

The Marrow of Memories: Mapping the Historic Springhill Cemetery

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Abstract

The Springhill Cemetery project is intended to illuminate and preserve the personal histories of ordinary people in rural Montana and illustrate how they correspond to broader historical arcs. The work was inspired by a desire to document the American West through the lens of social history with a focus on everyday experiences. The project collected and preserved the stories of people interred in rural cemeteries in order to maintain valuable historic data that would otherwise have vanished. Vertical files, archival information, genealogical data, books, letters, newspaper articles, organizational records, and oral histories were used to complete the research for this project. The researcher used both digital and physical collections to gather information about and photographs of the people interred in this cemetery, mapped the cemetery with GPS coordinates, composed biographies, and placed all material into the Story Maps program. The program provides a platform for an interactive experience with the cemetery itself that allows people to walk through the cemetery while clicking on the tombstones in the program to learn more about the people interred at Springhill. It can also be used for research into the American West and rural communities. The project tells the stories of over 170 people and how their lives tie into broader historical events from 1870 through to the present day. It will be discussed as a resource for genealogists, historians of the American West, and social historians since it provides a valuable database of historic information from ordinary Montanans.

Keywords: History, American West, Public History

1. Introduction

The Springhill Cemetery Project represents a slice of vitally important American Western history. The Springhill community, while small, is a historically vibrant one. It is located about nine miles north of Bozeman, Montana at the foot of the Bridger Mountains. Immigrants to the West initially settled the land between 1862 and 1864, and it was surveyed and incorporated in 1870. The homesteaders had high hopes of becoming an official town in 1871. However, Bozeman began expanding in 1872. When industrialists constructed a railroad across Bozeman Pass in 1883, that particular dream of Springhill residents came to an end. Despite this setback, the residents of Springhill persevered, and their experiences form a fascinating record of everyday life in the American West.

In 1902, the Ladies Aid Society was organized alongside the Springhill Church. Ladies Aid Societies were groups of women who formed clubs to financially support their churches and complete service projects in their communities and beyond. Springhill's Ladies Aid Society decided that the community needed a space to honor their loved ones who had passed away. While several graves were already in place, the cemetery was not yet officially coordinated. The Society organized the purchase of two acres of land from the O.W. Smith farm, the Pines, for \$200 in 1905. The land was officially deeded for the cemetery on September 15, 1906.¹

A set of trustees for the Spring Hill Cemetery Association were selected in 1905. These founders included Mrs. O.W. Smith, J.T. Roll, Margaret Roll, John Walton, and O.W. Smith. For decades, the Ladies Aid Society and the Cemetery Board of Directors maintained the cemetery.² Every Memorial Day, each family with ancestors or friends buried in

the cemetery came to tend the grounds and gravesites. Gradually, fewer relatives arrived each year, and community “retirees” like Carl and Beverly Carlson, Bill Wright, Jim and Billie Love, Betty Biggs, and other neighborhood community members took over the job of mowing and maintaining the cemetery. Today, these community members and a few hired hands tend to this beautiful, historic area.³

Springhill weathered a great deal during its history, including Indian attacks, a flu epidemic, and numerous population drops and spikes. However, its eminent inhabitants helped drive the town to success. From Annie Ryen’s independent spirit to John Boss’s keen business sense, these extraordinary ordinary residents built a successful and vibrant town. The stories of those interred in Springhill Cemetery provide a fascinating insight into the history of small towns in Montana. The Springhill Cemetery Project combines public history, local history, and new methods of digital history to explore the experiences of marginalized groups. It uses these everyday experiences to reveal broader historical patterns in general as well as preserving the data for later historical research. The final product was a highly accessible, easily understandable, interactive digital map that traced the history of Springhill and its inhabitants for over 150 years. It is valuable not only for historians as a primary source archive but also for the general public as a means of exploring stories of the American West in a new and innovative way.

