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The Basket Babies



In Gaines, Catherine Shinaberry and MU Professor Lee Stocks Solve a 100-Year-Old Family Mystery, and Find a Tragic Piece of World History

By Carrie Hagen

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Sarah Wagaman

Soil searching: Catherine Shinaberry sits in front of the stone that marks the resting place of her great-aunt, Marion Rexford, who died as a child from the Spanish Flu in 1918.

The Basket Babies

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Stories echo through the hollows. Rustling leaves sound like whispers, and waterfalls call wanderers off the trodden trails. The land rewards listeners with signs and questions that only a local storyteller can answer. Legends and family histories both have deep roots in the mountains...

Catherine Rexford Shinaberry has spent most of her life trying to extrapolate a story from a parcel of land that her family has owned for generations. Now sixty-five and living in Maryland, Catherine grew up wandering around a one-acre hilltop cemetery along Route 6 near Gaines. One side of the graveyard—once called Furman Cemetery, now known as the Brookside Cemetery—is filled with grave markers, crosses, and flowerbeds. The other is largely empty. At a young age, Catherine learned why her father, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother had kept this side cleared over the years: to honor the memory of “the basket babies.” As the story went, during the influenza epidemic of 1918, Catherine’s great-grandparents had let indigent laborers bury their babies—infant victims of the virus—on the family property. Unable to afford coffins or gravestones, the grieving families had put their little ones to rest in baskets made at the Gaines Basket Factory.

“We always kept the land sacred,” Catherine says today, “because we had no way of knowing exactly where they were.”

Paul Rexford, Catherine’s father, did have an idea of where. He kept a vigilant eye on a small depression in the cleared side of the land. He suspected that the sunken area indicated a shallow trench where the baskets had been buried next to one another. Catherine remembers her father repeatedly telling mourners and visitors that the side of the cemetery without grave markers was not a parking lot.

“Dad didn’t want them parking on top of these children,” Catherine remembers. “‘We keep it sacred’ became a bug in my ear.”

When her father died five years ago, Catherine decided to honor his memory by doing what she could to confirm the location of the babies. The discovery questions were many.

Had babies really been buried on the Rexford’s property during the pandemic? If so, how many? Would she be able to identify any of the children’s names nearly 100 years after their mass burial? Could she find out exactly where their bodies rested? How could she do this without having the land disturbed, something her father had instilled in her never to do?

Catherine knew that the story of the babies was more than a local legend. Well-versed in family history, she had tangible evidence of the 1918 influenza pandemic in the cemetery: her great-aunt Marion Rexford, for example, had died of the virus as a child in 1918, and Marion’s gravestone figured prominently in the Rexford family section of the lot.

Marion Rexford was one of approximately 67,000 Pennsylvanians who died of “Spanish Flu,” as the outbreak became labeled. Even though experts now say the Spanish Flu was an H1N1 virus of avian origin, they still don’t know what made this particular strain of influenza so deadly that it killed more than 50 million people worldwide.

In November 2017, John Barry summarized in the *Smithsonian* what doctors do know. Simply put, the virus attacked immune systems that could not recognize its rapid mutation. The influenza strain “infected cells in the upper respiratory tract, transmitting easily, but also deep in the lungs, damaging tissues and

leading to viral and bacterial pneumonias.” Surprisingly, the outbreak targeted young adults (ages 12-20) more than any other group.

According to James Higgins in the Spring 2019 issue of *Pennsylvania Legacies*, the virus was deadliest between September 1, 1918 and March 31, 1919. At least 675,000 Americans numbered in the death toll, with Pennsylvania taking the hardest hit.

“No other state had as many deaths or as high a mortality rate,” writes Higgins.

Theories vary on exactly how what became known as the Spanish Flu began. Some say it started in the port cities of England, transmitted by Chinese laborers. Others believe the virus began in France in 1916, or in Vietnam in 1917. Numerous historians have pointed to Camp Funston, Kansas, as military records reflect the quick escalation of a debilitating flu that soon reached Army camps on the East Coast before traveling overseas. As hubs for soldiers returning home from World War I, central Kansas and Philadelphia saw some of America’s highest mortality rates.

