



A VERY SPECIAL PARK

# Heritage

The Newsletter of Green Lawn Cemetery  
Winter 2023-2024

## Cuba to Florida: Remembering the Swim of Walter Poenisch

- Matthew Wolf

*Editor's Note: We would like to thank Faye Poenisch for graciously granting us an interview and contributing her photographs to this article. Faye, who still resides in the suburban Columbus home that Walter built, was not only his loving wife, but Walter's coach, cheerleader, protector, and soulmate through his incredible journey.*

He was once called the world's strongest endurance swimmer after he towed a 30-ton paddleboat up the Scioto River while swimming with his hands and feet shackled. He also set several world records and made international headlines in an epic swim from Cuba to Key West.

His name was Walter Poenisch, and he was a baker and rodeo competitor from Columbus, Ohio. According to his wife, Faye Poenisch, Walter began distance swimming following a good-natured dare by a patron in a New York State restaurant in 1962. Soon thereafter Walter qualified for the Jim Moran Lake Michigan Swim – an elite 30-mile race from Chicago to Benton Harbor, Michigan. Only 18 people in the world qualified and it was Walter's very first competition!

Walter clearly had an incredible talent that would allow him to accomplish an incredible dream.

Walter accomplished that dream when he became the first person to complete the swim from Cuba to Florida on July 13, 1978, at the age of 65. The swim covered 128-miles and took just over 34 hours.

Walter was troubled by the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the poor relationship between the two countries and his swim was one man's determined effort to bring two neighbors together using unconventional diplomacy. The "Swim for Peace" was conceived to achieve better relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

Given the high political tensions and complicated bureaucracy of the Cold War era, it would take fifteen years to obtain approval from the U.S. Government and Fidel Castro. Walter wrote letters, made calls, and traveled many times to Washington D.C., and even petitioned the Carter White House.

With confidence in his cause, he trained. Walter and his wife Faye set up training camps and built up an impressive resume of feats that attracted the attention of the media.



Above: a pre-swim toast with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro

Below: Faye helping Walter train



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## *President's Message*



Kelly Casto, President GLCA

Spring is our most important newsletter each year as we thank all of you who donate to the Annual Campaign conducted by the Friends of Green Lawn.

That makes this our second most important newsletter, as by now everyone should have received their request letters and this newsletter arrives as a timely reminder before the end of the year!

We have done so much this year in every category - repairs, restorations, and enhancements - and we have committed to adding a beautiful granite gazebo in front of the chapel next year to commemorate our 175th anniversary.

I want to thank Kevin Schoedinger for 12 years of service as a cemetery trustee, and Lynne Jeffrey for 9 years that also included leadership of the Friends of Green Lawn. We are still looking to replace Kevin, but Anne Jeffrey Wright has graciously agreed to take Lynne's place both as a trustee and with Friends. Welcome Anne!

Thank you again to each of you that continue to support Green Lawn, it would be a very different place without your contributions!

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## *Wildlife Stories*



*Green Lawn is well known as a spot to see merlins, one of our less common members of the falcon family. During tours in October we saw a merlin several times. The most exciting view was while we watched a murmuration of nearly 1,000 starlings settle into tree tops along the ridge only to be repeatedly harassed back into the air by a merlin. Merlins, a small raptor about 12" tall, are often seen in the tops of the dead trees we leave up for wildlife, using these as perches to hunt from.*



*The 2,300+ trees we have planted over the last 8 years have started to add significant color to the landscape. This image catches one of several sassafras trees we have added at near full color. Sassafras, in addition to its use in tea, is known for turning multiple shades of orange, red, and pink in the fall, as well as for having leaves of three different shapes. It is an important host plant for spicebush swallowtail butterfly and Promethea moth, along with 36 other species of butterflies and moths.*

## Remembering the Swim of Walter Poenisch

*(Continued from page 1)*

In 1972, he announced he would swim from international waters just *outside* Cuban territory to Fort Lauderdale. He swam over 90 miles before the sharks attacked and damaged his cage forcing him to stop. Four years later he set an open ocean swim record, documented by the Guinness Book of World's Records, with a swim of 122½ miles from Key West to the tip of the Florida Peninsula.

