

Decoration Day

IN THE MOUNTAINS



Dogwood tree in Brendle Hill Cemetery, Swain Co., N.C., September 2, 2004

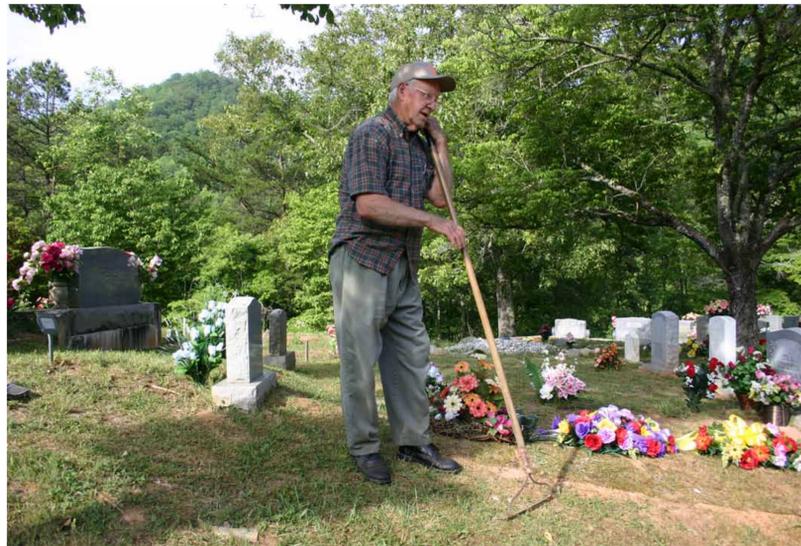
A Thriving Cultural Tradition

Every spring, thousands of mountain residents gather in cemeteries. They come together to remember and respect the dead by cleaning their graves and decorating them with flowers.

Decoration Day connects the living and the dead. It is both a religious event and a celebration of life where people pray, sing, share a meal, tell stories, and reconnect as a community.

When is Decoration Day?

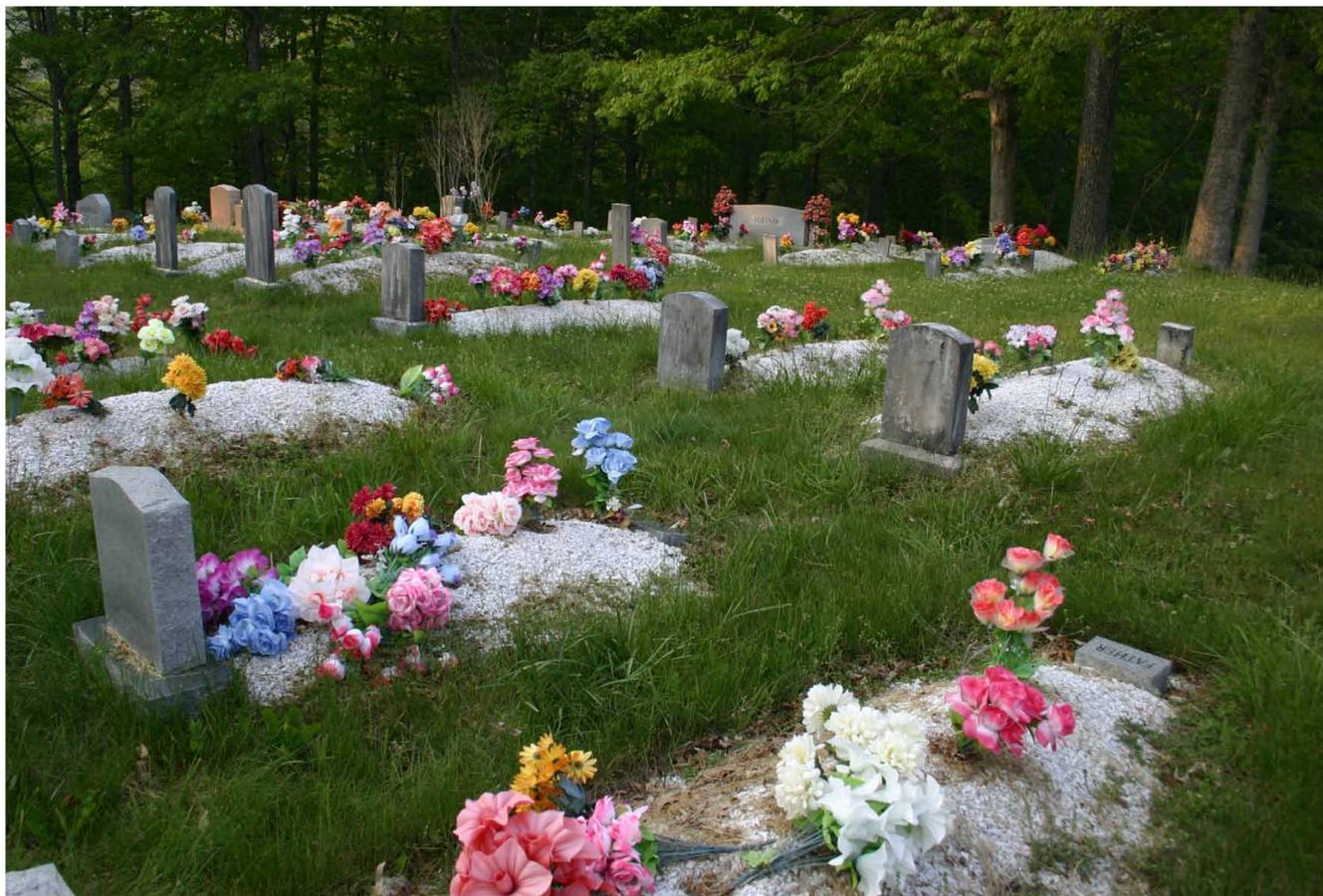
In the mountains, Decoration Day events, often called “decorations,” occur anytime from April to October, with most held in May and June. Many people attend multiple decorations throughout the year.



Roy Cochran cleaning the gravesite of his wife (and site of his own future grave), Brendle Hill Cemetery, Swain Co., N.C., June 9, 2007

Cleaning up the Cemetery

Cleaning the cemetery occurs before Decoration Day. Cleaning usually involves removing grass and weeds from around the graves, along with leftover flowers or old decorations. Men traditionally do the cleaning, while women often come later to decorate the graves.



Mounded, gravel-dressed, decorated graves at Mathis Cemetery, Jackson Co., N.C., May 22, 2007



Decoration disposal bin, Tabor Cemetery, Swain Co., N.C., May 23, 2007



Loose, high mounding at Sawmill Hill Cemetery, Swain Co., N.C., May 23, 2007

Mounding the Graves

Some cemeteries are grassless or clean-swept. Mounds of earth cover each grave from head to foot, and these mounds must be reshaped each year. Mounding has both practical and spiritual purposes. Mounds discourage stepping on graves and provide a good place to display flowers. Mounds also symbolize the body below, making it easier for visitors to connect with the person buried there. Standing in a mounded cemetery feels like being surrounded by dozens of people stretched out on the ground.