

## **“They’re Pretty, But They’re Work”: Shell-Decorated Graves as Community Art**

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Graveyard. Cemetery. What images come to mind when you hear these words? Is it a dark and eerie place, a scene from *A Christmas Carol*? Or perhaps you think of the lush, landscaped expanses of green grass, that, save for the occasional bunch of flowers, might be mistaken for a park. Row upon row of statuesque grave markers silently guard their permanent occupants. Most often, cemeteries remind us of static environments focused on the finality of death. When questioned, few would consider cemeteries an artistic, cultural landscape, one very much a part of a vibrant community. But such is the case at a rural cemetery in South-Central Kentucky.

The cemetery at the Hill Grove Missionary Baptist Church illustrates how a graveyard is utilized by church members as more than just a place to preserve the dead. Most graves are lovingly cared for, decorated using both ordinary and unusual objects, including most prominently shells, and visited by friends and family members throughout the year. A number of issues are played out within and beyond the boundaries of the cemetery: it is a culturally defined artistic landscape where the interplay between individual and community aesthetics is expressed via elements utilized in decorating graves; grave decorations and cemetery care are visible manifestations of the congregation’s cult of piety regarding both the living and the dead; and the decorated graves may be examined as folk *assemblage*. Through discussion of the tradition and practice of grave decorating in the Upland South region, the combinations of elements used to decorate graves at Hill Grove, and the role of individual and community aesthetic preferences, we see how a cemetery is transformed from just a final resting place to an expression of community art.

I begin my examination of grave decorating traditions at Hill Grove Cemetery with a brief history of the church and a description of the cemetery. Before looking specifically at decorating practices at Hill Grove, I discuss the phenomenon of the Upland South rural cemetery, and examine the traditions and practices of decorating graves with shells in other cultures. I address the origins of the tradition as it is practiced at Hill Grove Cemetery, and the changes that have occurred over the years. Cemetery decorations

involve a sense of aesthetics, both individual and community, and I examine the natural and human created materials utilized in grave decorating at Hill Grove Cemetery and the interplay between individuals and the collective congregation. Additionally, I address the idea that the graveyard is an aesthetic landscape that exists both within and beyond the boundaries delineated by the cemetery fence. All of these elements are codified as a cult of piety that binds the sacred and secular spheres of the community.

### **Hill Grove Church History**

The present day Hill Grove Church, a white, Baptist congregation, originated on the banks of Long Fall Creek, near its confluence with the Nolin River, a region known locally as the "forks of the rivers." In 1889, eleven charter members founded the Long Fall Baptist Church (Cawthorn and Warnell 1985:345). Over the years, the log church house fell into disrepair and floods on Long Fall Creek frequently prevented members from attending services. In 1905 the congregation moved up the hill to a two acre grove of oak and hickory trees on Dickeys Mill Road, constructed a new church house, and changed the name to Hill Grove Baptist Church. This structure was extensively remodeled during the late 1970s and replaced with a new church house in 1995. Located just to the north of the church house is an open-sided pavilion, constructed in 1991, and to the rear of the church, on the north and south boundaries, are the women's and men's privies.

Deceased members of the old Long Fall Church were not buried in a church graveyard, but in family graveyards such as the Criswell Cemetery, located on Long Fall Creek, and the Decker and Ward Cemeteries, located west of the church grounds along the Nolin River. The first burial at Hill Grove Cemetery occurred in 1910, and other graves soon dotted the churchyard. Some burials still took place in the small family graveyards, but after 1910, most burials occurred at Hill Grove Cemetery. The traditional practice of burying the deceased in small family graveyards ended in 1962 when the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), in preparation for the construction of a dam across the Nolin River, condemned much of the river's watershed for inundation. The activities of the ACOE, including the disinterment and reinterment of graves, and the effects of these activities upon not only the landscape of Hill Grove Cemetery but the lives of the local residents as well, are addressed later in this article.

Today the Hill Grove Cemetery contains approximately 400 graves. These graves are situated in two sections: they surround the church in the original graveyard, and they are located in the graveyard extension created by the ACOE. Most graves in the older, front section are marked by simple marble or granite headstones and footstones (see Figure 1).

Many of the graves in the newer, rear section of the cemetery are aligned in perfectly straight rows, marked only with small, numbered, marble headstones, and hold unknown persons (see Figure 2). Scattered among these anonymous graves are the graves of people who had a marker at their original place of interment. Most of the discussion about grave decorating focuses on the graves located in the front section of the cemetery. The two sections of the cemetery are not separated physically by a fence, yet there are notable distinctions between them. Many stately oak and hickory trees dot the front section, and the ground surrounding the graves is sparingly covered with grass. The new section of the cemetery is tree-less and the ground is carpeted with lush, green grass. No burials occurred in the western part of the cemetery for several years after the ACOE interments, and this section has retained a stark appearance. Today, as the older section of the graveyard has filled, the deceased are interred into the newer portion. These graves exhibit the decorating practices of the front section, in contrast to the plain, undecorated graves constructed by the ACOE, and blur the immediate distinctions between the two sections.

### **Upland South Graveyard Traditions**

Before examining the traditions of grave decorating at Hill Grove, we need to understand the many components of rural graveyards. D. Gregory Jeane developed a model and classification for graveyards located in the Upland South. According to Jeane, the Upland South cemetery is distinguished by five characteristics: site, size, vegetation, decoration, and cult of piety (1978:896).

Upland South graveyards are frequently located on hilltops, a tradition which dates back to antiquity (Jeane 1978:896). Although Hill Grove Cemetery is located on a hill, this was probably for practical rather than traditional reasons. These graveyards are usually small in size, often less than two acres, and frequently named for local families. At Hill Grove, the original cemetery was approximately two acres before the ACOE purchased and then donated, additional cemetery space for the graves it moved. Although Jeane argues that Upland South cemeteries contain specific types of vegetation—cedar trees, hemlock, and arbor vitae for their significance of immortality, and crepe myrtle for its shade, Hill Grove Cemetery does not conform to this characteristic. The original section of the current cemetery was nestled in a grove of oak and hickory trees, and the new section remains free of any vegetation other than grass.

Another characteristic of Upland South cemeteries is the decoration of graves (Jeane 1978:898). Most graves are marked with tombstones, either commercial or folk models. Additionally, the graves are mounded,

and artifacts such as shells, bottles, and broken pottery adorn them. Flowers are another important aspect of grave decoration. The graves at Hill Grove contain all these elements. Tombstones range from commercially produced models inscribed with information about the deceased, and engraved with artwork, to hand-inscribed cement blocks or field rocks with only a name and dates of birth and death. Shells decorate many, but not all, of the graves in the graveyard, and every grave has a flower for the annual Homecoming.

Finally, the care and upkeep of a cemetery in the Upland South is part of a well established cult of piety. Annual cemetery cleaning days are important not only for the care of the cemetery, but also for the maintenance of congregational and familial relationships. According to Jeane, "The care and upkeep of the cemetery is a ritual of love and respect and thus an expression of the character of the community" (1978:901). At Hill Grove, Decoration Day or Homecoming, always held the third weekend of June, is the most important event in the congregation's yearly cycle. Cleaning the graves usually begins at least a week before Decoration Day, and flowers are placed on the graves on Saturday. Homecoming activities on Sunday include a morning worship service, an elaborate noon dinner, and afternoon singing and socializing.

While the Hill Grove Cemetery exhibits several of the characteristics discussed by Jeane, the most relevant are site, size, decoration, and cult of piety. I would add grave orientation to the list of traits exhibited by Upland South cemeteries. Most Christian graves are oriented toward the east in anticipation of Judgment Day. According to Mollie Kersey, a member of the Sanders family and a frequent church attendee, "they're supposed, supposed to bury people facing the east. See, that's, that's another thing we've [Hill Grove Church] got. It's a law, I reckon" (personal communication, 10/7/96).