2. Historical Fields and Frameworks

Public history is a key part of disseminating history and making historical narratives available to a general audience. However, public history always raises the question of what (and whose) history to tell, and how to properly convey those stories.⁴ As explored by historian David Glassberg in his work “Public History and the Study of Memory,” the creation and dissemination of a public historical narrative is a highly politicized process.⁵ Glassberg discusses how public history can be utilized both to form a cohesive identity for a group⁶ and to establish a dominant narrative.⁷ The primary function of American Western history has been to create a historical narrative focused on white, European, male experience that is centered around individualism, commercialism, and technological and social progress. While this history is not completely inaccurate, it certainly does not represent a full and inclusive record of the American West. Calls for diversification of the American Western historical narrative have increased in recent years. Historians have begun to focus on the stories of ordinary people and include the experiences of marginalized groups, including women, immigrants, and Native Americans. For instance, historian Richard Etulain posits in his work “Meeting Places, Intersections, Crossroads, and Borders: Toward a Complex Western Cultural History” that American Western history is actually a study of a confluence of cultures rather than violent conflict and suggests that historians broaden their work to include varying cultural experiences.⁸

As historians of the American West create more inclusive accounts, they have turned to local history and microhistory as a means of understanding a broader historical period or group of people. This style of history uses a small slice of historical information to make broader generalizations about history through reviving the voices and stories of unknown and unrecognized figures. As explored by Nicole Etcheson in her article “Introduction: Local History, National Contexts: Exploring Microhistory in Henderson, Kentucky,” microhistory recognizes “that history was made by people acting within restraints”⁹ and explains how ordinary people experienced the world around them and how they chose to interpret the broader strokes of history.¹⁰ It looks closely at the records of a small group of people or a place to understand larger historical events. Public history and microhistory are also important methods of uncovering the experiences of traditionally marginalized figures, including women and immigrants.¹¹

In addition, digital history is gaining traction as a method of effectively reaching an increasingly technologically literate public. Digital media such as interactive websites and online databases are ubiquitous within public history institutions such as museums, and they provide a unique way to reach a wide swath of readers at once.¹² There is a specific focus on creating new archival bases with extensive digital storage and broadening audience access to and engagement with historical information.¹³ Increased access to sources, as well as new means of engaging in analysis, make digital history an exciting new aspect of historical scholarship.¹⁴

3. Methodology

The Springhill Cemetery Project mapped the cemetery through a digital StoryMap and provided biographies and historic photographs for each person in the cemetery. The biographies of the interred cover a time period from the 1870s to the 2000s and form a microhistory of Springhill, Montana. The goal of this project was to preserve a historic record of the area for a wide variety of researchers, particularly those interested in local and Western history. I completed the

project using methods of digital, public, and local history in tandem with ArcGIS technology, a specific type of geographic information system that allows for the creation of digital maps.

My research began in the annals of the cemetery, where caretakers recorded rough records for each of the 170 people interred in the cemetery in a logbook. However, in many cases, the logbook's information was inaccurate or incomplete. I gathered dates and locations of birth and death, as well as other vital records and basic information, from the historical database Ancestry.com. The project then progressed to the materials at the Gallatin History Museum, which maintains extensive information on local families in its archives. I assembled information on each person through newspaper articles, obituaries, family records, and other documents stored in the museum's vertical files. Next, I used the digital photographs archive in the museum's Past Perfect system to locate photographs of many of the people interred at Springhill and added those to the project folder. Next, I proceeded to examine books, club records, and other materials within the museum that focused on Springhill to put together yet more material on each person. I then synthesized this information into a biography for each person. Following biographical creation, I also crafted a summary of the biographies as a whole to explain how they fit together to create over a century and a half of Springhill history of Springhill.

I then used the ArcGIS program StoryMaps to store and host this information. First, I created a comma-separated value (CSV) file that held information on each person. GPS coordinates for each tombstone in the cemetery were entered into the CSV, which stored these coordinates and placed them as pins in a digital map. The biographies, birth and death dates, and digital links for each photograph were also stored in the CSV file, which was then imported into the StoryMap. Once the StoryMap contained all relevant information, I formatted the website with appropriate coloring, size, and organization as well as an explanation of the project, acknowledgments, and references. The final product was three digital maps corresponding to three blocks in the cemetery, incorporated in an interactive style so that each map contained GPS locations, photographs, and biographies that could be explored individually by the user. The StoryMap is hosted independently by the ArcGIS online software as well as linked on the Gallatin History Museum website, which makes it widely accessible to the public.

