

Callison: French woman adopts grave of S.D. WWII soldier

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Francis Los



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Eight times a year or so, Karen Sallier travels from her home in northeastern France to Epinal-Dinoze, which cradles the remains of American servicemen who died in World War II.

She pauses to acknowledge the hundreds of graves around her, but Sallier’s goal is the stone that marks the resting place of South Dakota native Francis Los.

World War II ended more than 45 years before Sallier’s birth, but the 22-year-old Frenchwoman feels a debt to Los and his fellow servicemen. Sallier, and hundreds of others, regularly tend the American graves in Epinal Cemetery as a small repayment for their freedom.

“They were about my age when they came to Europe, so maybe that’s why I feel close to them,” Sallier says. “They chose to fight for their country and also to save Europe, in my case France, instead of staying safe at home. Sometimes, I wonder what would I do if I were there and how people will react if something like that happened nowadays.”

That feeling of closeness to the Americans buried in Epinal Cemetery led Sallier several weeks ago to begin a search for any surviving family of Francis Los.

The information she found indicated Los, a corporal in the U.S. Army at the time of his death, served in the 409th Infantry Regiment, 103rd Infantry Division. His service record indicated he had lived in Webster, and she found a photo of him online.

“When you only have a name, it’s hard to feel close to the person,” she says. “When I found a picture, I was really happy because I realized at that moment that he had really existed, he was real. It wasn’t just a name on a list.”

Further research found information on the 2004 death of Clarence Los of Elkhorn, Wis. Clarence, his obituary said, had been preceded in death by one brother, Francis J. Seven siblings survived both brothers.

By this time, thanks to Sallier's plea on the *Argus Leader's* Facebook page, she had an ally in her search: me. One of the Los brothers' siblings, Joyce Kragt of Milaca, Minn., directed me to Francis' older daughter, Joanne Van Dyke of Elkhorn, Wis.

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Van Dyke and I spoke first, and she and Sallier have "talked" several times through instant messaging on Facebook. Van Dyke was two months short of her third birthday when her father died Dec. 1, 1944, and she has only one memory of Francis Los.

"As I get older, even that is fading a bit," Van Dyke says. "I remember he was home on leave, and he had to go to the Selective Service office, so we walked to that building. He was very tall, and I was holding his big hand."

Van Dyke also had the answer to a question that Sallier has puzzled over: Why did the father of two enlist?

"I will say to my mom, he had two little girls and a wife, why did he enlist?, and she says, 'He had to do it for his little girls and their freedom,' " Van Dyke says.

Francis Los' widow, Theresa, is 93 old and still drives her car. She was born and raised in the Netherlands, and several years ago, on a trip to Europe, mother and daughter visited the American cemetery. Theresa Los was reluctant but finally acceded.

"It was almost like a closure for me," Van Dyke says. "I was raised with a father that was killed in the war. I kept thinking in the back of my mind, maybe he was a prisoner, maybe he escaped and someday he would pop up. That kind of closed it for me in my mind."

Jocelyne Papelard is in charge of the adoption of graves in Epinal. She started the program in November 2012 with about 25 graves adopted. Now, 700 graves are adopted by French individuals or families in a cemetery that holds 5,255 graves, with another 420 names of the missing engraved on a wall.

Papelard is trying to expand the program to create a network of English-speaking natives who could meet families at the train station, take them to the cemetery and provide a room to stay.

The gratitude runs deep, she says.

“People always speak about Normandy, but it took much more time and many more soldiers to liberate this area, which is close to Germany,” she says.

“American soldiers not only came once, but twice to liberate and help this country for a cause which was not theirs an ocean away. The least the French can do is remember these brave men and honor their memories.”

Van Dyke’s father died in battle near Sélestat, France. He had arrived in France less than two months earlier. It was a long way from his birth in Todd County and the family farm near Lakeview. She and her father traveled to the family farm once, marked by an old windmill.

Van Dyke’s five children live within 10 miles of her, in contrast to her childhood. Age and health mean it’s unlikely she’ll ever see her father’s grave in northeast France again.

Sallier will be there to take care of it, traveling the 14 miles every other month and on Francis Los’ date of birth and death. Four of her friends also have adopted graves, along with their parents.

Her adoption of Los’ grave last year also has spurred an interest in learning more about her deceased grandparents’ experiences in World War II.