

Cemetery gravedigger performs task the old-fashioned way

Daniel Andrews spent his 20s and 30s working with his hands. He was a boxer. Now, Daniel Andrews spends his 60s working with his hands. He is a gravedigger.

Andrews, 68, is one of the last of a dying breed; he digs graves by hand. No machines. No bulldozers. With just a shovel and pick – and sometimes an ax – Andrews scoops out the earth in the shape of a rectangle, to prepare a final resting place for the dead.

Out of the hundreds of graves he has dug, Andrews has opened the ground for the caskets of nieces, nephews, friends and even his oldest sister.

For more than 20 years, Andrews' line of work has been grave digging. He's one of a dwindling number who still do it the old-fashioned way. But digging graves isn't the only work Andrews has performed with his hands.

Andrews was born and raised in Sumter County. He grew up on a farm, one of 12 children. He remembers working in the fields, working with his hands, learning at an early age their value and what could be done with them. His father died when Andrews was young, and he dropped out of school in the ninth grade to better support his large family.

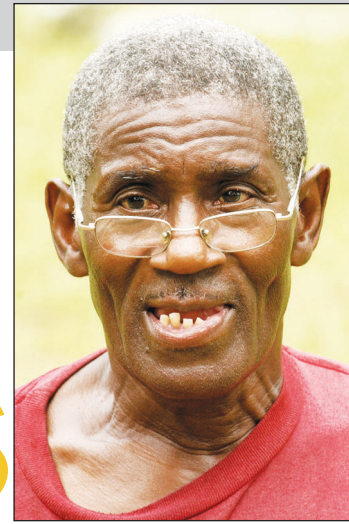
He didn't have the education he'd hoped to receive, but he said he learned the value of hard work. That life lesson would take him far.

As a young man, Andrews left his small-town life and traded it for one in Washington, D.C., and then in New York City. He found work most often as a custodial worker. His hands could do the work. His hands never let him down.

And when he wasn't working as a custodian, Andrews was boxing. Andrews fell in love with the sport of boxing, and he used his trusty hands to find success. After six years as an amateur, Andrews sufficiently proved his skills and was able to turn professional. That was in 1962.

After three years of professional boxing, often finding himself in the ring of the esteemed Golden Gloves competition, he called it a day.

The value of TWO GOOD HANDS



Andrews digs each grave to a depth of nearly four feet and can complete a grave in an hour-and-a-half. Andrews has dug as many as three graves in a single afternoon.



"I came out unhurt," Andrews said. "I was a very good fighter."

After living for a while in Ohio and then again in New York, he decided in 1979 it was time to come back home. Throughout the 1980s, Andrews started spending time vis-

iting friends, friends who ran funeral homes. Eventually, one of those friends asked him if he needed work. He needed someone to dig graves.

"And he asked me about trying that," Andrews said. His ninth-grade education didn't deter him from being

able to watch, learn and, he as puts it, memorize the craft of digging a grave.

"I've been doing it ever since."

For more than 20 years, Andrews has been on call for most of the predominantly black funeral homes in the area.

He digs his graves at Bradford Cemetery, tucked away near Pilgrim's Pride off U.S. 521.

Andrews said he's the only one he knows of in this area who does his brand of manual work. He doesn't like the idea of using a machine to help him.

"I like to stay in shape," he said. The digging, the scooping, the plunging of a shovel into the soil does just that. At 68, Andrews is lean in frame and small in stature.

Andrews rubs his arm: "This is the only machine I need."

He said his work is praised by funeral homes and grieving family members alike; his work is clean, neat, precise. He digs with his hands to honor the dead.

He thinks machines can't rival what he can do manually. He thinks machines can't do the job that he can. He makes sure to be respectful and to leave the grave site pristine and free of debris.

"I just believe in cleanliness," he said. "I want it to look decent."

Andrews has no plans of discontinuing his work anytime soon. He enjoys the hard work – "because I was raised up working hard."

Though his job is one that makes him face directly the grim reality of death, and often the death of loved ones, he said he's been glad to be the one to craft their final home.

"I feel like they'll be happy for me to do it," he said.

Andrews makes a living off a retirement check and the \$150 to \$210 per grave that he digs. Some weeks he digs no graves. Some weeks he digs two or three.

It takes him two to two-and-a-half hours to dig a grave, typically about four feet deep.

Last week, Andrews dug the grave for 23-year-old William A. McKenzie, who died from a gunshot wound he received July 18. McKenzie's family surely appreciated Andrews' work, the work that he did with only his hands.

— MARY DOLAN

