



Lavonia Hafele with dog Heidi at Happy Valley Cemetery which her late husband created. After a struggle, he was buried in the way he wanted. Los Angeles Times Photo

**HE WAS DEATH ON BUREAUCRATS**

## North Dakota Cowboy Rests In Peace

AMIDON, N.D. — Kenny Hafele had three wishes concerning his death. He wanted to die quickly, he wanted a true cowboy's funeral and he wanted to be buried on the 4,000-acre cattle ranch he owned and operated here in the starkly beautiful North Dakota Badlands.

These were, to Hafele's mind, simple wishes. But when he began to settle his affairs, he learned that the state Department of Health in Bismarck did not think they were so simple.

A person just cannot be buried anywhere he wants, the state told him. People have to be buried in cemeteries.

After five fruitless visits over six years to the capital 150 miles to the east, an exasperated Hafele decided that if the state wanted him buried in an official cemetery, he'd give them an official cemetery.

Hafele marked off the 160 acres of his ranch surrounding his chosen burial spot and declared "the whole danged thing" a cemetery.

**A Misspelled Sign**

Thus it has come about that a traveler lost on the crisscrossing dirt roads here in the isolated southwestern corner of North Dakota may stumble upon a misspelled hand-painted sign that says "Happy Valley Cemetary."

The sign marks the entrance to an officially registered public cemetery full of buttes, meadows, Ponderosa pine trees, wild turkey, pheasant, deer — and a single burial plot.

Hafele, who died of a heart attack at the age of 59 last August, rests peacefully where he wanted to be, on a wooden rise that has a breathtaking view of his house, barn and ranch.

By all accounts, in trying to settle

his burial, Hafele approached the state bureaucracy in Bismarck much as he would an ornery horse.

"They kept making us sit and wait and wait," Mrs. Hafele said. "Then someone would come in, and it would turn out he wasn't the right person to see, and he'd go out. Kenny held it in for a while, but about the third time up there, he went bang and let it out."

Mrs. Hafele said when her husband started what she calls "his cowboy talk" before a state official, "the feller's mouth would fall open. Then he'd stand up and go get someone else."

Hafele to his dying day was convinced that the first person they were sent to talk with at the Capitol was the Health Department's janitor. Later, he believed he had worked his way up to a secretary.

"He was sure of it," said Mrs. Hafele. "He said, when you come to the state Capitol for business, you might just as well ask for the janitor directly, because that was who they'd send out to talk to you anyway."

Eventually, the Hafeles were told they would need to identify exactly how far the proposed burial spot was from their land's section line.

State officials questioned recently explained that there are valid reasons for this request, which is mandated by the Legislature for purposes of grave maintenance and to avoid having graves dug up accidentally by construction crews.

But Hafele told the state he did not know the location of his section line; such markings were long lost on his rambling 4,000-acre ranch.

**'Didn't Like That Answer'**

"They didn't much like that answer," Mrs. Hafele said. "They figured we

should go and get us some of these high-priced surveyors and go through all that rigamarole."

It was the undertaker Ohms who finally suggested that Hafele solve his problem by forming a full-fledged cemetery. The manner in which this idea was accepted by the state remains murky.

The Health Department's file on Hafele contains little more than an approved application for a cemetery, dated July 10, 1979. Hafele's answer to Item 6 on this application indicates no survey was made by a trained surveyor, as required to register a cemetery.

Moreover, the three state officials whose responsibilities would have logically involved them with the Hafeles say they never encountered that couple.

"It's very puzzling," said Marion Sypnieski, office manager for the state health officer. "The Hafeles must have been seeing the wrong people. I have no idea who they talked to."

Mrs. Hafele offered her own explanation. "This proves Kenny was right. We were talking to the janitor all along. I think whoever we saw, even if it wasn't the right person, finally gave in and approved our application just to get Ken off his back."

Hafele's death came a year after his cemetery was approved. As he hoped, it happened quickly, and as far as his family is concerned, it took place in a fitting location — a theater stage.

The Hafeles were to take part last August in a play at the Slope County fair. As they sat together on stage in their costumes, going through a dress rehearsal, Hafele appeared to doze off. He had suffered a fatal heart attack.

On Aug. 30, about 200 relatives and friends in Western hats and boots walked up deer trails to the Happy Valley Cemetery burial plot. A neighbor strummed his guitar and sang "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," a Willie Nelson song Hafele loved. The body, laid out in a Western suit, was lowered into the ground. Hafele had his cowboy funeral.

**Meadow for Veterans**

There have been no other burials yet at Happy Valley, but Mrs. Hafele says she fully intends to operate a real cemetery now that one has been created. Ohms is the cemetery's sexton and plots are for sale at \$25 apiece. One meadow has been set aside for veterans.

And, just like the state of North Dakota, Happy Valley has acquired a set of regulations, made at Kenny Hafele's request.

No hunters are allowed in Happy Valley, and no cars. Burial plots must be fenced, because wild animals roam the area. The cemetery is intended mainly for ranchers, cowboys and hired hands, but "if anyone really needs a spot," Hafele said before his death, "he can have one here."

With one exception, that is. "Kenny said I shouldn't let no riff-raff in here," Mrs. Hafele said one day recently. "To him that meant government officials. They're not allowed. Kenny told me, 'No self-respecting cowboy would want to be buried next to a bureaucrat.'"

**(Editor's Note: For more details, contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Mrs. Lavonia Hafele, Amidon, N. Dak. (ph 701 279-5796.)**

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