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Local efforts revive cemetery

By PAULETTE LIKOUDIS/Finger Lakes Times

OVID — It's still not out of the red, but trustees say Ovid's Union Cemetery is creeping closer to the black.

Just over a year ago, an emergency meeting was held amid concerns that decreasing income from grave sales and interest earnings could no longer keep the historic cemetery afloat. There was even talk of turning it over to the Town of Ovid.

A new board of trustees stepped forward during that emergency meeting to relieve the former board, which had given many years of service.

The new board met Wednesday at the Ovid Fire Hall to announce that the cemetery is no longer in dire straits, but still needs strong support from the community and relatives of those interred there.

"Our finances are better than they were a year ago, but with the state of the economy we still need to sell 20 lots per year to meet mowing costs," said President John White of Trumansburg, whose parents, a brother, aunts and uncles are buried at the cemetery.

The current price of a grave site is \$500. At the time of burial, there is a \$500 cost for a full-sized vault, or \$150 for a container of cremains.

Over the past year, nine burials have taken place and 17 grave sites have been purchased; donations have also helped boost income. Secretary Sheila Reynolds explained that some of those sales figures came from the collection of late payments.

"We're not broke, but we're struggling," Reynolds said.

Trustee Gertrude Fischer attended the June 2007 emergency meeting because she was concerned that her husband's grave had settled and not been made level. She and her daughter brought in soil, manure, grass seed and straw to remedy the problem, making Fischer a shoo-in as a trustee.

"I thought if I'm going to complain, I'd better get involved. Let me tell you, I have learned a lot," Fischer explained.

White said the difference in the cemetery's appearance from a year ago is "dramatic." He thanked public works employees for bringing in millings gleaned from a recent repaving project. Trustees spread the material to improve roads that wind through the cemetery.

Inmates from the Willard Drug Treatment campus helped dig out soil that accumulated under a wrought iron fence along Gilbert Road, then painted the fence. While working on it, the crew found buried metal fleur-de-lis decorations that once adorned the fence. Trustees hope to find a welder who can reattach them.

White praised the Willard crew.

"They were happy to be doing good for the community," he said, noting trustees would like the inmates back to secure fallen headstones.

Others have also helped or made donations, including Brewer's Septic Service, the Ovid Fire Department and

Ovid Councilman and farmer Kevin Wilkins, who lives across the street and donated straw for reseeding.

In addition to bringing in funds to cover expenses, trustees would like to repair older, broken headstones and provide markers for the large number of Willard Psychiatric Hospital patients buried in the cemetery.

Trustee Leon Kelly, former Ovid mayor, said "ground-penetrating radar" devices might help caretakers more accurately pinpoint individual graves in that area.

Reynolds suggested that state Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-54 of Fayette, be contacted to see if grants are available to help with maintenance of the Willard section, given that institution's historical significance.

Treasurer Mark Jauquet pointed out that the sprawling Union Cemetery — set on 15 rolling acres punctuated by towering Norway spruce trees — was a perfect example of the rural or garden cemetery because of its park-like setting where people can enjoy the landscaped grounds and pay respect to the deceased. Graves include those of all denominations and social status.

Jauquet is researching the creation of a Union Cemetery Web site that would list all persons interred there. Trustees agreed such a resource would be valuable to genealogical researchers and perhaps spark support from distant family members who learn they have relatives buried in the cemetery. They discussed how this cemetery, like others, is challenged by the increased mobility of Americans; families are scattered and less available for regular cemetery visits.

Union Cemetery has its burial records listed in one book, in excellent condition. The first name — carefully written in calligraphic style by quill pen and ink — is that of Lucretia Dahin, who was buried on Aug. 22, 1860. The entry notes that she was "killed falling from a tree" at the age of 43.

The oldest person interred at Union Cemetery was 106-year-old Jennie Lerg, a Willard patient in an unmarked grave in what is known as "Patients' Row." Headstones throughout the cemetery mark the graves of infants only days old.

To help the community get reacquainted with what was once a vital centerpiece in Ovid, trustees have scheduled a Fall Remembrance Day for Oct. 18, with an Oct. 25 rain date. All ages are invited to gather at noon for a cleanup day and the offering of prayers for those in the cemetery.

Also at last week's meeting, trustees approved a draft of a brochure of regulations that will be printed and provided to grave purchasers and other interested parties. It includes cemetery history, prices, contact numbers for trustees and a basic map.

To share ideas, make a donation to Ovid's Union Cemetery or for more information, write to: P.O. Box 175, Ovid, NY 14521 or e-mail union.cemetery@hotmail.com.