



## P I O N E E R C E M E T E R Y

OCTOBER 18, 1980

BELMONT—Roy McLellan can't understand why people find cemeteries spooky.

"It's so quiet, so peaceful here." And besides, he says, early cemeteries have a real story to tell about how people lived in pioneer times in this country.

McLellan is standing in the Fifth Concession Burial Ground in Westminister Township near Belmont. He is one of three men hired by the township to restore the pioneer cemetery.

When the work began in July, the two-acre cemetery was a mass of weeds and choking undergrowth. The cemetery, near the intersection of Highway 74 and Concession 5 of Westminister, is the burial ground for many of the people who settled the area.

Evelyn Moore of RR 2 Belmont, who has written a history of the cemetery and served on the trustee board that once owned it, says the cemetery officially dates back to 1861.

In May of that year, two parcels of land for the cemetery--a total of 250 square rods or about two acres--were purchased for a total of \$55.

Moore says the first site was used for burials even before that--as early as 1840.

The first person buried in the cemetery is believed to be Matilda Palen, who was born June 27, 1813, and died Oct. 16, 1840.

After 1861, says Moore, the burial ground was used steadily until the 1930's. It was last used in 1950 for the burial of his aunt, Mrs. John McLellan. She wanted to be buried beside her husband, who died in 1927.

Moore says the cemetery fell into ruin during the 1950s and the board of trustees that was supposed to look after it lapsed. Several attempts were made at restoration but the project proved to be too long.

Then in 1961 a new board of trustees was formed and in 1966 it joined with the women's institutes of Belmont and Wilton Grove in a new restoration effort. By then the cemetery was overgrown with lilac bushes and undergrowth.

After weeks of work, the brush had been cleared and the stones put back in their original places. "The cemetery was restored to very good condition," says Moore.

"But then through lack of interest and ability on the part of the trustees it began to go back to wilderness."

Last April, it was decided something had to be done and township representatives met the trustees.

The trustees agreed to hand over control to the township, a step allowed under provincial legislation.

In July, three men hired by Westminister arrived to begin restoration. Two of the men, McLellan and Lloyd Penfold, also are members of the township's cemetery restoration board.

The men were confronted by a jungle, says Penfold. Trees and shrubs once planted to decorate graves had run wild. The boundary fence was broken and cattle could sometimes be found wandering among the gravestones.

The first job was to replace the fence. Then Penfold, McLellan and the third member of the team, Jack Hudson, began the back-breaking job of chopping out the undergrowth using only hand tools.

"You couldn't see the stones, a lot of them," explains Penfold. "If you had tried to go in there with machines, you'd have run over them."

Once the undergrowth was chopped away and burned, township machinery was brought in to move the stones out of the way and level the ground. All of the grave markers were catalogued before they were moved. Ideal Monument Co., of London also helped move stones.

In this restoration, the stones will not be put back in their original positions. Instead they will be laid out on three concrete pads on the high ground at the back of the cemetery. The tall monuments are being grouped according to size.

The markers are being laid out in family groupings on the front two pads. Many of the flat ones have been broken and will have to be fitted together before they are fastened in place.

The next step--next summer--will be to plant grass and build pathways between the pads.

Penfold says the restoration is being done this way to make maintenance easier and less expensive. He thinks it will also make it easier for visitors.