Finally, in March 1978, Walter obtained the required visa from the Cuban government needed to attempt the swim from Cuba to the United States.

His wife Faye remembers the trip to Havana and the warm welcome they received in July 1978.

“Fidel Castro met with Walter on (the) boat and discussed his planned route and ocean conditions, but most of all Fidel expressed admiration for Walter’s efforts toward peace.” When Castro departed, Faye made sure to save his smoldering cigar, which she later donated to a museum. She also vividly remembers how when they arrived at their hotel in downtown Havana, a bird-of-paradise graced their room, compliments of none other than Fidel Castro.

Following a toast of pineapple juice with Castro and Faye, Walter embarked on his swim from the shore of Havana, Cuba, on July 11, 1978, amid a large crowd of Cuban media. It was Walter’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. Castro boarded his own yacht and accompanied Walter for the first several miles, finally giving him a salute as Walter swam off into history.

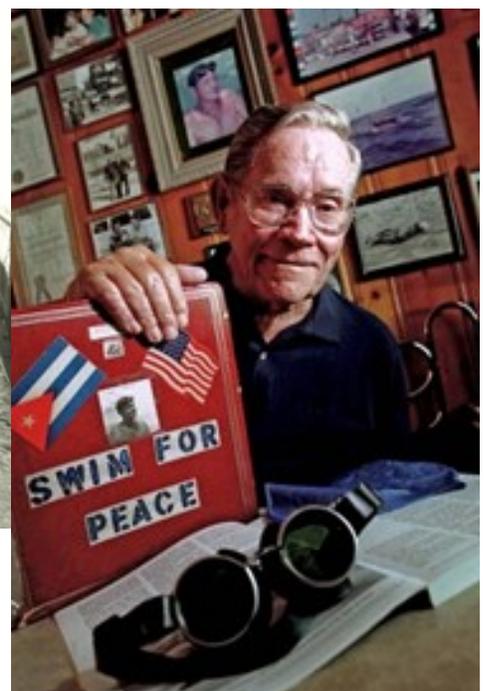
When Walter staggered ashore at Little Duck Key, near Marathon, Florida, over 34 hours later and 21 pounds lighter, Faye yelled at him to come ashore. With his arms still stroking as his feet walked on the beach, he finally reached down and grabbed a handful of sand realizing what he had done - the first to swim from Cuba to the United States! Walter’s swim was pioneering and subsequent distance swimmers would rely on rules, techniques, and technology resulting from his effort.

Poenisch was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in August, 2017, as a "Pioneer Open Water Swimmer." In May 2020, the International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame (IMSHOF) also inducted Walter.

Walter Poenisch died on June 6, 2000, and is buried in Section 74 of Green Lawn Cemetery, but as Walter liked to say, “Old swimmers never die, they just swim away...”



*Above: Walter on his epic swim inside a towed shark cage*



*Right: Walter later in life*

## Revisiting the Sandy Run Train Disaster - Randy Rogers

The evening of April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1882, was routine on the Columbus & Hocking Valley Railroad near the Sandy Run station in southeastern Ohio. The 44' long, 10' high trestle over Sandy Run Creek had been inspected just two weeks prior and found to be in sound condition. The span had been safely crossed 7 of the 8 times trains would traverse on a normal day with no problems noted. It was known that a particularly heavy rain the night before had raised the waters abnormally high, but the water had quickly receded and there seemed no cause for worry.

For their second round trip of the day, 39 year old engineer William Dewland and his 18 year old fireman son Charles, returned with their standard engine, 4 freight cars, and a coach.

As they reached the middle, the bridge suddenly collapsed!

Both men were killed although it could not be determined if death was by drowning, steam, or being crushed. Brakeman James Hiles was also injured and not expected to recover.

The Sandy Run Train Disaster resulted in the line's first fatalities and was attributed to the sudden rise and fall of the stream washing out around the trestle pilings. William Dewland left behind a widow, Sarah, and younger son, Willie, in Nelsonville.

