



# Bennettville Cemetery

## Remembering those who served

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Since 2004, Kathy Duclos has quietly carried on a long-standing tradition of care and respect at Bennettville Cemetery located 10 miles south of Hwy. 169 in Hazelton Township, Aitkin County. She first joined the cemetery board after being personally chosen and trained by her predecessor, the late Wilma Holder.

One afternoon, after an impromptu invite over for coffee, Holder blatantly told Duclos to assume her place on the board since she believed Duclos to be perfect for the role. "She didn't ask, she just told me," Duclos recalled.

Today, she serves as the cemetery's secretary/trea-

surer, managing everything from recordkeeping to property transactions. "I record every burial in a spreadsheet," she said.

"When someone passes, I'm sent their information. If we sell a plot, we prepare a deed, get it notarized with the president's signature and my own and mail it. There are a lot of laws that pertain to cemeteries that not everyone may know about."

The cemetery dates back to the 1900s (or perhaps even earlier) and currently holds 716 burials, including 97 veterans. "Many of them lived right here, went to war, came back and lived long lives," she said.

Among veteran burials are seven from World War I, 42

from World War II, four who served in both WWII and Korea, 13 from the Korean War, one who served in both Korea and Vietnam, 12 from the Vietnam War and another 12 who served during peacetime.

Each Memorial Day, the board ensures that a bronze star and American flag mark every veteran's grave. "We put them up the Thursday or Friday before Memorial weekend and take them down the following Tuesday," she said. "It's our way of honoring them."

For years, she and her family handled the mowing and upkeep themselves before hiring it out. "Now we focus on general maintenance such as seeding grass afterward,

cleaning up in the fall and keeping everything neat," she explained.

The cemetery also employs local high school students through a small fund. Twenty percent of the \$500 budget goes into a bank certificate of deposit used for perpetual care, which can be drawn from once a year.

Although the cemetery used to be managed by the township, it became an incorporated association in 1979. The township still supports it by paying wages to the three workers.

Duclos finds comfort in knowing she's helping preserve local stories. "This cemetery has special significance for me because I have a lot of family and friends buried

there," she said.

In addition to having loved one's burials at the Bennettville Cemetery, Duclos' Uncle Bill was a grave digger and caretaker during the 1950s-1970s. "As a child, I would ride with my dad when he helped Uncle Bill dig graves," said Duclos. "During the 1980s, my three teenage kids and I did the mowing and trimming also."

Kellie Gretschnann, a close friend of Duclos' was Aitkin born and raised and is the current executive director of aerial and office operations at Mike Enterprises Drone Services. At the request of Duclos, Gretschnann has used the company's drones to capture footage.

With Gretschnann's

grandfather being a WWII veteran, she has a soft spot for supporting and helping out. "Pretty much all the cemeteries in Aitkin are meaningful to me and I want to do anything I can to support the military and to help keep that history alive," said Gretschnann.

Each February, the board meets to plan for the year ahead. During this time, the team talks about projects like clearing fence lines or making improvements. "It's really a community effort," explained Duclos. The cemetery also has a Facebook page where residents can follow updates and learn about upcoming events at "Bennettville Cemetery."