There was another reason that Philadelphia lost so many—approximately 16,000—to influenza, and it had something to do with the virus’s nickname. Countries at war censored the press during wartime. In America, the Sedition Act threatened twenty years in prison to anyone who openly criticized the military or the government. So when Philadelphia planned to host an elaborate Liberty Loans Drive to finance the war, and reporters filed stories warning people to stay away from the crowds, editors didn’t print them. They feared that the articles, in linking the military to the outbreak, would read as forbidden criticism of the government.

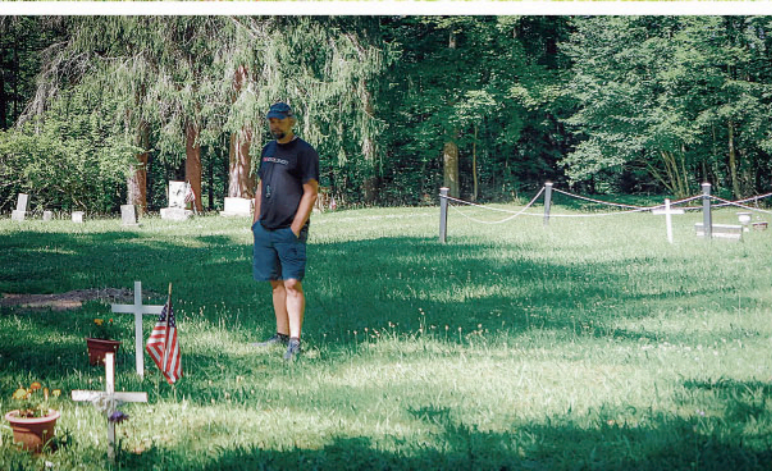
On September 28, 1918, approximately 200,000 people cheered the war effort in a



I once was lost: (from top) Nathan Harpster of Dr. Lee Stocks' radar unit, begins the task of identifying heat signatures within the cemetery; Charles Bastian, son of the Wellsboro funeral director who picked up the bodies, holds a basket used to transport the babies to the cemetery; Dr. Lee Stocks stands amid the cemetery that holds these unidentified souls.



(2) Sarah Waggoner



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celebration that filled twenty-three of Philadelphia's downtown blocks with parades, stunts, music, and laughter. The following week, 1,100 people died of influenza. The week after that, the virus took 3,000. And the following week, over 4,000 victims died. In the six-week period following the war drive, 12,000 people in Philadelphia perished of Spanish Flu. And why was it called Spanish? Because Spain wasn't at war, so the country's press published stories of the virus and its causes, especially when its king caught the flu and died. By actually covering the deadliness of the influenza strain, the Spanish press indirectly lent their culture's name to what many consider the deadliest outbreak in world history.

America did learn a lesson through Philadelphia's nightmare. Across the country, municipalities banned people from gathering in public throughout the fall and winter of 1918.

"It was decree by scare," says Catherine. "No church, no school, no funerals, no partying."

At the time, says Joan Howland Rexford, Catherine's mother and a resident of the Pine Creek Valley, the Rexford family owned land "from mountaintop to mountaintop." Operators of a large logging business, the family had constant contact with farmers, loggers, and miners who struggled to make a living in the WWI era. During the pandemic, Catherine's great-grandmother, Nellie Rexford, worked as a lay physician alongside a Baltimore-trained medical doctor in logging camps that her family operated in Cherry Springs. When Nellie returned home for Christmas, she found her husband, a son, and a daughter ailing from influenza. Her husband, Charles, and son, Clare, recovered. Her daughter Marion did not.

While indigent families didn't have money for caskets, wealthy families with money often couldn't get them either. Too many were dying too quickly, and demand far surpassed production. Philadelphia needed the coffins that would have been shipped from it to other places. Rumors spread of larger cities commandeering caskets initially intended for smaller locales.