In many cultures people decorate graves with a variety of shells. In Central and West Africa, practitioners of the Kongo religion believed that seashells represent the spirals of life and death, and their white color recalls the color of the spirit world (Fenn 1985:45). The practice of decorating with shells was observed in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1891 by H. Carrington Bolton, who wrote in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*: "During a recent sojourn in Columbia, S. C., my attention was directed to the cemetery for the poorer negroes...the numerous graves are decorated with a variety of objects, sometimes arranged with careful symmetry, but more often placed around the margins without regard to order. These objects include oyster-shells" (1891:214). A year later Ernest Ingersoll responded to Bolton's comments: "I saw at Columbia, S. C., a practice in vogue among the blacks which exists nowhere else so far as I can learn....Nearly every grave has bordering or thrown upon it a few bleached sea-shells of a dozen different kinds, such as are found along the south Atlantic coast" (1892:68). Both Bolton and Ingersoll indicate that the people who follow this practice do not know why they do so.

Many scholars suggest that grave decoration traditions in the Upland South, in both African American and European American cemeteries, might be explained by studying African religious beliefs and practices. Followers of the Kongo religion believe the deceased become white creatures called *bakulu*, who inhabit villages located under rivers or lakes. These spirits can travel between the real world and the spirit world, and their images are often constructed of white materials. Shells combine the associations of the color white and water, and when placed on the top of a grave, they create an image of a river bottom (Vlach 1977:163). John Michael Vlach suggests an African American grave "can be read as a cosmogram. The world of the living above, the dividing line of the shells, the realm of the spirits beyond, not only under ground but under water as well" (1977:163). Kongo religious beliefs, adapted by African descendants in America, are eloquently expressed by Bessie Jones, a resident of St. Simon's Island, Georgia: "The shells stand for the sea. The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory and the land of demise" (quoted in Thompson 1983:135). According to Terry Jordan, the use of shells on graves is common throughout Africa. In Nigeria, Yoruba funeral party members threw cowrie shells to others attending the funeral, and the shells often appear as grave decorations (Jordan 1982:21).

The use of shells in grave decorating is not limited to African and African American graves. Folklorists and cultural geographers working in Florida and Texas argue that shells symbolize eternal life, death and rebirth, and adoration of female deities. These motifs appear in Greek and Roman funerary monuments and "the custom spread as far as Britain...making the transition from pagan to Christian symbolism" (Stokes 1991:181-82). Additionally, John West noted the presence of shells on graves in Mexican and Hispanic graveyards along the Rio Grande in Texas (1985:50), and Beverly Kremenak-Pecotte observed the use of shells in the Alabama-Coushatta Indian Cemetery (1985:61). Many of these cultures, African, European, Latino, and Native American, are present in the Upland South. Which cultural tradition influenced grave decorating traditions in the Upland South is still open to debate, but a mingling and overlapping of traditions is not unlikely. It is entirely possible that the use of shells in grave decorating is an example of polygenesis, and the reasons for using shells may vary from place to place.

Use of shells as a decorating element at Hill Grove Cemetery conforms to the larger Upland South regional practices of grave decoration, but does not appear to be influenced locally by African American, Latino, or Native American cultural exchange. The "forks of the rivers" region is culturally homogeneous, populated by white Upland Southerners claiming English, Scots-Irish, and German ancestry. Few African Americans reside in this rural

county, and while racial integration is evident in schools, for the most part the communities remain segregated by choice. It is possible that as people moved through the Upland South they observed and absorbed numerous cultural and regional practices. Communities and individuals sift through a seemingly unlimited supply of tangible and intangible resources, choosing those that meet specific needs. Over time, new elements are melded with the old, resulting in traditions that are at the same time stable and evolving. Ancestors of "forks" area residents may have seen graves decorated with shells, but, for a number of reasons, did not adopt that element into their practices or traditions. Perhaps they did not reside in areas near waterways with mussel or other shellfish populations. Or maybe shells were available but not the "right" kind, or the soil was not the proper consistency for maintaining mounds over graves. Perhaps people were too engaged with the trials of day-to-day existence to be concerned with trivial matters such as decorated graves. We can only speculate on how the use of shells as a decorating element developed in South-Central Kentucky. What we do know is how one woman's activities transformed a larger regional practice into a unique community tradition.

### **Grave Decorating Traditions at Hill Grove Cemetery**

At Hill Grove Cemetery, the graves in the front section usually are bounded by headstones and footstones. The graves and headstones are oriented toward the east. Between the headstones and footstones the graves are covered with sloping mounds of dirt. These mounds range in size and configuration from just a couple of inches above the ground to almost a foot and a half in height. Some of the mounds are steeply sloped, while others are more gently rounded. Spread over the tops of some of these mounded graves are sheets of bright green, grass-like, synthetic, outdoor carpet similar to the Astroturf used on sports fields. Located on top of the "carpet" or "turf," as it is called locally, are rows of glistening white mussel shells. These shells are placed on the carpet directly next to one another or with a gap of two to six inches between them, in vertical or horizontal rows. All the shells are arranged convexly, with the exterior of the shell visible. Bouquets of flowers in a variety of forms are a final decorative element to these mounded graves. Some graves contain so many flowers it is impossible to read the inscription on the headstone. On other graves flowers are present in single bunches, or are lacking altogether.

During the early days of grave decorating at Hill Grove Cemetery, the graves were mounded and all vegetation scraped off the mound and area surrounding the grave. This practice is consistent with many rural graveyards. Frequent and repeated scrapings of the grave mound removed all the topsoil

and created a cement-like surface that inhibited the growth of grass and weeds. Like the use of shells, the practice of grave mounding and scraping appears in many cultures. Jordan, in his extensive research on Texas graveyards, indicates the origins of the mounding and scraping may lie in pagan European, African, and Native American traditions (1982:14-19). Mollie Kersey indicated that "the graves have always been mounded" (personal communication, 10/7/96). For many years, Charlie Sanders acted as the unpaid caretaker of the Hill Grove Cemetery and used a big maul or paddle to rebuild the mounds on the graves.

Most members of the Hill Grove congregation agree that one woman was responsible for the initial use of shells as a grave decoration in this area. Iva Decker lived along the banks of the Nolin River with her elderly parents. For many rural people, including the Deckers, life in the early years of the twentieth century was difficult and money in short supply. These circumstances often instilled a sense of inventiveness in securing resources. According to Mollie Kersey:

Well, years ago when the first grave was put in, it was awhile there were no shells on the graves. Later Iva Decker started getting shells out of the river, and cleaning 'em, and bringing, putting 'em on people's graves. She first started at her own cemetery down there [in the Decker graveyard along the Nolin River] and...so she got the shells out and put 'em on different peoples' graves. So later on, she, she started just carrying 'em from one place to another and putting them on for people. (personal communication, 10/7/96)

Mollie relates this narrative as an explanation of the origins of the practice. What she does not mention, but is frequently discussed by Iva's relatives, is the fact that Iva started cleaning shells and using them for decoration strictly as a way to earn money. Effie Hicks commented, "Iva was just curious about the shells, what could she do with them" (personal communication, 11/5/96). Iva found the shells, brought them home, and beat and scraped them to get them clean. At some point she thought there must be an easier way, and started boiling the shells in a solution of lye and water. Initially, Iva only decorated family graves; but the word got out, people came to see the cemetery, and she started decorating other graves. Iva charged three dollars for a bushel basket of shells, enough to decorate one grave. She often enticed children to help her gather the shells from Nolin River by offering to fix dinner as a bribe, or rewarding them with five cents worth of "maple sugar candy."

When Iva Decker first thought of the idea to clean mussel shells and place them on graves, she might have only been concerned with making money. But something in the white shells, arranged in rows on the mounded graves, caught people's attention. Twenty five years after her death, an

understanding of Iva's motives for using shells to decorate graves remains clouded at best. One relative says she began cleaning shells for economic reasons (Highbaugh, personal communication, 10/9/96), while another thought she was attracted to the shells for their beauty (Kersey, personal communication, 10/7/96). Another unknown is whether Iva began decorating her family's graves first, and then ventured out to other cemeteries after visitors saw the decorated graves; or if she just decorated graves in other cemeteries because those graves contained family members, and then others began to pay her to decorate graves. Interviews with family and congregation members who knew Iva have not shed additional light on her motives for using mussel shells or on which graves she first decorated.

Many people recall days from their childhood, after the practice gained acceptance by the community, when they would accompany a parent to the river to collect shells. Shell collecting usually took place in warm weather, as people remember wading out into the river to pick up the shells. Or they were collected from piles left behind by fishermen who had harvested the mussels for bait and the shells for pearls. Often a trip to the river for a swim involved the collection of shells. Effie Hicks, Florence Harrell, Wava Jean Meredith, Mollie Kersey, Willia Dean Highbaugh, and Ona Sanders all remember accompanying a parent, a grandparent, or an aunt to the river to collect shells.

