

Not owned by the City...

Volunteers focus on remembering Harlan's loved ones

By Michaela Ramm & Alan Mores
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HARLAN -- Residents in Harlan may have noticed the significant upgrades at the more than 150-year-old Harlan Cemetery, particularly along Cyclone Ave. and 12th St.

A new retaining wall and fencing on the north side of the grounds, a new web site that allows you to search for a loved one's burial plot and new concrete roadways replacing damaged asphalt are some of their renovation projects during the last several years.

These projects are all part of the Harlan Cemetery Association's efforts to not only maintain, but beautify the 33-acre land where residents can honor their loved ones.

The Association was incorporated on Sept. 2, 1872 with the oldest headstones dating back to the early 1860s. According to their web site there are approximately 6,500 burials; 10,300 spaces sold and 2,000 spaces for sale. They have 3,200 undeveloped spaces as well as the entire west hillside is available for expansion.

Board of Directors

The Association has a five member board who maintains and oversees the grounds, board members include: Don Stowe, president; Eldon Erickson, secretary, Mickey Williams, treasurer; Bill Early and Allan Ickes.

Eldon Erickson and his wife, Lesly, have been an integral part of the goings on at the cemetery since the summer of 1999. Eldon said they were approached by the late Jim Kalal, former Harlan Municipal Utilities general manager and then association secretary, about coming onto their board.

"Jim reached out to Lesly about getting involved on the board, and we both took up the charge to become involved. I was elected to the board, while Lesly became an integral part of the behind the scenes book work and record keeping."

"Her inside work allows me time to work on maintenance and repair projects as well as working with area funeral homes and monument companies to insure accurate burials -- it's a team effort with our entire board," he said.

The Ericksons said many of the renovations have been made possible by the Harlan Cemetery Foundation, a non-profit organization, which was the impetus of the late John Vanderheiden who served on both the Cemetery Association and its Foundation. The Foundation was established in 2007 as a 501(c)13 charitable organization allowing for tax deductible gifts. Its board members include: Julienne Ferry, Allan Ickes, Seth Johannsen, Dick Jones, Phyllis Lytle and Alan Mores. Donations can be sent to Harlan Cemetery Foundation, P O Box 43, Harlan, IA 51537

New Retaining Walls and Fencing

The largest project undertaken is along Cyclone Ave. where volunteers have been installing a retaining wall. Klein Fencing, Earling, is installing new fencing along the top of the retaining wall, as well as along the grassy slopes that didn't require a wall.

Don Stowe, Stowe Red-E Mix, and Bruce Burger, Bruce Burger Construction, have completed nearly all the work on the retaining wall themselves as volunteers.

Stowe, who serves as the board president, and has been involved with the association for 13 years said the mammoth project began in the fall of 2012 and when completed it will encompass 1,000 one-ton Stowe Red-E Mix concrete blocks along Cyclone Avenue.

Black wrought iron fencing has been installed by Klein Fencing and in 2011 and 2013 donations by former Harlanites Dick and Barb Nelson paid for the gates at each of the three entrances. The east gate entrance was made by Metal Ink, Harlan, and the two northern gates were completed by Panama Welding.

New Web Site - First in Iowa

The association, with financial assistance from its Foundation, hired Des Moines-based software company, NewCom, to create a GIS-map which has allowed the cemetery to be the first in Iowa to offer web-based searches of all its cemetery plots. All they have to do is log-on to the cemetery's new web site, HarlanCemetery.com, and click on the black monument which states, "Click here to find family burial sites" and you can search for your loved one's burial plot.

NewCom's, former vice president of business development said "Harlan's system becomes an important genealogical tool for finding burial information, and the system offers them a document management system. Future potential will allow them to add family histories as well as other family information such as birth certificates, etc."

The software also includes plot sales, burial permits, updates burial information and comprehensive reports.

Private donations as well

Since 2012 the Foundation has contributed \$28,195 to the cemetery thru fund drives, while other work at the cemetery has been completed thru donations directly to the association.

"We had a gift directly to our association from the Atkinson estate which helped with the majority of concrete roadways," Lesly Erickson said.

Along with Foundation and direct donations, the association operates roughly a \$53,000 annual budget to handle the 45 - 70 burials they have each year.

"Many continue to believe our Cemetery is city-owned and maintained, but it is not -- it is owned by the lot owners

past and present of the Harlan Cemetery," Erickson said.

One major expense is lawn maintenance handled by K & T Enterprises (Troy and Kenny Hansen), Kimballton, since 2001. Mowing takes an estimated 25-30 hours per week, while trimming every other mowing takes another 25-30 hours. Snow removal is handled by Stowe Red-E Mix and Dan Mennenoh, Audubon, is contracted to open and close graves, which is included in the burial fee to the family.

Memorial monuments and gravestones care is the responsibility of the family of the interred, while the board does their best maintaining those monuments with no family or survivors. Board volunteers also work to "reset" headstones, or replace their base if they become broken and fall over.

Erickson said during the last 10 years, there have been an estimated 100 monument resets, and there are still others who need repair.

A program to maintain the trees on the grounds has been in place since 2005 which includes trimming, thinning out branches and cutting down unhealthy ones.

"The trees are much better taken care of than they have been," Erickson said.

How It All Works

The five member board makes all decisions on the property for the cemetery's lot owners.

"The way I've always looked at it, the reason for the association is to respect those area residents who are buried here and honor their memory and that of their family. We want to make the grounds welcome and accessible to family and visitors."

Two members of the board receive a stipend for their time devoted to their work at the cemetery and they include; the secretary and the treasurer, while the remainder of the three positions are volunteer.

Like any body they are rules and regulations to follow to create order in the cemetery.

"We try to regulate rules and enforce them," Stowe said. "And we also improve the cemetery the best we can."

Stowe said the first 100 years of the cemetery's existence it may not have been maintained as well as they would have like, but the last nearly 50 years has been focusing on upkeep.

Erickson said the board has been working hard to change that. "I would say it's in a lot better condition since we've started."

Lesly Erickson said they have been getting good feedback from visitors about the streets, trees, new wall and fencing and overall upkeep.

"We enjoy what we do," Stowe said. "We're out there to do our best."

Board requests

The board asks that visitors to the cemetery stay on the roads while driving in an effort to protect unmarked burials and retain the grounds, while remaining courteous to other visitors. Recently their mowing firm has been concerned about the amount of pet droppings on the property and the board has encouraged those walking thru the cemetery to take waste bags with them for the cleanliness and respect of the property for visiting families.

Learn more by contacting the Harlan cemetery at 235-8888 or www.harlancemetery.com.

Tour and Search for
Loved Ones at the...
**HARLAN
CEMETERY**



One of their upgrades includes a new web site: harlancemetery.com



Just one of the new retaining walls with new fencing at the Harlan Cemetery.



Volunteers and board members gather at the Harlan Cemetery. From left, Bruce Burger, Burger Construction; Don Stowe, Stowe Red-E Mix and Cemetery board president and Eldon Erickson, board secretary.