Catherine emphasizes that the fast-paced spread of influenza defied logic and upended routine procedures. "I've talked about this many times," she says. "As people died in your family, they were covered with a blanket and put out on the porch. A wagon came by, just like in medieval times, with someone calling, 'Bring out your dead.'"

Sometimes, nobody could carry the bodies from the porch to the wagon. Parents were too ill to take care of sick children. Communities begged volunteer nurses to assist families, but even hospitals were short on nurses, and on doctors. At least half of all physicians under the age of forty-five had accompanied the military during the war.

To expedite burials for sanitary reasons, the living resorted to putting bodies in mass graves, then covering them with lime. Because public gatherings were forbidden, nobody except facilitators like gravediggers attended. And because of the embarrassment families would feel over the "non-Christian" burial rites, says Catherine, the living wouldn't talk about the way they interred their dead.

"I heard stories about the flu epidemic," says Henry Lush of Galeton. His family—which owned a large and well-known tannery for generations—also had private cemetery grounds. He

recalls stories of men carrying lanterns and bodies up to the property, where they would bury people under the cover of night. Henry was, however, unfamiliar with the notion that infants were buried in baskets made by the Gaines Basket Factory. The factory, built in 1912, closed in the early 1930s, according to the *Wellsboro Agitator* archives. As Catherine and her mother understand it, the factory stopped producing fruit baskets for apple and strawberry picking for a short time in 1918 so that it could craft funeral baskets—including those for the virus's youngest victims.

Charles Bastian, also from the Pine Creek Valley, accompanied his father, owner of a funeral home in Wellsboro, on many calls throughout Tioga and surrounding counties. Now seventy-nine, he remembers driving around the countryside with his father on work calls. On more than one occasion, his dad would stop in front of a log cabin, lift a small basket from the back of the car, take it up to the door, and return with a small bundle in the basket to bury. He didn't speak a word about the deceased baby—or the circumstances of his or her death—to his son.

"Sometimes these basket babies were put right into the ground," says Charles. To this day, he still has one of these baskets used to transport babies from homes to cemeteries.

By the time she decided to confirm the location of the interred babies, Catherine had spent a lifetime thinking about the Brookside Cemetery. At fifteen, she even had a summer job mapping the grounds for her grandfather, who asked her to draw a grid as the family considered how to allocate future plots on the active burial side. She was particularly taken with the headstone of her great-aunt, Marion Rexford. A couple of years before, she had found a silver box that had belonged to Marion. A comb and a trinket lay inside. The box connected her in spirit to the great-aunt who had died as a child in 1918.

"I was immersed in sadness of Marion's death," she remembers. Catherine knew that a grave marker like the ones she walked among would carry her own name one day. That, too, gave

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her a greater appreciation for her family's land, and a stronger tie to her great-aunt. "Kids at that age are interested in mortality," she says. "I've always connected with people who have gone before."

More than anything, Catherine wanted to examine the depression in the land as a potential location of the basket babies without disturbing the final rest of those buried in it. Her own investigation led her to the possibilities of ground-penetrating radar, a technology developed by NASA during the World War II era that has been increasingly used by archaeologists and geologists over the past decade. At a base cost of around \$15,000, the basic equipment includes antennas that send and receive radio waves to and from the ground, software and a laptop to process the data, and a mobile cart that can carry the control unit back and forth across the ground. She "didn't even want to think about" how much hiring a private firm to conduct the investigation would cost.

In 2016, Catherine called Penn State University to see if its geosciences program held the technology and might be able to help her for a reasonable fee. Penn State said they

didn't have it, but that Mansfield University did. Catherine was shocked. The school, just twenty-plus miles east on Route 6 from Brookside Cemetery, had recently received a Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development grant for ground-penetrating radar equipment.

A phone call or two later, Catherine learned that Dr. Lee Stocks, associate professor of geology at Mansfield University, was beginning a radar unit with his students and would be happy to use the cemetery question as a field research project. And he wouldn't charge her a dime.

