

Cemetery brought back to life

By BOB MOONEY
P.O. City Editor

NESTLED ALONG A LONELY township road is a little country cemetery.

A small, white storage building is surrounded by deep green grass and a sprinkling of yellow-topped dandelions. On the west side of the shed, facing the 75 or so graves in the cemetery, is a marker that, in part, explains why this particular cemetery is a little different than others.

For 32 years, the Dexter Cemetery was all but forgotten. After a tornado struck on June 17, 1944, and smashed the church where the storage building stands now, the cemetery was left to time and the winds that come sweeping over a small rise to the northeast.

But Earl Drake didn't forget about it.

"MY GRANDDAD'S BURIED HERE," said Drake, looking across the freshly trimmed field. "So's my grandmother, my parents and two sisters. When my time comes, I'll be buried here, too."

The 67-year-old Drake farms near Waubay and knows the history of this little corner of Codington County like he knows the fields he tends every year. In 1880, his grandmother homesteaded the land next to where the cemetery would later be established and the history of the area is as much a part of his life as his work is.

"They built the parsonage before they built the church," Drake explained. "The congregation was formed in 1902 and the church wasn't built until 1906. They had a pretty good congregation going and people from all over the area came here to go to church."

By the time the church was constructed, the cemetery was already 7-years-old. It was there before the congregation existed and remains there after the congregation dissolved.

"AFTER THE TORNADO, they never rebuilt the church," Drake said. "Everyone just kind of drifted apart and went elsewhere."

When the congregation dissolved, so did any organized effort to maintain the cemetery. And that's the way things stayed until one day in 1976.

"Different people felt bad that the cemetery

wasn't being taken care of," Drake said. "A bunch of us were talking about it and one day we all met over at my place and decided to form an association to take care of the cemetery. We wanted to make the cemetery a suitable place for those old pioneers who are buried out here."

One of those old pioneers was William Painter who was born in Pennsylvania in 1821 and died in South Dakota in 1902. Drake said Painter was a Quaker who moved to Iowa and started the first mill in that state. That site, he said, is now a national landmark.

ONCE THE DEXTER CEMETERY Association was formed, Drake and the other officers — Ralph Peeper, Lyle Thorson, Dennis Halse and Clarence Drake — needed to raise money to make repairs at the cemetery and maintain the site.

"The biggest thing was getting people interested," Drake said. "We sent letters out to everyone who had relatives buried here. The response was very generous."

In a short time, the association had \$3,000 that was placed in a perpetual trust. Over the years, that figure has grown to \$5,000 and the interest it earns is used to maintain and improve the cemetery.

There was a lot of work to be done. The 1944 tornado pushed some markers over and others were sinking into the ground. But as time and money allowed, they were repaired or replaced.

Drake and a few others did much of the work themselves when the association was first formed. Not everybody thought restoring the cemetery and keeping the association going was possible. But Drake and the others kept on doing what they could.

NOW THERE'S ENOUGH MONEY to mow the lawn four times a year and volunteers donate their labors to pull weeds and repair markers. The Dexter Cemetery is back in shape again and well cared for.

"I was putting in a window (on the storage building) one day," Drake recalled, "and this guy came by. He said, 'I remember when I told you once that this cemetery was going to be nothing but a field of wheat.'"

"He stopped and looked around for a minute and said... 'But I guess it looks like I'm going to be wrong.'"

Dennis is descended from Samuel V. Halse b. 1936

which time the board will hold an informal private conference of April, 1984, and