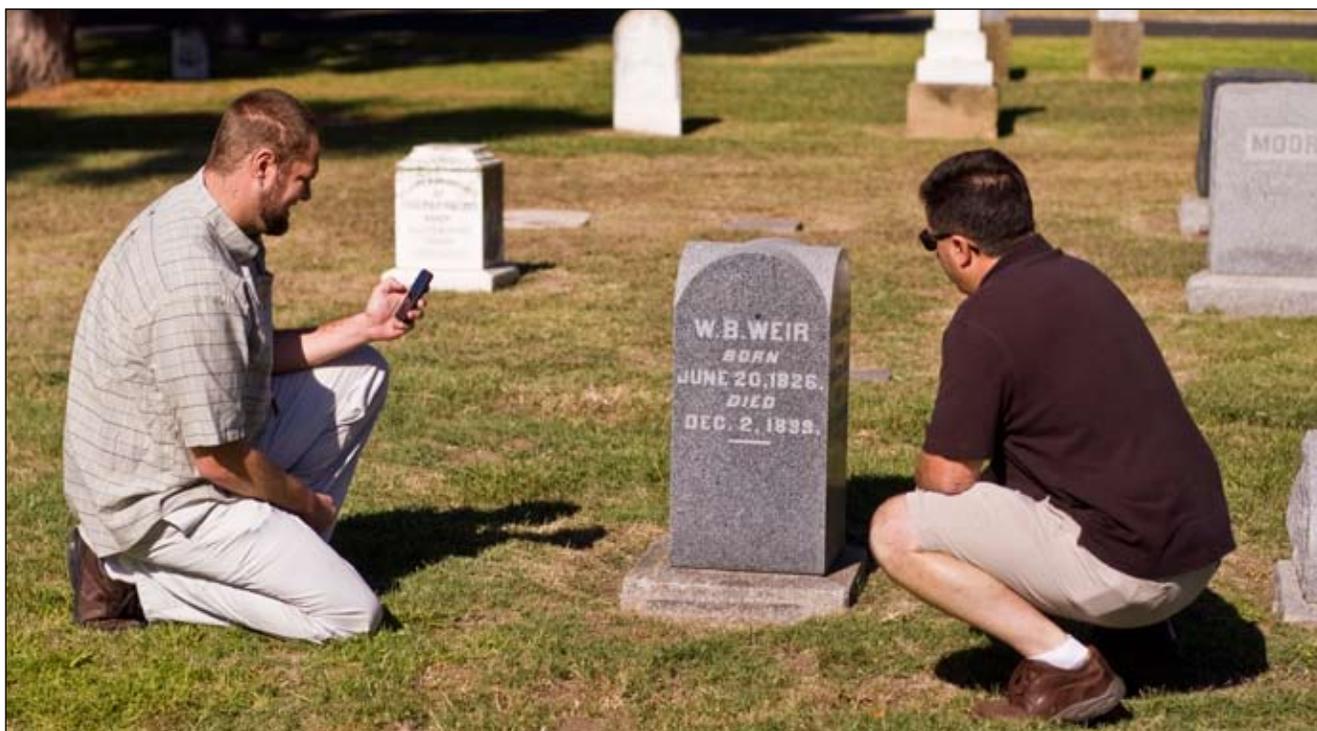


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STEPHEN NELLIS PHOTO

Tony Spore, left, and Mike Damron, log a headstone at the Carpinteria Cemetery District into the Tomb Finder system using a mobile phone. The service aims to create a GPS indexed database of tombstones.

Six feet under, in real time

Ventura firm creates tomb-finding app

BY STEPHEN NELLIS
Staff Writer

It's hard to imagine a facet of life that smart phone and tablet technology hasn't yet touched. But Tony Spore, founder of Ventura-based SaaSSoft, seems to have found one: gravestones.

Spore's firm has launched a website and mobile app named Tomb Finder to help people find where their loved ones are buried via GPS and create online memorials for them. It's a little like Facebook meets Google Maps, but for dead people. Once you overcome the cognitive dissonance of introducing technology into private and solemn cultural rituals that have evolved slowly over the centuries, it's not nearly as creepy as it sounds.

In fact, those who operate cemeteries wonder why something like it hasn't come along sooner. In an era when non-digital information is at serious risk of perishing altogether, most cemeteries keep their records on paper and organized in a crude fashion, if they're organized at all. At the Carpinteria Cemetery District, for example, records were kept on 3-inch-by-5-inch index cards in a vault.

"Cemeteries, as a whole, are the last people on the bus with technology,"

said Mike Damron of the cemetery district. "When you're out there looking for your great-grandmother, you're working with a 1900s technology — walk around and look."

For his part, Spore was a veteran software engineer who had helped build Web-based programs for a number of startups. He decided it was time to strike out on his own and launched from the Ventura Ventures Technology Center. "So far, we've found cemeteries have nothing, or a few have Dewey decimal system archiving," Spore said. "One client didn't even know how many plots they had. The industry is really hurting."

Here is how it works. At participating cemeteries, users walk around to each grave site and snap a photo in the Tomb Finder app on a smart phone or tablet. The app notes the GPS location and uploads the shot to Tomb Finder's servers, where humans review the photo and type headstone information into a database. A handful of cemeteries in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties are serving as a pilot, and users can request to bring a cemetery online via the firm's site.

On the site and in the app, each gravestone gets a profile page of its

own, which can be customized with dedications and other forms of online memorial. Everything is moderated and monitored. And of course, within the app you can search for a tomb and then use your device's GPS to locate it.

Without any serious marketing, the Tomb Finder app has been downloaded almost 1,500 times. If the service takes off, it will create a national, GPS-indexed database of gravestones. It would join services like Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com in a move toward digitizing family histories.

Tomb Finder is also a business. It is a software-as-a-service product — hence the parent company's name "SaaSSoft" — and cemeteries will pay a small monthly fee to be included in the service. Flower and wreath deliveries become a possible source of commission revenue with GPS. Another component is to charge for online memorial services at the time plots are sold by the cemeteries. A basic page with the name and birth and death dates is free, but the ability to leave messages or post photographs will cost extra. Damron, of the Carpinteria cemetery, said the small extra cost for those memorials can be helpful, especially

when faraway relatives cannot afford to attend services in person. "All those types of things help people with the healing process," Damron said. "The product has a practical application and also a humanitarian [one]."

Some might feel a vague sense of unease about introducing GPS-enabled smart phones into the funeral and cemetery businesses. There is, after all, the issue of permanence. The Internet as we know it has existed for only a couple of decades, smart phones and tablets for far less. Gravestones and tombs, by contrast, are carved in stone. They are intended to memorialize the dead for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

Spore said he thought long and hard about this before launching the service. In the end, he decided any way that he could use technology to ease a difficult time in people's lives was worthwhile. He personally felt a need for the service when a struggle to find his father's grave in a large cemetery added considerable stress to a family trip. He said he hasn't encountered any criticism of the idea so far.

"That was a concern, especially in the early stages," Spore said. "It's a really trying time in life."