After cleaning the shells, they could be placed on the graves. Orientation of the shells varied among the decorators, but all the shells were set convexly. Willia Dean Highbaugh said the shells should be aligned vertically, arranged similar to a pair of open hands with the thumbs connected. Mollie Kersey said her family placed the shells vertically and convexly, with the thick, round part of the shell located in the upper left hand corner if one were looking at the shell straight on. Mollie Kersey indicated that there were some tricks to keep the shells on the graves:

If they's turned flat way like this [horizontal], it holds. And if you turn them upside down like this [concave], this here [the inside of the shell], gets full of debris, and it's a mess. It's hard to clean off. But if you turn them like that [convex, vertical], you don't have as many bugs gets up in them or nothing. If you'll also, if you will put the shells on in the dark of the moon; you're gonna laugh now, in the dark of the moon, them shells will stay on this grave. But the new moon, them shells will slide worse on you. (personal communication, 10/7/96) (see Figure 3)

Others placed the shells in horizontal rows, and the arrangement of the shells close together or with spaces between them depended upon the person decorating the grave and the number of shells available. Iva Decker put one or two rows of shells down on the ground as well as on the mound, and often continued around the headstones and footstones.



Grave decorating at Hill Grove continued in this manner for at least twenty five years. Sometime in the 1940s, people apparently tired of all the work associated with keeping the graves clean and pretty. This work involved the frequent tasks of removing the shells from the graves, scraping vegetation and remounding the grave, scraping the dirt out of the shells, washing and bleaching them white, and then replacing the shells. These unknown persons decided to gather moss from the nearby woods, lay it on the mounded graves, and then, place the shells on top of the moss (Kersey, personal communication, 10/7/96). It reduced the work necessary to keep the graves looking pretty. Eventually everybody began using moss. From April to early June, people went to the woods near the cemetery or on their own property to gather moss. If it was collected early, the moss was stored in a cellar to keep it looking fresh. Because collecting involved putting one's hands under the moss to bring it up in sheets, many feared the chance of being bitten by spiders, snakes, or ticks. People preferred to get the moss early "before the snakes got to rolling, 'cause they are under that moss" (Kersey, personal communication, 10/7/96). Moss needed to be replaced every couple of years to keep the grave looking pretty.

According to some church members, moss was used on the graves for approximately thirty years. Like many practices, the use of a natural resource declined with the introduction of a commercial equivalent. Sometime in the early 1970s, someone, again unknown or forgotten, began using Astroturf on the graves in place of moss (see Figure 4). Then in 1973 Pauline Sanders used Astroturf on Charlie Sanders's grave. The idea that turf involved less work is reflected by Mollie Kersey's comment: "but it's so much easier to go to Lowes and say 'give me some turf.'" The turf is nailed down on the mounded grave to keep it from blowing off. The turf has a nap similar to corduroy: it has to be measured and placed precisely, or else it appears to be of different colors. The carpet also had to be changed every two or three years to keep it looking fresh. Today most of the mounded graves and a few of the flat graves are covered with turf, while only Estel Sander's grave is still covered with moss.

A couple of factors contribute to the Sander's continued use of moss. The grave is located on the shady, north side of the church house, where the moss is protected from the harmful effects of direct sunlight. Additionally, the Sanders family lives on a farm with abundant woodlands from which they gather moss without depleting the resource (Meredith, personal communication, 2/19/98).

Flowers are another element in grave decorations, especially for the annual event known as Decoration Day. For members of Hill Grove Church, the time spent cleaning and decorating the graves of family and friends culminates on the third Sunday in June, when the congregation gathers to pay respects to those who have passed on, and to reconnect with distant relatives. During the early part of the century, wild flowers such as goldenrod,

black-eyed Susans, and daisies were used. More common, especially from the 1920s through the 1940s, were flowers fashioned out of sheets of crepe paper. While some people made their own flowers, many commissioned Elburtia Sanders to make their flowers for Decoration Day. Because crepe paper flowers were especially susceptible to fading from the sun and disintegration due to rain, people devised several methods to extend their usefulness. Wires from old tires were incorporated into the flowers to stiffen them, and many people dipped the completed flower in melted paraffin. The materials used to make the flowers have also changed over time. During the early 1950s, plastic flowers were introduced into the cemetery. Because the new form of flower resembled the crepe paper flower, yet was longer lasting, the artificial flowers were readily incorporated into the existing grave decorating practice. Today all the flowers that decorate graves in the Hill Grove Cemetery are plastic.

Jeane refers to cults of piety as "the various functions meant to express reverence and respect toward the dead" (1989:161). At Hill Grove the central expression of the cult of piety is preparation for, and participation in Decoration Day. Decoration Day, or "the Decoration" as it is referred to locally, is not the day the graves are decorated but the day to view the decorations. The actual decorating usually occurs on the previous Saturday, when many church members come to the cemetery to clean the graves and place flowers. However, the various activities involved with grave decorating for the Decoration occur throughout the year. Shell and moss collection used to take place weeks before actual decorating began. Other decorating activities, such as buying turf and flowers, occur closer to the work days preceding Decoration Day. Family members frequently visit the cemetery, as often as two or three times a month, and usually touch up the graves of relatives and friends. Grave decorating, specifically flower placement, occurs throughout the year, with Christmas, Easter, and the deceased's birthday as the most popular occasions.

For members of Hill Grove Church the cult of piety known as Decoration Day is not a time to mourn or grieve the dead, but a day of celebration for the living. In the past, children received new clothes and shoes, and often extra money to buy ice cream. Cults of piety exist on the individual or small group level in addition to the larger community activities. For many years, a member of the community, but not of the church, was known for his social activities that did not conform to the Baptist ideal. After he passed on, despite much discussion to the contrary, he was buried at Hill Grove and his grave decorated in the appropriate community manner. His carousing buddies are said to visit his grave frequently, and share a beer and the local gossip (McKeegan, personal communication, 11/5/96). For members of Hill Grove Church, cults of piety are reflected in a variety of activities that take place throughout the year, but culminate on Decoration Day.

### **Individual and Community Decorating Aesthetics at Hill Grove Cemetery**

As previously discussed, mounded and scraped graves were always present in the Hill Grove Cemetery. The graves and the surrounding ground were carefully and consistently scraped to remove unwanted vegetation. Flowers have always been used to decorate the graves, especially for Decoration Day and other important days such as Christmas, Easter, and the deceased person's birthday. Freshwater mussel shells were added to the decorative practices early in the church's history and quickly assumed a prominent role. To eliminate some of the work in the cemetery, first moss, then carpet or turf was applied to the mounded graves. All of these elements do more than just visually highlight the grave of the deceased. These elements, singly and in combination, reflect the aesthetics of the individual or family that decorates the graves, and the congregation as a whole.

Although a community aesthetic preference exists throughout the cemetery in the form of mounded graves and the use of turf, shells, and flowers, individual aesthetic preferences are noted on different family graves. Mollie Kersey prefers that all the shells be placed vertically and in neat, straight rows. Yet she realizes that not everyone takes the same amount of care in placing the shells:

That's the trouble now. All the shells are supposed to be placed alike, but the newer generation don't realize that, and they don't know how to put them on, and they just get them back on the best way they can. And now that we're running short, some of the graves are really running short of shells, since we can't get as many as we need...and course they have to turn them any way they can to make them cover the grave, and some of them turns theirs wrong because they don't know the difference. (personal communication, 10/7/96) (see Figures 5 and 6)

Shells on some of the graves are intentionally different, not just due to a lack of knowledge of the accepted practice. The shells on one of the Brooks's graves were brought in from Barren River near Bowling Green, Kentucky, and are larger than the mussel shells available in the "forks of the rivers" region (Meredith, personal communication, 6/20/97). Because the family wanted to highlight these unique shells, they placed them a little farther apart than the indigenous shells and arranged them in horizontal rows (see Figure 7). The family of Betty Marie Hicks bought seashells in Florida for her grave. These shells are clumped in small groupings on the grave, and a row of whelk and conch shells fills the space between the headstone and the mounded grave (Hicks, personal communication, 11/5/96).

