

# Giving venerable cemeteries new life

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With shovels, weed eaters and sweat, Ernie Lasley, Gibson County coordinator for Indiana's Pioneer Cemetery Restoration Project, revitalizes history.

Lasley spent the weekend of Aug. 20 restoring the A. J. Phillips Cemetery east of Hazleton, with the help of Chad and Mark Ellis.

"It's hard work in the hot sun," Lasley said.

The men recovered three stones that make up the cemetery, placed the stones on their base and weeded around the area.

Lasley said cattle probably knocked down the stones about two years ago. This is not uncommon with old cemeteries, he said, because cattle often rub against tombstones.

Weeds had grown around the cemetery and fescue had developed on the tombstones. Lasley said the new owner was aware there was a cemetery on his property, but had yet to find it.

Cemetery restoration started as a hobby for the retired Patoka firefighter 19 years ago, but has developed into a passion.

"A cemetery celebrates the life of a person and memorializes their existed," Lasley said.

Lasley has maps of all the known cemetery locations in Gibson County and continues to research and look for new



Photo Submitted

Chad Ellis cleans the dirt back on a gravesite so he can restore the stone to its base as his father, Mark Ellis, looks on. The two were restoring the A.J. Phillips Cemetery, east of Hazleton.

information and locations of county cemeteries.

Lasley said he often receives calls from concerned citizens and people working on genealogy for the locations of dated cemeteries in the county.

Out of about 225 cemeteries in Gibson County, 100 are cemeteries of Indiana pioneers that no one no longer cares for, Lasley said.

"The problem is families move or die off and leave no one to care for family cemeteries," he said.

Lasley said a state law mandates that any cemetery built after 1935 must have a viable organization to care for it and ensure its future existence.

There was no law about cemetery care prior to 1935, which resulted in many older cemeteries going by the wayside.

He said some cemeteries built before 1935 are now owned and maintained by churches or organizations that were around when the cemetery was built.

Township trustees where the cemetery is located become responsible for its care, he said, if an organization that was responsible for it becomes defunct.

Lasley said cemeteries can either be owned by counties, townships or private citizens.

He said it is not a private landowner's obligation to take

care of cemeteries on their properties, but landowners can't destroy a cemetery.

"In my opinion, it is the family's descendants responsibility to take care of the cemetery," Lasley said.

Lasley said there are certain laws and regulations regulating cemeteries.

A person wanting to view a cemetery on another's property must get permission from the landowner before going to view the cemetery.

Also, Lasley said it is against the law to damage grave stones, move the location of the stones or disturb the soil within 100 feet of a cemetery.