



Of the pioneers who made Brown County home in the 1800s, little more is left than stories.

Entire communities — their churches, schools, stores and homes — have disappeared from the landscape.

The last signs on the land that their residents once walked these hills are the cemeteries where they took their final rest.

That ground holds often-overlooked works of art as well.

Henry Cross, whom some consider to be Brown County's first artist of recorded history, was a farmer by trade and a stone carver by craft.

The area in Van Buren Township known as Stone Head takes its name from the stone head he carved as a directional marker, which still sits at the junction of State Road 135 South and Bellsville Pike. Yet, the majority of his work is found in cemeteries.

Helen Wildermuth operates Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration and does work all over the United States. She said she has found Henry Cross' stones in Bartholomew County, too.

"His work I recognize instantly," she said. "If I go into a cemetery and I see one of his headstones, I can walk up to it and say, 'That's Henry Cross,' because his style was so unique and so advanced for a person that was, basically, just a simple country farmer."

Cross died in an accident while clearing land when he was 42.

"Who knows what kind of beautiful things he would have produced later in his life, too," Wildermuth said.

## **Threatened**

Even stone is not forever. The seasons and terrain of Brown County are not kind to cemeteries. The earth itself moves with enough time, and the hilly terrain of Brown County does nothing to slow that progress, Wildermuth said. Buried in the ground, stone can even bend by moisture and time.

Freezing and thawing and trees — either through roots growing or limbs falling in storms — can leave grave markers fallen, broken or on the verge of both.

In the past, families would tend to the graves of their own, said Van Buren Township Trustee Vicki Payne. One family still volunteers to mow the cemetery where their ancestors are buried. But few are aware of the condition of the graveyards, and some families don't even have a living member left in the county.

Under state law, it's the township trustees' responsibilities to care for cemeteries that do not have active associations caring for them.

Van Buren Township alone has 27 registered cemeteries, according to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' database.

Across all of Brown County, the DNR has recorded 113, some of which could be as small as a single grave.

With so many cemeteries dotting the county, even mowing can be a costly task, Payne said.

## Restoration

When Vivian Wolff came to early meetings of the Peaceful Valley Heritage preservation group almost two years ago, she carried an album filled with photographs of Brown County's deteriorating one-room country churches. From her work at places such as Mt. Zion Church, she took an interest in the condition of cemeteries as well.

Earlier this year, Wolff came together with others interested in Brown County's cemeteries to form the Brown County Cemetery Preservation Society, falling under the heritage group's umbrella.

Now, working with township trustees, cemetery associations and any others willing, the group is endeavoring to turn back some of what time has done.

Recent efforts have focused on Sprunica Church Cemetery in Hamblen Township and New Bellsville Cemetery in Van Buren, where they have partnered with the township trustees and the New Bellsville Cemetery Association to restore some of the grave markers.

The cemetery preservation society came to the table with a \$2,000 grant from the Brown County Community Foundation and another \$1,000 from the heritage group.

In New Bellsville, the cemetery association was eager to commit \$1,400 to the effort, Payne said.

Payne has committed \$3,550 to work in Van Buren cemeteries this year, including the restoration of several of Cross' stones at Melott Cemetery, which sits across from Cross' former home and is his own final resting place.

Hamblen Township Trustee Phil Stephens is contributing \$2,000 for current efforts at Sprunica. After successful restoration efforts at Mt. Zion Cemetery last year, Stephens sought more room in his budget for similar work.

Marie Fox, with the New Bellsville Cemetery Association, said all the work needed at that one cemetery has been estimated to cost about \$28,000.

The group has started a GoFundMe page, but support so far has been sparse.

Wildermuth said in one community she works with in Wisconsin, locals "adopt" markers in

graveyards.

They usually have enough raised in a year's time to work on six to eight markers, she said. By focusing on raising money in smaller portions, it can be less daunting than trying to raise enough to restore an entire cemetery.

### **Its own art**

Restoration of the stones could be considered an art form in its own right. Preparing to repair a marker made by Cross in New Bellsville, Roberto Rojas-Martinez adds dye to mortar, mixing in a bit then adding more, looking for just the right tint to match the time-colored face of the stone.

The stone was split in half, portions laying in the dirt, and was missing a fist-sized chunk when Wildermuth's crew started working on it. They shaped a replacement for the missing chunk using a "donor" piece from the grave's foot stone — a plain stone used to mark the foot of graves.

With the odd shapes of the pieces epoxied together, the mortar helps to protect the epoxy from the weather, as well as restoring some of the original appearance of the stone, Wildermuth said.

The work can be time- and labor-intensive, she said.

Normally, due to the cost that goes into the work, Wildermuth said she can't afford to take her crew to smaller projects. But even before all the funds came together for her recent work in Brown County — which is her home — Wildermuth was willing to make an exception.

"This is mainly because I'm trying to give back to the community," she said.

Payne said she hopes other locals who see the improvements at the cemeteries will be inspired to give something back as well.

"These are the people that made our community," Payne said. "I think that it's been forgotten too long."

### How to help

Indiana has several laws regarding cemeteries, and some work that goes beyond cleaning markers may require a permit from the state.

Those planning to take on restoration projects, or wishing to record the location of a cemetery, can seek guidance from Jeannie Regan-Dinius, director of special initiatives at the Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology.

- Email: [jrdinius@dnr.in.gov](mailto:jrdinius@dnr.in.gov)
- Call: 317-234-1268

The DNR's database of registered cemeteries can be found at [in.gov/dnr/historic/4505.htm](http://in.gov/dnr/historic/4505.htm).

To get involved with the Brown County Cemetery Preservation Society, email [bccempreservsoc@gmail.com](mailto:bccempreservsoc@gmail.com).

Tax-deductible contributions to the restoration of grave markers at New Bellsville Cemetery can be made at [gofundme.com/nbc-restore](http://gofundme.com/nbc-restore).

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### **Ben Kibbey**

Ben Kibbey is a Brown County transplant from the cornfields of central Ohio. He covers county government, business, outdoors, sports and general news.

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