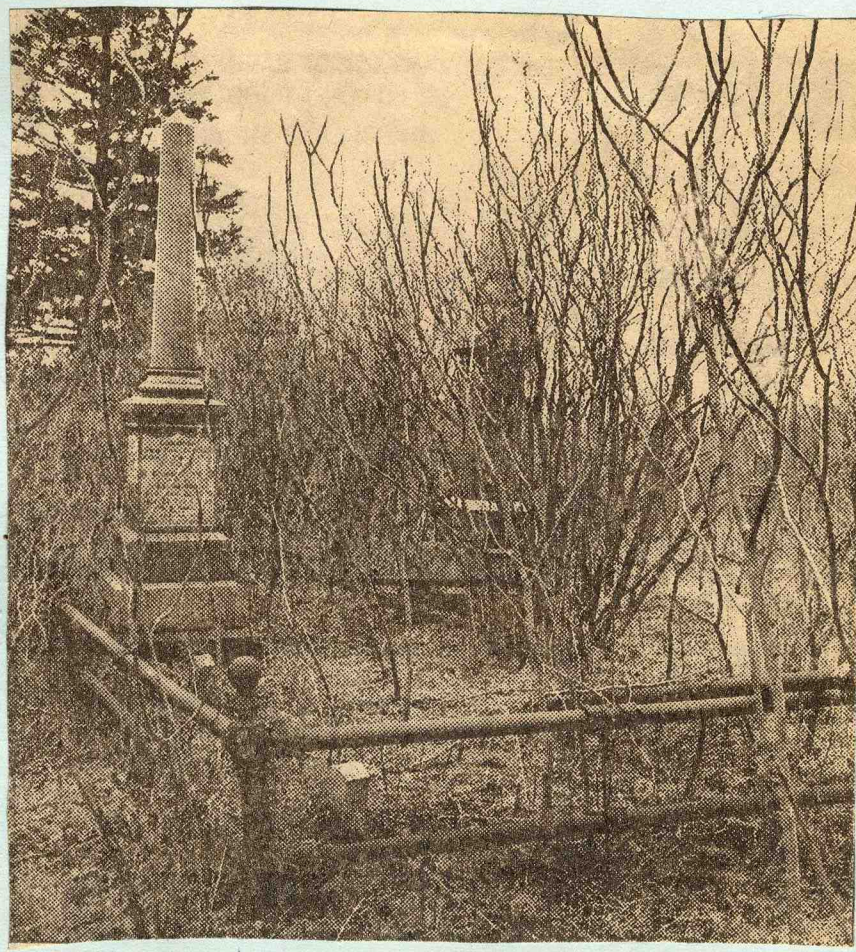
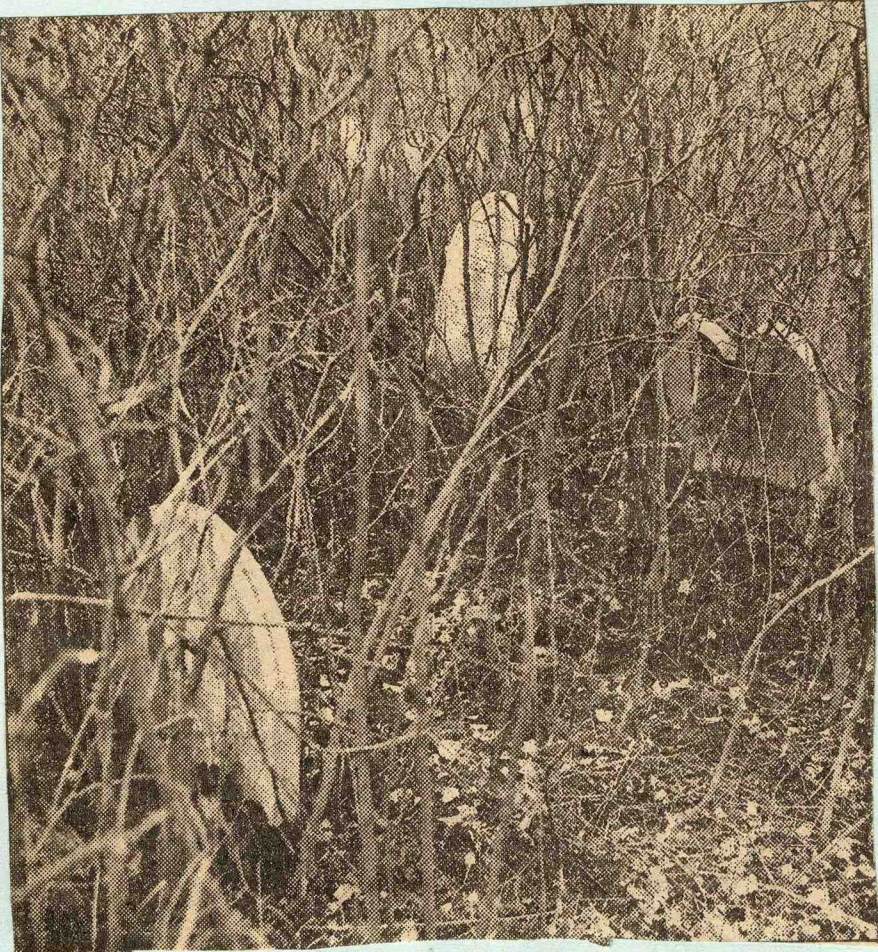
"People will be able to see who is buried there without wandering all over the place."

For McLellan, the work is something of a labor of love. He lives just across the road from the cemetery and his grandparents and other relatives are buried there.

His father used to tell him stories about early residents of the area and he feels he knows many of the people buried in the cemetery almost personally.

McLellan said many of the grave markers also provide an instant history of the people who settled the area. There is Joshua Odell, the founder of Belmont, who lived from 1785 to 1865 and Squire Jacob Manning, founder of the Manning settlement, who

**Before**



These gravestone markers, some of which are seen standing in dense brush in the 1966 photo at top, will be placed flat on the ground in the restored cemetery. Next summer grass will be planted around them.

