

# A family journey honours forgotten lives

by Cathy Anthony

For generations, it seems, everyone in my family has at some time or another been given a nickname. And so it was for Arthur Thomas Davis, known by those who were close to him as "Becky." Born in 1878, Becky hailed from Newbury, Berkshire, England and was the oldest of Agnes and John Davis' nine children. He was my maternal grandfather's older brother by 11 years.

My search to know this distant relative began about a year and a half ago. In October 1998 I attended the B.C. Self Advocacy Foundation's art exhibition called "From the Inside/OUT!" which presented the powerful memories of 28 individuals who had lived in institutions in B.C. Many of them had lived in Woodlands in New Westminster. This was of great interest to me, as I grew up in the same community and have my own memories of this institution. Of even greater significance to me was knowing the loss I might have experienced if my son Josh had been born in

an earlier generation, when institutional living was the path for so many.

On a warm summer evening, my mom, Josh and I were sitting outside. I was telling her of the art exhibit, of the stories people had woven of their experiences in institutions, and of the discovery of a graveyard on the grounds of Woodlands. My mom's urgent question, "Was there a Davis buried there?" took me by complete surprise. I didn't know, but I promised to find out.

We began to put together what little information we knew of Becky. We knew that Becky had "uncontrolled seizures" and that at some point my grandfather, who was caring for his older brother, found it necessary to admit Becky to Woodlands. I began a search, and within days – as if his spirit was calling to me to be rediscovered and remembered – I found him.

Among the records of Woodlands is an archive list of all those laid to rest in this forgotten graveyard. There I found the name of Arthur Thomas Davis. His date of death was recorded as August

15, 1934, and he was buried in Block 18, Plot 25. I had found him, and now I wanted to know him.

That night my mom, my stepdad and I went to Woodlands to find our Becky. It is hard to describe in words the feelings and emotions of that pilgrimage. At first we struggled to find the graveyard, for it was unmarked. We had a site map showing the burial plots identified by numbers. As we surveyed the map and searched the grounds, realization dawned. The field we were wandering on was the very place we were hunting for. We stood on the resting place of over 3000 individuals.

An image unfolded in my mind – an image of Flanders Field, but with a staggering difference. This field was without crosses, or name plates, or other significant markers by which we usually recognize the life and resting place of a loved one. The only evidence that this land was not a playing field or park was a small plaque, rather out of main view, and a small number of flat grave markers scattered in remote locations on the property. (A more visible sign has since been erected to indicate that the site is the Woodlands Cemetery.)

We were somewhat prepared for this, as I'd learned that most of the gravestones had been removed – some used for bizarre purposes such as building walkways or retaining walls or barbecue patios. What I wasn't prepared for was the barrenness of this site and the emotions that it evoked.

How different this graveyard was from others in our communities! Secretly hidden away, it sadly and ironically reflected the reality of most of these people's lives – separated, removed and unknown to the broader community. I was struck by the injustice of it.

We found Becky's place of rest, or at least its general location, beside one of the few remaining markers on the site. We stood in reflection, in prayer and in connection to Becky, a part of our history as well as our present. I wanted Becky to know that he was still remembered, that he had mattered. I wanted him to know that I had deep regard for his life journey, for he, like so many others, had



Cathy Anthony discovers the grave stone of her great uncle Becky.



**Douglas College students Paul Thornton, Roberta Ellison, and Judi Spratt join Cathy Anthony to record Woodlands grave markers.**

been a pilgrim who had helped shape the new philosophy of today. I wanted him to know that he had made a difference, for me and my son. I wanted him, and all the others buried there, to know that there are those who care and want to ensure that society does not turn its back on others again. I wanted all who had lived and died in institutional settings to know they had left a legacy of learning that had led to new ways, to community living.

I came to discover that others also care about that lost and unmarked Woodlands field. The B.C. Association for Community Living initiated a project with the Ministry for Children and Families to work with the B.C. Building Corporation to design a memorial that honours all of the 3,000 souls resting there and the history they were part of.

In the last several months, I have continued to be "beckoned" by Becky, and to learn more about his life. After requesting records under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act, I learned that he lived to the age of 55 and then relinquished life – cause of death being recorded as "exhaustion from epilepsy." In reading about the history of Woodlands, I have pieced together a sketchy image of what his life might have been like in his era, in an institution.

A few months ago, I joined a handful of volunteers from Douglas College and BCACL in a small project to inventory some 400 or so remaining grave markers that had been kept in storage in a rundown shed at the back of the

Woodlands grounds. As we worked on what initially seemed like a daunting task, the experience became a very personal one. With gentle care, each stone was lifted, cleaned off, and sorted according to its condition, and the name and date of death was recorded. Each stone represented a person whose life held a story and was part of history. As we gently spoke each name out loud, this ramshackle shed became a space that housed a presence – the presence of these forgotten spirits.

I began to wonder if, by some miracle, we might come across Becky's stone. The chances seemed slim – only about 400 of the original stones were saved. And of those 400, many were in poor condition – either broken or, if they had been used as bricks, made unreadable by coverings of mortar. Yet with a hopeful heart, I asked the group to stay alert for that one stone.

By mid-afternoon we were about halfway through the storehouse of stones when one of our team gasped. As she brought a stone over, the lettering A.T. Davis leapt out at me. With pounding heart, I held the stone and began to weep. The group stood by in respectful silence as I left the present world, lost in "conversation" with my great uncle. I knew in my heart that I was meant to find him, to carry his legacy forward.

His stone, now 66 years old, was in perfect condition. I carried it outside to the light and sat on the grass, brushing it clean. The group circled around and knew that an extraordinary experience

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had just touched us all. We each felt the impact of this opportunity to remember and honour the individuals whose names we had recorded that day.

That night I raced to my Mom's house to tell her that I had found Becky. We both cried. We had reclaimed a part of our history, our ancestry, and our family.

As I continue to learn more about this distant relative, I await the day when his name, and all the others, are honoured with respect at their memorial site. The legacy of the people represented by those 400 stones, and the 2,600 or more that are now lost or destroyed, will move forward. When they reclaim their rightful place as individual citizens whose lives mattered, that will be the time when we can say we have come to the closure of the history of Woodlands institution.