

Grave Responsibility

Andy "Digger" Hager makes his living six feet under **BY LISA MB SIMONS**

JUST WEST OF JANESVILLE at the Smith's Mill Cemetery, Andy "Digger" Hager is scooping out a hole for a funeral the next day, sweat beading on his face despite the cool spring air. He has a load of black dirt in his pickup truck and music from classic rock station KXLP cranked on the radio. His cell phone, resting on a veteran's marker, is the most high-tech implement around.

Hager digs by hand, eschewing the backhoe used by most modern-day gravediggers. It's not some kind of spiritual closeness he's after, getting his hands dirty with death. He likes the exercise, and frankly, he'd rather not bother dragging out heavy equipment. He uses two shovels—a tiling spade and a flat-bottom (crumbing) shovel—and nothing else but elbow grease to clear the soft earth, sand, roots, and rocks (unless it's winter, when a jackhammer and an air compressor come in handy). Hager works 46 cemeteries in southern Minnesota. To create an eternal resting place takes him all of two hours.

Grave digging comes naturally to Hager, whose father—who was also known as Digger—not only dug graves but cared for several cemeteries. Hager's grandfather also dug graves (but not for a living) in an era when entire communities pitched in at funerals. Though Hager wanted to become a mortician in high school, he took on the grave digging trade when his father died in 1990.

"I look at death as a whole different deal than anybody else," says Hager. "People don't understand. There is a grieving process, but you can't drag it on for years. Be done with it. Have some good memories, and go on from there."

Humor punctuates the conversation as Hager sits, his feet dangling inside the hole, not yet a shovel-handle deep, his tools resting beside his yellow work gloves. When he broke his leg a few years back, Hager told the doctor, "I cover up all your mistakes." When asked how business is, he replies, "Dead."

The benefits of a gravedigger's job, other than working in the great outdoors, seem limited. It's not about health care (self-insured), dental coverage (nope), a 401K plan (shakes his head), vacation and sick time (he's worked every holiday and once dug a grave while vomiting), or a consistent schedule. There are a few perks, though: job security (even families who cremate often bury the ashes), no time clock, watching the sun rise while birds sing, free Twins tickets from appreciative funeral directors, a bottle of brandy tucked in a freshly dug grave.

Hager seems most proud of the few thank-you notes he's received, including one he keeps in his truck: a floral card from a widow who thanked him for digging her husband's grave on a bitterly cold day. He reads it again, smiles, then continues hollowing the earth in a perfect rectangle, providing death its place. **MM**

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