

Graveyard gets much-needed care after years of neglect



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By Jon Tattrie - The Weekly News

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That changed last summer when he noticed the toppled tombstones and abandoned plots, and decided to do something. He and a group of volunteers went out each Saturday morning and righted the fallen markers, rebuilding the ground under them so they wouldn't fall again. They managed to fix 350, though vandals knocked down another 10 over the winter.

"They come in and have parties and push over the stones," said O'Brien, who has great-grandparents and great-great grandparents buried in the cemetery. "We have a dire need of security. We need lighting and fencing in a bad way." The Catholic Cemeteries Commission is in charge of the burial ground, but doesn't have the funds to restore it, leaving the task to concerned citizens.

"I'm encouraged by the attitudes of the volunteers. These guys come and work Saturday morning from 8 until 1, and they work hard, because it's tough work. They're all guys like me who have never done this sort of work in our lives, and we're raising tombstones and shovelling gravel," he says.

O'Brien has cobbled together a crew of grandsons and grandfathers, students, teachers and even a judge. "He really slugs it. He's pushing wheelbarrows, digging holes and shovelling gravel," O'Brien laughs. "We'll take a weekend or a number of weekends - whatever a person can do."

They've got about 1,800 graves left to go in the historic burial grounds, meaning six years of hard labour at the present pace. O'Brien is hoping more volunteers or donations will cut that time in half: all you need are old clothes and a good attitude.

"It's a big, big job. My gracious, it's much bigger than I ever thought it would be, God help us," he said. "If anybody is interested, we would welcome them with open arms."

O'Brien is also happy to show interested groups around the site to tell them about its history and help trace family roots.

"It's really just a gem of history of the Irish contribution to Nova Scotia," he said.

The chapel on the hill inside the cemetery has a curious distinction: it's the only church built in a day in Canada. Dating back to the 1800s, it's in sorry shape now and is on O'Brien's to-do list, and he's eager to get donations to refurbish it. Last year, the grave-fixers got help from a group of firefighters, and O'Brien hopes they come out again.

"They were tremendous help. They're strong, they're disciplined, they've got a good attitude," he remembers.

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