4. Results and Discussion

The Springhill Cemetery Project revealed key historical patterns through a microhistory of Springhill, Montana from approximately 1870 to 2000. Most importantly, the project illustrated a key pillar of New Western history, which is the value of communalism in small Western towns and the overall survival of Euro-Americans in the American West. The project proved that success in turn-of-the-century Montana came from communities working together to establish farms, schools, and other institutions. No family rose or fell on their own; instead, they were supported by neighbors, the Springhill Church, the Ladies Aid Society, and dozens of other clubs and societies. Immigrants were welcomed into the community and often celebrated for creativity, ingenuity, and hard work, as in the case of Jonas Forswall. Women had valuable roles to play in the community not only as schoolteachers and mothers like the Cooke women but also as entrepreneurs and moneylenders like Annie Ryen. The American dream was not achieved by a highly individualistic and stubborn spirit, but rather by a community-minded and generous heart within a group of people who depended on one another to survive everything from epidemics to bitter winters. As argued by the historian Mike Wallace and borne out by the Springhill Cemetery project, the idea of "true Americanism" based on individualism, commercial success, and disciplined "hard work"¹⁵ is an illusion. Instead, women, immigrants, and people of color carried out unrecognized labor, and communities had to work together to survive. Two particular examples illustrate the value of women and immigrants to the Springhill community and, in a broader sense, the value of these marginalized groups to the development of the American West.

4.1. Case Study #1: The Forswall Family

Jonas Alfred Forswall was a pioneering farmer and homesteader in the Springhill area, and, like many Montanans in the late 1800s, he was an immigrant. Jonas traveled from his birthplace of Smaland, Sweden to the United States in 1886¹⁶ to work on the Beinhart farm with his sister and brother-in-law Andy. Although Jonas couldn't speak English, Andy sent him to Belgrade to sell the farm's wheat. Eventually, Jonas picked up the language and became a farmer in his own right. He worked for the Penwell farm and bought 160 acres in Springhill in 1890. He and his wife Anna Rosalie raised three children, all of whom earned college degrees. Jonas was also an active community member, serving as the treasurer of the Springhill Telephone Company after it was installed in 1910 and as a trustee on the Springhill School Board.¹⁷

Jonas Alfred's wife, Anna Rosalie, was born on September 8, 1867, to Louise and Mr. Johnson. She also immigrated to the United States in 1888. She made her home in Chicago for six years, then came to Montana in 1894. It was only by chance that Anna and Jonas were reunited in the United States in their shared pursuit of the American dream. Anna married Jonas Alfred Forswall on July 12, 1894, and became a housewife in Springhill. Anna was very active in the Ladies Aid Society and church work as a member of the First Presbyterian Church in Bozeman.¹⁸

Though Jonas and Anna were first-generation immigrants and struggled with carving out space for themselves and their families in the American West, their recognized and unrecognized labor made a direct impact on their town. Jonas's farm became a fixture of the community and increased Springhill's economic output. The farm provided the town and wider Montana community with wheat and horses, and it served as a community gathering place.¹⁹ In addition, Anna's work with the Ladies Aid Society financially assisted the elderly population of Springhill through raising money for meals and supplies²⁰, and her domestic labor allowed Jonas's farm to thrive. The Forswall family was instrumental in establishing community initiatives like the Poor Fund in the Ladies Aid Society and funding drives for the Springhill school, thereby supporting their entire town.