Just as the placement of the shells is important, so is the upkeep of the shells on the grave. Mollie Kersey learned how to clean shells and decorate graves from her mother Elburitia Sanders. Elburitia, affectionately known as Burt to family and friends, learned how to clean and decorate the graves from Iva Decker. Burt developed a specific way of cleaning and decorating the graves, and Mollie carries on the same practice. For Mollie, the shells must completely cover the grave, the rows must be vertical, and the shells must be in good condition. She does not tolerate any unwanted elements such as grass clippings, leaves, or sticks on the graves of her family members. This fastidiousness extends to other aspects of the graves. The day I interviewed Mollie, she spent almost an hour attempting to place her mother's footstone square and level into the mound. She was rather insistent that the graves and the graveyard was a mess, that it was just "pretty" now, during the autumn, but in June for the Decoration it would be "beautiful" (personal communication, 10/7/96). The shells must be thoroughly cleaned on a regular basis. Every two or three years the shells are removed from the grave, taken home, soaked overnight in a bleach water solution, and set out in the sun to dry. This process whitens the shells and removes the stains caused by decaying leaves and cut grass. Additionally, the shells can be bleached and cleaned at the cemetery. Prior to Decoration Day, families bring buckets of water, bleach, and old rags to clean the shells (see Figure 8).

The implicit aesthetic preferences for grave decorations, not only the elements utilized but the overall condition of the cemetery, are reflected in the care given to graves in the cemetery. Like the shells, carpet or turf must be maintained or replaced regularly. Some of the deceased no longer have family to keep the graves in good repair. This is evident for graves where the carpet has been bleached by the sun and developed holes that allow grass to grow on the mounds. General cemetery care today consists of a hired caretaker who keeps the grass surrounding the graves cut, but does not maintain the individual graves. With a congregational membership of approximately 100 people, the routine tasks of cleaning and decorating graves are the responsibility of the older men and women. For special occasions such as Decoration Day, all ages assist with the duties of cemetery care. Without a person like Charlie Sanders, for many years the unpaid, unofficial caretaker, the graveyard has witnessed a decline in its upkeep, a situation that many members of the congregation find reprehensible.

Flowers also illustrate the individual's and the community's sense of aesthetics. For the Decoration every grave, even the anonymous graves moved to the cemetery by the ACOE, will have at least one bunch of flowers. While a few individuals continue to decorate graves with shells, every family is responsible for adorning graves with flowers. For Mollie Kersey, matched colors and symmetrical placement are important in flower placement (see Figure 5). Each year she changes the color of the flowers, and all members of her family will have that color for the year. Through observation she has

learned that white flowers get dirty too fast, red and pink fade badly, and the best colors to use are shades of blue and purple. Mollie prefers bunches that stand up off the shells, which allows leaves and grass to blow off the grave. She also prefers the flowers on the graves of family members to match, to the extent that she moved one of two white bunches from her mother's grave to her father's grave to balance out the arrangement. Others are more flexible in their flower choice (see Figure 9). Some people have no real preference for a particular color and prefer to mix and match the colors and flower types. While matched colors and types of flowers and flower placement on the graves are not considered a high priority, it is important to almost all congregation members that the graves of family and friends contain flowers. The orientation of the flowers does conform to an overall community aesthetic in that most graves will have a row of flowers along the apex of the mound and, for Decoration Day, a series of small bouquets placed near the headstone. Individual preferences build on the community preferences with additional flowers in rows parallel to the center row, and single or multiple rows of flowers perpendicular to the crest of the mound, which yields a profusion of flowers that appear randomly placed, but closer inspection reveals a symmetrical pattern. Other flower placements include: along the front of the headstone, at the footstone, on each of the four corners of an individual or family grave, and even in the space between the graves of a husband and wife or other family members.

For many people, the idea that the graves look good is based on both the larger community aesthetic and their individual aesthetic. Wava Jean Meredith expresses the opinion of many in the congregation with her comment that the graves look good when there are "not too many [flowers] to look cluttered" (personal communication, 10/13/96 and 11/5/96). During a walk through the cemetery with Wava Jean, she pointed to several graves located in the back of the graveyard. The graves contained so many flowers we could not see the shells or the headstone (see Figure 10). Wava said the graves "had too many flowers. It is important to see the grave and the name on the headstone" (personal communication, 10/13/96 and 11/5/96). There appears to be no consensus on the colors, types, and placement of flowers. Each is an individual or family decision and reflects the aesthetics of that person or family. Church members can look at other graves, and determine and articulate whether or not there is the correct, or proper, numbers or colors of flowers. Yet they are often at a loss for words in describing the graves of their own family members.

As we have seen, there is a wide variety of aesthetic preferences displayed by individual members of Hill Grove Cemetery. Many people use some, if not all, of the decorative elements discussed: mounded graves, turf or carpet, shells, and flowers. People express their individual sense of aesthetics through grave decorating, yet there is an over-arching sense of

community aesthetics involved as well. Church Trustees have delineated few limitations relevant to the decoration of the cemetery. Originally only members of the congregation could be buried at Hill Grove, but now nonmembers are allowed a place in the cemetery. The Trustees do not charge for the burial space; they only request that the grave be kept up, preferably in a manner consistent with current practices. Relatives of the deceased can erect any form of grave marker, and install iron posts anchored in cement for hanging flower baskets. One of the few prohibitions is the use of large mausoleums to house, or mark the location of, the deceased. Given these few explicit guidelines, most graves conform to implicit rules of community and individual aesthetic preferences. Most grave markers throughout the cemetery are commercial models, simple in design and inscription. Many of the graves in the front section of the cemetery retain their mounded shape and are covered with green turf and shells. The majority of graves in the rear section are marked by the numbered, marble headstones supplied by the ACOE, although a few graves have the stones from their original locations in the family graveyards inundated by Nolin Lake. A casual observation of the cemetery may present a profusion of unrelated design elements, yet a closer examination reveals individual grave decorations that conform to a larger community aesthetic.

Through the years, the distinguishing characteristics of the cemetery as an aesthetic cultural landscape have been mounded graves scraped clean of any vegetation and the use of flowers for grave decoration. These elements were typical of most graveyards, both community and family, in this region of South-Central Kentucky. Beginning around 1910, most if not all of the graves in the original section of the cemetery were decorated with shells. This too became a decorating practice at family and church graveyards throughout the region. Over time, Hill Grove Cemetery became widely known for its practice of decorating with shells, while other cemeteries discontinued the practice. At Hill Grove one can see differences in the practice of the tradition within the two sections of the graveyard. The traditional elements of the folk cemetery—mounded scraped graves, the use of flowers and shells as grave decorations, and the aesthetics that dictate the placement of these elements—are not uniformly present throughout the cemetery. This disparity in grave decoration occurred in part due to federal reactions to environmental events.

### **The ACOE Cemetery Reinterment Program and its Effects at Hill Grove Cemetery**

In 1962 actions initiated by the Army Corps of Engineers would soon affect the lives of those who lived in the Nolin River Valley. The great floods on the Ohio River in the early 1930s had resulted in the passage of the Federal Flood Control Act of 1937. This act mandated the creation of dams throughout

the Ohio River drainage areas. The dam across Nolin River was constructed during the late 1950s, with the final pool reached in 1962 (Purcell, personal communication, 11/5/96). Many farms, homes, and graveyards were located in the areas slated for inundation. When residents protested the disinterment of the bodies in the graveyards, the ACOE sought, and was granted, court orders in U.S. District Courts, in Bowling Green and Owensboro, Kentucky, to proceed with property condemnation and the disinterment and reinterment of graves (Colburn 1962). According to Wava Jean Meredith, many residents of the "forks" were against the construction of the dam and lake, but went along with the ACOE's plan because it meant progress (personal communication, 2/19/98). People wanted the benefits of better roads and a bridge over Nolin River that would reduce travel times to nearby communities such as Brownsville and Bowling Green, but they felt their relatives should not be disturbed by disinterment and reinterment. The Corps moved over 350 graves from 16 family graveyards to three cemeteries. One of these cemeteries was Hill Grove.

The Corps purchased from C. W. Sanders 1.29 acres of land adjacent to the west side of the original Hill Grove Cemetery, and moved 113 graves from eight different graveyards to the Hill Grove extension. Included in the eight graveyards were the Davis Cemetery, locally known as the Criswell Cemetery, the final resting place of many of the early members of the old Long Fall Baptist Church, and the Decker and Ward Cemeteries. In addition, the Corps moved any existing headstones and footstones associated with the graves, provided numbered marble headstones and blank footstones for those graves that lacked stones, erected chain link fencing around the entire cemetery, and attempted to landscape the addition in conformity with the original cemetery.

