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DENNIS NARTKER

Restorationists restore the near 140-year-old, five-foot-tall grave marker for Civil War veteran George Washington Dawson's grave in Lake View Cemetery north of Kendallville. Shown left to right are Justin

Straub and Helen Wildmuth of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration, Martinsville, and Mark Davis of Stone Saver Cemetery Restoration, Hartford City.

'Together we can restore dignity'

Lake View Cemetery's grave markers to get much-needed care

BY DENNIS NARTKER
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KENDALLVILLE — Civil War Union soldier George Washington Dawson survived in the infamous Andersonville prison and the explosion and sinking of the steamboat Sultana.

On June 28, 1865, this Kendallville area resident died from burns sustained in the Sultana disaster shortly after his release from prison at the end of the war. Marred by neglect, Dawson's

crumbling, discolored, lichen-encrusted five-foot high marble pedestal grave marker sat untouched at his gravesite on Lake View Cemetery's east side for nearly 140 years.

Untouched until now. "Every grave marker deserves to be restored," said Helen Wildmuth of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration. "Together we can restore dignity to our early pioneers," her business card reads. Using ammonia, water and a plastic

brush, Wildmuth washed away years of greenish black grime from Dawson's monument, careful not to damage the marble.

No sandblasting or power-washing is used, just tender loving hands-on care.

"We try to use the same methods that were used in the pioneer days to restore these marble grave markers," she said.

A new cement headstone for Dawson in front of the monument was provided

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DIGNITY: Restorationists will spend a month restoring approximately 125 historic markers

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by area veterans through a federally funded replacement program.

About 100 feet north of Dawson's grave lies the gravesite of another Civil War veteran, Pvt. John D. Weatherford of Co. L of the 2nd Missouri Calvary, Confederate States of America. He was born on Nov. 23, 1838, and died on Dec. 6, 1904.

Among Weatherford's family buried at the site is his daughter, Gertie, who died on April 18, 1870, at the age of 2 years, 8 months.

"Little Gertie died after falling into a vat of boiling soap," said Mark Davis, of Stone Saver Cemetery Restoration. "We'll restore those marble grave markers to their original white luster."

Beginning this week the two cemetery restoration companies will spend about a month restoring 125 historic grave markers in Lake View Cemetery.

A spring fund-raising campaign, organized by Kendallville residents Diane Peachey and Ruth Cook, successfully raised the money to pay for the restoration work.

Peachey and Cook noticed the poor condition of old grave markers in the 50-acre cemetery during a spring cleanup they also organized, and then recommended the restoration to the Lake View Cemetery Committee. Peachey learned about the restorationists from a newspaper story.

Wildmuth surveyed the cemetery to identify the 125 markers in most need of restoration.

"I became interested in this work about four years ago when

looking into my family's history," she said. Wildmuth saw a need for the work and formed Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration.

Together with Davis' Stone Saver Cemetery Restoration, they restore 1,000 to 1,200 grave markers a year throughout Indiana.

They block and tackle an A-frame to lift the monuments and use only hand tools to clean them — no chemicals, pressure washing or wire wheels.

"We don't use heavy equipment because it can damage the turf," said Wildmuth. They also use hand-mixed mortars and epoxies instead of cement.

"The restoration should last 75 years," said Davis.

Both are history buffs and document each project with before and after photographs. They also consult cemetery records, local history documents and history books noting the historical significance of each gravesite.

"Lake View's records are great," said Wildmuth. "We've never seen such detailed cemetery records."

Dawson's story is inscribed on his grave marker and noted in the cemetery records.

He was captured by the Confederates following the Battle of Perryville in Kentucky, and released from Andersonville in Georgia in April 1865.

Dawson joined 2,200 other freed prisoners for the trip home on the Mississippi River steamboat Sultana. A boiler explosion sunk the Sultana with the loss of 1,500 lives.

Dawson was seriously burned and taken to Overton Hospital in Memphis, Tenn. He



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Restorationists with Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration and Stone Saver Cemetery Restoration join restoration fund-raising campaign chairpersons Ruth Cook and Diane Peachey and Lake View Cemetery superintendent Ryan Alwine at the restored

Heimer white marble grave marker in Lake View Cemetery north of Kendallville. Standing left to right are Cook, Peachey, Helen Wildmuth of Stonehugger, Alwine, Davis of Stone Saver and Justin Straub of Stonehugger.

was the last Sultana survivor to die and his body was brought to his northeast Indiana home for burial.

The restorationists do all their work on site.

"Everything we do is a stone by stone basis. We do what's best for each particular stone," said Wildmuth.

They biggest headache is dealing with improper concrete repairs they must replace with

their special mortar or epoxy.

The restorationists are careful not to disturb graves.

"Indiana law prohibits digging at graves," said Davis. "All our work is done on the head stone."

The oldest grave marker they've worked on is 1823, and Davis has noticed an 1836 marker in Lake View Cemetery.

"This is one of the most

satisfying and rewarding jobs I've ever had," said Wildmuth, a former truck driver, factory worker and foster mother.

The restoration is possible because of contributions from the Iota Iota Chapter of Delta Theta Tau, the Olive B. Cole Foundation, the Noble County Community Foundation, Wayne Township, Lake View Endowment Fund and caring individuals and businesses.