

By Rich Chere

Standing in the First Reformed Church Cemetery on a spring morning in late March, Walter Kever had a good idea of what to expect. Using Ground Penetrating Radar, the 55-year-old excavator was searching for unmarked graves.

Nevertheless, Kever was not fully prepared when the GPR discovered 34 graves holding the remains of infants buried within the historic Cemetery back in the 1930s, and perhaps much earlier.

“We found more than 30 graves in the children’s area, sort of an unmarked potter’s field,” Kever explained. “They were all lined up. It was very sobering. It’s very sad if you think about it. But it was very satisfying to find them.”

Forrest Harper, the FRC Cemetery Manager who accompanied Kever on the project, had always been aware that infant graves likely were present in the area behind the Sanctuary. He was always careful to avoid disturbing the area, even though it was unmarked.

“I was told as a young man by Charlie Van Ness, who used to be the sexton of our church, that he remembered there being a section in that area where they would literally just dig holes and bury babies. There were no services. Bizarre by today’s thinking,” Harper reflected.

“That’s why I never wanted to do anything in that area until we found the graves. I didn’t want to dig in that area. It’s somebody’s grave. When they came up with the idea of using radar to locate graves it was incredible.”

Kever offered to help.

Along with engineer Robert Oestreich, he runs Applied Service Corp. in Lafayette, an environmental company founded in 1988 that does remediation and structural support which includes locating buried oil tanks and pipes. Much of the work involves taking out tanks and cleaning up contaminated soil.

A year ago the company invested in GPR, a \$30,000 apparatus the size of a walk-behind lawn mower with four wheels and a handlebar.

The lawn mower-like device is pushed across the area being surveyed and displays below-ground images. In this case it showed a line

of objects each 18-20 inches long and 12-18 inches wide buried head to toe from the road behind the Sanctuary in a straight line towards the Boulevard.

“What you see (on the screen) is an arc. The GPR will start sending signals on an angle in a forward direction and as you go over the area the signals become more straight down. As you move away from it, they’ll be on an angle behind you,” Keever said.

“Some arcs are very pronounced, like an underground tank. Some are very slight. You tap the screen on the center of the location and it will put a dot of that GPR location. The GPR will tell you there is an object there. It won’t tell you it’s a tank or a coffin. It takes a little training to identify it. It helps us to know what you are looking for.”

The remains are only about three feet deep.

Research is required in an effort to determine whether some of those children buried may have been victims of a health epidemic or whether families simply could not afford the cost of a service, burial or markers.

There are two existing markers, including one at the beginning of the row for a child who lived 1930-1932. The Cemetery Commission plans to install a stone marker designating the area.

“To mark that section would be a neat way to at least memorialize them,” Harper said. “They’re forgotten really.”

No longer.

“Number one is to respect the remains. That was a human being,” Keever stressed. “A lot of them have been buried for a long time. Possibly 150 years or even longer. To locate them gives you a good feeling so they won’t be disturbed.

“I was really a little nervous about doing it. I wanted to make sure I did it right. I didn’t want to make any mistakes.”

In addition to the infant burial area, Keever used the GPR to solve another mystery. Harper wasn’t sure which side of a headstone one of his own relatives was buried. GPR gave him the answer.

And they were able to locate a family in the oldest section of the Cemetery.

“There was a family buried in one area. The graves were from the 1700s,” Keever said. “I looked at Forrest and said, ‘They could never have conceived we were using radar to locate their remains more than 200 years later. They’d be amazed.’”