Cemetery rehabilitation through the eyes of DNR interns.

Preserving the Past

Story By Justin Ramey and Zach Rasche
Photos By Hal Hassen

Far off the beaten tarmac and wood-chip trails of Sangchris Lake State Park lies an important piece of Illinois history. The small, rural township of Cotton Hill, southeast of Springfield, is not often associated with historical landmarks, even for those who know the area well. On a cool morning in late November, we were reminded that the names of country roads are not the only marks left to immortalize the families first settling an area. Cemeteries reveal the names of those who lived there.

It was one of the first days of the year that the sound of northerly winds could be heard rustling through naked tree branches freed of their summer leaves. Our day began by following a muddy path resembling the carved remnants of an abandoned deer trail.

As we walked, Hal Hassen, DNR's archaeologist, described the cleanup work we would undertake at the overgrown Taylor Cemetery, tucked away in the southern region of the park. For Hassen and his colleague, Dawn Cobb, a physical anthropologist for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, working in remote, state-owned cemeteries repairing headstones is just another day at the office. Like many of their projects, Taylor Cemetery is located on state property and the discovery and maintenance of such sites keeps them busy year round.

Hal Hassen (left) discussed the work at Taylor Cemetery with the authors.

At the base of the hilltop cemetery overlooking a shallow overflow of the Sangamon River, scattered brush piles gave witness to a recent Eagle Scout project. The coloring and outline of a few, random headstones stood out among a dense, indelible understory dominated by the invasive Japanese honeysuckle. Many of the headstones were completely overgrown, making the removal of the dense cover labor-intensive and tedious.

As we worked, Hassen talked about the history of the cemetery and previous work by area students and Boy Scouts. In 1998, an English class from Southeast High School in Springfield researched the history and locations of the individuals and families associated with the cemetery. That research documented 41 grave sites consisting of at least 15 different family names dating from 1838 to 1902. One individual, Pvt. William Mislagel, was a Civil War soldier who fought for the Union until a common wartime disease took his life in 1863.

Listening to Hassen, we realized the significance of the stories told by Taylor Cemetery and the insight those stories revealed about the life of early Illinois settlers. Almost half of the 41 grave sites at Taylor Cemetery belonged to infants and children, many of whom succumbed to diseases such as measles, croup, scarlet fever, cholera and diphtheria.

Hearing of such hardship suddenly gave us a deeper appreciation for the work we were doing. When our labor at Taylor Cemetery was finished, we glanced back, admiring our work. We realized our efforts had not been about preserving the cemetery for future visitors, but our work was about restoring and preserving the dignity of Cotton Hill Township's settlers.

Justin Ramey and Zach Rasche are Graduate Public Service Interns with the Department of Natural Resources in Springfield. The GPSI program provides internship opportunities at state agencies for UIS graduate students. Both Ramey and Rasche are completing their graduate studies in the Department of Biology at the University of Illinois Springfield.