Restoring stones to their original state

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ONCE HELEN WILDERMUTH realized that damaged gravestones could look better, there was no turning back.

Her interest in genealogy had taken her to family members' graves that needed repair, and after taking a class that gave simple techniques for grave restoration, Wildermuth did volunteer work in local cemeteries for two years.

Now, seven years and some 12,000 stones later, Wildermuth's Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration in Nashville, IN is one of few companies doing restoration work for township cemeteries, cemetery associations, churches and for individuals.

"I knew how it felt when looking for my ancestors' graves. You'd find the stone, shoot a picture and get out of there in some cases because it was such a mess," said Wildermuth. "By no means do I consider myself an expert; I am self-taught over the years. But we use the mortars that were used 150 years ago, and the wooden tripod like would have been used then. We use no chemicals and if someone is trying to clean a stone, they should only use water and plastic brushes."

Stonehugger's restoration work can be found in Illinois township cemeteries in Laenna Township in Logan County; Princeton and Berlin Townships in Bureau County; Afton Township, DeKalb County and Decatur Township, Macon Co. Wildermuth has exhibited at TOI's Annual Educational Conference since 2006.

"One thing that is unique about our business is we include the documentation books with before/after photos with every project. This contribution to genealogy is huge," she said.

Berlin Township Trustee John Gaylord said his township highly recommends Wildermuth's work, and that the pictures she provides are nice to have.

"She does excellent work. She cleans the stones and repairs them when they are broken, and levels them and puts pea gravel under them. Some they make a new base for. If we weren't happy with her, we wouldn't have her come back," he said.

HELEN WILDERMUTH using a wooden tripod to work on stones at Lakeview Cemetery, Wayne Township, IN

Berlin Township budgets money each year for the repair work at Malden Cemetery, allotting about $10,000 some years, Gaylord said.

"I met her at the Conference and talked to her. We had been looking for someone to work on our cemetery."
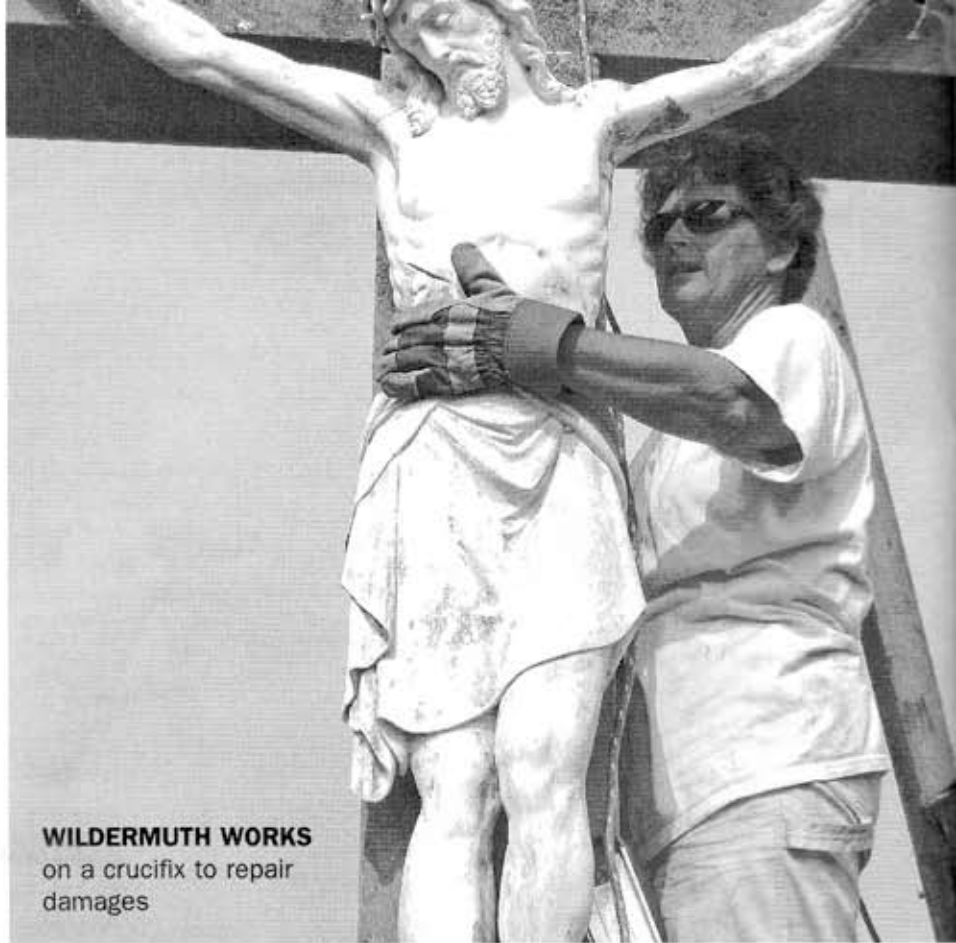
Wildermuth's work is year round, with projects in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Colorado. She also has a PowerPoint presentation that she makes to genealogy and other interested groups.

"It's an all-consuming profession," she said. "In warmer weather, we're in a cemetery from sun up to sun down, then it's back to a hotel to do the paperwork and documentation. But I've never had anyone say to me that they felt it was a mistake to have a cemetery restored. I usually bring a crew in with me because I can't dig some of those things out, but we do things the old-fashioned way, just like they did 150 years ago when they set the stones.

"A lot of my work consists of multi-year projects, because the funding isn't there to do it all at one time, so I do it in pieces," she said. "We also work on statuary and have done a little work on mausoleums. Most of my work comes from word of mouth."

Occasionally, there are stones that cannot be repaired, she said, and so she advocates that a replacement stone be set.

"Most of the time if we can find fragments, we repair the stone. These stones are very, very fragile, but they can be restored. It's a frame of mind, and 100 years from now, I hope my stones look as good as they do when restored today. The feeling at the end of a project is indescribable. Every stone is set differently and the climate affects things differently, and if repairs are done incorrectly, it takes much longer to repair that," said Wildermuth.

WILDERMUTH WORKS
on a crucifix to repair damages