

TENNESSEE COMB GRAVE TRADITION SURVIVES INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

by Richard C. Finch

But just barely. Myrtle Webb Judd, who passed away on Aug. 11, 2001 now rests in peace below a metal comb grave erected, at her request, by her brother. Until lately, this 2001 vintage comb was the most recent comb grave known, and the only one known from the twenty-first century. However, as of April 2012 there is another, erected for Kathleen Rodgers who had long been charmed by old fashioned cemeteries, especially those with comb graves.

Comb graves are burials that feature a type of grave cover that resembles a pup tent [Plate 1], or, in architectural terms, the comb of a roof. Cantrell (1981) describes them as “triangular and prismatic in shape, most often made by leaning two rectangular sandstone slabs together to form a gable roof over the grave.” (See also: Ball, 1999, White, 2002.)



Plate 1: Comb graves at Old Union Cemetery, southern White Co., Tenn. Note some have no head or footstones, some have only headstones, and some have both headstone and footstone.

In Tennessee, comb grave burials are known from approximately 360 cemeteries from the Tennessee-Kentucky state line south to near Winchester, forming a north-south trending belt that parallels the western escarpment of the Cumberland Plateau. Some combs are found in cemeteries on the western part of the Plateau, but the majority of cemeteries with combs are found on that portion of the Eastern Highland Rim that lies at the foot of the Plateau (Finch, 1982, 2004).

Most combs consist of two rectangular slabs of sandstone (quarried from the stratigraphic unit known to geologists as the Hartselle Formation) leaned together and commonly supported by triangular pieces of sandstone at the gable ends, though other means of supporting the comb may be employed. Where thin, smooth slabs of sandstone are not available, other materials may be used: slabs of limestone or other rock types, sheet metal over a wooden frame, or, rarely, cement or concrete. The combs covering Myrtle Webb Judd and her husband Joe Judd (deceased Feb. 28, 1983) are of metal: 5-Vee metal roofing over a wooden framework. [Plate 2]



Plate 2: Judd combs made of 5-Vee metal roofing over wooden frames at Bear Creek Church Cemetery, northern Putnam Co.

The oldest known combs were erected around 1820. A comb dated 1817 has been noted in White Co. (but is suspected to have been erected at a later date), and an 1822 comb exists in Overton Co. (Finch, 1982, 2004). The heyday of the comb grave custom was from the 1850s to the 1930s. In some parts of the comb region the practice continued fairly strongly on into the 1950s, but by the end of the 1960s comb graves were rarely being erected. Until the erection of the Rodgers comb, the most recently erected stone combs were two dated 1967 and 1969 in Stockton Cemetery, a few miles east of Jamestown, TN. No combs dated in the 1970s or 1990s have been recorded during this study, so the 1983 and 2001 metal comb graves for Joe Judd and his wife Myrtle are quite anomalous [Plate 3], and the 2012 Rodgers stone comb even more so.



Plate 3: Judd headstone showing comb grave dates of 1983 and 2001.

The Judd combs are found in Bear Creek Church Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN. A search in the local newspaper morgue yielded an obituary for Myrtle Webb Judd, which revealed that she had been survived by two sisters and a brother, Clio Webb. Good luck prevailed in that Mr. Webb still lives in the nearby community of Windle; it was he who erected the comb for Myrtle, and he readily agreed to be interviewed.

Clio (pronounced in his family with a long "i") was the youngest of seven Webb children. At 78 years old he continues to work his farm and had just come in from baling hay immediately prior to being interviewed. As a younger man, he worked in several furniture factories, where he likely acquired skills that served him well when it came to erecting comb graves.

Clio confirmed that he built both the 1983 and the 2001 combs. The first he built for Joe Judd, with Joe's widow Myrtle and Clio's wife Estellean helping. Estellean also assisted in the construction of the 2001 comb for Myrtle. Both combs were built at Clio's house and then taken to the Bear Creek Church graveyard to be set on the graves. Clio had never built a comb before 1983, nor had he witnessed anyone build one. However, with his experience from working in furniture factories one may believe that the carpentry involved was not difficult for him.