As would be expected, these activities altered the landscape of the Hill Grove Cemetery. Physically the extension went from a gently sloping hill bordered with trees on the north and south, to a level space devoid of natural vegetation. The graveyard doubled in size, and the newly reinterred graves were aligned in perfectly straight rows in six sections. The graves were initially mounded as part of the reinterment process, but the mounds were not maintained by church members. E. L. Colburn, reinterment project contractor, sowed the cemetery extension with bluegrass seed, which contrasted with the older section's scraped graves and bare ground. Because many of the moved graves were unmarked, members of Hill Grove did not care for these graves the way they did for the graves of known family members in the older section of the cemetery. The grave mounds were allowed to flatten out, and no scraping took place. None of the moved graves were decorated with shells. However, members of the church did, and still do, make sure that each of the moved graves has at least a single bouquet of flowers for Decoration Day.

Walking through the cemetery today, one immediately notices the differences between the two sections. The front section contains more graves, most of which are mounded and decorated with turf, shells, and flowers. These graves are aligned toward the east, and arranged in family groups. This section is shaded by stately oak and hickory trees. In contrast, the rear section contains mostly reinterred graves, although more recent burials are now present. Most of the graves are flat, grass-covered, and marked with a numbered headstone. Few of these headstones are adorned with flowers. The reinterred graves do face east, but are arranged in perfect rows running north and south. Except for the grass, none of the prescribed landscape vegetation remains in the new section of the cemetery. It is interesting to note that the moved graves do not reflect individual or community decorating aesthetics, yet the newer graves in this section are mounded, covered with turf, and decorated with shells and flowers (see Figure 11).

The damming of the Nolin River by the ACOE not only changed the physical layout of the Hill Grove Cemetery, it also resulted in the destruction of mussel habitat. Due to the depth of the lake and the differences between summer and winter pools, there is no viable freshwater mussel population in Nolin Lake (Rold, personal communication, 11/18/96). Additionally, collecting mussels is illegal, except for those engaged in licensed, commercial mussel harvesting. These actions have directly impacted grave decorating at Hill Grove Cemetery. As a result of these factors, grave decorators at Hill Grove no longer have a supply of shells to use on the graves. Some decorators like Elburtia Sanders and Iva Decker had large stockpiles of shells. The lack of shells to decorate graves has resulted in a variety of techniques used to conform to the community aesthetics. Shells are only lightly cleaned on site and rarely soaked in bleach. As good quality shells become scarce, fewer are used on the graves. When a family decides to flatten their relatives' mounds, the shells are offered to other relatives or friends for use on graves in their care. The specifics of decorating have changed to reflect the current availability of materials, but the practice of grave decoration remains true to the community's traditional aesthetic.

The tradition and aesthetics of grave decorating as a reflection of a cultural aesthetic landscape are not confined to the graveyard at the Hill Grove Church. Members of the church recalled the many times they were involved in decoration related activities, such as gathering shells from the river and moss from the woods, and assisting adults in the cleaning and decorating of graves. The ritual of decoration was as much a part of their lives as visiting neighbors and attending church services. Aesthetic preferences for grave decorating elements were often transferred beyond the boundaries of the cemetery into the secular lives of church members. The following two examples illustrate this idea.



Wava Jean Meredith and her brother Ottis were raised by their grandparents on a farm along Long Fall Creek. When Wava was about four or six years old, her mother gave Wava and Ottis each a beagle puppy. Some time after receiving the pets, Wava's dog Rusty was poisoned and died. Wava, her brother, and her aunt took the dog's body, wrapped it up in a blanket, placed it in a box, and carried it down to the end of their field, where they proceeded to give the dog a funeral. Wava said they always had funerals for any of the pets that died. At the funeral, Ottis did the preaching, Wava's aunt did the singing, and Wava did the crying. After the funeral, Wava cleared the dog's grave, mounded it, made crepe paper flowers, put moss and shells on it, and added a headstone. Every year around Decoration Day, Wava went to the dog's grave and cleaned and decorated it, just as everyone did their human relatives in the Hill Grove Cemetery.

Several years later a contractor for the ACOE surveying the graves to be moved, asked Wava's grandfather Claude Sanders about a baby's grave. Claude responded, "What baby grave?" The contractor said there was a baby's grave located by the fence down in the field, and wanted to know if it should be moved. Claude replied that it was not a baby's grave but the grave of a pet dog. Because the ACOE was responsible for moving only human graves, they did not move Rusty's grave. When asked how she felt about losing her pet's grave, Wava replied that enough time had passed that she was not upset, as the pet and the grave had served their purpose (personal communication, 10/13/96 and 11/5/96).

Willia Dean Highbaugh was looking for an easier way to clean the shells. She was tired of hauling water to the graveyard to wash and bleach the shells, and she did not want to bring them home to clean. Rather, she decided to spray paint the shells, that way they would stay white longer, and she would not have to bleach them so often. Willia Dean took the shells off the graves and brought them to her house where she spread them out on top of the cement cover of a well, and proceeded to spray paint them white. When the shells were dry, she picked them up and realized the paint had created an outline of the shells on the well cover. To this day, when she sees the ghosts of the shells, Willia Dean is reminded not only of the time she wanted to save herself some work, but of the grave decorating tradition started by her aunt Iva Decker (personal communication, 10/9/96).

These events illustrate the idea that the artistic landscapes of grave decorations are not confined within the boundaries of the cemetery. The traditions and practices are instilled in members of the community at an early age and fulfill important roles within the community. Wava buried her dog according to the practices of her Baptist faith, and decorated the grave

in the same way that her relatives' graves were decorated in Hill Grove Cemetery. Willia Dean, from her attempt to make the chore of cleaning the shells easier, now has a visible reminder of not only the practice of decorating the graves, but of the relative who started the tradition.

In addition to examining Hill Grove Cemetery as a culturally defined aesthetic landscape, we can view groupings of graves as *assemblage*, a genre of sculpture created through the use of found objects that combines "a variety of symbolic elements within a single frame, and the creation of a single aesthetic entity by grouping together disparate things" (Santino 1992:159). An *assemblage* is meant to be viewed holistically, rather than emphasizing the individual elements. At Hill Grove Cemetery, these elements are natural or found objects, such as freshwater mussel shells and moss, or commercially available materials like the bouquets of artificial flowers and AstroTurf. These elements are arranged to create aesthetically pleasing grave decorations (see Figure 12). While the shells on the graves garner the most attention, they are only part of the grave decoration. Members of the church might argue that other elements are more important—the scraped and mounded graves and the use of flowers, for example. When viewing the cemetery for the first time, one is struck by the beauty and rarity of the shells, but the other elements capture one's attention as well. The shells are just a single element utilized in a larger grave decorating practice.

### The Future of Grave Decorating?

Given all the changes to grave decorating, what is the future of the tradition as it is practiced at Hill Grove Cemetery? All these changes occurred gradually over time, were often the result of a single person's intentional act, and were incorporated into the existing decorating traditions. The practices have not remained static, and continue to change today. Areas between the graves, once kept scraped and free of vegetation, are now covered with grass. Early in the graveyard's history, mussel shells became a prominent element for decorating graves. Flowers have always been part of Hill Grove's decorating tradition, whether they are natural, constructed of crepe paper, or plastic bouquets purchased at the local florist. The inundation of Nolin River resulted in the end of a viable mussel population from which to gather shells for decorating purposes. Several members of the church who were prominent in cleaning the shells and decorating have passed on, most recently Elburta Sanders. Today as church members who were raised with the tradition of cleaning and decorating with shells grow older, they realize they can no longer do all the work necessary to keep the cemetery looking "pretty." The younger generation, while growing up with the tradition of shell decorated graves, has not participated in the events associated with the shells: gathering

them from the river, scraping and boiling the shells to achieve the desired whiteness, and cleaning the shells frequently to keep them white. Many of the church's older members are overwhelmed by the amount of time necessary to keep the graves decorated. Ona Sanders said grave decorating was "one of the biggest bunches of nonsense" (personal communication, 10/9/96). Others have already flattened the graves of relatives. Effie Hicks was planning to go to the cemetery in November, 1996 to "throw away the shells, flatten the graves, and sow them with grass" (personal communication, 11/5/96). Yet certain elements remain. The graveyard, although now grass-covered, is kept clean and neat. Flowers are ever present, in all colors and varieties, and placed in culturally defined arrangements. Family and friends often come to the cemetery to clean and decorate graves and "visit" with the deceased.

