

THAWDAWG AND THE DIGGERS

By Ryan Helfenbein

There are people who truly enjoy this time of year. Perhaps it's the idea of snuggling under a furry warm blanket or waking up to a crisp white snow covering the ground. Whatever it may be, rest assured those people are not gravediggers.

Yes the cold weather presents some challenges for us all, but for the grave diggers in Northern states, it creates challenges year after year. Some call them the "frozen chosen." They are the ones who make it possible for undertakers to see that families can lay their loved ones to rest if temperatures hit below zero and solidify the snow-covered ground. Let me note here, this is very rare in our state of Maryland, but for the states of Michigan, Minnesota and New York, among others, it unfortunately is an annual occurrence.

In the past, families would have to wait for the ground to thaw in order to see that their loved ones were laid to rest. The caskets would be placed into what is called a receiving vault at cemeteries. This was a large mausoleum-like holding area with multiple shelves. Some of these receiving vaults are still in use today during the cold conditions. However, changing state laws requiring a timely burial regardless of conditions are driving technological advances in the field of gravedigging.

Backhoes are always the go-to for a gravedigger today. But for the frozen chosen, they must modify the traditional backhoe to get through the solid ground. We find some using large curved metal teeth with carbide tips to help the outsides of the bucket cut through the ice, a tool known as "frost teeth" in the industry. Afterward, gravediggers take air compressor jackhammers and picks to break the ground up into smaller pieces.

Now this might be OK if the ground was quasi-frozen, but what is done when it is completely frozen for many feet down? How do they dig then? This is where we are finding unique technological advances. One tool is called a ground thawer.

Picture if you will a large 6-foot by 3-foot oil barrel, cut in half lengthwise. It is placed over the gravesite and with the use of propane, a torch is lit and heat is pumped into the barrel. After 24 to 30 hours, the gravediggers can return and scoop out the earth much like they can in the Spring and Summer months.

The innovators haven't stopped there. A company in Minnesota has created the *ThawDawg*, a compact ground warmer that is light enough for two people to carry. It, too, is powered by a propane source, but its smaller size leaves it susceptible to wind and frozen condensation turning it off in the middle of the job, leaving the gravedigger to start all over again. With that said, perhaps the option of a ground-thawing blanket will do the trick. Imagine if you will an electric blanket (yes, similar to the one you'll be covering up under this Winter) laid across the ground. It is plugged into an electrical source or gas generator, offering a less cumbersome and more fuel-efficient option. This same blanket is used in the construction industry. We find that the blanket must remain on the grave for 12 to 18 hours, depending on the frost levels and can typically thaw 10 inches deep every four to five hours under favorable conditions.

So when you are covering up with your furry blanket this Winter or frolicking through the snow with young ones in tow, think of those of the frozen chosen in the Northern states. No, they may be all smiles, but rest assured that through the use of "frost teeth" jackhammers, *ThawDawg*' and outdoor electric blankets, grave diggers are doing much better working through the challenges of laying loved ones to rest.

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