



Photos by John M. Galloway / Special to The Detroit News

Unadilla Township Supervisor Jim Peterson said local residents not only want to preserve their local history by repairing tombstones wrecked by vandals, but also to show whoever did it that they won't stand for it.

Volunteers help preserve past by fixing up graves

■ Livingston communities pay burial sites proper respects by keeping them clean, identifying bodies.

BY JON ZEMKE
Special to The Detroit News

MARION TOWNSHIP — Brad Beal not only can name the first of his ancestors to settle in Livingston County, but he can show you their graves.

It doesn't matter to Beal, 24, that his ancestors died about 150 years ago. The land surveyor and Howell resident can even tell you that his great-grandfather was among the first family members to move to Marion Township, buying a farm in 1845. Brad Beal knows where he is buried, too.

"To see the names on the big stone monument kind of ties it all together," Beal said.

Beal, 24, is one of about a dozen members of the Marion Township Cemetery Preservation Committee. The group is dedicated to cleaning, restoring and organizing cemeteries and tombstones in Marion Township.

It's one of several groups in Livingston County that take care of local cemeteries to preserve local history.

Todd Borek, owner of the Livingston County-based Borek-Jennings Funeral Home, said most of the county's cemeteries are more than 100 years old. Most of them were established in the mid- to late 1800s when the county was home to a much smaller rural population.

Livingston County has since become the fastest-growing county in the state. More than 40,000 people moved to the county between 1990 and 2000.

As of Nov. 1, almost another 30,000 have taken up residence since 2000, bringing the county's population to 184,000, according to estimates from the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

A suburban feel is quickly replacing



Peterson works on one of the destroyed tombstones in his Gregory barn.

To get involved

Marion Township Cemetery Preservation Committee meets at 7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month in the Marion Township Hall, 2877 W. Coon Lake Road. The committee is a group of volunteers who work to improve, beautify and preserve Marion Township cemeteries. For information, call (517) 546-1588.

the rural atmosphere that once dominated the county as it grows, but the preservation group is trying to keep the county's history in tact.

"I think preserving the history of the people who have been here before us is the best thing we can do to preserve our own identity," Beal said.

The preservation committee works to preserve three cemeteries, which range in size from 1.5 to 4 acres. Those cemeteries are more than 100 years old and filled with graves that date back as far as the 1850s.

Beal's mother, Marion Township Clerk Tammy Beal, is in charge of the cemeteries and started the preservation committee. The committee does everything from trimming bushes and underbrush to caring for tombstones.

Many of the tombstones need to be straightened, washed, repaired and even identified. Some of the engraved names have worn away through decades. Others are completely legible because they have been sheltered by trees.

"There are some Civil War veterans in there, a lot of children and some very old people," Tammy Beal said. "We lived to be 90 or so even back then." Unadilla Township is undertaking a similar program. Vandals knocked over more than 100 tombstones in October in one of its older cemeteries. The tombstones were mostly around 100 years old.

Township residents and officials have been working to repair them by gluing them back together. So far, 20 have been restored, while the rest await repair in a local barn.

Unadilla Township Supervisor Jim Peterson said local residents not only want to preserve local history by repairing the tombstones, but also show whoever did it that they won't stand for it.

"I just think it's the right thing to do," Peterson said.

Jon Zemke is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.