



All But Forgotten on Little John Creek... The Finale

Looking downstream towards the protected cemetery. Placed rock will minimize or eliminate erosion from occurring to the site during high streamflow events.

In mid-May, I received the phone call I had been waiting on for more than three years! “The cemetery project is done. It’s protected.” I gave a sigh of relief. The contractor, John Sawyer, with Sawyer Construction from Council Grove, had finished the stream bank stabilization project that will protect the Ohm-Litke Family Cemetery for decades to come.

The Ohm-Litke Family Cemetery, also known as the Little John Creek Cemetery, is a small family plot located on a severely eroding creek bank in Morris County. I stumbled upon the site several years ago when checking a CRP field and became personally vested in the little cemetery as I read the names on the toppled headstones and noted the disrepair of the entire site. The headstone in the corner of the plot belonged to Minnie, a 14-year old girl who passed away in 1899. My heart sank as I found that the erosion from the creek had washed away the contents of her grave, leaving only her headstone in tact. I vowed to pursue the means to protect the fragile environment of this historic cemetery and eliminate the further loss of Minnie’s family. It took years to secure grant funds to aid in financing the stream bank protection work for the project, months to obtain an official design and permits for construction, and less than a week to construct and complete the project.

For the complete project history, check out the article in *The Kansas Lifeline* article from March 2010; it can be found at www.krwa.net/lifeline/1003/104.pdf.

Grant funding fun

When I “found” the cemetery and decided it was my mission to protect this rich piece of history, I assumed that people and money would jump out of the darkness to assist in financing such a feel-good project. That was not the case, to say the least. I contacted the Watershed Management Section of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and opted to write a Clean Water Neighbor Grant on behalf of this project. With the main focus of the Clean Water Neighbor program being water quality protection, this stream bank stabilization project was right in line. This grant would focus on protecting the water quality within the watershed through eliminating future erosion from the site. It would also protect the integrity of a cemetery dating back to the 1880’s and fulfill an unwritten moral obligation to the family of the cemetery, past and present. I gathered information and submitted a grant proposal. I then made requested revisions and submitted again. And then submitted again. And again. I actually lost track around the fourth submittal. Long story short, the application was finally approved and Flint Hills RC&D was awarded a \$16,000 grant to address the needed protection of the cemetery site.

Engineering, permits, and patience

Sixteen thousand dollars seemed like a lot of money, until I began pricing engineers and rock and freight on quarried rock and contractors. Private engineering fees alone would

have cost this project over \$3,000, so I had meetings, wrote letters, and begged my friends at the Natural Resources Conservation Service to do the engineering and design for this project. Thankfully, they agreed to take on this project, in addition to their already abundant workload. Months later, I had a fantastic project design in-hand, specifying needs for excavation, earth fill, gravel fill, and 520 tons of quarried rock. I also had two permit applications to submit to the Division of Water Resources and the US Army Corps of Engineers. The approved permit from the Division of Water Resources was received back within a week and then a devastating blow – the property owner unexpectedly passed away. The property owner had been more than accommodating and supportive of this project. He was not related to the family of the cemetery, but had the greatest respect for their wishes to access the cemetery on his property, and was more than willing to let me pursue this project to protect someone else’s family history. His



The cemetery before clean-up or construction.
– Photo by Harold Gaston, used with permission.



The cemetery after clean-up by the landowner, local volunteers, and Katie Miller, KRWA, pictured in front.
– Photo by Harold Gaston, used with permission.



Katie Miller, KRWA, discusses the project with Litke family members on May 31, 2012. – Photo by Harold Gaston, used with permission.

Project Wrap-up

On May 31, 2012, nearly 30 people gathered at the Ohm-Litke Family Cemetery for a tour of the completed project. Representatives from local, state, and federal agencies were present, as well as organizations and businesses that were partners for the project. More importantly, however, lifelong family connections were made.

Several Litke and Ohm family members were present, some of whom had never met each other. Katherine, a 36-year old descendant from the Litke side, drove from Wichita to pay respects to a part of her family she had never known. Complete strangers warmly embraced her, excited to meet someone sharing the same family lineage.

What I was thought would be a run-of-the-mill tour turned out to be so much more. Family photos were taken, phone numbers and emails were exchanged, and family bonds were made. Now the picture is clear to me. This project was much more than rock and dirt and permits and applications.... It was about connecting a beautiful family to the past, and perhaps more importantly, to the present.

– Katie Miller

Thank You To The Partners . . .

The following agencies and organizations are thanked for making this project a success:

- KDHE – Watershed Management Section**
- US EPA, Region 7, Non-point Source Pollution Program**
- Flint Hills RC&D**
- Kansas Rural Water Association**
- Natural Resources Conservation Service – Emporia Area Office Engineers**
- Sawyer Construction**
- Betty and Merry Barker**
- The Ohm and Litke family members**



Brian Severin, NRCs Engineer, surveys the creek channel for the stream bank stabilization project design.

wonderful wife and daughter pledged to see the project through and gave me permission to push forward, as quickly as possible.

The Corps of Engineers (COE) permit took a few more months to obtain. Over a year had passed since the original grant had been approved and the June 1, 2012 grant deadline was right around the corner. Not receiving the COE permit until mid-May was enough to elevate my blood pressure. Thankfully, approval to construct was given for May 14, and Sawyer Construction was on site with dirt flying on May 14. It took five days to haul 520 tons of rock from 22 miles away, which equated into 21 semi-loads costing nearly \$11,000. Sawyer Construction was finished with construction by May 21. Three plus years of paperwork patience came down to five days of actual work that will last for more than a lifetime.

New life

The transformation of the creek, the channel, and the bank were astounding. This once unsightly, sad cemetery had been given new life. The ample rock protection will keep high stream flow events from causing further erosion to the creek bank and cemetery. A few days of cutting trees, weed eating, and setting up grave markers by the landowners and friends revived the cemetery's pleasing aesthetics. At times it seemed like this project would never be finished and was taking forever. Then I would remind myself that some of these graves had been there for more than 130 years. The

three years I had to wait were not too bad, in the grand scheme of things. There were also many times I had to justify why I was spending so much time, effort, and funding on "this type" of project. Maybe Minnie was helping me work on my patience. Perhaps she was connecting me to fantastic people that I would have never otherwise met. Perchance Minnie wanted to remind me to do what I know is right in my heart, even if it didn't make sense at times.

This unique project was well worth the wait. Through the fantastic partnerships of agencies and local organizations, the Ohm-Litke Family Cemetery is proof that projects don't have to be large or beautiful to make a pretty great impact, environmentally and emotionally. I'm so pleased that I've been able to share this story with so many. Now I know that this project, and Minnie, will never be forgotten.

Katie Miller joined the KRWA staff in October 2009. She previously worked for Flint Hills Resource Conservation and Development as a Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy Project Coordinator. Katie accepted a position with the Environmental Finance Center at WSU in late June.



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