This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Fri Oct 30 21:20:55 2026 / +0000 GMT

Mono cemetery to finally mark graves of previously forgotten 19th-century couple

Written By JOSHUA DRAKES

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

A long-forgotten chapter of local history is being illuminated as one man's deep dive into his family's past reveals two ancestors buried for more than a century without markers.

Most people don't regularly think about their ancestors, be it who they were, what they did, and how their lives were lived ? but Michael Grimes is tracing his family line back for generations to make sure they are properly remembered.

It all started from a casual comment from his mother that set Grimes on a journey through family history, one that is now culminating in long-overdue recognition for two forgotten ancestors.

?It really kind of got started with my mom,? he said. ?She said to me one day, ?Did you know that my great grandmother died in the Orangeville jail?' And I started thinking more and more about it from there.?

Surprised by the revelation, he began digging into genealogical records alongside his mother, who had long been interested in ancestry research. What began as curiosity quickly became a passion project as Grimes took on the work of piecing together the story.

?After my mom told me about it, we started to piece stuff together from there,? he said. ?Originally my mom was doing it, she's been working with ancestry forever. She's almost 90 now, so over time I took it over more and more, because she was worried at first that there would be no one to continue the work.?

Through historical documents, newspaper clippings and archival research, Grimes uncovered the story of his great-great-grandmother, Mary Ann (Gibson) Smith, who died in 1899 after spending her final year in jail as a described vagrant ? likely suffering from dementia at a time when mental health was poorly understood.

?She likely had mental health issues or a form of dementia,? Grimes said. ?It was back in the 1800s, so mental health wasn't understood, and they didn't have mental institutions. They just put people like that in jails with criminals. She was actually the last female inmate of the jail.?

Her husband, Robert Smith, had died earlier.

Both were buried in unmarked graves at Mitchell Cemetery, a historic site in Mono Township.

With no formal burial records marking their exact locations, Grimes relied on painstaking research. By tracing family members interred nearby ? including their daughters and relatives ? he concluded the couple was buried near an existing family monument. The cluster of graves, though unmarked, pointed to a shared resting place.

Determined to correct the historical oversight, Grimes approached municipal officials for permission to install a headstone.

?My mom always said that she wanted to put something out there, a stone to properly mark the graves,? Grimes said. ?We got in touch with Ralph Manktelow, a Mono councillor. He put us in contact with the clerk, and they granted permission for a flat stone. Mitchell Cemetery has been under perpetual care since 1962, so basically it's closed and historic, so we had to get permission to place a stone there.?

Along the way, the project has grown beyond a single goal of honouring a forgotten grave. Grimes has connected with a wide network of relatives ? some previously unknown ? spread across Ontario and beyond.

Many have contributed financially to the headstone and joined in the research effort, helping uncover generations of family history tied to the Hockley Valley area.

?Along the way while we were doing our research, we found a lot of second cousins, third cousins, a number of them we became really close to,? Grimes said. ?Everybody's really spread out. People are in Vancouver and Sudbury and all over the place.?

?It's fantastic, the stuff that I've learned along the way. It's been a great experience,? he added.

The journey has also revealed stories of early settlement, hardship and resilience, from immigration roots to connections with historic events and local landmarks. For Grimes, preserving that history has become just as important as marking the graves themselves.

A dedication ceremony is now planned for May 31 at Mitchell Cemetery in Mono. Grimes hopes to gather as many descendants as possible, along with community members who helped bring the project to life.

The ceremony will formally recognize Robert and Mary Ann Smith, ensuring their names ? and their story ? are no longer lost to time.