

Probationers help restore Concordia Cemetery

By Adriana M. Chávez / El Paso Times

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Since the late 1800s, many El Pasoans have looked on Concordia Cemetery in Central El Paso as an eyesore.

"Groups would come down here and try to beautify it, but they would just give up," said Ray Valdez, the community service manager for the West Texas Community Supervision and Corrections Department. The probation department has overseen thousands of adult probationers in recent years as they did their part to change the face of the historic cemetery.

On Saturday, about 50 probationers continued the cemetery's beautification process as they helped build a storage facility and burial services pavilion near the cemetery's Masonic section. As they worked, they did not want to comment.

Valdez said that during the last seven years, the probation department's beautification committee has helped plan several cemetery improvements, including brick-lined pathways, iron benches, and elaborate wrought-iron and brick fencing around the grave of John Wesley Hardin, an El Paso gunslinger who was shot in the back of the head by Constable John Selman on Aug. 19, 1895.

"We've been turning what people call an eyesore into something that complements the history of El Paso," Valdez said.

The probation department works with the Concordia Heritage Association, which sets beautification goals and raises money, to improve the look of the cemetery.

"They put the foot power to it all and carry out the manhours," said Patricia Kiddney, the association's president. "It's a great partnership.

It gives them a sense of pride to see how clean everything is, and it also encourages family members to go out and work on their own family plots. It's like throwing a pebble in the water. One good act brings about another good act."

Lloyd Muir, chairman of the cemetery committee for El Paso Masonic Lodge 130, which is responsible for the Masonic section of the cemetery and is overseeing the construction of the burial services pavilion, said there are also plans for an adjoining meditation area, rock benches, landscaping, and a piece of granite that will be dedicated to the Adult Probation Department and to lodge members.

"I came here three years ago and I couldn't believe what a filthy mess it was," Muir said. "Without the help from the probation department, we couldn't have done it because the lodge doesn't have the funds to do this kind of stuff."

Muir said that because of the probationers' work, more lodge members now want to be buried at Concordia.

"We have more funerals here now, but it used to be so bad people didn't want to be buried here," Muir said.

Probation department officials estimated that about one burial a week takes place at Concordia. The cemetery is owned by several public, private and religious organizations and consists of 54 acres and more than 65,000 graves.