Stonehuggers restore cemetery

By Nicole Inman
Daily News correspondent

ROCKTON — After years of planning, the Rockton Township Cemetery began work on the headstone restoration project Monday.

"It is important not to forget where we came from and our cemetery provides a piece of thUt history so it is important to preserve it, said Jerri Noller, Sexton and Records Clerk for the Rockton Township Cemetery. "Five years ago I started researching how to restore these old, broken headstones."

The 25-acre cemetery started out with 7 acres, purchased from Wait Talcott in 1857. The oldest burial belongs to the child of a friend of Talcott's that was there before it became a cemetery and is still in good condition today.

Headstone restoration is a process that requires the care and knowledge that only the experts are equipped with. Over the years headstones in direct contact with the earth suffer weather related deterioration. Other contributing factors to gravestone disfigurement are industrial and automotive pollution and chemicals such as iron and copper in the water supply or in cleaners.

A sign placed by Stonehuggers Cemetery Restoration in the Rockton Township Cemetery notes work is in progress to restore headstones. Work began Monday to restore and repair headstones.
Photo by Nicole Inman

Once the decision was made to start restoring and preserving the Rockton Township Cemetery it was up to Noller to find the right professional for the job.

Noller discovered Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration Inc. at a business conference. After looking at their previous projects Noller put her name on a waiting list.

Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration Inc. (SCRI), a full-service cemetery restoration company based in Indiana, specializes in complete renovation and repair of pioneer cemeteries in the Great Lakes area and beyond. In 2010, SCRI will have completed restoration of more than 15,000 gravestones, markers and monuments.

"It is important to restore and preserve cemeteries because they are our history, these are the pioneers that settled and created this township," said Helen Wildermuth, Owner of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration Inc.. "They made a home out of the wilderness, many went through unspeakable difficulties, so out of respect to them, we work to preserve and restore their history."

After securing the professionals the Rockton Township Cemetery had to set aside money in order for the restoration project to begin.

"Through budgeting and wise spending we were able gather $10,000 for the initial amount," said Noller. "With such a labor intensive project, you need a good incentive to make it worth the company's time, especially coming from Indiana."

As part of the restoration project Wildermuth and her crew will work on the selected headstones that are lying broken throughout the cemetery. They will photograph and document everything that needs work, level, reset, and repair and clean them.

"Some of the selected headstones are weather worn, have been lying in the dirt for many years and are in really bad shape," said Noller. "These are 1800s and 1900s stones, made mostly of marble and sandstone, which have been selected randomly for restoration and will look as good as new once the project is complete."

Last year Noller and staff started working on their own on the smaller granite stones and were able to clean and restore 15 short rows of headstones. With the help of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration Inc. the cemetery will have 40 to 45 markers and stones restored.

"I think this project is so important because it lehg the town and the people who have family members and ancestors buried there know that we care about

preserving history," said Noller. "Once it's gone, it's gone; it is no longer something you can fix.