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Restoration continues at Rockton Township Cemetery

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Photo by Toni Rocha

Stonehugger owner Helen Wildermuth

Stonehugger owner Helen Wildermuth applies epoxy to seal repaired cracks on a marker.

Posted: Saturday, September 17, 2011 1:00 am

By Toni Rocha Beloit Daily News correspondent | 0 comments

ROCKTON — Time passes.

People pass on or move on.

What remains behind of social and historical value is most often found in the cemeteries where time seems to stand patiently still.

Erosion, pollution, the slow but steady influences of the passing years steal the grace and dignity from graveyards where loved ones rest. The 150-year-plus Rockton Township Cemetery on Union Street is no exception, but now a carefully phased effort is underway to restore the serenity, purity and beauty of this quiet place.

Under the direction of Jerri Noller, township sextant and clerk, a crew of dedicated craftsmen from Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration are revitalizing the oldest, most stressed stones. Two phases are now complete.

"I looked at a lot of restoration companies but chose Stonehugger because they do not use acids or chemicals," Noller said. "Instead, they use water and a gentle friction process to remove dirt, moss, mold and stains. Then the stones are properly replaced and aligned."

Beginning with the very oldest grave sites dating back to the 1850s, the restoration process is transforming not only the look but also the feel of the cemetery. Noller said \$10,000 has been allocated for each phase by the township augmented with donations from the public.

"What has been so good about this work is that now families are coming forward and paying for restoration services on their loved ones' resting places," Noller added. Pointing to a century-old grave, she said, "Look, there are flowers here. In all the years I have worked with the township, this is the first time I have seen



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flowers at the stone."

For Stonehugger owner Helen Wildermuth, restoring cemeteries is more than a profession. It is a passion.

"I was into genealogy, looking for family and photographing their graves when I attended a historical society meeting on restoration," Wildermuth said. "It was like being struck by lightning. I knew I wanted to do this."

So at age 45, Wildermuth launched Stonehugger, based in Indiana. As she knelt by a time-pocked white stone patiently applying epoxy to seal cracks left from repairing the broken stone, Wildermuth explained how her business evolved.

"Cemetery restoration is a self-taught skill," she said. "There are no classes or manuals written to teach a person how. And every stone is different so it has to be carefully assessed. I don't want to cause irreparable damage. The basic rules are when in doubt, don't do it and don't get in a hurry."

During the restoration process, Noller said some mysteries have cropped up.

"At the back of the cemetery, we found an individual marker stone sticking up about four inches with the rest buried upside down," Noller added. "It had the name Champion on it but we have no family by that name represented here. I researched the name on line and found that Mr. Champion is actually buried in an Ogle County cemetery. I contacted their sextant who is going to come for the stone. We have no idea how it got here nor how long it has been here."

When what Noller described as "the worst of the worst" grave stones are restored, Rockton Township will phase in general cleaning and restoration on the younger sites. (For those who may visit, the older portion of the cemetery is located closest to the Rock River.)

The hope is that when the work is complete, the cemetery will display the loving care and dignified atmosphere that those who rest there deserve.

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