

TRAVEL

Indianapolis: President, poet draw cemetery visitors

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A group tours Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, Indiana.



Monte Stevenson rides his bike down the hill.

INDIANAPOLIS, Indiana (AP) -- Seven women stand reverently in front of the grave marker of Albertina Allen Forrest. The women do not know her -- she died in 1904 -- but they are learning a bit about her as part of an art and architecture tour at Crown Hill Cemetery.

Tour guide Tom Davis reads a passage from an Alfred Lloyd Tennyson poem that has faded from the face of Forrest's sprawling monument. The statue of a weeping female -- a "perpetual mourner," Davis said -- kneels at the grave of the woman who died in her early 30s.

Forrest is one of more than 190,000 people buried in the cemetery. Among them are Depression-era bank robber John Dillinger, and President Benjamin Harrison, whose grave is one of the top tourist destinations in the cemetery.

The mix of historic figures and lush grounds draws 2,000 to 3,000 people a year to Crown Hill's public tours, generally offered twice monthly from March through November, said Marty Davis, public relations coordinator for the cemetery and the tour guide's wife. Thousands others, like Monte Stevenson, come on their own.

"I've been here many times," Stevenson said, standing along his bicycle on the cemetery's crown -- an 842-foot-high hill. "I like coming here to ride, especially the hill."

The cemetery was founded in 1863 at the site of a former tree farm and nursery. Its first burial was in 1864.

Today, Crown Hill is home to more than 100 species of trees. About 25 miles of road and 4,000 trees lie within Crown Hill, which, at 555 acres, is one of the largest cemeteries in the country.

The grounds feature a Gothic Chapel built in the late 1800s and a burial plot including the remains of more than 1,600 Confederate soldiers who died in Indianapolis as prisoners of war. Their names are inscribed on 10 bronze plaques that make up a monument to those fallen.

"Everyone has the right to have their name over their grave," said Indianapolis Police Sgt. Steve Staletovich, who led a three-year project to get the prisoners' names added to the markers.

Mike Dooley, the cemetery's vice president of operations, started working at Crown Hill 30 years ago as assistant grounds supervisor. Since then, he's learned a lot about the people buried there.

The leprechaun in a tomb's stained-glass window represents the family's company logo. The tombstones shaped like tree trunks with broken branches symbolize a life cut short.

"There's 190,000 people buried out here," Dooley said. "Every one of them has a story -- we just don't know them all."

But some of the stories are well-known.

There's Dillinger, the Indianapolis-born bank robber who was killed in a shootout with FBI agents in 1934.

Author and playwright Booth Tarkington, who won two Pulitzers before his death in 1946, is buried here, as is Col. Eli Lilly, who founded the Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical company named for him and died in 1898. Other graves of note include automobile maker Frederick Duesenberg, James Baskett, an actor best known for his role of Uncle Remus in Disney's "Song of the South," and Civil War general Jefferson C. Davis.

Atop the cemetery's crown is the Greek revival-style grave marker of James Whitcomb Riley, the Indiana-born poet who created the characters Old Aunt Mary, The Raggedy Man and Little Orphant Annie. (The famous comic strip with the more conventional spelling of "Orphan" appeared in 1924, nearly 40 years after the Riley poem was published, but the 20th-century Annie had little in common with Riley's original character, a feisty country girl who kept house for the family that took her in.)



The James Whitcomb Riley Monument sits atop "The Crown" at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.

Marianne Randjelovic, vice president of development for the Crown Hill Heritage Foundation, said visitors to Riley's grave sometimes leave behind special items on October 7, the poet's birthday. He died in 1916.

"There are still schools in the area who will bring the children out on a field trip and they will put a wreath up on the Riley monument with their names all attached to the wreath," she said.

Many visitors come to Crown Hill just to see the grave of Harrison, the nation's 23rd president, who died in 1901.

"The president (Harrison) is a draw because there are people who spend years visiting every presidential burial site," Dooley said.

Harrison's understated grave, shaded by trees at the foot of the cemetery's hill, is surrounded by a tidily manicured hedge, about a foot high.

Nancy Ahrbecker, one of the seven women who took the art and architecture tour, said she wanted to stop on the way out to buy Crown Hill's small history book.

"We're gonna have to come back," Ahrbecker said. "At least I'm gonna have to come back."

IF YOU GO ...

Crown Hill Cemetery: 700 W. 38th St., Indianapolis; <http://www.crownhill.org> or (317) 925-8231. Open October through March, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; April through September, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Tour information: (317) 920-2644. Public tours are generally offered twice monthly on weekends, from March through November. Tours range from about 90 minutes to 2 hours. Tickets are \$3-\$5. The cemetery charges a minimum of \$50 for private group tours. People arriving for tours should enter through the gate at 34th Street and Boulevard Place.

Upcoming events:

Crown Hill's Authors & Fall Colors tour, Oct. 16 at 2 p.m., visits the graves of the cemetery's authors during peak fall foliage season.

Veteran's Day Ceremony and tour, Nov. 11 at 2:30 p.m., which begins at the cemetery's Field of Valor.

Skeletons in the Closet tour, Nov. 13 at 2 p.m., visiting the graves of some of Crown Hill's more mysterious residents.

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