



A solitary figure on the wide open plains of rural Wyoming, Anngela Starnes stumbles across this cemetery and makes it her mission to restore it and find the histories of those buried there.

# FINDING HAROLD

## Part 1: Finding the Forgotten Brother

It took a transplant from Idaho Falls to reinvigorate the community's pride in its history, as they restore a cemetery long since abandoned.

When the phone rang one afternoon in late August at the family cabin in Laramie, Judy Kechter nonchalantly answered. Then she quickly broke down in tears. "I couldn't believe the news," she said, excitedly. "It was the last thing I expected to hear."

Someone had finally located her uncle Harold's grave in the Prairie View Cemetery outside of Lost Springs. The family had been looking for the grave for years, but after a handful of unsuccessful attempts to find it, they'd all but given up hope.

The cemetery had been without a designated person to look after it for years. To say it had fallen into disrepair might be an understatement. Vegetation and dirt had long since consumed the landscape around and over graves. The unruly thicket of sagebrush and weeds masked what lay beneath for anyone venturing out into the prairie in search of their family history.

Several graves, like Harold's, had originally been marked only with makeshift wooden crosses. The years had not been kind to those, many of which had eroded into piles

of twigs or worse, were simply blown away by the harsh prairie wind.

"We knew that Harold had been buried there," she said, "and it was devastating not to be able to find him."

That was particularly true for Harold's brother, Raymond, who had come back to Lost Springs years ago to visit Harold's grave, only to find the cemetery overgrown and any trace of Harold's final resting place gone.

Or so the 93-year-old Cheyenne man thought.

Raymond could not recall where his brother's grave was exactly located in the tiny cemetery. The remnants of the wooden marker, like so many there, had simply disappeared into history.

Raymond had been a young boy when Harold died. Now, many decades later, he keenly felt his brother's loss for a second time and desperately wanted to reconnect with his lost sibling.

"It was important for Raymond to know that his brother was properly laid to rest," Judy said. "After Harold died, the family never really talked about it because it was too painful for them. As a result, Harold just kinda became the

forgotten one."

Harold was only 13 in 1926 when the unthinkable happened. He was out checking cattle when the rope around his horse's neck somehow hooked his foot. The horse bolted. Harold was dragged for nearly a mile.

His death spurred suspicions . . . and rumors in the small, tight-knit rural community.

Harold had a well-known, ongoing feud with his neighbor, who was constantly annoyed with Harold for crossing over his land on the way to school.

Ultimately, the coroner got involved and initiated an investigation and empaneled a jury to make the call. In the end, Harold's death was ruled an accident.

Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, his parents, both Russian immigrants who had moved to Wyoming to farm, decided to move the family to Fort Carson, Colorado.

The young Raymond barely remembers that day. Except for the devastating shroud of grief that hung, unspoken, over the entire family.

"Finding his brother has brought him such a sense of relief," Judy emotionally commented.

"Now, finally, it feels like he's not been forgotten."

The family is in the process of ordering a headstone, which they plan to install at Harold's grave this fall . . . "if the snow doesn't come before the marker," Judy adds.

Almost as surprising as finding Harold's grave, however, was the woman on the other end of the phone call barely a month ago.

How had this woman possibly tracked the grave down after all of their unsuccessful attempts? Perhaps more surprisingly, why in the heck had she done it?

But anyone who meets Anngela Starnes would hardly be surprised by both her tenacity to solve a mystery, as well as the generosity of spirit required for the task.

Anngela, a recent transplant from Idaho Falls, happened upon the cemetery during one of her daily, four- to five-mile walks. She found herself at a loss for friends and a connection after coming from the busy life in Idaho Falls to the tranquil, remote high desert prairie. Lost Springs is home to four residents, according to the Census Bureau data, though most who call it home live on ranches scattered miles apart.

Anngela was lonely.

But the plight of this forgotten cemetery was even lonelier in her mind.

She could not bear to leave it in such a poor condition. She returned with a weed eater and went to work.

Passersby noticed the woman cleaning up the landscape in the middle of nowhere. A strange sight, to say the least, for people used to working the land from sunup to sundown with a whole different purpose in mind.

Her commitment to this effort, instead of making her an oddball or source of jokes, has made her a lightning rod for action.

Now, the entire community can be seen taking turns cleaning the cemetery.

She has single-handedly inspired the small community – including her husband and teenage daughter – to help her restore the cemetery. Weeks later, the cemetery is not only clear of weeds and other debris, but tumbled headstones have been righted and the majority of the 67 graves have been identified.

She has "one or two" mysteries left to solve.

Not only have the graves been tidied, but they are now all honored. A spattering of flowers – in the case of adults – brighten an otherwise dreary, monotone prairie. Plastic pinwheels spin in front of the graves of children.

At least two Confederate soldiers rest beneath American flags whipping in the Wyoming wind.

A new American flag decorates one corner of the cemetery, replacing a frayed, deteriorating version she had purchased at a garage sale.

Next, Anngela plans to document the lives of every single person buried there. If necessary, she will track down long-lost family members who might not know where their loved ones are buried or how to find them.

Because, like Judy and her family, Anngela believes there are several families out there who are looking for lost loved ones and deserve to hear their stories.

These are stories that already have Anngela captivated.

"This was the first call I made, and I'm so excited it ended so well," Anngela said with a big smile. "I was so happy to be able to do that for them."

And though Judy still can't believe that Anngela cared enough to find Harold's grave, let alone take the time to piece together his history in order to track them down, she feels blessed to have received that fateful phone call.

"Anngela is such a special person," Judy said, wistfully. "There really aren't enough great ways to describe her."

In the meantime, Anngela has a lot of work in front of her, putting in the countless hours necessary to piece together another forgotten life in order to make that next call.



This original sign marks the cemetery outside of Lost Springs. Residents are now coming together to restore the historical site.

Next week find out more about Anngela Starnes and her mission to restore an Old West Cemetery Long Lost on the Plains of Wyoming

A Three-part series by Jen Kocher  
Photos by Jen Kocher and Phil Harnden