

FINDING OLD GRAVES

By Bill Rexroad



In May 2007 I was privileged to take part in a week-long project to find unmarked graves using ground penetrating radar (GPR). Searches were conducted at several cemeteries in Pendleton County, West Virginia. My interest in the project stemmed from the fact that four generations of my ancestors had lived in Pendleton County, including Johann Zacharias Rexroth, the first of our clan to come to America. The project was sponsored by The Fort Seybert Heritage Educational Association (FSHEA), Sandra Pope, chairperson. FSHEA is a project-oriented, historical organization headquartered in Pendleton County. Its primary objective is to research and preserve the rich history of the county.

The company that provided and operated the GPR equipment was NAEVA Geophysics, Inc., with offices in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Congers, New York. A two-person crew from the company did the work. They were Mark Weis and Amelia Paruch, both of whom have degrees in geology.

The GPR equipment consisted of a device similar in configuration and about the same size as the power lawnmower we use to mow our yards. Its enclosed radar unit is wheeled over the ground in a prescribed path across known, marked graves and onto an area where unmarked graves were thought to be. Going across known graves is done to establish a reference for the signals that unmarked graves would give. A readout screen on the device shows where there had been disturbances in the consistency of the soil below, such as those caused by a grave having been dug. Several passes are made and a marker flag is put down wherever an anomaly is detected.

After an area had been swept in this manner, a pattern of flags emerged. Known graves showed a pattern of three or four flags in a line with the length of each grave. Previously unknown graves clearly became apparent when the same pattern was seen where there was no headstone. Also, the unmarked graves were often found to be in a line with the marked graves, thus further substantiating that they were in fact graves.

Soil conditions sometimes caused the readings to be inconclusive. In one such instance the pattern of flags showed what appeared to be a row of unmarked graves, but the readout indicated they were only two feet deep. This made it questionable that they were graves. But the pattern of the flags did indicate several grave-length disturbances side-by-side, all in a line. The GPR was then run over some nearby graves that did have headstones and were recent enough that they would have been six feet deep. Those graves also gave signals that said they were only two feet deep. The conclusion was that the soil conditions caused an inaccurate depth reading and that the flag patterns did indeed show grave locations.

Seven cemeteries and one other burial site were scanned during the course of the project. Many unmarked graves were found. For the most part they were in areas where the burials would have taken place during the 1800s. There is no way to know who was buried in all those graves, but the information is valuable nonetheless. For example, there was a church cemetery in which many of the stones were missing, leaving a large vacant area. The cemetery owners believed that graves existed there, but had difficulty convincing people that the area was not available for new graves. Now they have evidence.



In another cemetery a certain family buried there was known to have owned slaves during the mid-1800s. Family lore said that the slaves had been buried in the same cemetery as their master. Sure enough, the GPR equip-

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ment found indication of graves in a far corner of the cemetery where the slaves were thought to have been buried.

My own particular interest was at the home place of my ancestor, Johann Zacharias Rexroth, the first Rexroad to come to America. He died in 1799 and his wife about 1806. A man who had lived nearby many years ago remembered seeing grave-like depressions in the ground where Zacharias and his wife might have been buried. The depressions are no longer visible because the land has since been cultivated, but the GPR search found signs of graves in the same spot where the man said the depressions had been. Were those my ancestors buried there? I'll probably never know, but it is an intriguing bit of information to add to my family history.

R: More discovered graves



L: Ground Penetrating Radar unit

R: Amelia and Mark searching with the GPR unit

Opposite Page: Several discovered graves identified by flag markers

