



Hamilton County Recorder Wayne Coates, left, and Amberley Village genealogist Jim Dempsey with the historic cemetery ledgers. THE ENQUIRER/CARRIE COCHRAN

## Unlikely heroes keep veterans' names alive



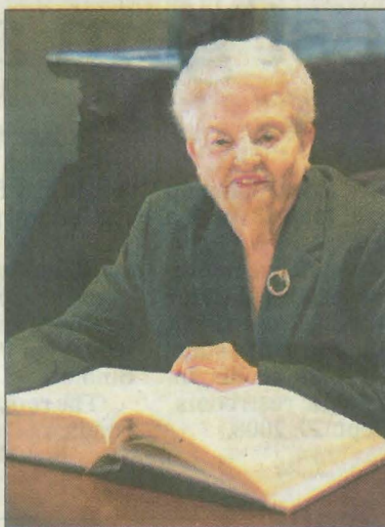
Cliff  
**RADEL**

**T**housands of old soldiers can rest easy tonight. Their names will not fade away.

Their tombstones may crumble. Weeds may cover their graves. Records on film may turn to dust.

But Hamilton County veterans who fought for their country in every conflict from the Revolutionary War to World War I will not be forgotten. Their names and the exact location of their graves are now online. They will be officially unveiled today during ceremonies at the Hamilton County Recorder's office and at [www.recordersoffice.hamilton-co.org](http://www.recordersoffice.hamilton-co.org).

Those old soldiers – as well as fact-



Genealogist Mary Remler of Milford says the veterans cemetery records "show us who fought to keep us free." THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON

hungry historians and veterans groups wanting to decorate graves on holidays – can thank Mary Remler and Jim Dempsey, two genealogists who live by these words:

*Never throw anything away.*

Remler and Dempsey saved five priceless books from the Recorder's dumpster. Thirty-two years later, the books have come back home and saved the day.

The books make up a five-volume Works Progress Administration project from 1939 that surveyed all of Hamilton County's cemeteries. The pages map the grave sites of veterans who fought in wars from 1775 to 1918. The county planned to scrap the set.

Then, Remler came to the rescue. She took possession of the books on behalf of the Hamilton County Genealogical Society.

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"I could not let those books be destroyed," the 86-year-old Milford resident said. "They represent our heritage. They show us who fought to keep us free."

Unlike today, the Hamilton County Recorder's Office in the late 1970s cared more about house cleaning than history. Old documents and old books were being dumped. They were already on microfilm, the reasoning went, and shelf space was at a premium. So, sell them to a scrap dealer. Make some money off the old things.

Remler heard that the WPA set's days were numbered in 1979. She asked county officials for the books. They happily gave them to her. She remembered Mike Campbell, the courthouse's superintendent, "meeting me at a side door and carrying them to my car."

She was not being a delicate flower. The books are heavy. And huge. Not only are they bigger than a coffee-table volume, they are larger than most coffee tables.

Remler didn't have a shelf or cabinet to accommodate the books. She put them "on tables made out of doors from our house that was hit by a tornado in 1969."

The books went to a good home. Remler is the author of an 18-volume series of Hamilton County cemetery records. She regularly referred to the WPA works during their 20-year stay in her basement.

"They were in a safe place," she said. "My basement was dry and sanitary."

After a stint at the Norwood branch of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, the books moved to Jim Dempsey's basement in Amberley Village. And that's where they would have stayed - if not for a chance conversation in January between Dempsey, 68, County Recorder Wayne Coates and David Pittinger, the recorder's chief of staff.

Pittinger told Dempsey about the terrible shape of the microfilm version of the WPA books. Pages were fading to nothing. Some were completely out of focus - and always had been. The cutting-edge technology of the 1950s, '60s and '70s that had been ballyhooed about lasting forever was on its last leg.

Coates and Pittinger wished they could lay their hands on the original books. Their pages could be scanned and put online.

Dempsey smiled and said: "You want the originals? I've got them."

Coates thought "he was just messing with us."

He soon became a believer.

"When those books came in," Coates recalled, "I said, 'Thank you, Jesus.' To have these images scanned and digitally cleaned up helps people when they are trying to certify a veteran's grave." That way, they can apply for Uncle Sam to pay for a grave maker.

"I always thought," Remler said, "that those books would come in handy some day."

Now that the county has the books in its possession, there are no plans to let them go.

"They're staying here forever," Pittinger said.

Good idea. Technology can change. Film can fade. Online images can crash and be erased. But the names of those old soldiers and the freedoms they fought to preserve live on forever.

*Cliff Radel welcomes email at [cradel@enquirer.com](mailto:cradel@enquirer.com)*