



Group restores broken gravesites of Oregon founders, pioneers

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-ObsERVER

POLK COUNTY — Lloyd Collins uses a trowel to scrape excess epoxy from the base of a broken headstone he is repairing in a pioneer cemetery south of Monmouth.

The simple gesture has a rhythmic quality to it: scrape, scrape, scrape and then tap, tap as he knocks off the solution into a nearby bucket. Collins performs the task as if he's done it dozens of times.

He has. An original member of Polk Cemetery Savers, a volunteer group that finds and restores pioneer cemeteries in the county, Collins is among its most dedicated. He and fellow volunteers Ruby Garman and Pete McDowell have been faithful to the cause, working on the cleaning and restoration of all six cemeteries the group has undertaken.

Sometimes, like on March 21 at Chamberlin Pioneer Cemetery, Collins works by himself, slowly piecing together broken or toppled headstones. It's a monumental task and one that takes patience and respect for the final resting places of people who lived and died many decades ago.

"I'm not sure what happened to this cemetery," Collins said. "During World War II, Adair Village was training soldiers and they used this whole area for training and maneuvers. We understand that some of the cemeteries got moved, supposedly this one did not."

Unveiling the history of the area — and the inhabitants of the cemetery — often comes with the work of restoration. Volunteers don't just clear debris and repair headstones, they catalogue burials, making an official record. Those records are turned in to Bollman Funeral Home in Dallas, the Polk County Museum and the state.

Chamberlin Pioneer Cemetery has its mysteries — including the identity of an infant buried there. Still unable to identify the baby, Collins made a temporary marker, stamped with "infant" to mark the gravesite. Pieces of headstones that don't appear to belong in the cemetery have been found, adding to the intrigue surrounding Chamberlin.

"Lots of unknowns and lots of questions," Collins said. "We have more questions than we have answers in this cemetery."

Doing the detective work — much like the physical re-



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-ObsERVER
Lloyd Collins repairs a headstone at Chamberlin Pioneer Cemetery during a recent weekend Polk Cemetery Savers work session. The group is in need of more volunteers.



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-ObsERVER
Collins examines a monument that will have to be repaired and repositioned in its original place. Finishing the job will require pouring a new base and sliding it into place.

pair of headstone and family monuments — is something Collins and other volunteers learned on the job, so to

speak. The first restoration began almost three years ago at Hart Riggs Cemetery between Dallas and Falls

City. Many of the tasks are at least two-person jobs, but that doesn't stop Collins from doing what he can on his own. When asked why the three-person team continues to do the work with little other help, Collins pauses for a second.

"Somebody asked me that about two years ago ... I said these people were pioneers, so they made this state what it is," Collins said. "I don't want to see their cemeteries rotting into ruin. It doesn't take a lot of money to repair them. It takes a little of bit of time; you have to be careful because you don't want to do any damage. But basically that's the reason. When I saw Hart Riggs, I think both (group founder) Ray (Files) and I had tears in our eyes." McDowell has similar

Much Done ... Much To Do

Projects of the Polk County Cemetery Savers:

Hart Riggs Cemetery

This was the first cemetery the group restored, found by group founder Ray Files when he was looking for pioneer cemeteries to take photos of. The deplorable condition of the final resting place of 58 people buried there prompted Files, Collins and other volunteers to take action. They began work at the cemetery, located between Dallas and Falls City, in the summer of 2012. That soon led to other projects.

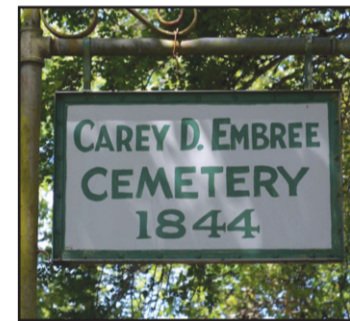
Whiteaker Cemetery

Located southeast of Dallas, Whiteaker Cemetery with its 15 interments had been long neglected and vandalized. Headstones and monuments were leaning, damaged or toppled. Thick blackberries, poison oak and apples trees that were damaging gravesites had to be removed before the painstaking process of cleaning and repairing headstones could begin. Pieces of original headstones were found all over the cemetery and carefully pieced together and placed back where they once stood.



Carey D. Embree Cemetery

Embree Cemetery was founded in 1844, located in a grove of trees in a field in Rickreall. This cemetery had a volunteer caretaker and was in relatively good condition, but needed repairs. Deciding to restore the cemetery to its original state, volunteers reseated several monuments and removed dead trees damaging headstones. Workers removed decades of dust and dirt from gravesites and cleaned and repaired headstones. Thirty-nine people are buried at the cemetery.



Burch Family Pioneer Cemetery

Also located in Rickreall in the center of a farm field, Burch's earliest burial was in 1849. This cemetery houses the resting place of Harrison Brunk — the builder of the Brunk House on Highway 22 — and other notable pioneers. Larger than other cemeteries — more than 140 burials — the restoration started in 2013 and continued into this year. Like the others, it required removal of brush, weeds and trees, in addition to finding and restoring headstones.



M.L. Robbins Cemetery

Located just outside Dallas, M.L. Robbins Cemetery was in very poor condition by the time the group found it. All the headstones had been knocked over or broken. The seven-week restoration revealed 20 interments, though four of them still are unknown. The group cleaned the area, retrieved pieces of headstones and monuments for repair. Following the restoration, the cemetery was fenced off.

Chamberlin Pioneer Cemetery

The group's current restoration project, Chamberlin Cemetery's first burial was in 1845. Still cataloguing interments, Collins estimates between 20 and 30 people are buried at the hilltop site south of Helmick State Park near Monmouth. Restoration began in September 2014 and should continue for another month. More than half the headstones were damaged and all were sorely in need of cleaning. The land owner, who has been cleaning the cemetery annually, may build an access road.

— Jolene Guzman



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-ObsERVER
Leaning headstones, or broken and missing markers, are common in neglected pioneer cemeteries. The group performs repairs and documents burials at each location.

reasons for volunteering for the cause.

"Since I started doing it, I've come to see that this work is really important for preserving these historic sites," he said. "Besides just showing respect for the deceased, I think we need to preserve the record of life and death during the early days of our state."

As dedicated as Collins, McDowell and Garman are, they could use a few more hands. No longer able to perform many of the physical tasks, Files has had to step away from much of the work.

McDowell added maintaining the cemeteries once restoration is finished is an ongoing process.

"We just need to get more people involved so the burden gets spread out a little,"

he said.

Collins listed two other cemeteries he's looking into for future projects and they will find more, no doubt. Work parties are scheduled every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings starting at 8 a.m.

"If we can get some more volunteers, it's not so bad. They don't need anything but boots and gloves," Collins said. "We can use all the help we can get. They don't have to make three days a week, but if they can make it one, that's great."

To volunteer, or for more information, go to www.polkcemeterysavers.org or email Lloyd Collins at LloydCollins@aol.com. In the last two weeks of April, the group will be cleaning cemeteries of winter debris and could use volunteers.