4.1. Case Study #2: Anna Ryen

Anna "Annie" Ryen immigrated to Chicago from Norway at the age of forty in 1864. She then traveled to Helena, Montana with a Mrs. Brown in 1868. A few years later, Annie came to Springhill with the Ecklund family, taking care of their cat on the trip. Annie worked for the Benhams sawmill from 1872-76 and saved up enough money to buy the sawmill, house, and adjoining land on September 18, 1876. Annie then ran the sawmill herself, hauling logs out of the canyon with oxen and directing the sawmill's activities. She also had her own mine and insisted on dragging mining equipment up the hillside by herself, actively participating in the mine's activities. Annie was independently wealthy and loaned money to many people in Springhill. Annie never married, but her nephew Martin assisted her work at the sawmill, and she turned over control of the business to him in the early 1900s. Annie gradually began farming hay in the last twenty years of her life and settled into a busy retirement.²¹

Annie's work in establishing community businesses and lines of credit provided a strong economic base for Springhill's longevity. She overcame numerous obstacles (including her age and sex) to create two highly successful enterprises. Her work also increased opportunities for women in the Springhill community, since she employed women at the sawmill and mine.

While these two case studies do not provide a comprehensive summary of the data that can be mined from the Springhill project, they explain how a historian might utilize the information. Additionally, they illustrate how the general public might gain new knowledge of everyday experiences in the American West.

5. Project Relevance

The Springhill Cemetery Project is a valuable historic resource for a variety of researchers. One of the most foremost results of the Springhill Cemetery Project was the preservation of ordinary peoples' historical records, a vital resource for future Western American historians seeking out sources for their own research. For those looking to research immigrant pioneers in Montana, the project can be used to access family records and understand everything from travel routes to birth records. For those who wish to understand women's place in early Montana communities, the project can be used to understand women's activism in communities as well as their domestic labor. For those who want to know more about the working-class experience in turn-of-the-century Montana, the project provides information on how family farms survived and thrived (or crashed and burned) in this time period. For those who want to learn more about their local ancestors, the project traces the history of Springhill families back to the very beginning.

Additionally, the project showed that there is historic value to microhistories and examining small towns to understand more about broader historical context. For example, Maude Helen Cooke's work as a teacher points to a broader historic pattern of white American women leaving the house in the mid to late nineteenth century to serve as teachers before marriage. This transition was part of the rise of the cult of true womanhood, which held that the ideal woman was pious, pure, submissive, and domestic and that "female education was necessary for the molding of the ideal woman."²² Cooke, however, never married, which points to another trend of Western women working as teachers as a means of escaping some societal gender roles and taking part in expanded opportunities.²³ Reading and understanding the Springhill community's experiences as microhistories of broader trends humanizes larger historical patterns and makes Western history more accessible to the general public.

Finally, the project explains the importance of public accessibility for records and historical narratives. Without the research completed in this project, many of these stories would have been lost to time. Since the project is now in a

digital format, it is accessible to a much larger population than if it was a purely physical project. Also, anyone with an Internet connection can examine the project, thereby democratizing information retrieval rather than restricting it to one institution. Therefore, the public has access to a wealth of knowledge about Montana pioneers and personal experiences of the American West. It is a particularly important source of historical information not only about Springhill itself but also about Montana's small towns, local history, and Western history as a whole. It allows the general public to learn more about the people who helped shape the American West and the forces that influenced their behaviors and decisions as well as providing insight into the current state of the American West. Finally, the StoryMap is engaging to the public due to its interactivity. Anyone who accesses the website can click through the tombstones using the digital pins or the photo carousel at the bottom of the page. They can explore families or certain areas of the cemetery, and they can learn more about Western history in a bite-size, biographical format.

6. Conclusion

The Springhill Cemetery Project combines a number of historical approaches to provide an interactive online database that brings local Western American history to life. The project emphasizes the necessity of communal labor and cooperation in Western American communities. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of marginalized groups in developing the American West and ensuring the survival of small towns. Finally, the project contributes to furthering public access to historical information and presenting historical narratives in an engaging and interactive manner.

This research was intended to diversify the historical record of the American West and focus historical narratives on the experiences of everyday people. It is my hope that this project will preserve the stories of the Springhill residents for future historical research and remembrance. The Springhill Cemetery Project could serve as an inspiration for future documentation of small rural communities to provide further information on the American Western experience.

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