

HARRIS TOWNSHIP

273 tombstones repaired in cemetery near Elmore

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By [ERIKA RAY](#) BLADE STAFF WRITER

A month ago, all that was left of Jacob Grambling's broken tombstone was his name.

His age and birth and death dates on the bottom half of it had been busted into several pieces and, over time, ended up buried beneath his crumbling headstone lying nearly flat on the ground.

But now, anyone visiting the Harrington Cemetery in Harris Township just west of Elmore can plainly see that Mr. Grambling was 64 years old when he died on Aug. 12, 1854.

His was one of 273 tombstones that were repaired through a complete cemetery restoration project that just wrapped up last week.

Helen Wildermuth, 48, from Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration, and Mark Davis of Stone Saver Cemetery partnered with a handful of freelance contractors to work under the blazing sun for four weeks to restore each of the gravestones inside the wrought-iron cemetery fence.

"You couldn't read anything, hardly," Ms. Wildermuth said of the headstones when she arrived at the cemetery.

Though the two companies are both Indiana-based, they have traveled to cemeteries throughout Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky to restore the tombstones to as close to the condition they were in when they were first set at the graves, Ms. Wildermuth said.

Each headstone was hand-cleaned with water and straightened so it stands perpendicular to the ground. Cracked headstones were fixed using epoxy so the inscriptions on the soft marble could once again be easily read.

"I realized I could make a difference in some of these cemeteries," she said, explaining why she opened her business. "A cemetery is a microcosm of the community."

A month ago, most of the headstones were dirty and leaning every which way. Some were broken in several pieces or lying on the ground instead of standing tall.

"It looked like a sorry-looking cemetery," Trustee Ken Neeb said.

That's why he and the other Harris Township trustees voted to spend \$47,250 to restore the cemetery that holds the remains of Israel Harrington, who bought a plot of land that eventually grew into the village of Elmore. Mr. Harrington, who died in 1841, was a judge and the township's first trustee and minister.

The funds to repair the headstones came from the township's 0.7-mill cemetery levy.

Almost all the restoration Ms. Wildermuth does involves pioneer cemeteries - or those that are at least 100 years old.

She said she works year-round and repairs an average of 2,000 tombstones annually.

About 40 percent of the headstones in the Harrington Cemetery, like most pioneer cemeteries, are smaller because they mark children's graves. These stones often have lambs or a broken rosebud carved into them.

In addition, Ms. Wildermuth said the Harrington Cemetery is the final resting place for two War of 1812 veterans, one Mexican War veteran, one Revolutionary War soldier, and 35 Civil War veterans.

"We don't just restore the cemeteries," she said. "We research so we know who these people are. It's taking a step back in time, really."



Helen Wildermuth and Raul Martinez of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration of Indiana use epoxy to put together one of the broken headstones in the Harrington Cemetery in Harris Township just west of Elmore.
(THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)