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County history gets a face lift

By CHRISTOPHER SHORT
For The Paper

Old cemeteries never die - they just sit and wait for some much-needed TLC.

That was the message Tuesday night, when a restoration expert updated a dozen members of the Genealogy Club of Montgomery County and other groups on a three-year process to rejuvenate local graveyards.

Helen Wildermuth, of Nashville-based Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration, was contracted by the Union Township Trustee's office to restore 15 cemeteries in the township's jurisdiction - from Youngs Chapel on 450N to Finley on 500S. In all, they contain about 1,400 headstones, which makes for a whole lot of work.

"It's a very tedious process, but when you see how it turns out, it's all worth it," Wildermuth said.

Most of the sites date to the 19th century, and consist of fragile marble, limestone and sandstone markers. After photographing and removing the stones, Wildermuth and subcontractors wash off decades of grime and algae using only water and plastic brushes. Then they put them back on re-leveled foundations, using mortar specially matched to the material.

The result is not only a like-new gleam in the old stones, but an occasional chance to set history straight.

Old Town Cemetery, at Lafayette Avenue and Covington Street, was recently found to be the final resting place of Revolutionary War veteran Lot French, who died in 1828. He was previously thought to be buried farther south, at Odd Fellows Cemetery. Wildermuth ordered a replacement headstone from the U.S. Veterans Administration, and hopes to get the grave properly marked by the end of the summer.

"We're hoping that Mr. French will get the attention he deserves," Wildermuth said.

Such misunderstandings aren't uncommon, given the old graveyards' neglected states. Shilo Cemetery, near State Road 136 and 400 East, has only 160 markers among its 198 graves, according to documents on display Tuesday.

Genealogy Club members were impressed by the presentation, which was held at the Donnelley Room in the basement of the Crawfordsville District Public Library. Dian Moore, who also serves as the library's local history specialist, appreciated the amount of work involved, recalling that the club took six years to restore nearby O'Neall Cemetery.

"I found that I really don't like scrubbing tombstones," Moore said. "They seem to be doing a great job."

The current restoration project is set for completion by the end of the year. It is budgeted for \$93,000 in 2010, trustee's office workers said.