

Dowless' labor of love: marking vets' graves

By RAY WYCHE
Staff Writer

Layton Dowless' goal is to see a marker at the grave of every U. S. military veteran.

Dowless undertakes his payless work as a token of appreciation for what the veterans have done.

He has researched the military records of more than 100 former members of the armed forces, and this research is only the beginning of the project of making sure the final resting places of ex-servicemen are identified. After proving that the subject was an honorably discharged veteran, Dowless orders the markers as the family specifies - granite or bronze - through the local Veterans Service office. Then he undertakes the often hard physical labor of placing the heavy stone at the grave.

Dowless' efforts are his way of saying thank you to those who defended the nation.

"I don't charge anybody anything. I feel like I should do this for the sacrifices they made for us. They paid the price. They won't be forgotten," he says.

Dowless got started with his unusual hobby while researching the records and verifying that he had ancestors in the Revolutionary War.

"So far I have found six ancestors in the Revolution and I've got markers for five of them and am working on the sixth," he says. Three of these are buried in the Brown



Layton Dowless erects a marker in the Creech-Caffee Cemetery in memory of Wesley J. Creech who was killed in action in World War I and whose body was never recovered.

lists all information available about Tar Heels who served in the Late Unpleasantness

physical location of the grave must be furnished. Many early graves, particularly in

sometime difficult to locate. In such cases, Dowless says,

degree angles which, when loosely held parallel to each other, will swing toward each other when they are passed over an underground object or where the soil has been moved about.

Dowsing is also used to find water underground ("waterwitching.") Though some scientists say such mysterious actions can't be proved scientifically, many people swear by the system for locating what cannot be seen on the surface.

He demonstrated dowsing while erecting a marker recently in memory of Wesley Creech of the White Marsh Church area, who was killed in World War I and whose body was never found.

The two bent rods eerily moved across each other as he walked over a certain, unmarked spot in the cemetery. He had been told that there were several unmarked graves in a section of the graveyard where his two rods indicated an anomaly underground.

Dowless has the markers shipped to his workplace at Todd Furniture Company and Discount Warehouse and carries them to burial sites in his pickup.

He has had as many as 20 stones on hand at one time and has erected 10 markers for military veterans in one family alone.

In one day, Dowless and a helper, Bladen County native Jason Bordeaux who now lives near Greensboro, placed markers on eight graves. At

(if the grave is unmarked), Dowless uses posthole diggers to cut a hole about 16 inches deep in which the bottom part of the stone will rest.

He uses a special metal slide he had constructed to his specification to ease the granite marker into the hole.

Ever meticulous in his work, Dowless places a carpenter's spirit level on the stone to make sure it stands exactly perpendicular to the ground.

He gets permission to erect a stone, after contacting the veteran's descendants, and talks to whomever is in charge of the cemetery before placing the marker. He lines up the stones with nearby tombstones.

"I try to look out for the lawnmower man," says Dowless.

Dowless, retired after 38 years in the National Guard and Army Reserves, is a member of the Columbus County Camp of Sons of Confederate Veterans, the Mother County (Bladen) Genealogical Society, and has applied for membership in the Sons of the American Revolution.

He keeps meticulous records of stones he has erected, including photographs, in loose-leaf binders.

Once he erects a stone over a veteran's grave, Dowless does not move on and forget about it.

"I furnish U. S. flags for veterans' graves. I try to go back once a year and replace them," he says.

his unusual hobby while researching the records and verifying that he had ancestors in the Revolutionary War.

"So far I have found six ancestors in the Revolution and I've got markers for five of them and am working on the sixth," he says. Three of these are buried in the Brown Marsh Presbyterian Church Cemetery near Clarkton.

In his search for the burial sites of veterans whose service he has verified, he has traveled as far as Trenton and Kinston. He has placed monuments in these locations as well as in Bladen, Brunswick and Robeson counties.

Every honorably discharged veteran of the U. S. armed forces is eligible for a government-furnished grave marker.

"A lot of people don't know they can get one and that they are free," he says. "Sometimes I go to the family (to tell them about the stones) and sometimes they come to me."

Memorial stones are available for servicemen who are buried overseas, Dowless adds.

Proving an ancestor was in the service in wars long past is not always an easy undertaking, and Dowless has learned where to look for find the proof the Veterans Administration requires.

"You've got to have some good proof," he says, before the government will ship a grave marker. Records of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) are acceptable proof usually, and Civil War rosters are good.

"That's the easiest to get," he says of Civil War records. He relies heavily on the Roster of North Carolina Troops put out by the state Department of Archives and History, which



Layton Dowless erects a marker in the Creech-Caffee Cemetery in memory of Wesley J. Creech who was killed in action in World War I and whose body was never recovered.

lists all information available about Tar Heels who served in the Late Unpleasantness, including ages, home counties, dates of enlistments, units, and health records. Pay vouchers are also good proof of someone's service in the military, he says.

One of his best sources of information, Dowless says, is the Columbus County Veterans Services office where records of many veterans can be verified.

Once the Veterans Administration accepts the submitted documents as proof of an individual's service, the

physical location of the grave must be furnished. Many early graves, particularly in predominantly rural areas such as Columbus County, were marked with wooden boards on which pertinent information may have been crudely carved.

These wooden tomb indicators were made primarily from pine fat lightwood boards and forest fires sweeping through the burial sites often destroyed these markers.

In cemeteries now abandoned – or in abandoned sections of currently used cemeteries – exact locations are

sometime difficult to locate. In such cases, Dowless says, "I get my wire out."

Dowless says he can locate places where the ground has been disturbed by the dowsing method, a mystic (and debatable) system of determining what is underground by use of a twig or metal rods.

Dowless works with two pieces of wire bent at 90-

He has had as many as 20 stones on hand at one time and has erected 10 markers for military veterans in one family alone.

In one day, Dowless and a helper, Bladen County native Jason Bordeaux who now lives near Greensboro, placed markers on eight graves. Others who have pitched in to help Dowless include Lionel Todd whose company forklift Dowless uses to unload the 230-pound stones, and Keith Davis of Whiteville.

He uses a handcart to move the stones to the grave sites.

Once the divining rods show something underground

loose-leaf binders. Once he erects a stone over a veteran's grave, Dowless does not move on and forget about it.

"I furnish U. S. flags for veterans' graves. I try to go back once a year and replace them," he says.

He began his program of honoring deceased veterans about three years ago.

"I wish I had started sooner," he says.

Ray Wyche
910-642-4104, ext 229