



THE CEMETERY SIGN at the entrance (above) was restored by Vince Carlson of Atwood, who has relatives buried there. Cleaning overgrown grass beside the gate at the Swedish

Lutheran Cemetery south of Midway in Rawlins County was Galen Olson (below) of Oberlin.

— Photos by Mary Holle

Volunteers spruce up rural church cemetery

By MARY HOLLE

Rawlins County Square Deal

A year ago, Galen Olson of Oberlin visited the Swedish Lutheran Cemetery in eastern Rawlins County to decorate the graves of relatives with flowers.

"I was just appalled at how terrible it looked," he recalled. "Trees were overgrown, tombstones were covered. Yes, the grass had been mowed around the graves, but there were still areas of uncut grass."

Mr. Olson, who said he had grown up about a mile north of the cemetery, made a commitment last year to do what he could to improve the conditions.

His sister, Arian Arnold, still lives on the Olson homestead with her husband, Steve Arnold, and she accompanied him last Memorial Day. She agreed that she would help.

"Because some of the tombstones had been thrown under the trees," he said, "and we didn't know who they belonged to, we decided we should make sure we have a good inventory of everyone there. That led into a much larger project."

Last fall, the brother and sister, along with her husband, took a chain saw to the overgrown evergreen trees, starting phase 1 of the clean-up project. They left the cut branches to dry over the winter.

Vince Carlson, a businessman who has a metal shop in Atwood, had already taken down the cemetery's battered and weather-beaten sign to restore.

"He donated part of his labor because he has relatives there," Mr. Olson said.

Phase 2 was researching records and history books to find out who was buried in the cemetery and where. Mrs. Arnold also talked with older county residents about burial information of their relatives.

"It was a lot of fun," she said, "but it was also frustrating when I'd hit a dead end."

The deeper the siblings dug into the history of those buried among the prairie grass on the windswept, east-sloping graveyard, they said, the more intrigued they were about preserving its history.

"(The mapping) just snowballed," Mr. Olson said.

The result of the research is an eight-page, alphabetized list in neat columns.

"We now have the genealogy of everyone in the cemetery," he said. "For each grave, we have the name of the person; date of birth and death; parents' names, including mother's maiden name; children including married names; siblings, including married names; and a miscellaneous category for things of interest, like place of birth in Sweden, how they died, if they were in World War I, etc."

"The oldest graves are from the 1880s." Next, Mrs. Arnold did the same



MANY DEAD BRANCHES were picked up by Randy Olson with his tractor loader and were then hauled away from the cemetery by several trucks during the cleanup day.



research for the Swedish Baptist Cemetery and Herndon Covenant Church Cemetery. Both are within a five-mile radius from the Arnold farmstead.

"We thought we were done, until someone said, 'What about Achilles?'" Mr. Olson said.

Arian explained that the four cemeteries contained a "tie" or common thread of families who intermarried within the communities and were buried in different locations.

Phase 3 of the clean-up began this spring.

"In late April," Mr. Olson said, "we went back and cut more branches, because we knew a clean-up crew was coming."

His sister said she checked the mapped lists of burials against the actual tombstone location and made several corrections.

Swedish Lutheran Cemetery was the burial plot for the former Enne Lutheran Church, which was about a mile south of the cemetery. Enne, which was later changed to Bethel, merged with Faith Lutheran Church of Oberlin in 1961, Mr. Olson said.

Faith members and others gathered on a Sunday afternoon, May 19, at the cemetery and raked, cleared branches, mowed and whacked weeds. The clean-up took 2 1/2 hours.

"We were so pleased with the

turnout," Galen said.

The refurbished sign gleams above a gated opening to the cemetery. The Faith Lutheran church council agreed to keep the existing fence that surrounds the area, but will be replacing some of the rotted posts, Mr. Olson said.

Trimmed trees allow easier access to graves that were previously buried under branches. Mr. Olson and his sister removed a deciduous tree that had rooted in the southwest corner of Ole Anderson's plot outline. Baby markers that had been scattered under the trunk were gathered and gently lined up beside a larger stone marking the infants' deaths.

"We recorded 116 graves, including the unmarked ones," he said. "We found several (deceased persons) who are recorded but don't have markers."

Plans are to set up a fund for cemetery care and to mark the graves.

"This has been labor of love," Mr. Olson said. "We had no idea it would take us a full year to get everything done."

He added that two people generously donated money to buy flowers for each grave to decorate the cemetery for Memorial Day.

"We want this year to be special," he said, "because the trees are trimmed and the archway has been restored."



A TOMBSTONE is scarcely visible due to the overgrowth of branches before the Swedish Lutheran Cemetery was cleared of debris, then mowed and manicured recently by volunteers and friends from Faith Lutheran Church.

— Photo by Galen Olson