



# Madison County Genealogical Society

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## Campaign Aimed at Stopping Cemetery Thieves

By David Hendee, Omaha World Herald Staff Writer  
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St. Paul, Neb.--Posters going up in some rural Nebraska shops and churches have caught the attention of national cemetery preservationists.

Now the Nebraskans hope their neighbors will take notice.

The 230-member Howard County Historical Society is distributing dozens of posters and newspaper advertising displays in a campaign to raise public awareness about the theft of decorative and religious objects from cemeteries.

Ron Sack, an art director for the Bozell Worldwide advertising company in Omaha, started the campaign after becoming aware last spring of the thefts of a few grave markers from rural Howard County cemeteries. Sack grew up in Howard County and is a board member of the historical society.

One of the posters features a large photograph of the old grave sites of a father, mother and daughter. Ornate crosses mark the graves of the mother and daughter. The father's marker has been stolen. Only the broken base remains.

"There's a reason why you can't remember your great-grandfather's name," the poster reads.

Another poster shows the missing marker in an antique shop. A price tag dangles from the cross. That poster reads: "More people are becoming interested in your family's history."

Small blocks of copy remind readers that there is no such thing as a second-hand cemetery item. They are all stolen.

Cemetery preservationist Armand St. Martin of Los Angeles praised the effort. He and his wife, Patty Lee St. Martin, are founders of the New Orleans-based National Cemetery Conservation Foundation.

Cemetery thefts across the country reflect a growing interest in garden furnishings and architectural antiques. Benches, urns, stone carvings, statues, stained glass and iron fences pilfered from cemeteries are feeding a thriving trade in black-market antiques, said Patty Lee St. Martin.

The plundering is relatively rare in Nebraska and Iowa. But cemetery preservationists and antique dealers said it's happening more frequently everywhere. Most cemeteries, especially those in isolated, rural areas, are easy pickings for thieves to spirit away artifacts on dark nights.

Sack said his grandmother, Pauline Sack, taught him to respect cemeteries.

"Going to the cemetery was a ritual for my grandmother," he said. "She would say, 'On this spot is where generations of our family have gathered to grieve the loss of loved ones.' My grandmother made me realize how important and beautiful cemeteries really are."

Sack said cemeteries were meant to be places to reflect and find peace. For someone to violate that peacefulness with vandalism or theft is a crime, he said.

"It's like losing a loved one twice," he said.

Marion Bahensky of St. Paul, a retired New York City schoolteacher who is president of the historical society, said the thought of people taking cemetery artifacts is shocking.

"There's nobody around to protect these old family graves," she said. "It concerns me that people can be that awful. (Tombstones are) a repository of our history. It's all we can do now to protect them."

Bahensky said her only fear about launching the public campaign is that it will draw the attention of thieves and unscrupulous art and antique dealers to cemeteries.

But fear of copycat crimes should not prevent anyone, including the Howard County group, from raising public awareness to the problem and reporting vandalism or theft of cemetery objects to police, the St. Martins said. Awareness and police reports are two key factors in stopping the trade of stolen cemetery artifacts, they said.

The St. Martins started their self-funded crusade to stop graveyard thefts in 1997.

They try to shame sellers and buyers into stopping the practice by

appealing to their sense of decency and history. They also are in the process of producing their second public service announcement on the issues for television. They provide localized public service announcements for radio at no charge on request.

The St. Martins are pushing for a federal law to protect all cemeteries.

Anyone who knowingly sells stolen property can be prosecuted, and many states have enacted laws prohibiting the removal, ownership, sale or attempted sale or purchase of memorial art, Nebraska's theft laws cover things taken from cemeteries.

The historical society's campaign to produce 600 posters and advertising materials was an ambitious task for an organization that gets only \$5,500 a year from the county tax levy. Sack made it possible by rounding up a paper company, a graphics art company, a printer and others to donate services, money and time.

## **Cemetery Tips**

- Photograph family headstones and decorative objects.
- Inform area antiques stores to be on the lookout for cemetery objects.
- Ask local law enforcement agencies to patrol by cemeteries.
- Form groups to regularly check up on cemeteries, especially those in remote rural area.

Source: Howard County Historical Society