**after**

lived from 1795 to 1889.

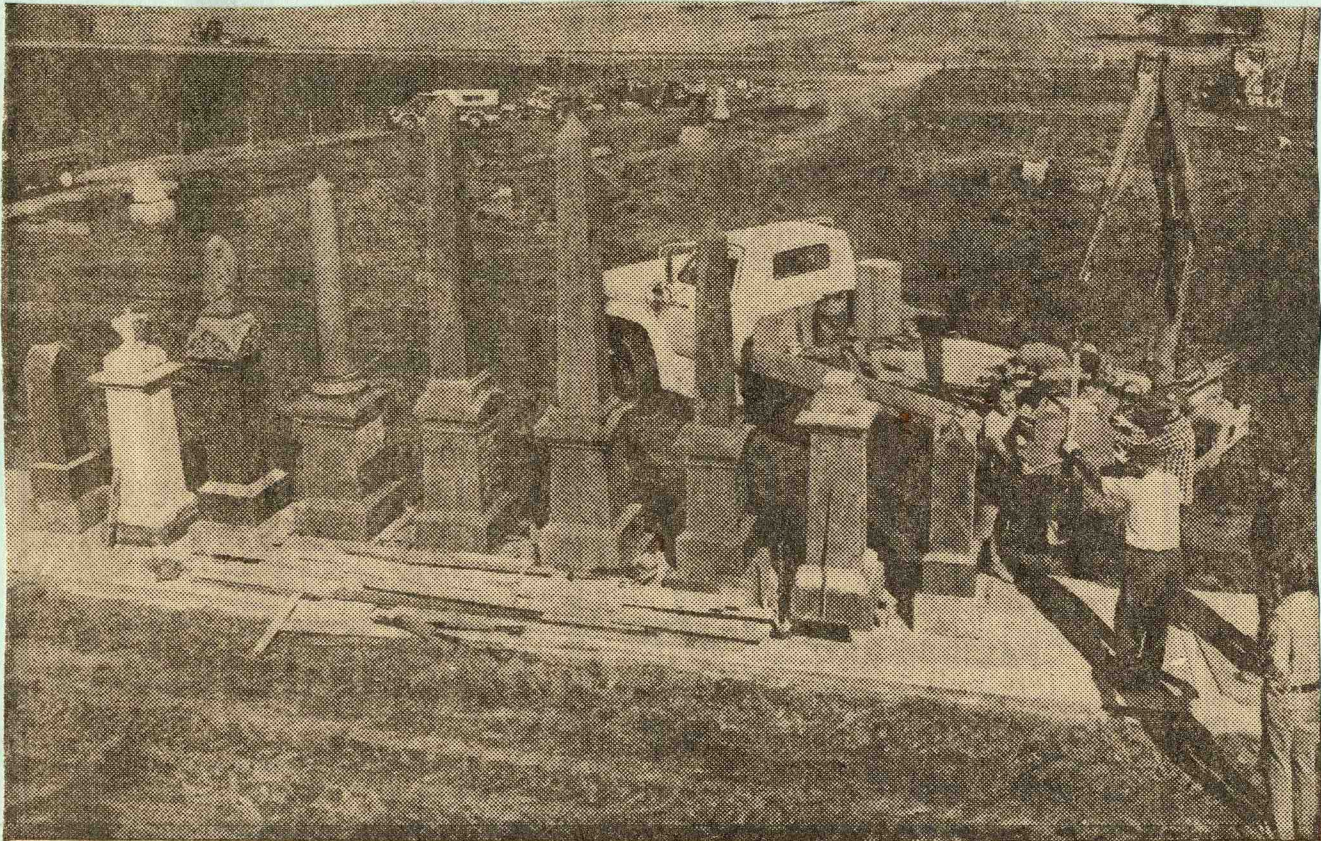
The stones also give an insight into the harshness of pioneer life, when epidemics often wiped out entire families and many children didn't live past infancy.

Penfold thinks it is important to have reminders of Canada's early days and he has little patience with critics of the restoration.

"Anybody who would find fault with what we are doing has forgotten about history and everything else. If it wasn't for those fellows buried there we wouldn't be here."

Historian Moore does have one criticism of the work and it's not because she lacks a feeling for history. She and her husband Frank have studied the area's history so long she has come to regard many of the early settlers almost old friends.

She is bothered by the fact that grave markers aren't being put back over the places where people are buried. She feels that just isn't right.



Restoration work has begun at the Fifth Concession cemetery near Highway 74 in Westminster Township. Workmen place stones in place following the clearing of old trees and shrubs as seen in top photo.