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For growing ranks in U.S., preference to go out green

No embalming, no metal caskets, no vaults and, for some, a contribution to land conservation

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When Billy Campbell's father died a number of years ago, the family did what was expected at the time: Bury him in a historic cemetery behind the family's Methodist church.

The setting was lovely and bucolic, but Campbell, a devoted land conservationist, couldn't stop thinking, "With what we spent on that funeral, I could have bought 5 or 10 acres and created a more permanent memorial to him."

With his father's death in mind, Campbell in 1998 decided to try to marry the multibillion-dollar U.S. funeral industry with the nation's growing land conservation and environmental movements. On 38 acres

in western South Carolina, he opened the first conservation burial ground in the United States, a stunningly beautiful stretch of woods, grassland and lush creek beds where people are buried with the simplicity of centuries past and where the proceeds go toward preserving and restoring the land.

Known as "green burial," the concept, which is gaining popularity nationwide, essentially follows the religious pronouncement of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

People are buried without embalming chemicals, their remains refrigerated or kept on dry ice to prevent decay before family viewings. Bodies are placed into the ground in simple pine or cardboard caskets that will quickly decompose, and some people choose to be buried in nothing more than a white cotton shroud or a beloved family quilt.

There are no vaults. Grave markers consist of small, flat stones natural to the area. And the money spent on the plot -- about \$2,000 at the South Carolina cemetery -- helps fund a land trust that will forever keep the area pristine as well as replant native trees and vegetation around the grave site.

"Through this kind of burial, people have a real opportunity to be part of the healing of the land," said Campbell's wife, Kimberley, who oversees much of the day-to-day operation of Ramsey Creek Preserve,



A promotional advertisement for T-Mobile. On the left is a Samsung flip phone with a woman's photo on the screen. To the right is a pink background with the T-Mobile logo at the top. The main text reads "1500 Whenever Minutes® for only \$39.99/mo". At the bottom right is a "Get it now" button and a small note: "2 year agreement req. restrictions apply".

the burial grounds the couple started in Westminster, S.C. "In the U.S., so often we think of nature as a place of recreation. But this concept is a way to connect people to the land through tradition and ritual, and there are few traditions and rituals more important to us as those that surround death."

Taking off quickly

Indeed, "green" cemeteries have taken off quickly in the decade since Campbell's cemetery opened. In recent years, similar ones have opened in California, Florida, Texas, New York, Washington and Maine. Three more are in the works, in Maine, New Mexico and Georgia. And in response to growing demand, many traditional cemeteries throughout the country are considering devoting portions of their land to burials where remains are not embalmed and vaults are not used.

John Bucci, a Wisconsin funeral director who serves southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois, said he is beginning to see the green burial trend creep into the Midwest. A prominent Milwaukee cemetery recently converted a significant portion of its acreage to a green cemetery and has returned the land to its original wooded condition. Bucci has yet to find a cemetery in Illinois that has gone so far but says he hopes that some will begin to respond to the growing demand.

"What happened 30 years ago with the rise in cremation could eventually happen with green burials," said Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council. "People like the idea of their burial being part of a national conservation strategy. ... They want their last act to be meaningful, something that heals the land and the soul and connects them to something bigger and longer-lasting than a coffin or an insurance policy."

Funeral directors cite problems

But green burials also have downsides, mainstream funeral directors contend. They say that makeup application, often used to make the deceased look better after long illnesses, is difficult without embalming. They worry that doing viewings quickly -- usually within 24 to 48 hours to beat any decomposition -- is sometimes too fast for grieving families. They say that digging graves in some parts of the country can be next to impossible for weeks on end in winter, but that unembalmed bodies should not be kept unburied for that long. And they assert that embalming cuts down on the risk, however small, of disease transmission from buried corpses.

"Embalming is the technical side of what we do," said funeral director Bucci. "For many of us it's been very hard to hear from the green movement that they believe there is not only no value but actual harm in what we do."

Proponents of green burial counter all that. They say most cultures view their dead quickly and without trauma with no embalming. They say the simple burials often are healing for families because they can dig the graves by hand, build the caskets with locally found wood and lower the body into the ground themselves.