On April 28<sup>th</sup>, a train pulled into Columbus carrying Sarah and Willie and a host of mourners, where they were met by local friends (the Dewlands were from Columbus), and a large procession formed for Green Lawn. Included in the hundreds of mourners were family and friends, contingents from the Columbus Barracks band, Ex-Soldiers and Sailors Association (William had served during the Civil War), the Freemasons, the Oddfellows, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. Donations provided for an elaborate monument, which notes that the father and son who worked and died together would now be buried in a single grave.

Time was not kind to this monument.

Tree limbs fell on it, it was vandalized, the stone urn and vase both stolen, and for many years the remaining broken pieces lay on the ground around the plinth.

Five years ago, the cemetery association started efforts to restore the monument. The best remaining of the four broken columns was carefully measured with specs sent to China to be copied (a process delayed by Covid). Originally it was determined we could only replace the columns and reinstall the "roof", but later that year we found that we had an identical monument on the other side of the cemetery. This discovery informed us what the original urn and vase looked like and their measurements, so we started the process to replicate those as well. This fall all the pieces finally came together and we were able to reassemble the Dewland/Sandy Run monument.

Green Lawn preserves many stories, at least so long as the monuments to each story endure, and restoring this monument preserves the story of the Sandy Run Train Disaster and the unique tragedy of a father & son locomotive crew.



*Clockwise from left: the restored monument, "father and son buried in a single grave"; "Before" photo; Detail of new vase, we had no idea what this vase looked like until we found an identical monument on the other side of the cemetery!*

## News from Memorial Properties

*Operating Green Lawn Since 2019!*

### A New Limited Time Promotion for Green Lawn

**- STOP INFLATION TODAY -**

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**FIDELITY MEMORIAL GROUP:**  
EFFECTIVE DECEMBER 1, 2023. UP TO,

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\*INTEREST FREE FINANCING IS AVAILABLE WITH, THE PURCHASE OF 3 OR MORE INTERMENT RIGHTS FOR UP TO 24 MONTHS. WITH THE PURCHASE OF 2 INTERMENT RIGHTS FOR UP TO 18 MONTHS. AND WITH THE PURCHASE OF 1 INTERMENT RIGHT FOR UP TO 12 MONTHS.

<b>3+ INTERMENT RIGHTS</b>	<b>20% OFF PROPERTY &amp; MERCHANDISE</b>	<b>0% 24 MONTHS</b>
<b>2 INTERMENT RIGHTS</b>	<b>10% OFF PROPERTY &amp; MERCHANDISE</b>	<b>0% 18 MONTHS</b>
<b>1 INTERMENT RIGHT</b>	<b>5% OFF PROPERTY &amp; MERCHANDISE</b>	<b>0% 12 MONTHS</b>

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## Coming Soon....

December will launch a new project to refinish or replace all of the missing or damaged section signs throughout the cemetery. There are (or should be) about 450 signs that mark our 130 gardens, and nearly half are missing, damaged, or heavily worn. The association and Memorial Properties will work together to improve signage throughout the cemetery.

These signs cost about \$145 each (half that to refinish), so we are going to work this project over 24 months. During this time we will remove some signs to be refinished even as we install new signs, so some gardens will be less marked for a time until eventually the number of new signs outnumber those that are in shop.

Short-term there may be a small inconvenience, but in the end all of the gardens will be better marked, and signs throughout the cemetery will all be of the same design.

This may be a routine maintenance project, but it will result in a significant improvement to both the appearance and the navigability of the cemetery.

*Mismatched signs will be replaced (A), worn signs refinished (B), missing or broken replaced (C) until all gardens are properly marked (D) - a process that is expected to take about 24 months.*



## New Decoration Honors WW1 Dead in Section 71

For Veterans' Day we added a new decoration around the flag in Section 71.

