

Vandals strike rural Union County cemetery

Headstones knocked off concrete platforms, statue shattered

By **DICK MASON**
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Sunlight was starting to dim when John Lamoreau went to Ackles Cemetery north of La Grande early Wednesday evening.

The fading light did little to obscure a sight that horrified Lamoreau — 15 headstones off their cement bases. Neither Father Time nor the forces of nature did the damage — it was vandals.

“I was heartbroken and absolutely shocked,” said Lamoreau, a La Grande High School social studies teacher and a former Union County commissioner.

Lamoreau is so upset he is funding a \$500 reward the Union County Sheriff’s Office is offering to anyone who comes forward with information leading to the arrest and conviction of the individual or individuals responsible. Anyone providing information regarding the case will remain anonymous, said Union County Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen.

Crimes go back months

The sheriff said he believes young people partying off and on at the cemetery over a span of about six months committed the crimes. He thinks the first damage was done last fall and has continued until early this month. Rasmussen has had dep-



EO Media Group Photo/Dick Mason

La Grande High School history teacher John Lamoreau on Saturday examines the vandalism of headstones at Ackles Cemetery north of La Grande. Lamoreau is putting up \$500 as a reward to help catch the people responsible.

uties increase patrols of the cemetery as reports of suspicious activity have continued.

The vandalism is painful for Rasmussen to see because of how much the cemetery, which is part of the La Grande Cemetery District, means historically to the community.

“This raises criminal mischief to a new level,” Rasmussen said.

The sheriff has offered to provide Union County work crews to assist the La Grande Cemetery District with restoration efforts at the old cemetery off Mt. Glen Road. Those work crews are composed of individuals who have committed low-level crimes and need to do community service.

“We can provide manpower,” Rasmussen said.

Sue Anderson, manager of the La Grande Cemetery District, said a county crew would have to be approved by her district’s board. And the board could not grant the approval without first rescinding its policy prohibiting volunteers from working at any of its four cemeteries. The board adopted this policy several years ago after a new state law took effect requiring entities, such as cemetery districts, to pay higher workers’ compensation insurance fees if volunteers assist them.

Anderson said her staff will first try to see how many of the fallen headstones could be put back up

with a backhoe before making a decision on having a work crew assist at Ackles Cemetery.

Beyond knocking headstones off concrete platforms, vandals also broke a pair of lamb heads at a gravesite of two children and shattered the head of a statue, Anderson said.

Catching those responsible will be challenging since the cemetery district has no security cameras at Ackles. Anderson said the district has put up cameras in the past, but they have been destroyed because there is no place to hide them at the treeless site.

Facebook hit

Many people are interested in the vandalism at Ackles Cemetery. Lamoreau said he took pictures of the toppled headstones and posted them on Facebook, where others have shared them more than 500 times. This is far more than anything else he has posted on the social media platform.

“People are furious about this,” Lamoreau said.

It is easy to distinguish the headstones that were recently pushed off and the others that fell to the ground years ago. The concrete bases of the headstones with recent damage have no moss growing on them, but the bases of the ones toppled years ago have moss, Lamoreau said.

“The lack of moss tells you that it was recent,” he said.

Rasmussen said the sheriff’s office has been alerting people who live near the cemetery to be on the

lookout for suspicious activity and call law enforcement if they see anything. The sheriff said he can understand why people may have not seen questionable activity in the past because the cemetery is about 200 yards off Mt. Glen Road and most people passing it are driving between 45-50 mph.

Three-century legacy

Ackles Cemetery was created in the mid-1800s as a family cemetery, Anderson said. It was then deeded to the Methodist Church, and in 1955 became part of the La Grande Cemetery District.

Lamoreau visited Ackles Cemetery last week to see if he could find information for how the 1918-20 influenza pandemic affected the Grande Ronde Valley. He said the number of people buried at the cemetery who died of that flu appears to be small.

Most of the people buried in Ackles Cemetery died before 1960, and nobody has been buried there since 1988. The cemetery has no more room for burial plots, Anderson said.

Lamoreau said he will do everything possible to right the fallen headstones, almost all which date back to the 1800s or early 1900s.

“The burial monuments that were vandalized had survived the Wright Brothers’ first flight, the sinking of the Titanic, two World Wars, a man on the moon, the New Year celebrations of 1900 and 2000, but fell prey to vandals in the last year,” he said. “I am determined to see them restored.”

Forecast for Pendleton Area

