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## Survey shines light on Mormon Trail history

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Brad Klodt talks about some of the history that took place on what is now his family's land in Van Buren County. At right, within the fence, are two of the earliest gravesites along the Mormon Trail.

KEOSAUQUA — Most people have a certain image of archaeological work. It's a dig, perhaps with trowels

scraping off layers of dirt to find artifacts. Maybe tinged with images from films like “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

It’s not always like that.

The amateur archaeologists that fanned out across a field on Friday in Van Buren County weren’t there for a dig. It was much closer to a walk. Elizabeth Reetz, who works in the office of the state archaeologist, said people are often surprised at what they can learn just looking down.

“Archaeology is a destructive science,” she said. “But a lot can be learned without disturbing the ground. Archaeology is not all digging.”

Friday’s effort focused on the Mormon Trail, which brought settlers west beginning in the 1840s. Most of the people on the trail early on were part of the Mormon migration from Nauvoo, Ill., to what is now Salt Lake City. And that’s what the people with Reetz were focused on.

Moving long distances over roads that were not much more than dirt trails is slow going, even when things are good. When conditions are bad, it’s next to impossible. The Mormons headed west got stuck in Van Buren County for about two weeks while they waited for better weather to make travel a bit easier.

You don’t have an estimated 2,500 people camped out in an area for 13 days without leaving traces, some of which will be visible for a tremendous amount of time. The goal Friday was to find the borders of where the camp was in a field about 10 miles west of Keosauqua.

John Wenck of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources said the method is called a pedestrian survey.

“It educates the local population and at the same time facilitates understanding of the archaeology of the area,” he said. The survey had targeted a site closer to the Des Moines River, but couldn’t get permission to go onto the land from the owner.

That’s where Brad Klodt comes in. His family has owned a large amount of land in the area since the 1970s. It includes Richardson’s Point, where the group stopped for lunch. The point itself is heavily wooded. A wooden fence and a visitor’s sign explaining the site mark two graves from the time the Mormons waited in Van Buren County.

“My grandfather loved history, and he instilled that to me,” Klodt said. And he knows the history of the site.

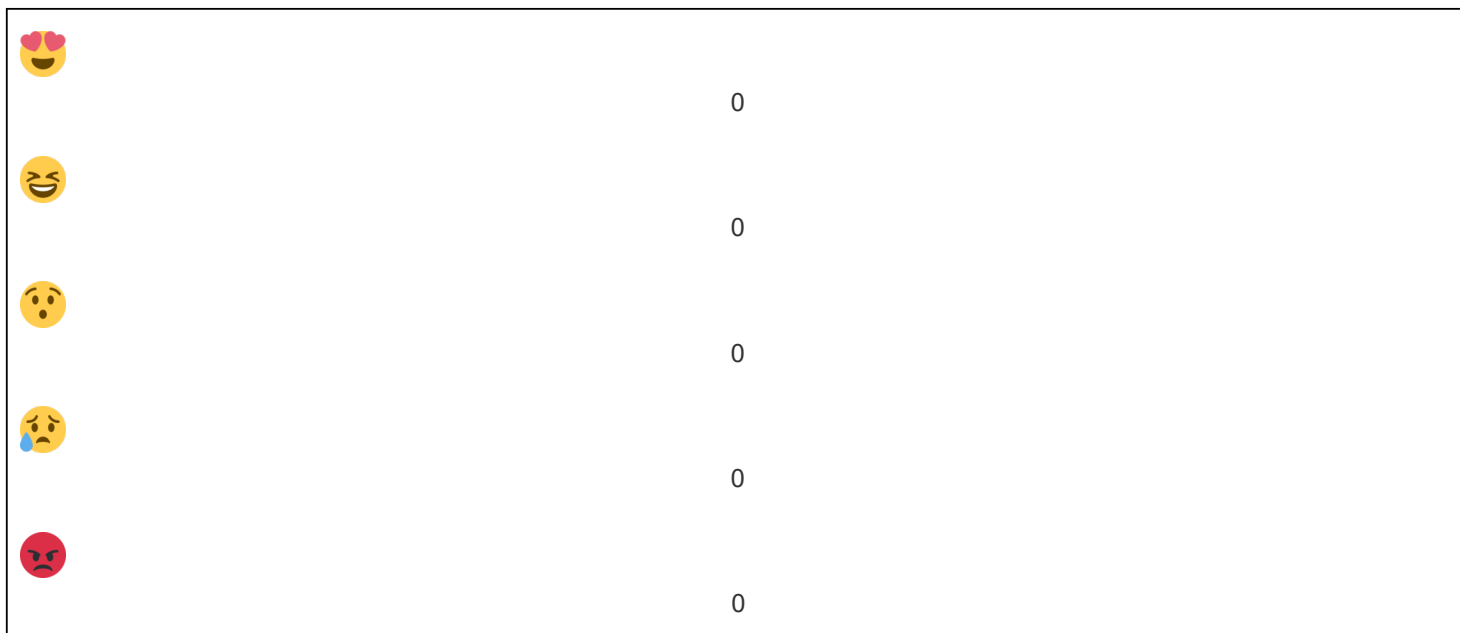
He's able to tell you who both the burials are, as well as how Mormon leader Brigham Young appreciated the oak trees on the landscape.

Historians know the Mormon camp stretched out over a large area, but the precise locations are harder to pin down. The goal Friday was to start determining specifics for that land. Wenck said finding the boundaries are important.

The field being searched still had corn stubble and the occasional cob that squirrels and deer had yet to discover. Klodt hoped the survey would find information to help clarify a piece of Southeast Iowa history that isn't as well known as it probably should be.

It's the kind of work Klodt's grandfather would have appreciated.

"Once history is gone, it's gone," he said.



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