

Ipock, Lennis: The Dead Ones ^[1]

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Lennis Ipock: the dead ones

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/13/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited gravedigger Lennis Ipock at his home in Newport, a small town in coastal North Carolina. For nearly 30 years, he dug graves by hand for the Bell-Munden Funeral Home in Morehead City. He was something of a legend: a tremendously hard worker who was so friendly that local church people often took him dinner in the graveyard. Others came just to hear his jokes and tall tales. People elsewhere might request a special preacher or singer for a funeral, but people in Carteret County often asked that Ipock dig a loved one's grave.

After meeting him, I could understand why: For all those years, he was surrounded by death, but he walks through life with a light step and a glad heart, just excited to be here.



Lennis Ipock. Photo by Chris Seward, 2006. To request permission for **Lennis Ipock** to purchase a print, please contact the **News & Observer**.

I loved to dig graves. When I went to a cemetery, my job was to go there, dig that grave, make sure it was ready. I've had to dig graves while it was pouring down rain, lightning. I was standing right there in the rain in Broad Creek for an hour. I dug as many as three a day. One time, my third one, it was 4 o'clock, 90 degrees. I started digging. Next thing I know, I woke up and it was 8 o'clock. I had passed out! Been lying in that grave for about three hours and the funeral was next. Once or twice a year, you use a backhoe: for water problems, maybe a giant stump or if you've been in a dry spell. Otherwise, I dig them all by hand -- over 5,000 in 29 1/2 years. They used to say I probably dug more graves than any single. When I started, my arms and legs were real little. Real little. I weighed 129 pounds. The more I dug, the bigger my body got. Next thing I know, I was big. They used to call me Popeye. All this up here was big. Back then, you needed to be big. I dug graves as far as Ocracoke, but mostly from Cedar Island to Bear Creek and all them places up there. There's over 200 cemeteries in Carteret County, mostly family cemeteries, you know. In Otway alone, 34 cemeteries -- they're in back. There's a place at South River. It's a cemetery called Lukens Island. You've got to go there by boat. They had a big, open barge. They would put in my tent, shovels and everything, and take me over there. They would leave me over there all the first time I was there, they said, "Now, you watch out for the bears." I said, "Man, don't tell me none of this bad stuff." But it's the prettiest place you've ever been. Used to be a town there. Back in 1933, there was a hurricane, those people were telling me, and that's the last time people lived over there. For the burial, they put the body, all the flowers and the family on the barge, and all the friends would get in their boats. It was real neat. I could go to Core Creek cemetery, put up a tent, dig a grave and roll 15 wheelbarrow loads of dirt in two hours flat. That's average. But I dug a grave one day, it was 13 hours. The top of the ground was tree roots, big as this, unreal. It was a I worked and worked and worked: chopped, broke axes, picks and shovels. My arms hurt so bad I didn't think I was going to be able to get my tent up. I had several cemeteries where the mud is like quicksand when it gets hold of you -- Oscar Davis Cemetery in Davis Shore, Bayview Cemetery in Mill Creek. I got stuck there in Mill Creek. I was in the grave an hour and these three guys were jogging by and I was hollering, help, help! They went over and said, "Gravedigger, what is it?" I had mud up to my knees and couldn't get out. They pulled me. A lot of people bring me food. Down to Williston, there's a cemetery, every time that I went there, somebody would come and take the most food -- barbecue, chicken, deviled eggs, potato salad, big things of iced tea. They'd say, "Is this enou. Another cemetery I like, there's a place in Marshallberg called Through the Woods. You go down a path and it opens up by the water. It's real pretty in there. I bet there's 50 or 60 graves. I dug most of them myself. I also dug up hundreds of people. A lot of times, people have sold the land and you got bodies buried in the backyard, beside the house. I move them to another cemetery. With them old graves, there are a few pieces of clothes, there's some hair sometimes. Sometimes you don't find nothing, just the changing of the color of the dirt, you know. Other times, you're picking up bones with your bare hands. It doesn't I'd always say, well, there's another one that has died. Must be a reason, I don't know. I can't understand the way some deaths are, you know. I go to the funeral home and I see somebody that is 7, 8 years old and I just don't know. I went to Bettie one time. A man down there had to show me his brother's grave, and the man was drunk. He had his son over there weed-eating. He looked at me -- at one time, I had real long hair and a long beard. He says, "See that boy, c I said, "I will one day." He said, "Come here. Let me show you where to dig this grave." And I was digging. Man, I was knocking that hole out. I was going to it. He come over there. He said, "Can I tell you something?" I said, "What's that, captain?" "You're an ugly SOB, but you're a hell of a gravedigger."

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