



Photo: David Dodson

Rescuing Rural Cemeteries From Ruin

Nature has taken over many once carefully tended country cemeteries. But concerned families and communities are reclaiming some of these historical treasures.

When Delbert Hicks of Scottsboro, Ala., began a genealogical search for his roots, his travels took him to Georgia. "I found my ancestors buried in a pine thicket," says Hicks, still saddened at the thought.

"So I made a study of why graves go back to the woods," he adds. "When I got back to Scottsboro, the people here asked me to help get our local cemetery back in shape."

And that he did. Fifty dump truck loads of rotten plants and 10 years later, the 3½-acre Pleasant View

Cemetery in Scottsboro is well kept.

An association monitors the investment of a \$100,000 trust. Additional funds for the cemetery come from selling and inscribing monuments and from selling memorial plaques for family members buried at the site.

Is Cleanup Worth the Effort?

To genealogists, historians, and some families, old cemeteries are sites of "buried treasure." Beneath the briars, copperheads, and poison

oak is some of the best documentation of local history available.

Cemetery researcher Paul N. Allen of Prestonsburg, Ky., is concerned that as rural cemeteries succumb to neglect, so also goes the rural tradition of Decoration Day, or Memorial Day, an annual reunion that strengthens family ties in many rural areas.

"It still is an important day for people getting together in some areas," says Allen. "In years past, that's when most of the maintenance





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was done on the cemetery too."

Although the task may seem insurmountable, some families are determined to reclaim their family cemeteries from briars and brambles. Communities, too, have found that old-time volunteerism, ingenuity, and a common goal are factors for successfully turning a local eyesore into a source of pride. In some cases, a registered historic landmark also has been established.

Getting Started

"No one person can do it alone. Get a faithful group interested. Search for ideas, then work and sweat, and it can be done," Margaret Bass advises would-be cemetery restorers. She is president of the Mount Antioch Cemetery Association in Mount Calm, Tex.



With the help of county inmates and community volunteers, Joyce and Billy Cusic have restored old St. Joseph's Parish Cemetery in Morganza, Md. The cemetery is shown as they found it in 1988 (top), after clearing undergrowth (above), and as it is today (left).

Photos: Joyce Cusic

If the cemetery is on land that isn't yours, avoid a possible trespassing charge by getting permission from property owners. It's also a good idea to talk with relatives of the deceased; they may provide physical and financial help.

Civic, youth, and church groups are likely candidates for providing labor and resources. Individuals such as Joyce Cusic have shown that community members can be rallied for monetary and volunteer support. Most of the people in the Morganza, Md., area, for example, didn't know that the old St. Joseph's Parish Cemetery existed, but Joyce Cusic did.

"Every time I passed by, I would have a feeling of despair, knowing that hundreds of people were buried in that tangle of vines and trees," she remembers.

"Deep down, I always wished that there was something I could do about that cemetery, but I didn't know how to get started on such a formidable project."

Joyce, her husband, Billy, and their son John began work when they learned of a man from a neighboring county who also was interested in cleaning up the cemetery because he had relatives buried there. A few weeks into the project, however, the

Cusics decided that the 10-acre cleanup was too large a job for their puny work force.

They called the sheriff and learned that the county's work release program allowed inmates who have committed minor offenses to participate in community service.

Only two inmates volunteered. But when word got back to the others

about the wonderful lunch Joyce served, as many as 20 inmates showed up each Saturday thereafter.

Materials You'll Need

The inmates provided manpower, but for big jobs, like removing giant tree stumps, the Cusics used three wreckers from their small auto and truck repair service. Those who are



(Above, center) Eddie Gibbons (left), Joe Parker (center), and Richard Wells help reset an old tombstone at Carter Cemetery in Giles County, Tenn. The restoration project was initiated as part of the Tennessee Homecoming '86 celebration. Photo: Clara Parker



not as well equipped might ask service station owners about donating their wrecker service trucks for a few hours. Also, most fire departments will assist in burning debris.

"The tools we used were simple ones," says Phyllis Hanney, recalling her project in Princeton, Ky., "a pair of loppers [pruning shears] for saplings, an ax, a chain saw, and a little tool called a Woodzig (a curved saw blade that fits into a wooden handle).

"The Woodzig, in addition to a good limb saw, was indispensable for tearing away the thick mat of honeysuckle, wild grapevines, and 'graveyard myrtle' or creeping phlox, which covered the ground."

Other materials typically needed include trash bags, paint for fences, and landscaping tools and materials. Also, water, household bleach, cleansing agents, baking soda, vinegar, and bristle brushes or heavy-duty plastic scrubbing pads can be used for cleaning mildew, dirt, and lichen from tombstones.

Money and Labor

Even if labor is free, the cost of materials adds up. Often, most of the payment for cleanup comes out of the pockets of the person who initiates the restoration project.

In Mount Calm, Tex., letters sent to members of the Mount Antioch Cemetery Association successfully generated donations, notes Margaret Bass.

"Each time new problems arose, letters were sent and appeals were made for money," she explains.

New plants cost money, but the knowledge of local garden club members may provide great savings. Before doing away with all plant growth, check with knowledgeable gardeners about which plants to prune and which to keep for low maintenance.

Continuous Upkeep

Many people designate an annual cleanup maintenance fundraising day for their cemeteries. Family reunions are perfect occasions for such cleanup and collection days. Raffles and barbecues are great fundraisers for these family gatherings.

In 1910, the local chapter of the Woodmen of the World began maintaining the Red Mud Cemetery, 6 miles west of Spur, Tex. Now, the entire community has a cleanup day and business meeting on the first Saturday of June every year.

"Each family brings a basket lunch, and we enjoy the day in mem-

ory of our loved ones," says Bessie Lee Martin, secretary-treasurer of the Red Mud Cemetery Association.

Planning for Perpetual Care

Delbert Hicks says the future care of cemeteries is uncertain unless you're able to identify a supportive group that cares about the cemetery.

"Success depends upon identifying the sensitivity surrounding that cemetery," says Hicks. "Who cares about the cemetery? And who wants to see that it's still standing for future generations?"

And to be sure that their labor of love won't be in vain in the years to come, many groups have set up perpetual care accounts for the future.

Other cemetery associations have set up similar endowments or trust funds to assure proper upkeep.

According to Hicks, initiator of the Pleasant View Cemetery Association in Scottsboro, the first step toward present and future care of the cemetery should be to hire an attorney who is familiar with setting up trusts for this purpose. The attorney can help establish a nonprofit status for the association and set up the group's necessary bylaws and constitution.

By **DEBORAH G. LOWERY** and **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON**



For More Information

Publications on the how-to's of cemetery cleanup, repair, recording, and maintenance are available from the following organizations.

The American Association for State and Local History, 172 2nd Ave. North, Suite 202, Nashville, TN 37201; phone 1-615-255-2971.

The Association for Gravestone Studies, 46 Plymouth Rd., Needham, MA 02192; phone 1-617-455-8180.

The Georgia Genealogical Society, Box 38066, Atlanta, GA 30334 (no phone).

The Tennessee Historical Commission, 701 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37243; phone 1-615-742-6716.

When William Benbow Davis died in 1979, his wife, Marjorie, wanted to bury him in his family cemetery in Clarendon County, S.C. His burial marked the family's efforts to restore the site that dates back to 1798. (Far left) Here is Benbow Cemetery as it appeared in 1979 after clearing and (left) as it appears now.

Photos: Rebecca Margarte and Maynard Davis