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Abandoned, overgrown cemetery defies efforts to find who's responsible

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The story of Duncan Heights Cemetery leads deep into tangled woods. It speaks of unsung soldiers and pine boxes. Its corporation is a ghost, and records are nowhere to be found.



Pieces of headstones lie strewn under pine trees in the Duncan Heights Cemetery in McCandless. The cemetery is so disordered that many graves are unmarked or poorly marked. (Bill Wade, Post-Gazette)

For four decades, a trickle of visitors to the six-acre marsh in McCandless has come upon the desecration, left appalled and agitated for something to be done. In this day of accountability, one makes assumptions: Someone owns it, someone is responsible and something should be done.

The story of Duncan Heights Cemetery would seem to confound this logic.

George and Mary Ann Bigelow, whose property sits above the cemetery, have spent 10 years playing detective. She has trekked often to Grant Street and spent stuffy hours poring over Allegheny County deeds, wills and property maps. While filling boxes with copies of yellowed letters, surveys and legal documents, she has fed her frustration and says, "Something about this stinks."

"The deeper you dig," says her husband, "the weirder it gets."

One Saturday afternoon, George Bigelow walks down to the woods, ducking wild branches and briars to get to a clearing. He taps the toe of his boot against a chunk of headstone, fuming softly. On it, a Marine private's first name, "Joseph," appears above the enlistment date of Jan. 11, 1918. Joseph's last name lies several feet away -- Paprzycki.

For years, Bigelow, an ex-Marine who served in Vietnam, has studied the names of the dead in these woods. His boots always sink into the muck.

Since 1961, when it was abandoned, and long before that, Duncan Heights has been a flood plain of innumerable, unloved remains -- possibly thousands. Some were veterans of the first and second world

wars. Most were indigent, residents of rooming houses in their final years.

It extends back from Duncan Avenue near Thompson Run Road, starting with a football field-sized lawn of neatly ordered stones. Korean War veteran Harry Bishoff of Hampton cleared that section in 1994 -- about 200 feet -- and has kept it mowed in years since. Beyond the lawn, the woods begin.

It is a mess of weeds, brambles, fast-growing trees, rusted grocery carts, discarded tires, cans, bottles and mushy footing. Two Pine Creek tributaries that meet here fail to carry water through the clogged and broken culverts. Throughout the woods, human-sized depressions show what happens when a pine box yields to six feet of earth. The land eventually splays up hillsides that lead to tidy, suburban homes.



This is one of many abandoned cemeteries in Allegheny County. Estimates range from 30 to more than 100.

Many are old churchyards. Some are on old family farms. Road crews move old burial sites for highways.

"This is a natural progression for older cemeteries," says Tom Roberts, president of Allegheny Cemetery, a nonprofit that is home to some of Pittsburgh's most illustrious dead. A hefty fund ensures future maintenance of all the graves there. Roberts has recently advised McCandless on efforts to re-dignify Duncan Heights.

Roberts' idea is a common memorial bearing a list of names: "Even if we couldn't identify all the burial sites of all the veterans, we do have written material telling us who is there."

The town of McCandless says this is the only cost-effective solution to memorializing the war dead.

Cemeteries were not regulated until the '30s, he says, and perpetual care wasn't mandated until the early '60s. Without that assurance, what did people expect? "If I asked you where your great-grandmother was buried, could you tell me?" he asks. "Most people can't."

Today, a lowland would never be permitted as a cemetery, he says, "but back then, it was a convenience, a match between the user and the provider. It had no economic value, and its users [the buried] had no money."

A forlorn cemetery may be no scandal, but the indignities to be found in the heavy brush strike many as such: "The veterans' graves were one of my motivations for getting involved," says Roberts.

In the early '60s, veterans groups urged veterans agencies to give financial help, to elevate the status of this potter's field for the sake of its soldiers. In letters, also sent to county officials, W. Raymond Jones, chairman of a cemetery committee for the American Legion, described the conditions with words like "disrespect" and "disgrace."

Mike Murphy, the vice commander of the American Legion for Western Pennsylvania, says it's not clear whether any organizations answered Jones' call. In recent years, veterans groups have posted U.S. flags along the neat rows of headstones in the front section.

But the stones lie too close together to signify burial sites. Reports at the county Department of Veterans Affairs point out these space discrepancies, as well as that five to 10 stones mark the wrong graves.

By having backup record keepers in the military, the veteran dead fared better at Duncan Heights than civilians.

Hannah Stevens, of the North Side, was 9 when her father, Albert, died in 1961. He had been a grave digger for Sirlin & Leonard Funeral Home, which buried indigents at Duncan Heights.

"My mother was raising seven of us on Social Security, and she didn't have money for a headstone" says Stevens. "It wasn't until the past 10 years that my sister and I tried to locate him."

In the late '80s, Stevens' mother passed the cemetery with her daughter. By then, houses rimmed the hillsides above the cemetery.

"Look!," Stevens recalls her mother saying. "There's houses where your father was buried."

Lying aslant, under weeds and illogically, some stones are inscribed as minimally as the lives they represent were lived. "H" says one, with two holes beside it to indicate disappeared letters. One is a concrete block that reads, simply, "Hendershot." One grave among the few of women reads, "Rosie Ray, 1862-1937: She was faithful."