However, the use of shells has created an interesting dilemma for church and family members. What started out as a method to earn money and beautify the cemetery, has become a labor-intensive activity that challenges the physical, emotional, and monetary resources of the church's congregation. When the graves were only mounded and scraped, they were fairly easy to maintain. Adding shells to the graves made them more difficult to clean. Moss was placed on top of the mounds and underneath the shells. But the moss had to be replaced frequently as it died in the sun. Turf replaced moss, but it too had to be changed as it disintegrated. The shells themselves required an enormous amount of work to prepare them for use. They needed to be harvested, boiled in lye, and scraped to remove the outer skin. In order to keep the shells looking good, they needed to be bleached every two to three years. The lye bath, bleaching, and exposure to the elements eventually disintegrated the shells, and they had to be replaced every ten years. As tradition bearers pass on, and the younger generation has less time for activities like cemetery cleaning and decorating, it has become increasingly easier to throw away the shells and the turf, flatten the mounds, sow the graves with grass seed, and hire a caretaker to mow the cemetery.

Will the practice of decorating graves with shells continue, or will the tradition change again in response to the desire of the church members who want a cemetery that looks nice but without time consuming work? Wava Jean Meredith predicts that within five to ten years, all the graves will be flat, all the shells gone. Even if church members could find a way to get the shells, she believes most people think the decorating is too much work and are not willing to put in the necessary time. On a somewhat more optimistic note, Terry Highbaugh says "the tradition will continue out of respect for the elders" (personal communication, 10/9/96). What will continue are the elements of the tradition that have always been important: the use of flowers to honor the deceased, and a day set aside during the summer to gather as a community to worship, pay respects to relatives who have passed on, and renew and strengthen familial bonds.

### Conclusion

Folk cemeteries offer valuable information about the communities where they are located and the individuals who participate in their care and decoration. At Hill Grove Missionary Baptist Church and Cemetery, congregation members express devotion and respect to both deceased and living friends and family through the practice of grave decorating. A myriad of decorating elements are utilized in a complex cult of piety that is both ordinary and unique. Mounded and scraped graves are common throughout the Upland South region, and the use of shells as a decorating element is noted in historical and contemporary cultures. In the "forks of the rivers" region of South-Central Kentucky, shells were utilized in at least a half a dozen cemeteries. For a number of reasons, the use of this specific element ceased at all but the Hill Grove Cemetery, but the use of other elements remains. While visitors unfamiliar with the tradition and practice of shell decorated graves gaze in awe at the cemetery, community members wrestle with the dilemma of how to keep the cemetery "pretty" in spite of diminishing natural and financial resources. Aesthetic preferences of individuals and the larger community exist at the cemetery with or without utilizing shells as a decorating element. In fact, most community members argue that the use of flowers as a decorating element better reflects community and individual aesthetics, especially since the use of flowers is inextricably tied to the cult of piety represented by Decoration Day. Outsiders view the cemetery and only see white mussel shells as a unique decorating element—a static form of folk art. Hill Grove Church members experience the cemetery as an aesthetic cultural landscape, one which incorporates various decorating elements into the most important aspects of life—honoring the deceased and celebrating community.

### Acknowledgments

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Many thanks to those persons named and unnamed who helped me tell the story of the community tradition of grave decoration at Hill Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Edmonson County, Kentucky.

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Figure 1. Hill Grove Missionary Baptist Church and Graveyard. Edmonson County, Kentucky 1996.

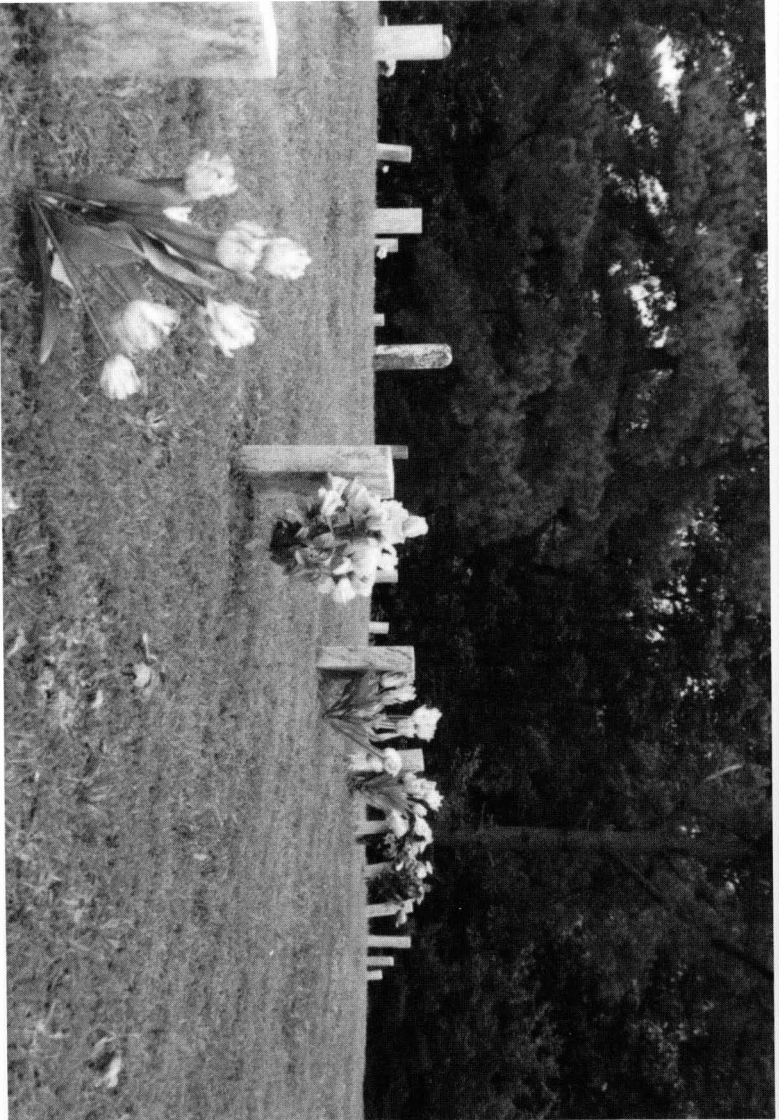


Figure 2. The western extension to the original cemetery contains graves reinterred by the ACOE.



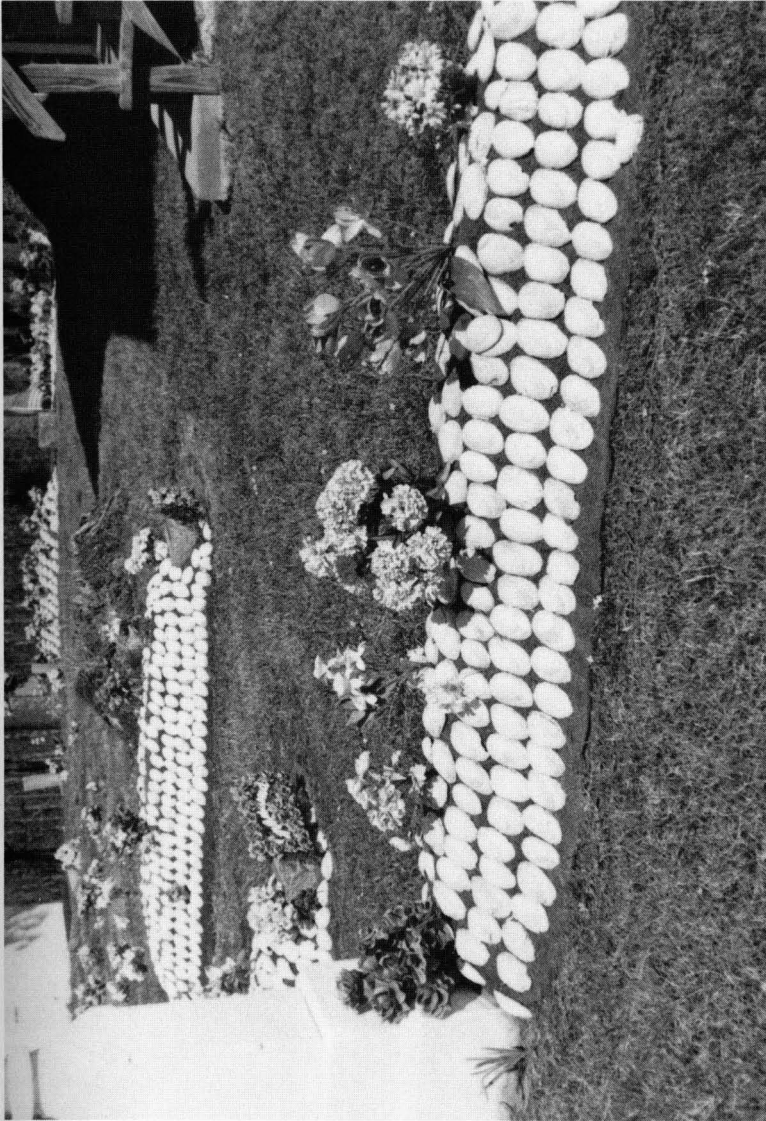


Figure 3. An example of the most common shell placement on graves.

