

Cemetery Q&A

By Kenneth E. (Ken) Lindsay, Harris Township Trustee

Why is there an article about cemeteries?

This is the next in an ongoing series of articles about Harris Township. The fact is that the township's responsibility is to maintain two cemeteries: Harris Prairie Cemetery (HPC) on Adams Road and Salem Cemetery (Salem) at Brummitt and Ash roads.

Why?

Not by choice, but by Indiana statute.

No really, why?

When a cemetery is abandoned or goes broke, who else? That is the logic, generally, that someone has to do it, in the opinion of the state, as long as the cemetery was conveyed to the township by a cemetery association that existed before March 9, 1939.

Hint: The Great Depression started with a stock market crash in 1929 and ended about 1939.

How does a cemetery go broke?

It takes money to cut and trim grass, for example. A person may have purchased a plot (say in 1921), but that doesn't mean 100 years of related maintenance could be paid from the proceeds.

By the way: The book *The History of Harris Township* (page 153) recounts a time in the early 1900s when the condition of HPC was "a disgrace to the whole community."

So the township runs cemeteries?

Harris Township maintains two cemeteries. Maintenance is limited to straightening monuments, leveling and seeding the ground, erecting and fixing fences, cleaning up detrimental plants, and (more recently) mowing. I personally go a bit beyond that definition, but it is a challenge at times.

So, how is it going?

There is that saying about beauty and the beholder. The reality is that very few people behold anything about township government. Of them, township cemetery beholders are even fewer. My hope is that people take at least some notice of positive changes.

For example, this trustee cleaned up two raggedy looking cemeteries in 2015, arranged for hundreds of monuments (aka headstones) to be restored in 2016, mapped Salem Cemetery to improve documentation, removed overgrown vegetation, refreshed the HPC driveway surface, and recently replaced a badly deteriorating shed roof.

By the way: What I saw upon taking office in 2015 included many dozens of downed and scattered headstones, a tall brush and garbage pile almost covering an entire gravesite, and a tree that long ago fell and smashed a shed, with both still laying on the cemetery ground.

What issues remain?

Many. Maintenance is expensive and ongoing, with the cost of maintaining the grass leading the way. Many older headstones deteriorate easily, and qualified repair people are hard to find. Records are virtually non-existent. Some beholders have family members buried in these historic cemeteries and expect to continue the tradition, but that is not always possible. Delivering that message to people in a highly emotional state can be a challenge.

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Give us some good news

The two cemeteries in Harris Township are historic (HPC was established in 1834), with many early pioneers and residents buried in them. Anyone interested in history has a great resource in them. The grounds can be viewed as attractive, and peaceful, when you're in the right state of mind. They are open to the public, with parking available in the Salem Church lot for Salem, and onsite at HPC.

Are you open to people helping?

Absolutely. I'll gladly grant access to information and work with passionate people interested in history, early settlers, burial records or headstone designs. I'm a cemetery novice but can attest there is a lot to learn including why certain flowers were planted on a plot, which way headstones are to face, and the significance of certain epitaphs (inscriptions on headstones) or monument designs.

Who knows, your work may end up on the township website or as part of a history tour you lead.

You're a cemetery expert?

VERY far from it. Taking proper care of cemeteries is a profession that requires skill, dedication and training. You can find experts at the University of Notre Dame, for example, which runs an operating cemetery. I've relied on, and deeply appreciate, people like Mike Lauderback of Community Vault, and former trustee Sue Dylewski, both of whom spent decades around the township's cemeteries and now willingly share their expertise. I'm just the guy who arranges for the grass to be mowed.

Is there an "a" in cemetery?

There is no "a" in the word cemetery (practical advice reflective of my level of cemetery expertise).

Are you selling plots?

The short answer is no. I've learned enough to conclude the risks far outweigh the potential benefits. Maybe I'll expand on all that in a future article.

If you can't wait, I'd be happy to talk with you. That goes for any township area of responsibility.

Interesting Tidbits about July:

- In early July, a period of time called the "dog days of summer" begins. Historically they were observed within Ancient Roman and Greek astrology and were connected with bad luck, mad dog attacks, unexpected thunderstorms, heat, and drought. They gained their name as "dog days" as they were connected with the star Sirius, which is part of the Canis Major (Greater Dog) star system. Nowadays, "the dog days" refers to when the hottest days of summer begin.

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