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Stew Thornley walks through Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis on Tuesday. He bought a plot for himself and his wife and used it as the background for his photo as author of "Six Feet Under: A Graveyard Guide to Minnesota." **Below:** Their grave marker, sans year of death for each.

Grave digger

Baseball Hall-of-Famers. Presidents. Gangsters. Stew Thornley has visited them all. Well, their final resting places, anyway.

By Alex Friedrich
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Every so often, Minnesota Department of Health spokesman and author Stew Thornley goes to Minneapolis' Lakewood Cemetery and visits a grave.

His own. Sounds kinda creepy. But Thornley thinks it's a hoot.

He's a "graveyard hunter" who doesn't dwell on the afterlife. He's a published sports historian who sees his own death as just another notch in history. And he's a jokester who has photographed himself and his wife next to their burial plot — and sent the pictures out as holiday cards.

"Sometimes I'm in the area and say, 'Hey, I might stop by and go see the graves,'" he said. "We got (the plot) now, so we could enjoy it now."

Thornley, a 52-year-old Roseville

resident, has nurtured a preoccupation with "grave hunting" or "grave surfing" since 1997, when he and a friend visited the graves of President Benjamin Harrison and gangster John Dillinger in Indianapolis.

Since then, he has photographed hundreds of graves, including those of every buried U.S. president, vice president, Minnesota governor and practically all of the 200-plus Baseball Hall-of-Famers.

He's also visited the sites of a slew of Civil War generals, movie stars and other celebrities — even victims of Charles Manson.

It's no idle hobby, though. Thornley is the author of a guide to the graves of Minnesota notables, and is considering a coffee-table book on the resting places of well-known baseball players.



> Famous graves

The published guide — “Six Feet Under: A Graveyard Guide to Minnesota” — was the impetus for Thornley’s own cemetery plot. He said he needed an author’s photo for the book, so he got a plot for himself and his wife, Brenda Himrich, at Lakewood and used it as the picture’s background.

It cost him about \$7,000 for a spot large enough to hold their ash urns, and includes markers with their names and years of birth.

“We have money,” he said, “but we don’t have kids to spend it on, so we spent it on graves.”

And those holiday cards. Those who know the couple “thought it was funny,” he said, though his sister-in-law was “a little creeped out.”

Take note that this is a guy who, when his mother asked him to help scatter the ashes of his late father years ago, invited along a woman he had just started dating.

(That was Brenda, who obviously didn’t run away screaming.)

So why does he hunt graveyards?

It’s about history. It’s a reason to travel. It’s a way to make lists and collect things, but without all the bric-a-brac that comes with it.

But Thornley isn’t one to navel-gaze.

When visiting the grave of a celebrity, he said, “I’ve never really felt I’m connecting with greatness. It doesn’t stir any emotions. It’s just empty remains.”

He views his own plot with no great reflection, either. He just admires gravestones the way one admires architecture, and he talks about good graveyards the way one describes fine parks.

But those who know Thornley say it might come down to connecting with the dead — especially baseball players — and respecting their accomplishments.

The friend who made the Indianapolis trek with him, Paul Rittenhouse, 52, of Richfield, said, “Maybe for Stew, it’s like, ‘I never got to see the guy play, but at least I got to see his grave.’”

With any luck, his plot will lie empty for decades. The couple may visit it on occasion, show it off to friends and, they’ve joked, even have a little “party” there someday.

As his wife, Brenda, said, “It’s the only lakeside land we’ll ever have.”

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GRAVE HUNTER FAVES

> **Number of graves he’s visited:** 1,000+

> **Number of entries he’s submitted to findagrave.com:** 326

> **Favorite graveyards:** Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis, Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, Congressional Cemetery in Washington, and Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, where Jim Morrison is buried. “It’s the Yankee Stadium of cemeteries,” Thornley says.

> **Most memorable graves:** Babe Ruth’s in Hawthorne, N.Y., for its sheer size and elaborate headstone, and the number of offerings people have left there — baseball cards, notes, bats, teddy bears. Hall of Fame shortstop Joseph “Arky” Vaughan’s in Eagleville, Calif., which is “out in the middle of nowhere.”

> **What he looks for in a grave:** Unusual designs, inscriptions and offerings.

> **Why his own grave is so plain:** “I didn’t feel like spending \$20,000. I’ll be dead. I don’t care what my grave looks like.”

> **Favorite inscriptions:** “I told you I was sick,” found in a Key West mausoleum.

> **Offerings he’s left behind:** A note he left at Ruth’s grave somehow made it into the Babe Ruth Birthplace Museum in Baltimore. He also left a fuchsia bra and panties at the grave of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, an alleged cross-dresser.

> **Stew Thornley has another death-related hobby:** a fantasy death league, in which players draft a list of 100 people they think might die in the current year — and get points if they do die. (Murder or suicide earns bonus points. But Thornley stresses that players who murder people on their list lose five points. “It’s considered poor form.”)

> **What bugs him:** When cemetery directors don’t know — and don’t care — that they have a Hall of Famer on the grounds.

> **For more information:** stewthornley.net