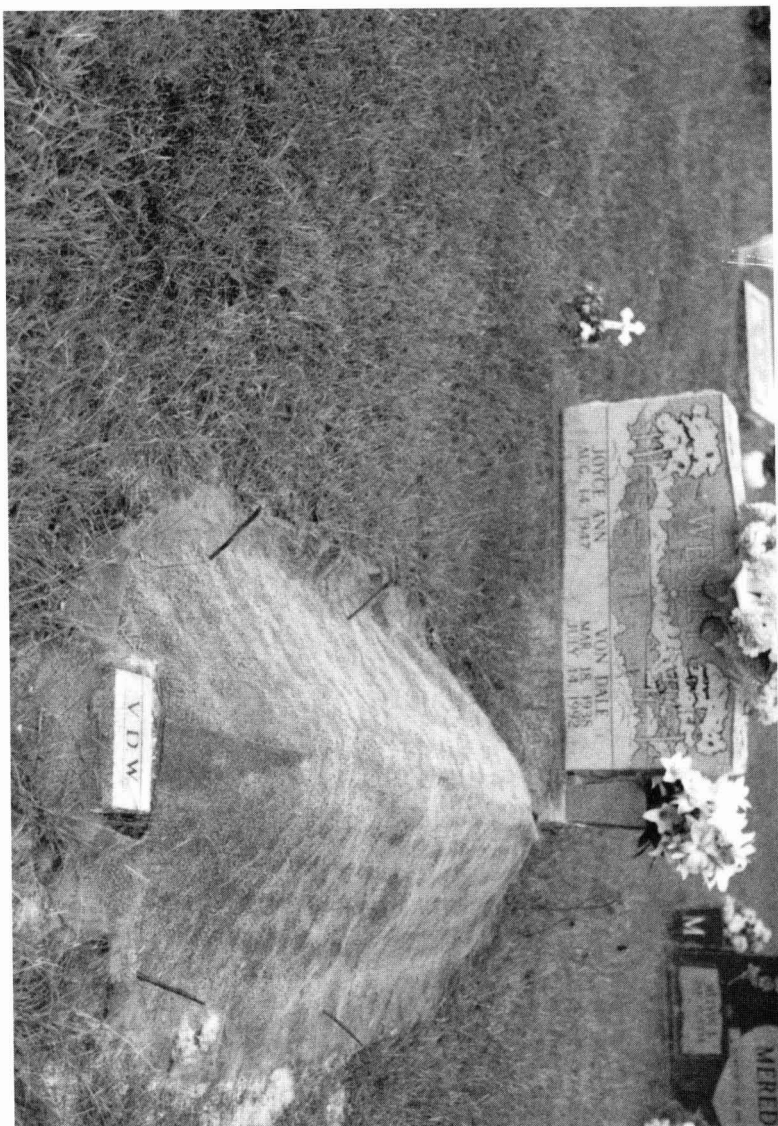


Figure 4. Astro turf covering a mounded grave. Note the rows of shell "ghosts" on the carpet. In early 1997, the turf on this grave was removed, the mound flattened, and the burial site sewn with grass seed.



Figure 5. The Sanders family graves. Note the carefully arranged, vertical alignment of the shells.

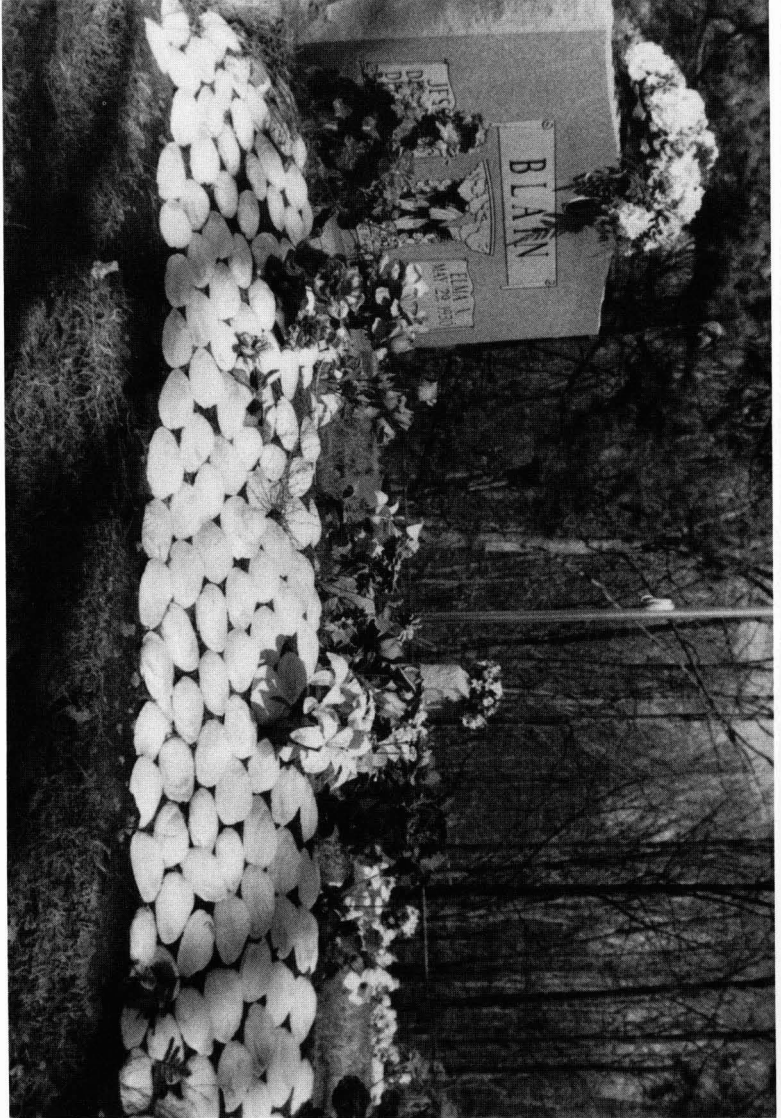


Figure 6. Shells on the Blain family graves are placed in haphazard, horizontal rows that illustrate both individual and community aesthetics.



Figure 7. The Brooks family grave. Many of these shells are at least eight inches in diameter.

