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Oak Hill reclamation - Effort under way to restore historic city cemetery

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Two North Carolina women whose roots are in Johnson City have joined with a local brother and sister to bring back the city's Oak Hill Cemetery.

Betty Seaton Williams, Burnsville, N.C., her friend, Barbara Thomas, Salisbury, N.C., and Doug Sizemore and his sister, Natalie Sizemore Bailey, both of Johnson City, have sent a mailing to all known members of the Oak Hill Cemetery Association seeking funding for a cleanup of the cemetery and a securing of the site.



Douglas Sizemore, Jack Ragsdale, Barbara Sanders-Thomas and Betty Seaton-Williams are leading the effort. (Dave Boyd / Johnson City Press)

They recently mailed out a letter that explains the plight of OHC. "Many people who assisted with the upkeep of OHC have either passed away or moved without a forwarding address," the letter says. The loss of annual dues has been so considerable that the board of directors was driven to seek support from outside organizations.

Peter Naher, the manager of the cemetery for 25 years, is in declining health and unable to continue with maintenance, and the board sold the cemetery to Jack Ragsdale of Greeneville.

The desire to see the cemetery cleaned up and preserved goes beyond the fact that is the resting place of family members, but it also includes the graves of Henry Johnson, founder of Johnson City, and Col. LeRoy Reeves, designer of the Tennessee state flag.

Cited among the problems is the growth of trees and wild bushes,



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some of them actually on the graves, stumps from trees that have died or been cut, about 300 tombstones that have been vandalized and a chain link fence in need of repair.

An account for the Oak Hill Cemetery Friends and Volunteers was set up at Bank of Tennessee for contributions to the cleanup effort. Once that is accomplished, an annual Decoration Day event is planned to bring relatives and loved ones of the descendants together to share the day. Historically this has also been a day for families to clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones.

The committee asks for a voluntary continuance of payment of the \$75 annual dues, and any donations to the account that anyone wishes to make. The project is done with the blessing and permission of Ragsdale, the owner of the cemetery, which has approximately 1,500 to 1,600 grave sites still available.

Ragsdale made the records of the association available to the committee and they sorted through about 1,000 records, all on 3-inch-by-5-inch index cards. "Of these we were down to about 100 people who contributed to upkeep between 2000 and 2004," Thomas said.

As contributors dwindled the curator was limited to how much work he could do other than mowing. While modern cemeteries have gone to stones mounted flush with the ground that can be mowed over, older cemeteries such as Oak Hill must be mowed and trimmed around each stone, a never-ending task. Woody growth can intrude in any area left neglected for a year, and within three years such areas get taken over.

"We're seeking a one-time cleanup," Thomas said, "hopefully that will also include repair of the fence to keep vandalism down and repair of those tombstones that have been broken or tipped over."

She said they've gotten quotes from three landscapers, and including removal of trees, vines and shrubs, the project would cost thousands of dollars.

Ties to the cemetery run deep. In addition to having grandparents, aunts and uncles buried there, Thomas said she once lived on Lamont Street.

"It is right in the center of Johnson City and should be a showplace of our history," she said. "I hope some of the service clubs can also join in cooperation."

Natalie Sizemore Bailey said she has seven or eight family members buried at Oak Hill, including her parents and grandparents. "We try to keep our section cleaned," she said, "but it's a losing battle."

When she was a student at Henry Johnson School, their history teacher Gordon Grubbs took the entire class on a field trip to Oak Hill. "We walked over there and were required to take notes," she said.

She understands the difficulties in maintaining an old cemetery. "You'd like to see it all clean and fresh, but we really don't have a good

list of dues payers. Many people think that perpetual maintenance comes with the purchase of the lot, and it doesn't. However, if they hope to sell new lots there needs to be maintenance on the entire cemetery," Bailey said.

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