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## Arkansas inmates preserve distant past by cleaning up cemeteries

by Sara Forhetz, KY3 News

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Several cemeteries are getting facelifts and are back on the radar after inmates got their chance out of jail for a day to clean them up. They're repaying a debt while reconnecting ancestors.

MOUNTAIN HOME, Ark. -- From a distance, Wesley Chapel Cemetery just looks like an overgrown and long forgotten field. If you get up close, however, you'll see history unfolding before your eyes.

"Some of these headstones date back to the 1800s," said Baxter County inmate Jonathan Harig.

He is one of 12 inmates who did the legwork.

"I've raked a lot of grass, picked up a lot of brush and burned a lot of wood," Harig said.

It's all in the name of uncovering names from the distant past.

"There are members of many different families that have lived in Baxter County since the turn of the 20th century that are buried here, and it would just be a shame for this to be totally overgrown and abandoned to the point it disappears some day," said Baxter County Sheriff's Dept. Capt. Jeff Lewis.

That will never happen if Lynn Baker has his way. He tagged along with the inmates on Wednesday and is a genealogist and cemetery historian. He says this find is like Christmas for him.

"I've been working on this cemetery for two years and it was impossible for me to make any headway by myself," Baker said.

"Once we've recorded it, no matter how bad the stones are weathered in the future, we'll always have that firm record," he said.

Up until now, historians thought 48 people were buried here. You can add one to the list. One grave was just uncovered, and that's big news for anyone tracing genealogy, especially, in this case, the Pugh family.

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"This is significant; these older stones, we can find them because we hope to find the descendant so they're able to find where their great-great-great grandpa passed away and where these final resting places are," Baker said.

With his paper log and bottle of shaving cream, Baker is bringing Wesley Chapel cemetery back from its death.

"It's just great, it's opened a whole new avenue!"

At the same time, he's helping give a little more life to the days of men who would otherwise just be wishing their time away.

"The fresh air is doing me a lot of good," Harig said. "It's quite rewarding if you look at the headstones we've popped back up."

The inmates have cleaned up three cemeteries so far, they have two more to go.

The volunteer historians are archiving digital images of all the gravestones. They're posting them online as a permanent record. If you're looking to do your genealogy, you can check [www.arkansasgravestones.org](http://www.arkansasgravestones.org) to see where your ancestors might have been found.

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