

The Bismark Tribune

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Memorial to honor Jewish homesteaders

GARSKE (AP) - A granite monument is being dedicated to honor immigrant Jewish families who settled near here in the 1880s.

The monument, about 25 miles north of Devils Lake, will be dedicated Sunday at 1 p.m. at the Sons of Jacob Cemetery, which holds graves of Jewish settlers and family members.

Hal Ettinger, of Lawrence, Kan., led the effort for the monument. He was traveling in the state on business a couple of years ago and decided to research his great-grandfather's gravesite.

"I knew that my great-grandfather was buried somewhere in North Dakota," he said. "He was attempting to homestead in Ramsey County. I did some homework and found that cemetery."

He found his great-grandfather's gravesite, outlined by a ring of rocks. A crude, rusted metal nameplate with his name and the year he died, 1891, was attached with barbed wire anchored into the ground.

Simon Ettinger arrived at the Garske Colony five years earlier. He died just six months after he was issued a land patent free title to 160 acres. His widow, with five young children, then moved away, with a total of \$10 in their pockets.

Hal Ettinger counted a dozen total grave markers, mostly stones gathered from the surrounding countryside. Many had names and dates of those buried, some adults and some children, carved into the stone, some with inscription in Hebrew. All were weathered, some barely legible.

After Ettinger returned to Kansas, he wondered what could be done to preserve the memory of his great-grandfather.

"My curiosity grew," he said. "I wanted to know more about him, and that led me to other people, other descendants."

Ettinger started researching names and found other descendants. He decided that a permanent memorial was needed and started a fund-raising campaign for the \$2,500 granite monument.

He contacted people in Devils Lake. Mike Conner, whose family homesteaded near the colony, adopted the cause.

"My parents always talked about how tough the Jewish settlers had it at the turn of the century," Conner said. "They went through some times that we couldn't imagine."

Conner manages the Devils Lake Basin Joint Water Resource Board, which became the official sponsor.

The campaign has raised about \$5,000. Ettinger said the extra money is being held in a fund for cemetery maintenance. The money has come from all over the country.

Dennis Kitsch's family owns the land where the cemetery is located.

Kitsch's grandfather, Nick Kitsch, bought land from the government in 1902, after many of the homesteaders had gone.

"They watched over it, and fenced it to keep the cattle out," Kitsch said of his grandfather.

The Kitsch family has continued to maintain the cemetery over the years, keeping the grass cut and mending fences and gates.

"It's a wonderful thing to put a monument here," the 79-year-old retired farmer said. "They were good neighbors. And future generations should know they were here."

Hal Ettinger agreed.

"It's been a very rewarding experience," he said. "It's important insomuch as it's a memorial to those individuals who attempted to homestead there. Without it, any record of their existence might just fade away."

Comments

Mary wrote on September 17, 2006 9:11 PM:"Do people realize there is another Jewish Cemetery in Burleigh County, just east of Regan? It is very interesting and well kept, just very difficult to get to. Does anyone know if there are any living descendants of the Jewish pioneers buried there?"