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Damaged Gravestones Might End in Tangle of Ivy

by Sally James

Stumbling on a pile of gravestones recently, one Clark County resident was shocked to discover that the graves on which they stood might be unmarked.

But such can be the fate of graves, if damaged gravestones cannot be repaired and cemetery officials cannot contact relatives.

At St. James Acres cemetery, just east of Interstate 5 across Fourth Plain Boulevard from the Vancouver Veterans Hospital, about 13 abandoned gravestones lie in a tangle of ivy at the northeast side of the grounds.

They are the casualties of vandalism or weathering, says John Gunderson, owner of Hamilton-Mylan Funeral Home in Vancouver. For the past 16 years he has been supervisor of the cemetery, which is owned by the Seattle Archdiocese of the Catholic Church.

A gravestone damaged beyond repair will not be replaced unless a relative or someone volunteers to pay for a new one, Gunderson said.

One abandoned stone bears the name of the Rev. R.M. Kauten, identifying him as "Chancellor of the Diocese" who died in Seattle in January 1912.

Another stone bears the name of John Scanlon, who died the same year.

The cemetery "could not afford to replace" broken stones, Gunderson said. Vandals drive cars onto the cemetery lawns, and weather also weakens old stones.

"You can glue it only so many time, then you can't do it anymore," he said of repair efforts.

"Permanent care," a phrase used to advertise cemetery services, applies to the grounds, mowing the lawn and such, not to replacing gravestones, said Ed Romey. He is cemetery supervisor for Park Hill and Old City cemeteries.

Old City, on Mill Plain near Grand boulevard, has some monuments in storage that have been damaged or broken beyond repair.

"We clean things up and store the upright monument, in hopes that some member of the family will inquire. Then it's up to us and the family to decide what to do," Romey said.

The cemetery does not make a point of notifying relatives when there is damage, he said.

Washougal Cemetery suffered vandalism to more than a dozen of its gravestones recently. The city has asked its liability insurance carrier, Nystrom-Peery & Associates Inc. Of Camas, to investigate the possibility of paying out on claims from families for the cost of damage to the stones.

A spokesman for the city of Washougal said the idea was new, and the insurance company had not yet determined if damages would be paid.

Some newer cemeteries avoid problems with tall monuments by allowing only flat markers. Northwood Park Cemetery, near the Clark County Fairgrounds and Evergreen Memorial Gardens Cemetery in the Evergreen area are examples.

Spokesmen for both said they had no particular problems with vandalism. These two cemeteries, as well as Memory Memorial Park, 6906 NE 144th Street, also are endowment-care cemeteries. That mean a portion of the price of a plot is automatically placed in a trust fund to ensure money for maintenance and repair, said Gordon Messick, part owner of Memory.

Evergreen's cemetery manager, Willard J. Carlson, said vandalism was part of the cost of doing business. Each cemetery has to deal with eternity, and time's damage to gravestones, in its own way.