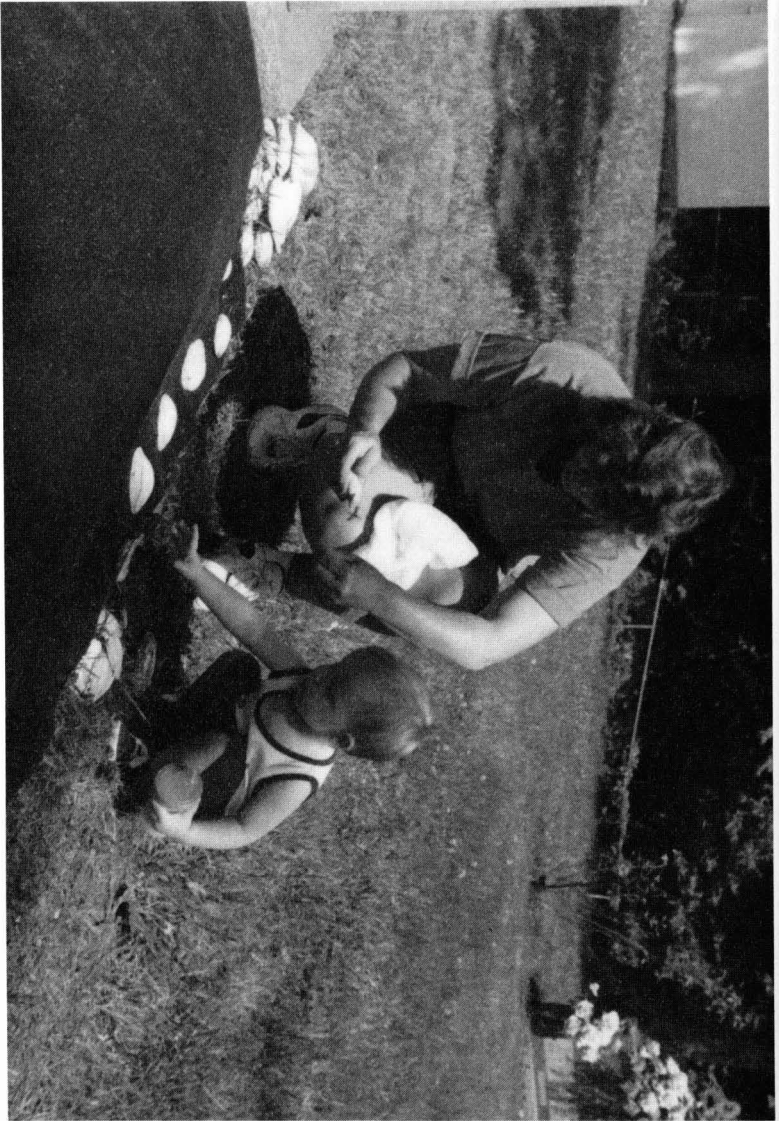


Figure 8. Members of the Hicks family spot-clean shells prior to their placement on new turf for Decoration Day 1997.



Figure 9. These graves, with their single row of flowers, are typical of many of the graves in the cemetery.



Figure 10. A grave with a profusion of flowers. Closer inspection reveals symmetry that reflects both individual and community aesthetics.



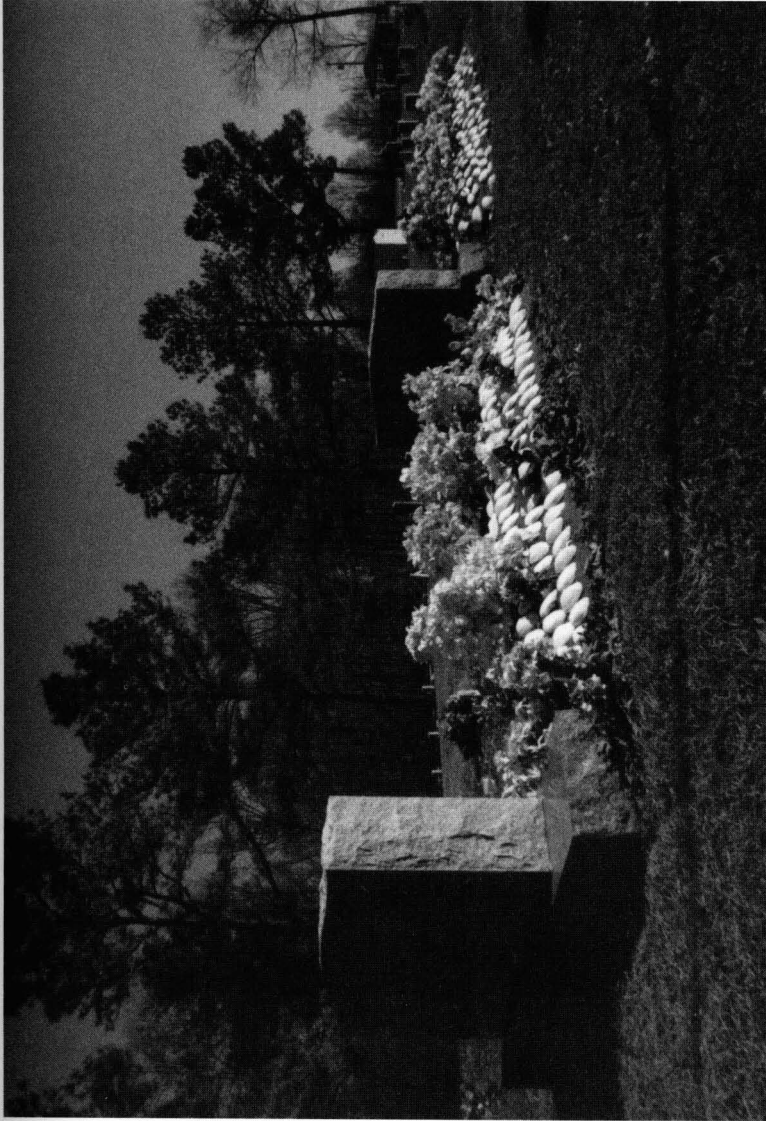


Figure 11. These graves, containing relatives of current church members, are located at the far end of the cemetery addition. Note the absence of any decorative elements on the graves containing persons unknown to the congregation.

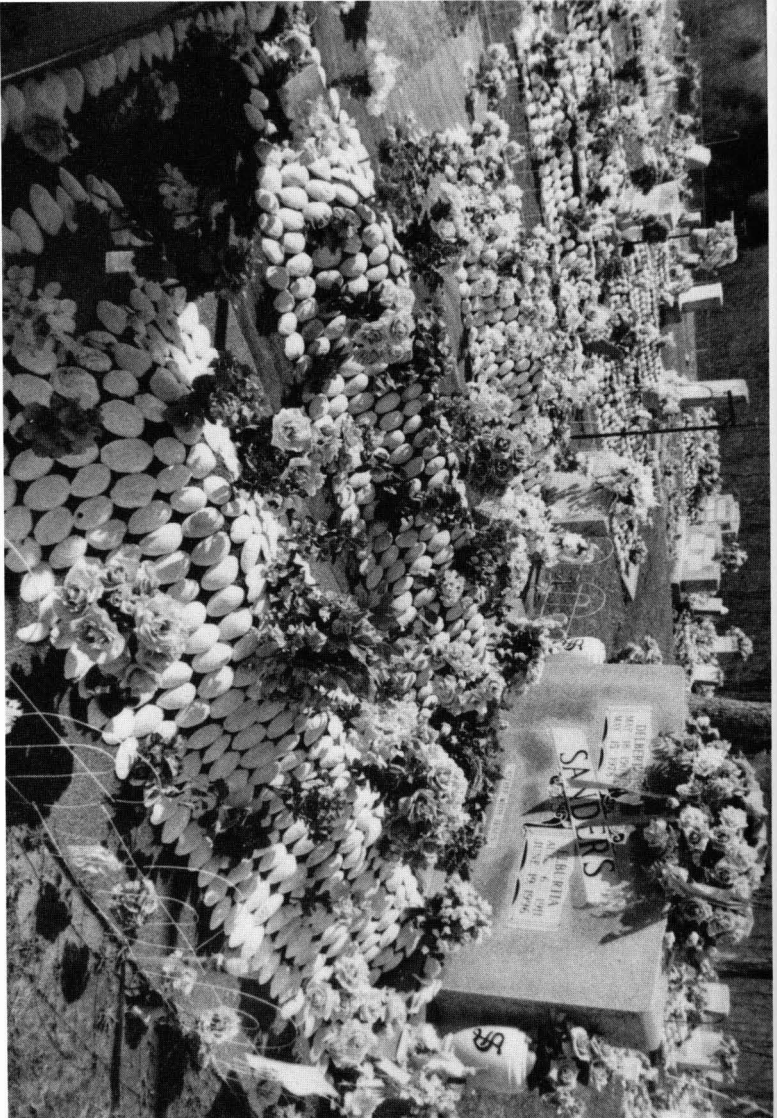


Figure 12. The Sanders family graves as *assemblage*. Individual elements such as shells, turf, flowers, shepherd's crook plant holders, and small figurines attached to the headstones are framed by the white, wire fence that surrounds the graves. The graves are meant to be viewed holistically, without emphasis on the individual elements.