

# Volunteers photograph Ohio tombstones for easy online research

**Licking County man is on a mission to document each tombstone in a local cemetery for easy online research**

By [Lori Kurtzman](#)

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PATASKALA, Ohio — He likes it out here because it's quiet, serene, just him and 6,000 tombstones and a curious breeze that never sways the trees.

He passes through the cemetery methodically, pausing at each stone. This one reads "ANDER-SON. Boyd and Ruth."

Boyd died in 1974, Ruth might still be alive. The dash after her birth date hangs there like a paused thought. He brushes grass off the marker and pulls out his digital camera.

Click. He heads to the next grave. Click. Ron Cruikshank, 62, of Pataskala, has a thing for the past.

To him, our ancestors aren't just dead things; they're human beings with rich stories and real emotions, people who fought in wars and fell in love and watched the world change in ways they couldn't have imagined.

Cruikshank has traced his roots to the 1300s, a task that saw him digging through old court records and visiting cemeteries to sketch a family tree 3,100 people wide. He's hoping to make it easier for others to find their roots.

"My whole purpose is to help people not have to go through what I went through," Cruikshank said, lifting his bucket of cleaning supplies and heading to the next tombstone in the Pataskala Cemetery.

Last year, he became one of a group of volunteers transcribing the state's cemeteries as part of the USGenWeb Project, a free online collection of genealogical information.

Robert Sizelove, the project manager for the so-named Ohio Tombstone Photo Project, said workers are trying to collect information from thousands of cemeteries before it's too late. "A lot of the tombstones are just literally melting away, and there's going to be a point in time when they're not readable," Sizelove said.

Volunteers have photographed their way through cemeteries in all 88 Ohio counties. Sizelove himself has documented dozens of them.

Tombstones, he said, give information one can't always find at courthouses: Birth and marriage certificates don't always exist, and records of children who were born and died between census counts might be found only in a cemetery.

Grave sites also can tell a different story from a piece of paper. Plots with rows of tiny headstones speak to plagues that devastated young families. Granite carvings show that a dead man was a war veteran, or that he loved music, or that his family wasn't ready to say goodbye.

"We're just fascinated with life stories and what happens to people," Size-love said. "There's just so much behind the birth date and the death date, that little dash in between that they don't even talk about. It's your whole life."

In Pataskala, Cruikshank continues his work, stooping to snap another stone: "FRAVEL." The name reminds him of the puppet show Fraggles, which reminds him of his two boys, which makes him think of his four grandchildren.

Out here, the mind can wander.

Click.

This is Cruikshank's second cemetery. The first one, in Kirkersville, took him four months to document. This graveyard is one-third larger, and he'll finish it in a few weeks. He knows what he's doing now. He's addicted.

Married for nearly 40 years and retired from the airline-catering industry, he doesn't go out carousing or drinking, he said. His escape is the cemetery and the stories that surround him — and that breeze across his neck.

It's not the wind, he said. It can't be. It doesn't so much as flutter a leaf. Cruikshank thinks that whatever it is — and yes, he does believe in spirits — might be curious about the man photographing the tombstones of strangers.

So he answers it, sometimes aloud.

"I'm taking pictures," he says, "so people will remember you."

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