

Why Bother?

In 1853 William Hixon donated one acre in Wabash Township in Parke County Indiana to be used as a public cemetery. Hixon Cemetery is one of over 200 pioneer cemeteries in Parke County. Many of these are poorly maintained, totally inaccessible because of uncooperative land owners, or long since forgotten. There are those that believe such cemeteries are not worth preserving. The following two short stories indicate how wrong these nay-sayers are.

Coarsegold, California is a small town on the lower slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains located near the exact geographic center of California.



Bill & Carole Lavery

It's a long way from Coarsegold to Wabash Township in Parke County, Indiana. But not too far for Bill and Carole Lavery to travel as they set out from their home in Coarsegold on a trek to Indiana in search of some of their family ancestors.

One stop on the Lavery's journey was the Hixon Cemetery which is located near Mecca in Parke County. Bill was pleased to find the grave of Jane Lavery, his ggg-grandmother.

It was an emotional moment for Bill as he knelt down beside his grandmother's grave and reached out to touch her gravestone.



Of course, Bill never really knew Jane, but somehow that did not matter. The connection he felt with her spirit was real and very meaningful to him. Tears filled his eyes as he stared intently at Jane's gravestone and said "Somehow it seems like I almost feel her spirit". Jane was born in Ireland in 1756 and was laid to rest in Hixon Cemetery in 1847.

When someone asks "why bother" with these "old" cemeteries, the answer lies in moments like Bill experienced. On a beautiful fall day on a hill in an old Indiana cemetery, a thousand miles from his home, Bill was reunited with part of his family he never knew when he reached out and touched his grandmother's headstone. Somehow that made the long trip from California all worthwhile.

Around Christmas in 1776 in Cumberland County Pennsylvania, a young 18-year-old named Joseph Ghormley made a decision to support his burgeoning new country by electing to serve as a patriot in the American Revolution. Joseph entered the Pennsylvania Militia as a private serving under a Captain Mitchell.



Two-hundred and thirty-two years later on a beautiful September day in 2008, Vannetta (Ghormley) McDowell, Joseph's gggg-Granddaughter, knelt beside his grave in the Hixon Cemetery in Parke County Indiana.

On October 25, 1843, Joseph applied for, and presumably received, a pension from the new U.S. government.

Information on his pension application indicated that he had lived in Parke County, Indiana for two years having previously lived in Floyd County, Indiana.



None of us can know who might search in the next 10, 20 or even 50 years for a distant relative who was laid to rest in Hixon or another Indiana pioneer cemetery.

While this story of Vannetta and Joseph's reunion may not be unique, it does underscore the importance of maintaining all pioneer cemeteries for future generations.

If we do not preserve the past for the future, who will? As the Indiana Pioneer Cemetery Preservation Project has so poignantly pointed out,

"Preservation of a cemetery is not about the living. Instead, it is a commitment to honor and remember the lives of those who have come before us. We owe our pioneer ancestors a better monument than a forgotten grave amid bramble and thicket".