

Who's buried at Greenlawn?

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Franklin's Greenlawn Cemetery is not huge, but with more than 15,000 graves spread out over 40 acres, it can be challenging to find a specific resting site.

The cemetery, 100 W. South St., which includes graves going back to the early 1800s, is making history more accessible through modern technology.

Greenlawn is mapping all of its graves and importing information on each individual into a computer program. The process is far enough along to allow cemetery staff to quickly find someone's name on its computers.

But in a few years, folks might be able to log on from home to find their ancestors -- complete with photos of headstones and memorial markers -- as well as obituaries and documents.

And after that, it might be possible for schoolchildren, college students and history buffs to do more sophisticated searches, such as veterans of a specific war.

That's the vision of Richard DeWitt, who doubles as Franklin's storm-sewer coordinator and cemetery manager.

For much of the past year, DeWitt and co-worker Julie Parsley have been transferring information from 3-by-5 cards and old maps with handwritten notes into a computer program.

The program Cemetery Information Management System or CIMS is offered by Ramaker & Associates, Sauk City, Wis. More than 400 cemeteries across the country are using the basic system, and some have upgraded to e-CIMS, the more-interactive version that DeWitt would like to use in the future.

Among the handful of Indiana communities with some version of the program are the Moravian Cemetery in Hope and Mount Aerie Cemetery in Columbus.

The cemeteries span all sizes -- from a half-acre graveyard to the Naval and Air Force academies' cemeteries, said Rachel Tygum, project manager for Ramaker. The firm also is in talks with Arlington National Cemetery, she said.

Often, the push to computerize cemetery records and map the gravesites comes when someone realizes much of that information is stored in the mind of a longtime employee who is nearing or past retirement, Tygum said.

"They realize somebody, who is 70 or 80, has all the knowledge" and can easily direct visitors seeking relatives' graves, she said.

In Greenlawn's case, the move was driven by the June 2008 flood, which swamped the cemetery and the office under 6 feet of water. However, records were salvaged, and other than a few headstones being knocked over, Greenlawn didn't sustain significant damage, DeWitt said.

Already, as new burials are held, DeWitt incorporates published obituaries and where the person is laid to rest into the computer records.

Retrieving old information is time consuming. DeWitt is working with groups -- such as the Johnson County Museum of History -- to find and import documents on significant Franklinites buried at Greenlawn, such as Jefferson O. Rairdon, town marshal from 1882-88, and George King, one of the town's founders.

In researching military veterans buried at Greenlawn, he has tallied 716, with help from some Franklin College students. DeWitt has found documents that reveal one Civil War veteran on site, James Thomas Stewart, was a Confederate soldier, at that.

DeWitt has documents that indicate Stewart was taken by the Union as a prisoner of war.

A "Roll of Prisoners of War" document, with typed sections and Stewart's information added in the longhand of the day, says:

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"Claims to have been loyal. Enlisted through false representations. Was captured and desires to take the oath of allegiance to the U.S. and become a loyal citizen."

Those kinds of documents could be jackpots for history buffs and genealogists, DeWitt knows, but it will be a while before the information is easily available. The city will have to budget money to add to the CIMS program. The basic program begins at \$3,000, but Franklin already has gone beyond for Ramaker to import certain information. The e-CIMS upgrades require additional purchases, prices that depend on the software's complexity.

Until then, folks can still get help finding great-grandparents and other ancestors by stopping in at the office that DeWitt and Parsley share weekdays.

Call Star reporter Diana Penner at (317) 444-6249.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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