The same cannot be said of the planners of Duncan Heights Cemetery. Its articles of incorporation in 1931 promised a perpetual care fund of at least 10 percent of proceeds from the sale of lots. There is no proof the fund was established. No bank was named. The state Bureau of Corporations records do not show proof of a fund. Robert A. Wilson, attorney for the town of McCandless, says it's likely a fund never grew; most people in this cemetery could not afford much care in life.

Elderly residents, however, recall the cemetery was well maintained into the '50s.

"A young caretaker had the place looking like your front lawn," says Alice Sachs, who has lived nearby with her husband, Lou, for 46 years. "The water was channeled, though it did flood occasionally." She recalls that families picnicked and children played badminton.

Someone paid for the maintenance Sachs remembers. But if there was a fund, says Wilson, it cannot be traced.



The most glaring question of all is, Who owns Duncan Heights?

Myer Sparks, a Penn Hills man, bought the land for \$12,000 and incorporated it as a cemetery in 1931. He was the majority shareholder. When he died in 1953, he made no mention of the cemetery on the 5-inch-by-5-inch index card on which he hand-wrote his will. His properties reverted to his widow, Rose Sparks.

None of the handful of minority shareholders specified the cemetery as an inheritance, either. Two people remain alive who can be connected to the cemetery corporation.

In 1959, Robert Schilling and his wife Evelyn, as president and secretary, respectively, began operating a different cemetery: The Duncan Heights Cemetery Corp. had bought land in McKees Rocks that included the Hollywood Cemetery and a home where the Schillings lived and ran the office as caretakers. This was when Duncan Heights began going to seed.

The Schillings are both infirm today and cannot be reached. But Robert Schilling last year told Wilson he had nothing to do with Duncan Heights and has no idea how his name ended up on the documents.

William Sirlin of the defunct North Side mortuary Sirlin and Leonard operated Duncan Heights in the early '60s, although he was not a shareholder, according to McCandless' attorney. When he died in 1972, he left no heirs and mandated that his executors "properly bury my body in a grave and a cemetery of their choice."

His involvement was the last known at Duncan Heights. Cemetery records are nowhere to be found.

The town of McCandless went the legal route to find a responsible party. It placed public notices, and Wilson queried possible beneficiaries. None claimed to know anything about Duncan Heights.

The benefactors may have been kind in their vagueness: Imagine inheriting a piece of derelict swampland on which backhoes would dig up bones. By 1997, the land was valued at zero for inheritance purposes but had been tax delinquent for 20 years, \$13,604 in arrears. The lien now belongs to GLS Capital Services, a firm that buys liens in quantity, like dollar boxes at the flea market, in hopes of finding some treasures among the junk.

So, whose responsibility is this cemetery?

The town for several years has sought the help of state, county and federal officials, legislators, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and neighbors.

The neighborhood response has been sporadic, and the corps of engineers presented a \$40,000 to \$80,000 estimate on the cost of cleanup.

The manager of McCandless, Toby Cordek, says the town wants to be involved in repairs and restoration, but deserves help with the burden. The county morgue buried indigent people in Duncan Heights, and both jurisdictions received property taxes through 1977.

But the county does not take over delinquent properties, says Tom Donatelli, director of the county's public works department. Just as municipal officials are expected to enforce local building and zoning codes, they also are responsible for the failures of their predecessors.

Wilson says state law does place the burden on municipalities where abandoned cemeteries are located, but adds, "I'm telling you, this is going to become more of a problem in the future as you lose population and cemeteries are not producing revenue but have to be maintained. That can be a heavy load to bear."

After a series of public notices that went unanswered, town officials felt satisfied they had legal access to the property.

A few neighbors had already taken on the Sisyphean battle of clearing brush. Their efforts show, in places. Clearing the stream presents another dilemma. A hillside that has supported a house since the '70s sits on top of a 30-inch pipe. If the streams were cleared and fortified and all the culverts repaired, the flow of water may overwhelm the pipe: "We're afraid it would wash out the hillside," says Bruce Betty, land-use administrator.

The town is now talking with veterans' agencies to get them involved in a volunteer restoration effort. But in the past four decades, perhaps the most valor in the line of duty was shown by a Cub Scout troop.

In 1977, Shaler homemaker Toni Gizzi put out a call to her 45-boy Cub Scout troop to adopt the cemetery for Memorial Day. The Saturday before, nearly every boy turned out with his parents and siblings. Twenty dads with mowers, weed cutters and axes cleared paths to the graves. The effort stopped short of the daunting mess of woods that lie beyond the lawn.


Gizzi collected flags from the VFW and asked each of her Scouts to adopt a soldier and claim his grave for care.

"One of the kids practiced and practiced so he could play taps," says Gizzi. "We had a ceremony there that day."

As for Mary Ann Bigelow, emotionally vested through 10 years of research and pleas, she continues to dig for answers but is clearly

frustrated. "I said to the township, 'You had an owner 30 years ago. Why didn't you do something then?'

"It's disgusting when you leave graves like that. I don't know who these people were, but I know they don't deserve this."

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