HISTORY BUFFS FIND, RESTORE FORGOTTEN BURIAL PLOTS
By Mariann Martin

JACKSON, Tenn. — The gravestones are half hidden by brush and weeds, the names almost obscured with lichens and blurred from more than 100 years of rain and snow. Names that once represented the earliest settlers in Madison County.

They are only a faint memory, almost forgotten, until Billy King, David Smith and Tim Batross began swinging their machetes and wielding chainsaws to preserve some of the oldest cemeteries in the Mercer/Denmark area.

Photo: Tim Batross clears weeds from a cemetery in the Denmark area. Batross is a member of the Big Black Creek Historical Society and has been locating and restoring abandoned cemeteries since last November.

"It's sad, really sad," said David Smith on a recent Sunday morning as he poked through the brambles and trees in the Chapman family cemetery off U.S. 70. "These people never pictured their final resting places looking like this."

The men are members of the Big Black Creek Historical Association, founded by King in 2006 to identify, preserve and promote historical sites in the Denmark, Mercer, Leighton and Woodland area. The society has tackled various things, but Smith and Batross recently began a project to restore the forgotten cemeteries in the area.

"Billy supplies the history part, and we do the brawn," Batross joked as he and Smith unloaded weed trimmers, machetes and other tools from the back of their truck. "We say we are visiting our dead friends."

The area has at least 11 cemeteries they have identified to restore, King said, and they continue to find more. Since November, Batross and Smith have partially restored three or four and are working on several more.

Smith, 41, is self-employed as a remodeler of historic homes and has a fascination in local history. He said working in the cemeteries has been like finding another piece of the puzzle to fit into the stories about the houses he restores.

"This is part of our history," Smith said. "Life in a community ... like southwestern Madison County is filled with fine people and old-fashioned values inherited from the ancestors we are rediscovering today."

Batross, 64, works as a transportation manager at Kirkland's since moving to Jackson from Ohio five years ago. He started paying attention to the history of the area when he became involved in this project.

"It is really satisfactory to get out and do something productive like this -- the history gives me the chills," Batross said. "Besides, it's good exercise for an old guy like me."

Denmark, now unincorporated but founded as the oldest town in West Tennessee, was established in 1820, King said. The cemeteries they are restoring date from then until the early 1900s.

During that time, most people were buried in family plots, Smith said. As the family members died or moved away, the burial places were no longer cared for.

Some families established trust funds to maintain the sites, but many of the cemeteries in the Denmark area have deteriorated and almost disappeared.

The men look for cedar trees and an evergreen groundcover called vinca to find abandoned cemeteries.

"Many people would plant cedar trees to mark a grave until they could have a tombstone made," Smith said.

The Taylor cemetery Smith and Batross worked on during a recent weekend was not marked on maps, but one of Batross' co-workers remembered playing around the gravestones as a child. They also found an old geological survey map that marked a possible cemetery. So they set out on four-wheelers and scoured the area until they spotted white obelisks glinting in the sun.

Their research showed a cousin and nephew of President James K. Polk buried there, as well as ancestors of at least one Jackson family.

What is particularly striking is the amount of money and care that was put into many of these old cemeteries, Smith said. Many of the stones are large and expensive, shipped in from St. Louis, Ohio or eastern locations. Family plots are separated by carefully constructed fences.

The Springfield family cemetery, in the middle of a large cornfield, is surrounded by an ornate, wrought-iron fence.

"I can't imagine what this would have cost to ship in," Smith said, as he uncovered another part of the fence, a fleur de lis, buried in the soft black dirt and covered by a tangle of morning glory vines.

Poking around the twisted, partially-collapsed fence, they find several more gravestones that were buried under the weeds and dirt. They are waiting to restore that particular site until they decide the best way to secure the fence from thieves, Smith said.

The Crittendon cemetery is the largest one they have restored so far, Batross said. Two doctors, both Merriweathers, are buried there among dozens of others.

To the men's surprise, they also found a gravestone they believe belonged to a slave. "Suckey," the stone says. It shows she died in 1842, when she was 75.

"When you discover something like that, it really sinks in that this is a part of our history," Smith said.

Another fascinating discovery was finding the grave of Adolphus Britton, owner of the land where the Britton Lane Battle was fought.

King said, according to local historians, the Brittons moved to Arkansas after their farm was partially destroyed in the battle. So King was thrilled when he unearthed a headstone marking Britton's grave in the old Methodist Church cemetery.

"Now we know he did stay in this area after the Civil War," King said.

The men also have talked to members of the black community in an attempt to locate slave cemeteries. King said one has been found so far, and he continues to look for more. Those sites would have been marked with wooden crosses that disappeared a long time ago, making them difficult to find, Smith said.

The men hope that eventually they will generate enough interest in the area that residents and descendants of the people buried in the cemeteries will establish a trust fund to maintain the cemeteries.

"It's like a disease," King said. "Once you have it, you can't get rid of it."

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