

Cemetery cheque presentation



Del Harbourne, member of Royal Canadian Legion Branch 139, presents Murray Simpson with a cheque for \$1,500 on Wednesday, April 29. The money will go towards the construction of the Cairn monument for the Vale of Peace cemetery in Notikewin.

MICHAEL STAMOU

= Good Work Murray & Warden

Cemetery caretaker helps bring closure to people

Joanne McQuarrie
Record Gazette

The unique service Murray Simpson provides connects people with the locations where previously long-lost family members and friends are buried, and he's had requests from the region about what he knows.

"It's about the recovery of dignity and identity. It brings closure to the families and to the community," he said.

"I do get requests from people asking me if I've found so-and-so in a graveyard. When I identified a soldier's grave a few years ago, I got a call from someone in the region - another soldier who had served in the war - who was pleased that I'd identified this soldier."

Simpson has been identifying unmarked graves since 2012. He lives in Notikewin, an hour north of Peace River, has been the caretaker and director of the North Star Public Cemetery for 31 years and has been working at the Notikewin Public Cemetery as a caretaker for over 20 years. Through his work,

Simpson is very familiar with the layout of the Notikewin Catholic Cemetery, across the highway from the public cemetery.

The news of what he does has captured the interest of people in a bigger area; Simpson said he gets "feedback from Peace River, Grimshaw, kind of all over."

Not only does Simpson identify who is in an unmarked grave, with the extensive knowledge he's gained, he can also provide answers about their background.

"Recently someone asked if I knew about someone's history who passed away a couple of years ago," he said. "I was able to give her a quick run-down of where they were buried and of the history of that family; that gives a tremendous amount of information in a short amount of time."

"I have a habit; if I see someone in one of the graveyards, I stop and see if they need help. Seven times out of ten, I have helped people."

Simpson starts his quest

for the identity of someone in an unmarked grave by sending a request to the Alberta Provincial Archives,

which provide "mostly the time and month and year of death, and the cemetery they're buried in. Death certificates - through churches - (are) a card telling that a person died at a specific time and the cause of death, signed by a doctor. Go through the death registry; that gives you a really good pinpoint. Either public or Catholic, you can also find out by checking baptism records."

Simpson said he's identified up to 50 people in unmarked graves over the years. "Last fall, I found and identified five babies; four from 1957 and one from 1954" in the Notikewin Catholic Cemetery. "None were marked. I found a map and that showed what row they were in. They probably stayed marked for five, ten years. Someone removed the markers - which were wooden crosses - because they were rotting and fell over - that's how they

became unmarked. So they laid unmarked from about the early 60s to last fall.

"That's the case with pretty much most of them becoming unmarked. People didn't have a high priority on cemeteries, so stuff rotted without being replaced."

"When I found (the) five babies," Simpson continued, "my confidence went over the clouds. They laid there that long - I don't know how or why. I bet there's a lot more there - and that's what keeps me going. That's why I do it, that's what fuels me up. I want to make sure they're identified and acknowledged... It's saying you do matter, you do count... (from) babies to pioneers who are in the history books, but you can't find them because the markers were taken away."

When Simpson identifies someone in a grave, he places a silver marker on the site. "After that, the family purchases a headstone and gets it put in place," he said. He extended a welcome: "If someone from the region contacts me about a lost



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Simpson also urged others to do what he's doing. "Don't just wait. I encourage people to step up to the plate and do what kind of thing I have - providing knowledge about who's in what graveyard."

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