



# Tourism Among the Tombs

BY DAN MCCUE  
PHOTO ILLST: R DIAZ



**H**e was a charismatic firebrand, a firm believer in bare-knuckled politics and, somewhat improbable in some people's minds, a lover of the blues.

To many, Lee Atwater will always be remembered as the framer of Ronald Reagan's "Southern Strategy" in the 1980 presidential contest and as the architect of the infamous Willie Horton ad that helped propel then Vice President George W. Bush into the White House.

Scores of those who still walk the halls of power in Washington owe a debt of gratitude to the former chairman of the Republican National Committee for their lofty positions.

But 18 years after his death from a brain tumor, it's not Atwater who inspires a steady stream of visitors to Greenlawn Memorial Park in Columbia; instead, it's the "Fabulous Moolah," otherwise known as Lillian Ellison, the professional wrestler and inductee into the WWF Hall of Fame, who still draws a crowd.

"People ask her whereabouts pretty frequently," said a friendly receptionist at the park's office, as she offered to point out the location of Moolah's gray marble monument.

Although no one has been keeping statistics or can say with any certainty what the economic impact of the activity is, cemetery tourism has caught on and keeps growing. Not only do visitors continue to flock to well known historic cemeteries like Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia or the Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston, they're also seeking out the final resting places of specific individuals in more private settings, like the grave of Clare Booth Luce at Mepkin Abbey in Monks Corner.

In fact, a number of historic cemeteries are embracing the trend, turning to interest in the departed to raise money for restorations and upkeep of the grounds, or, like Elmwood Cemetery in Columbia, using it as an opportunity to tell their community's story. Others in South Carolina's cemetery industry admit to being something of graveyard tourists themselves, out of professional interest, if nothing else.

"I think the biggest misconception people have is that people who show an interest in cemeteries and those who are resting there have some kind of weird or morbid fascination," said Jim Tipton, whose

gained unanticipated renown among "gravers" as proprietor of the popular Find A Grave Web site.

"In fact I think in most cases, you're not there to contemplate the death of the person; you're there to think about their life," he said in an interview with Greater Columbia Business Monthly.

That suggestion was borne out by Sarah Blackwell, Elmwood's director of programs, as she spoke about the nighttime tours the cemetery offers one evening a month from spring through fall.

"As one of the oldest cemeteries in Columbia, we realized that we have many famous people here — famous, at least, in terms of Columbia history, and we thought, 'What a wonderful way to highlight the history of our community, telling it through the lives these individuals and families,'" Blackwell said. Depending on the weather, the tour, which is led by narrators wearing period costumes, draws about 30 people a night. But this isn't a "ghost tour," Blackwell hastened to explain.

"What it's really about is community connectedness and everybody coming away





with a little bit more knowledge," she said. "We're currently working with Randolph Cemetery, the African-American cemetery next door, to come up with a similar program."

### Who's a "Graver"

So just who are the people who are sometimes referred to as "gravers," "cemetery buffs" or "grave hunters"?

Unlike the aging baby boomers and other rock music fans who continue to flock to the grave of Doors lead vocalist Jim Morrison at the Cimetière du Père Lachaise in Paris, most of those who stream into South Carolina graveyards aren't looking to connect with notorious celebrities, but are instead are history buffs, military aficionados, family genealogists, or specialists interested in a specific category of the dead, be they former Major League baseball players, or like Moolah, someone who accomplished something singular during their lifetime.

"It's a lot bigger than most people realize," said Tipton, who started his Web site as a lark in 1995, and as of July had a database of 35 million graves available online. "It used to be seen as something of a niche hobby, and those who did it used to feel like the black sheep of their family. I think what the Internet did was allow the people who do this to feel more a part of a community," he said.

Most people discover Find A Grave because they wonder whether a celebrity is dead, and have done a Google or other search to find out. But like soft-boiled peanuts, after one visits the site it's difficult to stop.

For those interested in South Carolina's departed, the site features a handy search by state. From there the dedicated graver can scroll through some 440 entries, the vast majority being either former congressmen or governors, or Civil War notables, whether they actually fought in the war or recorded its personal impact, like Mary Chestnut, whose 400,000 word diary won a Pulitzer Prize and who is now buried at Knights Hill Cemetery in Camden.

But if history, perhaps suitably, dominates the state's burying grounds, the arts are also represented in the region. James Dickey, best known for his novels "The Firebombing" and "Deliverance" found his final rest at the All Saints Episcopal Church cemetery on Pawleys Island in Georgetown County, while R&B great Brook Benton, best remembered for "Rainy Night In Georgia," lies at the Unity Family Life Cemetery in Camden.

Stories of crime and punishment also wait among the region's tombs. Florence's Gaskins Cemetery holds the earthly remains of Donald "Pee Wee" Gaskins, who claimed, although it was not proven, to have killed 181 of his fellow South Carolinians in a crime spree that lasted from 1969 to 1975. Convicted of nine of those murders, Gaskins plea bargained for life sentences in exchange for telling authorities where the bodies were. He later killed a fellow prisoner, and was electrocuted for that crime in September 1991.

Heroic and far more notable, is another grave in Florence, that of the former FBI agent Melvin Purvis Jr., who became famous for leading the group that gunned down John Dillinger in Chicago in 1933, and then cemented his legacy — and forever raised the ire of a jealous J. Edgar Hoover — when he led a similar group that gunned Pretty Boy Floyd at an Ohio farm in 1934.

Purvis himself would die under mysterious circumstances in 1960, his body being found at the top of a staircase in his home with a bullet through his head. This summer, his legend and his exploits were the heart of the movie "Public Enemies," starring Christian Bale, as the lawman, and Johnny Depp, as Dillinger.