Asked to describe the process of building a comb, Clio stated that he cut and fitted 2 X 4s to construct three inverted Vee-shaped supports (steep rafters), one for each end of the comb, plus one in the middle. He then connected these supports using four 2 X 4s of an appropriate length, one at the bottom of the supports and one at the top, on each side. Then, using standard roofing nails with rubber washers, he nailed one piece of 5-Vee metal roofing on each side, being careful to lap one sheet over the other at the top, to keep out rain. A triangular piece of plywood was fitted at each end to close the combs. [Visible in Plate 2]

When asked if he had ever considered erecting the more traditional combs made of stone slabs, Clio replied in the negative, because Myrtle had requested metal. Joe Judd's parents are buried nearby and metal combs covered their graves until removed in recent years. Possibly Joe had asked

for a comb grave similar to those covering his parents, but this is not known. In any case, Myrtle requested a metal comb for her husband, and she later asked that one be erected for herself. Her brother Clio faithfully carried out her wishes. [Plate 4]



Plate 4: Mr. Clio Webb at the two metal combs he erected for his sister and brother-in-law.

Not only did Clio build the combs his sister requested, but he maintains them. When storm winds damaged Joe's comb, Clio re-attached the metal, this time using modern roofing screws which tend to hold tight longer than roofing nails.

Asked if he knew if there was any special purpose for comb graves, Clio replied that Myrtle wanted one for Joe "to keep his grave dry". This is one of the two answers that old-timers give to the question of "why" combs, the other being "to protect the grave from animals".

Mr. Clio Webb, then, is the last person known to have erected not one, but two comb graves in his lifetime, and to have done it not as anything out of the ordinary, but simply to fulfill the wishes of his sister. Myrtle requested the combs because she was concerned about protecting the graves from the elements and, we may infer, because it was a long-standing tradition in this part of Tennessee, a custom familiar to her.

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The 2012 comb erected for Kathleen Rodgers by her husband Jim Vance is a special comb in several ways. In addition to being the most recent comb, one of only two twenty-first century combs, it is the only stone comb from this century. Furthermore, it is special in that it not only memorializes the departed, but in fact honors the comb grave tradition itself. Kathleen was a lover of pastoral beauty, including peaceful country churches and graveyards. While on drives along backwoods Tennessee roads she would often ask Jim to stop so she could stroll through old cemeteries. She was especially captivated by graveyards featuring comb graves.

Kathleen Rodgers was buried at the home she loved on Spring Creek in Jackson County in February 2012. Her comb [Plate 5] was erected a few weeks later, when a memorial service was held for Kathleen on April 14th, her 54th birthday. The stones, which are sandstone slabs, were supplied by Rocky Ridge Stone Co. of Crossville, TN. They were quarried from the Hartselle Formation from the Walker quarry located just off SR 84 north of Monterey [Plate 6], then taken to Rocky Ridge's main stoneyard in Crossville for finishing.* The side slabs measure six feet long by three feet wide and 2.5 – 3 inches thick, and weigh approximately 600 lbs each. The stone sawyers cut the end stones as squares, three feet by three feet, rather than triangular. This was done, apparently, to provide more stability: each end stone was buried half way into the ground with one corner point down.



Plate 5: Kathleen Rodgers comb, erected April 2012 as a tribute from her husband Jim Vance.

*The cost of the complete comb set from Rocky Ridge Stone Co. was \$486. In contrast, the 2013 cost of a pink granite headstone similar to that placed at the Judd graves is in the \$2600 - \$4000 price range, according to a salesman at Vaughn's Monument Works in Cookeville. It may thus be said that erecting a comb grave not only preserves a time-honored Tennessee tradition but is also a relative bargain.



Plate 6: Walker quarry in sandstone of the Hartselle Formation near Hwy 84 between Monterrey and Livingston, Overton Co.

Kathleen's comb was erected by Tony and Linda Scharko of Fairburn, GA, friends of Kathleen who have cemetery work experience, though this was their first comb grave. For ease of movement and also for reasons of safety, the stones were moved into place using a tractor-mounted hydraulic lift. The end stones were set first; then the side slabs were moved into place. One side slab was left propped open [Plate 7] until the end of the memorial gathering of friends. Before the comb was closed, friends who wished to do so were invited to leave a token of remembrance inside the comb. An earring, flowers, selected stones, writings and poetry were among the personal memorial items left inside Kathleen's comb. After the grave gifts were in place, crow bars were used to remove the wooden props, adjust the alignment of the side slabs and the comb was closed. The author of this article was privileged to participate in the closing of the comb.



Plate 7: Kathleen's comb at her memorial service, before closing. Image courtesy of Eliseo Rios.

At the time of the erection of Kathleen's comb the stones were just as they came from the quarry. Jim plans to have them inscribed in the future, probably on the gable end stones.

And so the Tennessee comb grave tradition has survived into the 21st century, spanning a time range of at least 190 years. We have reason to believe that Kathleen's 2012 comb will not be the last.

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