



Roots and soil horizons are exposed under headstones teetering on the edge of Little John Creek.

The day I stumbled upon the Ohm-Litke family cemetery changed me, and this journey has become more than just another water quality project. While traditional articles for the Lifeline are not written from a first person, in this case, this project has become entirely too personal for me to let the “third person” tell it.

That day last summer started out as any other, as I set off to check a CRP field for a landowner interested in installing buffers on his property. Since part of my job at the time was to inspect the property to determine program eligibility, I was walking the perimeter of the field when I came across something that I never expected to find: a cemetery. This quaint little cemetery seemed to be the resting place for over a dozen graves, and upon looking at the headstones, it was obvious that this was a very old family cemetery. With dates on the markers ranging from 1882-1934, I leisurely browsed the cemetery noting the overgrown trees, the toppled headstones, and the area where the deer had bedded down the night before, until something instantly caught my attention. This cemetery was literally teetering on the edge of a creek bank.

The channel of the creek is narrow and deep, but unfortunately, the cemetery is located right on the edge of the bank, where the creek makes a nearly 90-degree turn.

Little John Creek is your average intermittent stream in the Flint Hills, only flowing water during high rainfall events. The channel of the creek is narrow and deep, but unfortunately, the cemetery is located right on the edge of the bank, where the creek makes a nearly 90-degree turn. This location, in combination with various high-flow events, has led to massive erosion to the bank.

A pledge to “Minnie”

I noticed one particular headstone on the edge of the cemetery, near the dilapidated perimeter fence, leaning and tipped. As I read the stone and took mental note of the 14 year-old girl buried there, I jumped down into the creek channel, and to my horror, found that the bank, from a combination of water and burrowing animals, had completely eroded away. In knowing that Christian tradition will bury the dead with the head to the West facing the East, my heart sank in knowing that “Minnie” was gone. I pledged to Minnie and her family, right then and there, that I would fix this problem.

Having no knowledge of burial practices or the history of this cemetery location, my basic research led me to the astounding fact that in the late 1800's, arsenic was the main component in embalming fluid. Thanks to its affordability and effectiveness at slowing (and in some cases, stopping) the bacterial process in decomposition, arsenic was widely used until 1910, when it was finally banned from the embalming process. Arsenic, a basic element, will not degrade or change when exposed, and has been a major contributing factor to water quality nightmares all over the world.

Although it is unknown what levels of arsenic were used in specific body preservation, it is documented that from the late 1800's, as little as four ounces, to as much as twelve pounds of arsenic per body may have been used. Many turn of the century cemeteries are now the locations of arsenic-contaminated groundwater sources.

Aside from the obvious and disheartening issue of remains being unearthed by the erosion, the potentially hazardous threat of arsenic contamination to the surface and groundwater in the area immediately became a high priority. I contacted the



A weathered headstone still reveals a chiseled heart from more than 100 years ago.



Ann D'Alfonso, KDHE Watershed Management Section, Katie Miller, KRWA, and Angela Beavers, Flint Hills RC&D, discuss the parameters of stabilizing the area and maintaining the integrity of the past.

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Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) and began to pursue a grant to fund the stabilization of this creek bank, and hopefully eliminate further loss and water quality contamination. The soil lost from this bank, in addition to the potential arsenic contamination is not only a local issue, but could cause for concern

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Katie Miller, KRWA, Ann D'Alfonso, KDHE, and Paul Ingle, Flint Hills RC&D assess the creek bank and the erosion that has occurred.

many miles down the watershed. The KDHE is strongly focused on watershed protection and restoration by eliminating potential water quality hazards when possible and striving to prevent additional sediment from filling our reservoirs.

A series of site visits with the appropriate agency personnel have ensued, as well as creek bank assessments, engineer designs, and grant applications. This process, while at times has seemed a tad slow, will ultimately be worth the wait when we are able to protect this precious resource. When the grant funding is obtained, construction should occur in mid to late summer of 2010, when the water flow will be low. The creek bank will not only be stabilized, we also plan to rebuild the perimeter fence, eliminate the unwanted vegetation, and begin routine maintenance on the cemetery.

Not to be forgotten

Researching the Ohm-Litke family cemetery, also known as the Little John Creek Cemetery, has led me on a fascinating genealogical journey. After visiting with numerous family members about the history of the cemetery and the progress of this project, one thing is clear; no one has forgotten, nor will forget their rich history linked to this tiny spot on the creek. Through the years the land has changed ownership and the adjacent farmstead has fallen to disrepair, but this cemetery is precious to the members of this family as well as myself.

Thanks to the interest and passion of so many, I am confident this project will be successfully completed and maintained for decades to come. It is hard to believe that so many years of history can be gone in such a short time, but all we can do is preserve what we can with the resources we have. This journey has been personally fulfilling, but won't be complete until it is properly restored. I cannot describe the spark compelling my interest in seeing this through, but I do know that I am thankful for the opportunity to meet a fascinating family with a special connection to their past. As far as Minnie, she will be a person that I will never know much about, but I know with all of my heart, will never be forgotten.

Katie Miller joined the KRWA staff in October 2009. She previously worked for Flint Hills Resource Conservation and Development as a Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy Project Coordinator since 2003. She organized and coordinated the Twin Lakes Water



Festival in 2005 – 2009; it has been attended by more than 6,000 participants.



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