"I think Melvin Purvis and his grave have also been objects of interests, even before the movie," said Gloria Williamson, office manager at the cemetery.

"And it's not just the curious who come to see it. We've had people come and tell us they're from the Discovery Channel, we've had authors writing books about Purvis, and even children writing reports for school," she said.

The grave itself, lying under the shade of a nearby tree, is typical of its era, featuring a tall marker and a large concrete slab.

The cemetery was established in 1880, but several of the headstones recall much earlier death's, their grave's occupants, having been moved to Mount Hope from church and family cemeteries during its early years of operation.

"We have lots of Civil War veterans, as well as a Confederate memorial that commemorates 64 unknown soldiers," she said.

Interestingly, Mount Hope also reveals something else about cemeteries. Being interred isn't necessarily the end of the story.

Williamson said that over the last few years, the Sons of the Confederacy has managed to identify three of the unknowns buried at the memorial, and has since erected markers in their honor.

All of the confederate graves at Mount Hope feature black crosses courtesy of the Sons of the Confederacy. Today, a sharp-eyed visitor will note that each not only bears the name of the fallen, but also a serial number.

"That's because people were stealing them as souvenirs," Williamson said. "With the serial number at least, if they turn up, we can put them in their rightful place," she said.

According to Williamson, rarely a day goes by that someone doesn't show up, looking for a particular grave, and when they do she hands them a map and points out the location. Rather than viewing the preoccupation as strange, Williamson understands the interest. In fact, she went so far as to suggest that cemeteries are a fine place to be.

"I've been here 12 years, and every time I go out in the golf cart, I see something I haven't seen before," she said. "People say, 'Isn't it



Credit: Dan McCue



creepy?" But it's really not. It just like working in a big, serene park."

### A Powerful Feeling

Tipton said most cemetery tourists venture forth to find a Melvin Purvis or a Virginia Harper, a member of the Manhattan Project that developed the first Atomic Bomb, who is now interred at Bush River Memorial Gardens in Columbia, for the same reason that one might visit the grave of a relative; to remember the person and to pay their respects.

"It's just not as morbid as it might look on the surface," he said. "Generally, when I visit a grave myself, it's because I respected the person and, frankly, being six feet from someone — say an author you really love — is a powerful feeling."

Like Williamson, Tipton also thinks of cemeteries as pastoral places, calling them "beautiful, peaceful parks for the introverted." But he cautions gravers to show the utmost respect to the park, its occupants and its managers, and to not be surprised if they are not welcome everywhere.

"For instance, and while I'm sure you don't have this problem in South Carolina, there are certain graves that have been problematic for their cemeteries, Jim Morrison being a case in point," Tipton said. "So often have young people desecrating neighboring graves with graffiti and such that the Paris authorities actually considered kicking Morrison out — more than 20 years after he died. While that's an extreme example, how welcome a cemetery is of tourists varies from cemetery to cemetery. Some, and I'm thinking specifically of Forest Lawn in Hollywood, will kick you out if it seems like you're searching for a celebrity grave or actually ask, 'Hey, where's Clark Gable buried?' On the other hand, other cemeteries are happy to cater to your interest. In New York for instance, I asked where Louis Armstrong was buried, and a cemetery worker took me right to him. It was a point of pride."

### You Never Know What You'll Find

It's safe to say David Brown, of the Florence Memorial Gardens, falls into the latter category. In fact, it turned out he's something of a cemetery tourist himself.

Somewhat apologetic about the relative newness of his facility — the Gardens are all of 57 years old — Brown initially had trouble thinking of the noteworthy individual buried on the grounds around him.

"We had a lady here who died at 119; and there's one gentleman here who worked for the United Nation's food program," he said.

In fact, since 2003, there has been one bonafide celebrity on the grounds: Bill Trader, composer of "Now and Then, There's a



Credit: JSD

Fool Such As I," a hit for Elvis Presley in 1958 that was also recorded by Willie Nelson, Hank Snow and Anne Murray.

But when it comes to remembering, celebrity really is unimportant, Brown said.

"There are probably hundreds of thousands of stories out here, but for the most part, they're only important to the families of the deceased," he explained. "The whole thing about cemeteries is that they preserve a name and the fact that the person whose grave you're standing in front of was here from this date to that date. Also, a lot of memorialization reveals the interests the departed had in life. You'll see images of farming tools, carpenter levels, ballroom dancing ... and all these things add up to making a visit to a grave a powerful or moving experience."

Brown himself has visited cemeteries throughout the state

and around the world, but he's done so, he said, in the interest of his profession.

"I'm always looking at what's going on in the business, at how someone else's cemetery compares to mine, and whether there is anything else I can do to help families deal with their grief," he said.

His travels also help him understand international customs, something that came in handy when a Greek family came to bury a loved one.

"During our conversation, the woman asked, 'when will you put the rocks on?' And then she continued by asking, 'How long will they be here?'" Brown recalled.

"My first impulse was to say, 'As long as it takes for Jesus to come and get them,' but I understood where the question was coming from," he continued. "Greece is much older than South Carolina and it doesn't have room for new cemeteries. As a result, it's become a culture of reburials, where bodies are left in the ground for about a year or so, and then moved so the grave can be used by somebody else."

Although he's visited funerals far and wide, including the catacombs beneath a Franciscan monastery in Peru, Brown said he was most impressed recently by a visit to a pet cemetery on the west side of Columbia.

"They actually had memorials of two dogs that were war heroes and members of the 82nd airborne," Brown said. "One was named Satan's Angel III and metals belonging to both dogs are in a museum in Fayetteville. Now I went out of a professional interest — we're thinking of starting a pet cemetery adjacent to our people cemetery — but I definitely found that interesting. I like visiting cemeteries, you never know who or what you'll find."