

Cemetery Restoration Workshop Helps Alleviate Grave Concerns

by Jeff Padgett
Correspondent

John "Walt" Walters started taking care of cemeteries almost by accident six years ago. Now he is Indiana's only professional cemetery restorer.

On Saturday, May 11, Walters led about 32 people in a cemetery restoration workshop in Dunreith, with morning discussion at the community building and hands-on work in the Dunreith Cemetery in the afternoon. The workshop, sponsored by the Henry County Cemetery Commission and the town of Dunreith, drew cemetery caretakers and officials, genealogists and other interested people from a wide area of Indiana and one man from Tennessee, working with an area resident in restoration of a Tennessee cemetery where many of her ancestors are buried. Two women from west of Indianapolis are working to restore a small cemetery on the farm one of them owns, in honor of her late husband, who always hoped to restore it.

In 1996, Walters told the group he was employed by the Fayette County Highway Department, basically mowing grass, when the caretaker for several small cemeteries retired. The county commissioners asked him to take on the job temporarily. He quickly became intrigued with the graveyards and felt something should be done to restore them.

He went to the library seeking information on how to repair tombstones and soon attended a workshop held by an expert from Illinois. At that workshop, he learned about an epoxy for gluing stones back together. He orders the epoxy, Mastico, from Hilgartner Natural Stone Company in Baltimore, Maryland, the only source. He also learned of a book, *A Graveyard Preservation Primer* by Lynnette Strangstad, which has become his source of training for restoration work. He told the group they should not be frightened by Strangstad's oft-repeated instruction to find a professional. Since there weren't any, he decided to become one, following her instructions.

He found a child's marker broken in five pieces and used the Mastico to put it back together. Placing it in a canvas bag normally used in elections, he took it to a meeting of the Fayette County commissioners. When he unveiled the stone, they voted unanimously to hire him for a restoration project for their cemeteries. Now he does workshops teaching others, since, he said, he

can't restore all the cemeteries in Indiana by himself.

Walters showed a number of slides of well-intentioned, but wrong, attempts at repairing broken stones. Repairs made with iron or steel rods and straps are unsightly, the iron pieces rust apart so the stones fall again and rust stains get in the stone, something he has never been able to remove. Often caretakers attempt to preserve stones by pouring a patch of concrete and placing the stones flat down. That changes the historic landscape of the cemetery and allows moisture to stand on top, damaging the stone. Epoxies, other than Mastico, tend to come loose in a short time, allowing the stones to fall again, often breaking into more pieces.

Other slides were of stones he has restored. In many

cases, he has found only parts of the stone. With the epoxy, he has put the parts he found together, often leaving gaps for the possibility of finding the other pieces.

Walters is especially opposed to putting stones in wet concrete bases. He explained that modern concrete

is much harder than old stone. When a mower or even a cow brushes against a tall stone, there is no give in the concrete, and the stone snaps. Instead, with a tall tablet stone where a third of its length can be put underground without obscuring the engraved information, he simply uses a bed of a half-and-half mixture of sand and pea gravel.

For stones which cannot be placed so deep, he uses slotted bases. In many cases, the old base is near the stone or buried where it should be. If he can repair it, he does. If not, he makes one using strips of 8-inch wide plywood. He measures the box so it extends three inches beyond the stone on all four sides, then fastens boards to a slat that goes across the box to form a slot ½ inch wider and ½ inch longer than the stone. Then he pours in concrete and lets it set. The extra space in the slot allows the stone to move instead of snapping when it is bumped.

For cleaning stones, he recommends starting with water alone and a nylon brush. If that is not enough, a mixture of one part ammonia and four parts water should be used. Bleach should never be used, because even though it gets the stones clean for a while, it eventually yellows the stone permanently.

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In the afternoon, Walters demonstrated some of his techniques in the cemetery. The Dunreith Cemetery was used from 1834 to the last marked grave in 1932, the last unmarked about 1962. Many stones were damaged in the 1966 train derailment and explosion, which led to the burning of the canning factory west of the cemetery. Town board president Tim Martin and member David Dudley said they always find funds to keep the cemetery mowed, but would like to restore as many of the stones as possible. As in most small cemeteries, broken stones are piled in a corner of the fence. Dudley also said there are some people interested in being buried in the cemetery, but records have been destroyed, so no one knows if space is available.

Spiceland Township Trustee Donna Tauber is president of the Henry County Cemetery Commission. They are working to

help restore and preserve pioneer cemeteries, defined as started before 1850. Instrumental in starting the commission and working with old cemeteries is Ulysses "Bud" Bush of New Castle. His website, www.hcgs.net, provides resources on genealogy and cemeteries in Henry County.

For the broader view of cemetery restoration, one should see the website of the Indiana Pioneer Cemetery Restoration Project, www.rootsweb.com/~inpcrp, and

that of the Association for Gravestone Studies, www.gravestonestudies.org. Strangstad's book and others are available from that website.

Tauber said contributions to the cemetery commission may be made to the Henry County Auditor, Pioneer Cemetery Fund. Those donations may be designated for a specific cemetery if the donor desires.

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