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Tilted headstones made right again Township may continue work at Greenwood Cemetery

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DECATUR - Looking over the rolling hills of 104-acre Greenwood Cemetery, Helen Wildermuth and Mark Davis agree on one thing: They could spend the rest of their lives cleaning and straightening its headstones. Instead, the operators of **Stonehugger** Cemetery Restoration of Nashville, Ind., spent slightly more than two days at the cemetery last week, restoring 10 headstones under a contract with Decatur Township, which owns and operates the cemetery.

Township Trustee Gary Brennan pushed for the work to make a start on restoring the dozens of damaged, tilting or fallen stones among the more than 18,000 graves. Burials at the site predate 1857, when a cemetery association was formed to manage the grounds. Township cemetery workers were given tips by the restoration crew on resetting fallen stones, work the township board hopes can be done as time permits in coming years. Wildermuth, Davis and four workers performed their services 12 hours on Wednesday and the same on Thursday. They did several additional stones for free that were related to ones either the township or Wildermuth had selected for restoration.

Wildermuth said she liked genealogy as a young adult and looked for her grandparents' graves in a rundown cemetery, a condition she considered normal at that time.

"Six years ago, a restoration professional did a workshop in my area that I attended," she said. "It was like a light bulb clicked on in my head. I said to myself, 'I can do that.' "

Her efforts the first two years were on a volunteer basis, but calls flooded into her home, seeking her services. Wildermuth said she decided it could become a business.

"We're booking now into 2010," she said, noting their crew works year-round.

"We've got people everywhere screaming for us," Davis said. "They want work done by Memorial Day, but we can't be everywhere at once. We could work here forever and not get done."

Most of the limestone, sandstone or marble stones the firm cleans using a plastic rotary brush and water can be read once the mildew, moss and dirt are removed, Wildermuth said. The firm does not recut stones if inscriptions are weathered away, she said.

Observing the work and nearby tilting stones, cemetery Superintendent John Simroth said, "You'd be surprised how much the ground shakes when (Canadian National Railroad) trains are parked nearby. We have a lot of groundhogs, too. They dig into the hills, and that causes the stones to tilt. Lots of them collapse, eventually."

Wildermuth pointed out various parts of headstones that were missing. She said one with an arched top that stands about 4 feet high should be twice that height.

"It should have marble columns on both sides under the arch, which should be way up in the air," Wildermuth said. "At some point, it likely toppled and whoever straightened it just put the arch back on the base and hauled the columns away."

The older parts of Greenwood are filled with large, old oak trees, which give the cemetery a restful appearance but are becoming brittle. Limbs tend to break off during storms, such as the ice storm

overnight Nov. 30, damaging headstones as they fall. At least one stone knocked over last fall was righted by **Stonehugger**.

Wildermuth said the multiple hills also guarantee ongoing problems because gravity always wins the battle with shifting headstones and monuments.

One stone Wildermuth cleaned and reset belongs to Norton Campbell, who died in 1868 at age 33 years, 8 months and 3 days. His stone states he was born in Ithaca, N.Y., and died at Tamaroa, Ill. Next to his marker is a smaller, military stone. On it, his first name is spelled "Morton" and it provides the information that he was a musician in Company A of the 61st Illinois Infantry.

"The government stone likely has his first name misspelled," Davis said. "His family probably placed the larger stone with his correct name on it. It has a Masonic symbol with crossed swords underneath. That's unusual because he was in the infantry, not the cavalry."

Stonehugger workers cleaned the smaller, government stone as well as the family monument, though the firm will not be paid for that work.

"Every November, we go to a cemetery that we choose on Veterans Day and set stones for free," Davis said. "We feel it's giving something back to those people who served our country. A lot of those stones need help."

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FOR INFO

Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration of Nashville, Ind., has worked at cemeteries in Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio. The company can be reached at (317) 796-6133 or online at www.stonehugger.com.

Herald & Review photos/ Kelly J. Huff

Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration owners Helen Wildermuth and Mark Davis lift the 1856 headstone of James B. Maffitt in Greenwood Cemetery.

Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration employees Jose Angeles Juan Gonzalez and Basilio Gaspar lift a stone back into place in Greenwood Cemetery.

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