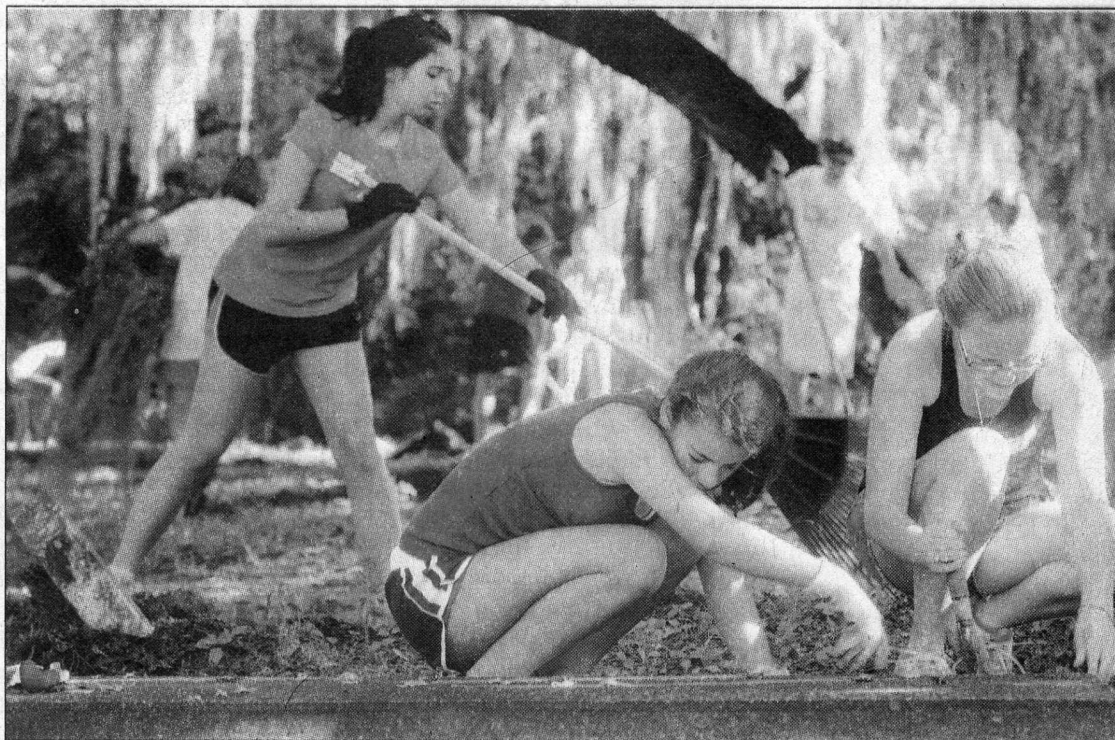


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ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR **BILL KOCH** ■ billkoch@dailycommercial.com ■ 352-365-8208

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From left, Reaghan Wooster, 13, Hannah Sears, 13, and Maggie Conrad, 14, work around grave markers Saturday at the Yalaha Cemetery.

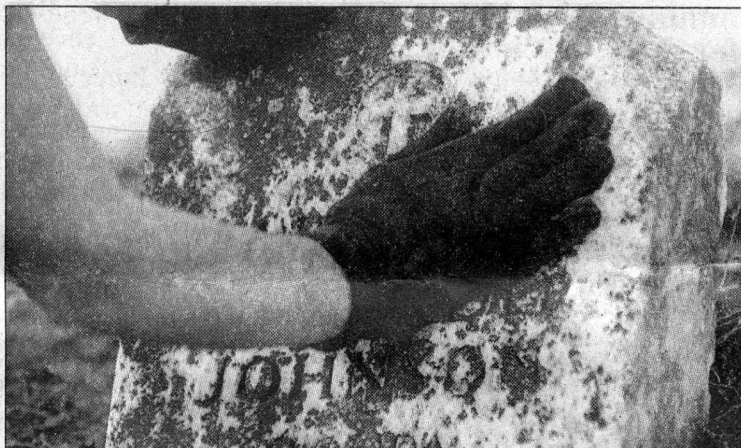
YALAHA

Young volunteers restore cemetery

MILLARD K. IVES | Staff Writer
millardives@dailycommercial.com

Bodies in a Yalaha cemetery may be a little more at peace now thanks to a Saturday community restoration project.

About 35 volunteers mowed and weeded, raked, planted flowers and mulch, trimmed bushes, uncovered hidden graves and pressure washed headstones at the St. Matthews Church of God by



planted flowers and mulch, trimmed bushes, uncovered hidden graves and pressure washed headstones at the St. Matthews Church of God by Faith Cemetery. Members of Adopt-a-Family, a Tavares Middle School organization, led the effort as part of their end-of-the-year project.

Founded in 1921, the African-American graveyard is on Guava Street in Yalaha, about 100 yards long and is comprised of approximately 50 graves. Many of the headstones are cracked or missing pieces.

The restoration splashed more color into the site with green, white, purple and red plants and flowers, including some begonias and crape myrtles.

"We wanted it to look as pretty as possible," said Reagan Wooster, a seventh-grader and president of the school group.

The project was funded in part by donations from local businesses, including Ace Hardware in Tavares that donated hundreds of dollars in landscaping. Doug Heaberlin, manager of the store, said after being asked to help, he drove past the cemetery to take a look.

"It did need some attention," said Heaberlin, whose daughter is a member of the school organization.

Maybe the biggest revival of the project was the addition of a sign, which the cemetery didn't have before. The 5X3-foot white sign with black lettering of the cemetery's name and date founded was arched on two posts with gothic tops, thanks to CTI Signs.

"We wanted to bring some pride to the church," said Kevin Von Maxey, founder of the student group and former Teacher of the Year for Lake County Schools.

Many of the headstones were covered with moss and mold. All County Pressure



Reagan Wooster, 13, wipes a grave marker.



Resident George Gandy bows his head in prayer.

Washing in Eustis cleaned the headstones. The company's Trevis Tibbals said with many of the headstones cracked, he had to take special care.

"But we were more than happy to help out," he said.

Gary Miller, pastor of the church, said the church had been able to keep up the cemetery to some extent, but Saturday's project helped put a new face on the grounds.

"It is really a big difference between the before and after picture," said Miller, who led

the group in prayer early Saturday morning before the project.

Though most of the volunteers were young teens, there didn't seem to be any jitters about conducting a service project in a graveyard. Many seemed happy to be there.

"We were too excited about the project," Von Maxey said.

The project took about six hours to complete and ended with volunteers planting American flags beside the graves of veterans — just in time for Memorial Day.