No stone unturned

By Kristy Zurbrick
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When you wipe away 150 years of grime, you clean up history.

Canaan Township trustees Jim Meeker (left) and Monroe Harbage (right) flank Helen Wildermuth, owner of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration, and a monument of a Civil War soldier. After cleaning the stone, Wildermuth was able to record the exact inscription honoring Luther Harrington, a member of Co. D 40 Reg. of the Ohio Volunteer Infantry, who died on May 2, 1888, at the age of 54 years, 4 months and 4 days: "Can we forget those boys in blue, those boys we used to know. Should their country prevail so true so many years ago."

On Nov. 9, Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration out of Nashville, Ind., completed the first phase of a four-year gravemarker cleanup at the cemetery behind Big Darby Baptist Church in Canaan Township.

Stonehugger owner Helen Wildermuth and a crew of five spent a week-and-a-half leveling, re-mortaring, resetting and, where necessary, repairing 61 monuments and tablets—some dating back to the 1850s and at least one marking the grave of a Civil War veteran.

"What we're doing here should be a 75- to 100-year fix," Wildermuth said. "A lot of the stones haven't had any attention in 100 to 150 years."

The Canaan Township trustees, who maintain and operate the cemetery, hired Wildermuth to do the project after learning about her services through a promotional postcard and referrals.

"We've always gotten positive comments on how we care for the cemetery grounds, but we were always disappointed in how the monuments look," said Canaan Township trustee Monroe Harbage. "So, we saw this as another way to keep up the cemetery."

Trustee Jim Meeker added, "It's important to save your history so it doesn't erode in front of your eyes."

The Big Darby Baptist project is somewhat unique, in that only a few other cemeteries in Ohio are getting the same treatment, Wildermuth said.

Stonehugger serves a five-state area, including Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana and Michigan. The Big Darby Baptist cemetery is the company's first project in Madison County. They also have worked on or will be working on cemeteries in Springfield, Sidney, Huron County and Darke County in Ohio. As word gets around, Wildermuth said the number of inquiries and project commitments increases. She has averaged 2,000 stone restorations per year over the past six years.

The Process

The solution used to clean the gravemarkers is as simple as it gets—water, a plastic brush, and judiciously applied elbow grease.

"We do not use any chemicals because they will do damage down the road, even eat stones up," Wildermuth said.

It's amazing what a thorough scrubbing will do. Stones shrouded in dirt from years of standing out in the elements gleam in the sunlight. Inscriptions once impossible to read are clear again, without the need for re-carving.

"When we're done, each stone looks close to what it looked like the day it was set," Wildermuth said.

As for the "glue" used to keep sections of monuments from toppling over, Stonehugger uses a hand-mixed mortar appropriate to the stones' original time period.

"We use sand, lime and portland, which replicates what they would have used back then," Wildermuth explained.

Most of the earliest stones were made of marble, rather than the granite popular in recent decades. As such, Stonehugger forgoes concrete and setting compounds which could cause marble to break.

While they use some modern tools to restore the stones, the crew finds that the old way often is the best way. A case in point is the mechanism they use to disassemble then reassemble the larger monuments—a simple tripod and winch does the trick, Wildermuth said.

Documentation

Comprehensive documentation is part of the process when Stonehugger enters into a cemetery cleanup project. Crew members take "before" and "after" photographs of each gravemarker, as well as record each inscription, the type and measurements of each stone, and the restoration work performed.

The documentation serves several purposes, Wildermuth said. When the stones are cleaned up again in 75 to 100 years, workers will know how they were handled during the first restoration.

The documentation also is a genealogist's dream. Dates, names, and inscriptions once unreadable or, in some cases, misread, due to decades of grime are now accurate.

"We usually change or correct about 30 percent of the existing listings due to errors caused because the stones were previously too hard to read or were lying on the ground and too heavy to move," Wildermuth said.

The information that is revealed is enlightening.

"There are a lot of stories on those stones. Some are sad and tragic, and some you see lived long and prosperous lives," Wildermuth said.

"This is really the most valuable part of the restoration," she continued.

The stones are a physical record of lives that have come before. In some cases, their inscriptions are the only formal accounting of a life, as in the case of infants who didn't live long enough to get counted in the U.S. Census.

"Always at the end of the day, I feel like we did something worthwhile and made a difference," Wildermuth said.

Future Cleanup

Stonehugger got to about 25 percent of the stones that need attention in the Big Darby Baptist cemetery. If the trustees so choose, Stonehugger will be back for three more sessions over the next three years to restore the rest of gravemarkers. In total, the project encompasses approximately 200 stones.

The first part of the project cost $12,500, according to Phyllis Sparks, the township's fiscal officer. It has been money well-spent, say the trustees.

"We're trying to preserve and record the history that's not only in the township but in the graveyard," Meeker said.

"We've already had people commenting on how great the markers look," Harbage said.

The township purchased the cemetery in 1860, at which time it contained 20 graves. It previously had been a family cemetery. It sits at the intersection of Price-Hilliards and Plain City Georgesville roads.

Contractor Mark Davis, owner of Stone Savers Cemetery Restoration, repairs a broken grave marker.