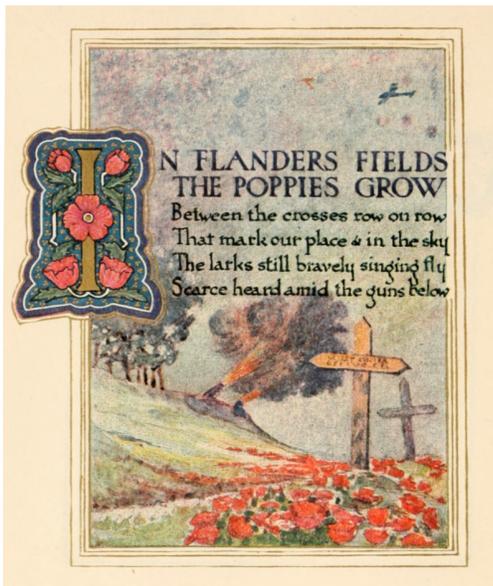
Section 71 contains a National Cemetery for local soldiers killed and buried in Europe during WW1 before being brought home in 1919.

The inspiration for the design was the poem "In Flanders Fields".

Canadian surgeon MAJ John McCrae wrote the poem after the death of a close friend in the Second Battle of Ypres, for whom McCrae had personally performed the burial service.



*Made possible by your donations!*



*Illustrated page by Ernest Clegg - the words "grow" and "blow" are used in various versions of the poem, McCrae hand wrote "grow", but the first published version used "blow".*

### *In Flanders Fields* - Major John McCrae

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

## Upcoming Green Lawn Cemetery Events

**Saturday, December 2, 3:00pm, Elks Rest Rededication.** For over 20 years Elks Rest (Section 64) was missing its elk. Thanks to a partnership between Green Lawn Cemetery Association & BPOE #37 a new life-sized bronze elk was recently installed. A special service in Huntington Chapel begins at 3:30pm. Rededication in Section 64 follows. Free and open to the public.

**Saturday, December 9, 3:00pm-5:00pm, Holiday Remembrance Program.** Held in the historic Huntington Chapel, this annual service provides an opportunity to remember recently departed loved ones. Please join us for a special time of fellowship, reflection, and music. Light refreshments will be served. Doors open at 2pm. Seating is limited. Please RSVP to have your loved one's name read aloud. Call 614-444-1123.

**Saturday, December 16, 11:00am, Wreaths Across America.** Remember the Fallen. Honor Those Who Serve. Teach Our Children the Value of Freedom. Wreaths Across America will be at Green Lawn to remember and honor our Veterans through the laying of remembrance wreaths on the graves of our country's fallen heroes. This event proceeds rain, sleet, or snow. This year we will decorate Soldiers' Circle in Section M.

**Thursday, January 18, 1:00pm-3:00pm, Pre-Planning for Eternity.** Have you thought about pre-planning but don't know quite where to begin? Ralph Caron, Director of Family Services, will discuss the process from start to finish and how Green Lawn walks you through every step of the way. You will also learn about the latest green options available at Green Lawn Cemetery. Held in the Huntington Chapel at Green Lawn Cemetery. Please RSVP by calling 614-444-1123.

**Sunday, January 28, 2:00pm-4:00pm, Landscapes, Landmarks, & Legacies Walking Tour.** Join us for a guided walking tour of Green Lawn Cemetery as we uncover some of the best kept secrets of Green Lawn. The tour begins in the historic Huntington Chapel. We then stroll outside to visit unique monuments, hear fascinating stories, and enjoy the enchanting winter landscape. \$25/person. Fees directly support ongoing restoration projects in the cemetery. Register at: <https://app.donorview.com/zncQk>

**Sunday, March 31, 7:00am, Easter Sunrise Service.** Emmanuel Lutheran Church will hold Easter Sunrise Service in Huntington Chapel at Green Lawn Cemetery. Emeritus Pastor Floyd Stolzenburg will officiate. All are warmly welcome!

## Latest Events and Updates

**Website:** <https://www.greenlawncemetery.org/events/>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/GreenLawnCemeteryColumbus>





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Saturday

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Sunday

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**Green Lawn Heritage Newsletter**

Matthew Wolf, *Community Outreach & Events*

**Special Thanks to our Green Lawn Trustees and  
Volunteers**

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