first post offices was called Devil's Lake Post Office, which was at the northeast end of the lake. And then later, there was a school by that name up there. And then gradually over the years on the maps, it was always Good Spirit Lake. But as I say, the local name for it was Devil's Lake.

And in researching for the family history and that, on my dad's maternal side, he was descended from Peter Fiddler, who was a trader and an explorer with the Hudson Bay Company. And he had referred in one of his journals and one of his maps, as there was a God's Lake, which at that time, Peter Fiddler was on the Assiniboine River north of Canora at the trading post there. And on his map, where he had listed this God's Lake, is just where Good Spirit Lake, Devil's Lake, is now.

And the thinking that my grandfather always had, was that the difference between good spirit and bad spirit is so close in the aboriginal language of the ones that he traded with, that God's Lake became the lake of the good spirits. But then when the first settlers came in and the first hunters and trappers and that, it got referred to as Devil's Lake. And part of that is the fact that in the winter time, when the ice is formed and then begins to expand and cracks and heaves, at one time some of those booms that you heard from that happening could be heard almost as far away as Springside, which was almost 15 miles away. And it became the fact that, well, it's the spirits talking, or if they wanted to, it's the devil talking. So they're thinking that is perhaps where the name came from.

Dick DeRyk

Because the post office, I looked again at the RM of Good Lake website, they have old maps, there's maps from 1920 on. The 1920 map, which was hand drawn, refers to the lake as Devil's Lake. It has it written right on there. By about five or six years later, the next map had Good Spirit, and all the other ones had Good Spirit. But back in the 1920s, even the official map, which showed all the landowners around the lake, still had Devil's Lake.

Joyce Anaka

Yeah, Devil's Lake. And the topographical maps were showing it as Good Spirit Lake. My dad finally, we got the post office at our place in 1935, I believe it was, or somewhere just around in there. And it started out because the park had come in by 1931, the provincial park had been established, and they first called it the beach, it was Kitchi Manitou, which is translated as you know, good spirit. So the post office, when that first opened, became Kitchi Manitou too. That didn't last very long because all the patrons at the post office and that, complained because it was too hard to spell and it was too hard to pronounce. So the post office name got changed to Spirit Lake. So officially we were Spirit Lake Post Office. And there was the original Devil's Lake Post Office at the northeast corner that had been there before 1900. It had closed in the early 1900s, but family just east of where Canora Beach is now, Mr. Deaton got the post office master's job there, and between he and the Daneliuks that were next door neighbors, they had again Devil's Lake Post Office. So as I say, you had the two post offices, the two names in two post offices around the lake.

Dick DeRyk

One Good Spirit, one Devil's Lake.

Joyce Anaka

One was Spirit Lake and one was Devil's Lake.

Dick DeRyk

Have you had any reaction, any response over the years from the work that you did on the cemeteries? Have you heard from any of the people who have used the information?

Joyce Anaka

It was quite interesting. We got a number of phone calls and a few letters. The people had seen it and either asking us for more information, and in other cases they were able to give us more information that I was able to pass on to the genealogy society. They would say, Oh, such and

such grave that you have marked as unnamed, that is, you know, a relative of mine, or that's my grandfather, that's my sister, and then usually had the date of of their death or something in there. It worked out very well.

Dick DeRyk

I'm guessing it would have been for anybody who is doing their own genealogy research, this would be an invaluable type of resource to have. You know, one's family moves away but is looking back at you know earlier years and they're not in the area. You know, these days you can do that online. I mean there are websites that you know will help you track your family, but back in the 90s that was not.

Joyce Anaka

No, I know we had phone calls from people in Ontario, from BC, practically all points in between. Or a letter just you know asking for more information or giving us information. So it worked out very well. And you were talking about families moving away. There was an interesting one at one cemetery we had. We thought we had a man that had been married twice because there were two headstones for him. And then we were able to contact somebody and learn that what had happened was when this original man's wife had died, they were putting up a second headstone on the grave, marking both of their names, and then discarded the headstone just off to one side. But there was another family that had just buried someone, so borrowed the headstone to use to mark the grave. But then that family moved to Ontario in the 1950s and never did replace or remove the original headstone. So there's the man that's buried twice.

Dick DeRyk

And there's one man who's buried and has no name.

Joyce Anaka

And there's one man, yes.

Dick DeRyk

Because somebody else's headstone isn't on his grave.

Joyce Anaka

On his grave, exactly. So I think sometimes people move away and forget the ones they left behind.

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