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Archeological excavation of gravesites on the North Dallas Tollway

photo by Chris Fritchie

Little Ireba – Left Behind

By Bob Warren

IN THE 1800s and early 1900s, family burial plots were common in rural areas. Time and circumstances left many of those graves unmarked and, unfortunately, some have been lost.

You may have seen the news last September when North Dallas Tollway construction was halted at the Lebanon Road intersection to allow an archeological dig. It was Frisco resident, Ben Beckelman, who requested the dig so that he might look for the grave of his great aunt, Ireba Kelsay. This is the story of Ben and his relentless, year-long search for the remains of little Ireba who died as an infant 104 years ago.

Ben's search began in 2005 after he lost two key members of his family – his great uncle, Ben Kelsay, for whom he was named, and his grandfather, Arlon Leslie Farley. Seeing those pioneers slip away renewed Ben's interest in his family history, so he dug out all the records he could find, a family Bible, a relative's

genealogy study, old church records and the memories of his ninety-year-old grandmother, Neitha Kelsay Farley. Everything indicated that on December 14, 1902 a stillborn baby was given the name Ireba Kelsay and was buried in the Sonntag family cemetery. Why there? Why was she not put in a regular cemetery like other Kelsay family members? And where was the Sonntag Cemetery? These were questions that drove him to pry into the memories of some of Frisco's old timers, including members of the "coffee club" at Johnnie Mart. Some recalled that there was indeed a Sonntag Cemetery, but could not pinpoint its location.

Funeral home records indicate that, in 1974, the graves of three Sonntag family members were moved from the family plot to Frisco's Bethel Cemetery, but there was no record of Ireba having been moved. A search of the Kelsay family



Young Ben Kelsay and a Kelsay relative
photo provided by Ben Beckelman

plot at Bethel found three graves, that of Fannie, George and Vera Kelsay, but no Ireba. Ben began to suspect that because her grave was not marked, the infant's remains had been left behind.

That thought heightened Ben's search for the exact location of the Sonntag Cemetery. So, using modern day technology, the "Google" map system and a GPS device, he found the Sonntag Cemetery had been located where Lebanon Road and the North



Collecting samples from the infant's gravesite
 photo by Chris Fritchie

Dallas Tollway intersect. Ben said, "At that point I was in a quandary. I couldn't investigate further, because the cemetery was buried under one foot of Lebanon Road's paving." But Ben didn't give up. He knew the Tollway was to be bulldozed under Lebanon Road, so he asked the city and the North Texas Tollway Authority (NTTA) to pause and search for Ireba's grave when they reached the intersection. He even asked for the opportunity to dig at his own cost, if necessary.

Using modern day technology, the "Google" map system and a GPS device, he found the Sonntag Cemetery had been located on the Tollway.

The next few months were frustrating for Ben. He felt alone in his belief that Ireba's remains had not been moved but that they were still buried beneath Lebanon Road. Everyone he approached



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*Excavation of adolescent gravesite
photo provided by Angela Tine of GeoMarine*

said, "Sonntag family cemetery's remains were moved to Bethel in 1974." He made trip after trip to Bethel looking for answers in the Kelsay and Sonntag plots, but found none. He checked and rechecked cemetery records, court documents and history books – still nothing. Then, in March 2006, Ben was told that when the concrete was broken and lifted off Lebanon Road he could have a forty-eight hour window of time to dig and do his search. That gave him hope, but Ben knew he could not do the dig on his own. He needed professional help, and, after a long search found Dr. Randy Moir, an archeologist who not only listened to his story but who was willing to help coordinate the effort.

Dr. Moir met jointly with the city and the NTTA in April 2006, and they skeptically agreed to the dig. Five months later, concrete on the Lebanon strip was broken out and hauled off. As Ben said, "At that point the game was on, and I had 48 hours to complete the search."

A second body was found in a more ornate coffin. Indications are that it was a teenage male, possibly that of Benjamin Sonntag, who died at age 16 in 1905.

Ben explained, "Without help I would never have found the grave shaft, because only an archeologist could detect the slight changes in soil patterns. After the topsoil was removed, a bulldozer gently scraped the soil away a few inches at a time. It was a slow process, but on September 13, Dr. Moir found an infant burial grave shaft, a Bois d'arc pier and



a slab of marble. I felt we had found Ireba!"

"Further digging unearthed a rusted nail on top of a hexagon shaped, decomposed casket.

No human remains were visible, but screening of the soil revealed small ribs, vertebra and a cranium. These will be tested against the DNA of my grandmother in hopes of a match that they had the same mother."

Then, a surprise: A second body was found in a more ornate coffin. Indications are that it was a teenage male, possibly that of Benjamin Sonntag, who died at age 16 in 1905. DNA tests will be crosschecked between these remains and a Sonntag family member.

Ben had planned to have a private burial at Bethel Cemetery for Ireba on

December 14, 2006, the 104th anniversary of her death, but that will have to wait until DNA evidence confirms that she was a Kelsay.

Though Little Ireba's story is not yet complete, Ben can be proud of his determined search which produced not one, but two bodies that had been left behind. Great work, Ben!

*Frisco native
Bob Warren
is a humorist,
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