"We were blessed. I could not have imagined in a million years what that would have cost us!" remembers Catherine.

Before visiting Brookside Cemetery, Dr. Stocks had used the radar equipment to study sinkholes and glacial deposits, but had "never really applied it to void space before." He cautioned Catherine about being too hopeful. Certain soils had better conductivity than others, and factors like background noise and electrical signals could hamper findings.

Using the active burial site as a control

area, Dr. Stocks and his students divided the land into grids and used the radar equipment to send and record electromagnetic pulses that sought "heat signatures"—evidence of a body's location—underground. Fortunately for the team, the soil was low in clay content (clay has a high conductivity, meaning it absorbs sound waves and limits penetration) and the equipment functioned perfectly. Atop the pushcart, computer software combined the radar findings with drone camera imagery to create a heat map of the subsurface land, and high-resolution 3-D images of subsurface objects.

"The radar doesn't show shapes. It shows density changes," says Nathan Harpster, a former student of Stocks' and one of the professor's collaborators on the Tioga County Cemetery Mapping Project, an effort to create a database of each of Tioga County's 271 burial grounds.

Nathan, now a resource conservation technician with the Susquehanna County Conservation District, and two other of the professor's former students—Jesse Olsen, and Cecil Cooper, a graduate student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania—have co-authored a paper for publication along

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with Dr. Stocks on the process of using ground-penetrating radar to survey clandestine gravesites.

"Very few people are doing this type of research," says Cecil, which is significant in "a world that is rapidly changing environmentally." As land is exchanged, developed, or simply maintained, he says, its inhabitants need to understand what lies under the surface in order to steward it responsibly. This includes studying the land for abandoned wells, rates of tree growth, and septic systems—all things that non-invasive technology can access.

After studying the control site, Dr. Stocks and his team divided the cleared area near the depressed trench into grids, and studied it with the radar equipment for heat signatures. Catherine was with them.

As her father Paul Rexford had predicted, there was evidence of little bodies lying in baskets next to one another. "There were eleven of them," Catherine says quietly. Tears flooded her cheeks when she saw the images onscreen. "It was such an emotional thing." She wanted to know the names of each child—a long shot, considering that families would have been ashamed to share word of their babies' unmarked, clandestine burials. Still, she posted the finding on Facebook and heard from a man who said his grandparents had had twin infants who had died of influenza in 1918. His family had thought they might be buried at Brookside. Their names were Lawrence and Louise Shelley.

Near where they discovered the babies who had lain without recognition for 100 years, Catherine placed two white crosses bearing the names of the Shelley twins, and also a stone marker. It reads: "Sacred to the memory of the unknown souls buried here."

And there were far more unknown souls buried at Brookside than Paul Rexford or his daughter had suspected. Aerial drone video showed not one, but two depressions in the land. The second area sits over 100 yards behind the trench holding the babies. Radar revealed it to hold a mass grave of adults.

Having studied other cemetery grounds, Dr. Stocks says the discovery was not abnormal. "What we've found," he says, "is that there are a lot of clandestine graves."

Catherine hopes the story of Louise and Lawrence Shelley will bring more names to memories, and identifications for the other babies in the baskets. Should people wonder if they do have a family connection to Brookside, she recommends looking at census records between 1916 and 1918 to check the numbers of people in households, and then to rummage around for an old family Bible, where many locals would have recorded birth and death dates. Comparison of the two may very well lead to identities for the other babies.

Catherine and her mother, Joan Howland Rexford, look forward to using the new mapping of the grounds to create a cremation garden at Brookside. Over the years, as the cemetery has filled (Catherine herself has two husbands buried in the Rexford section), it has run out of room for new gravesites. The garden will rest on the babies' side of the cemetery, in an area full of trees with rustling leaves that can sound like whispers coming from the land.

Inspired and haunted by true stories, IRMA and Keystone Award-winning writer Carrie Hagen is the author of We Is Got Him: The Kidnapping that Changed America. She lives in Philadelphia.

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