Greensprings, a green cemetery in upstate New York, has a ground warmer that can be used to soften frozen earth for digging in the winter. And advocates say that only in the rarest of circumstances would disease transmission be a concern.

"A lot of the public is completely confused about what is or isn't allowed when it comes to burial," said Mark Harris, the author of "Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial." "They believe embalming is required, when in fact that is almost never the case in any state in the nation. Look at Jewish burials, for example: They do not embalm, and that's

absolutely legal everywhere."

Environmentalists have long been critical of the funeral industry in the U.S. Cemeteries often are on ground cleared of trees for a new forest of marble headstones. Critics, including Harris and the Green Burial Council, say that nearly a million gallons of toxic embalming fluid is buried in cemetery ground every year, a potential risk to groundwater supplies. They further charge that enough metal goes into the production of caskets and burial vaults each year to rebuild the Golden Gate Bridge and that enough concrete is used on vaults to build a two-lane road from New York to Detroit.

Return to old ways

So proponents of green burials advocate burying the nation's dead the way people were buried for centuries, until the 1900s when embalming became popular in the U.S. and Canada. (In virtually no other part of the world is embalming with formaldehyde used as frequently as it is in North America.) They urge embracing the decomposition of the body and what it gives back to the environment rather than fighting the inevitable.

"There is no chemical or coffin or vault that we can use that will forever stop a body from decomposing or from being affected by the elements," said the Green Burial Council's Sehee, a former Jesuit lay minister.

People nationwide are choosing green burials, even if such cemeteries do not exist in their home states; at Ramsey Creek, for example, people from California to New Jersey have had their bodies shipped on dry ice to be buried there.

Harris believes the trend toward green burials is typical of Baby Boomers.

"As Baby Boomers approach the end of their lives, they are going to bring a very do-it-yourself mentality to death," Harris said. "Green burials isn't just about preserving the environment, though that's a big part of it for a lot of people. It's also significantly cheaper. The burials tend to be simple affairs that are led and controlled by the families themselves. And it is a return to tradition that speaks to old-fashioned American values of thrift and self-sufficiency, and that appeals to a large swath of America, not just environmentalists."

The conservation link

For those who advocate green burial, it has been a no-brainer to link the burials with land conservation. Consider the model of the Galisteo River Basin preserve south of Santa Fe, a 13,000-acre former ranch covered with bonsai, pinion and juniper trees. Plans for Galisteo call for part of the acreage to become a sprawling green cemetery while other portions become orchards, meadows and sites for a non-denominational chapel and an environmental education center. Every person who donates \$4,000 to the conservancy that oversees the project receives the right to be buried there.

Yet it is not just those with environmental urges who are choosing green burials. Many simply want their final place of rest to be beautiful, natural and uncomplicated.

Billy Campbell recently saw exactly that when a man from Westminster chose to buy a plot at Ramsey Creek. When Campbell told the man, known for a curmudgeonly streak, that he was surprised by his burial choice, the man said, "Listen, I love the woods. It's you ... environmentalists that I can't stand."

The man paid \$4,000 for plots for him and his wife. He got eternity in the woods. Campbell got money

to preserve the trees and land.

"With green burial, maybe everyone wins in the end," Kimberley Campbell said with a laugh.

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Green option often less costly

Green burials often are significantly less expensive than traditional burials.

The National Funeral Directors Association estimates the average cost of a funeral to be about \$6,500, a number that often is much higher after the costs of a burial plot, headstone and cemetery burial fees are included.

In contrast, burial at Ramsey Creek Preserve, a green cemetery in South Carolina, can be as low as about \$3,600, including the price of the plot, burial fees and the \$1,200 cost of working with a local funeral home for transport and refrigeration of the body before burial.

At Greensprings, a green cemetery in upstate New York, the cost of plot and burial fees comes in at just under \$1,000.

But in areas of the country where land is more expensive, green isn't always the cheapest option. At Forever Fernwood, a green cemetery in Mill Valley, Calif., plots alone can cost up to \$9,000.

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