

The Man Who Spends His Time Among Death Records

Swaranya Sarkar, News Editor

The first time I met Don Hilton, the wind was dragging October across the grass, and we were scrubbing lichen from the face of a gravestone.

“There’s a Phenomenon that people talk about who spend time in cemeteries,” he told me this Sunday. “It happens everywhere. Say you go into a physical library looking for a book. You’re not exactly sure what you need, but as you walk through the stacks, a book catches your eye, and that’s the one. The same thing happens in cemeteries. I’ve gone into huge cemeteries, 50,000 graves, not knowing where I’m going, just looking for one grave. I park, walk a little way, look down, and there it is.”

Westwood Cemetery, across the street from his house, is not as massive as the others he describes. The graves there know him intimately. The Phenomenon knows him too, but we will talk about that later.

About six years ago, Hilton took a class in gravestone cleaning and preservation at the Brownhelm Historical Association. As a writer, he was interested in working on a book about gravestones. Since then, through volunteering with Friends of Westwood Cemetery, he has spent years coaxing names back into legibility. Hilton claims his reasons for doing this work are not the usual fascinations with the town’s storied past.

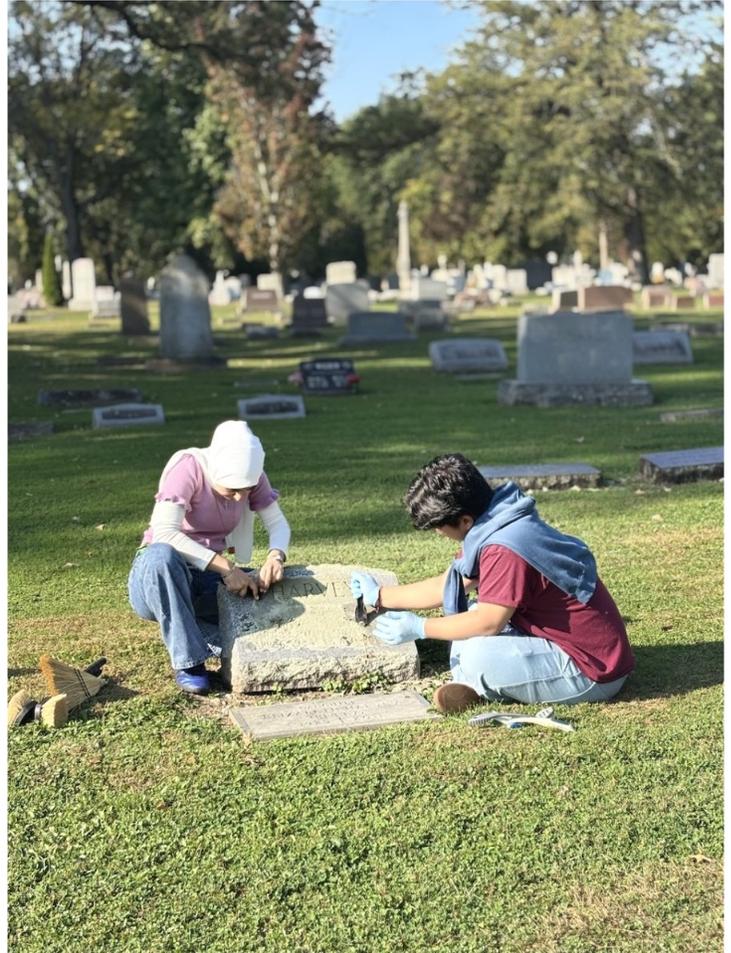
“Quite honestly,” he confided, “and this is a terrible thing to say, I’m not really interested in the history of Oberlin at all.”

In a town where the air still hums with memories of fiery abolitionists, and the ghosts of revivalists and radicals seem to linger along sidewalks, this is nearly scandalous.

A geologist by training, Hilton chooses to focus on other particulars.

“I’m interested in how the stones evolve over time, how the materials change, and in keeping them in as good shape as possible.”

If Hilton resists broad narratives, he is enthralled by small absences, even outside of stains on stones. In 2012, he published *Murders, Mysteries and History of Crawford County, Pennsylvania 1800–1956*, delving into forgotten local crimes and hoping to remind people, according to the book’s webpage, that “the past was never a gentle place to live.”



Swaranya Sarkar

Having firmly established a fascination with death records, he went on to chronicle killings in Lorain County, looking at records from 1824–1956, and published another book in 2018, tracing violence through court transcripts and coroner reports.

In Ohio and other states carved from the Northwest Territory, ceded from the English after the Treaty of Paris of 1783, the County initially kept death records. Hilton says the early records weren't properly maintained.

"The state wasn't interested in who lived and who died until about 1855," he said.

While the first set of records, kept from 1855–1865, have vanished, the next set from about 1865–1908 are kept at the probate offices, he explained. Records used to be collected by tax assessors knocking on doors who orally passed on information to the probate courts that compiled them. Oberlin maintained its own records during the late 1800s through the Board of Health. According to Hilton, there are years where 60 percent of deaths are not contained in official Oberlin records.

"I started running into these gaps when I first began looking for people who I knew had died, but I couldn't find a record," he said.

During the pandemic, Hilton set to work on uncovering as much of these records as possible. In 2022, *Early Death Records of Lorain County: A Companion Guide* was published. Last year, he revisited his fascination with taxmen, releasing his second book in the same series, *Early Death Records of Lorain County: Oberlin v. the Tax Assessors*.

Hilton claims he is allergic to boredom. Based on his work experience, I believe him. Apart from the jobs that I have mentioned thus far, his website lists the following others: boat pilot, lab technician, post-graduate research fellow, statistician, teacher, stand-up comedian, computer support analyst, and martial arts instructor.

It was a connection to the last one, martial arts, that resulted in Hilton's book on judges. A few years ago, Lorain County Common Pleas General Division Judge Mark Betleski, now retired, asked Hilton if he would be interested in writing conversational biographies of judges. Hilton agreed, later publishing the biographies along with additional essays in a 2021 book, *Dearly Departed Judges of Lorain County, Ohio, 1824-2020*. Yet it all began with a contact reaching out to him because Hilton had taught their kids taekwondo.

Even apart from taekwondo and the books he has written, Hilton's own life reads like a stack of mismatched, well-thumbed volumes.

His undergraduate degree is a double major in Geology and Philosophy, and he went on to earn a master's in the former. He studied American Sign Language and was offered a doctoral position but declined.

"I was tired of being poor," he said. "I'd eaten enough ramen and couldn't imagine another few years of it, so I left."

During this period, he worked as a research associate at Oak Ridge National Labs and freeclimbed rock faces as a young geologist.

"In a lot of parallel universes, I'm dead," he told me. "Tell your readers not to do dumb things."

When oil prices collapsed in the 1980s and geologists were laid off by the thousands, he pivoted into technology, seeking stability. At Oberlin College's computing center, he stood at the doors of the digital age.

"I was at Oberlin College when they put up their first web pages," he said. "I learned HTML when it was still in beta. I was there when we got our first email system."

Students did not yet own laptops. Many didn't own computers at all. In the basement of Mary Church Terrell Main Library, they lined up for machines. He recalls a student who would sign up for the same Macintosh again and again, sleeping in the lab between shifts to guard his "lucky computer." Most students wanted Macs; Windows machines stood lonely and available.

Today, Hilton's LinkedIn profile informs the world that he is no longer engaged in professional or corporate work. Instead the first "experience" he lists is "Window Looker-Outer."

He also writes murder mysteries, though, with characteristic contrariness, he doesn't particularly like reading them. What he likes are personal stories. Disinterested in the grand sweep of Franklin Roosevelt or Magellan, Hilton says he wants to know what Magellan ate on the ship.

Surrounded by the varied narratives of his life, I was hunting for connections. In this moment, I recalled *The Phenomenon*, which Hilton wrote a thriller about.

“In the book — it’s fiction, of course — there’s something in the cemetery that knows where everything is,” Hilton said. “If you pay attention, it leads you where you need to go.”

I imagine history has been leading Don Hilton.

Westwood Cemetery, like many others, holds thousands of small, unfinished stories. And across the street, in a house with two watchful cats and shelves of books, a man who claims not to care much for history keeps rescuing it, one name at a time.