

# A resting place on Duncan Avenue is nearly forgotten

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from the county morgue, said Mrs. Bigelow. They were alcoholics, or died out on the street, with no family of any means to pay for a decent burial. Many lived in halfway houses in Pittsburgh, she said. The cemetery has several mass graves marked only with a number.

"They were injured in the war, and I don't think any of them were the same ever again," she said. "If this is the way you treat people who couldn't take care of themselves after they've given the best of themselves, then you're just taking a big eraser and saying these people never existed."

The last major push to restore Duncan Heights Cemetery came several years ago, said Mrs. Bigelow. They had promises or grant money, and ideas of erecting a common memorial to the veterans. But in the end, the coalition made up of neighbors, state and local politicians, lawyers, cemetery experts and representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers was stymied by a single, intransigent fact: The Duncan Heights Cemetery is private property, but owned by no one.

"Basically, nothing's been done," said Mrs. Bigelow. "It's probably worse now than it ever was."

Meyer Sparks, of Penn Hills, bought the low-lying six acres for \$12,000 and incorporated it as a cemetery in 1931. There was no mention of the cemetery in Mr. Sparks' handwritten will, but all properties were passed along to his widow in 1953. The cemetery was abandoned in 1961.

Attempts years ago to reach the few remaining minority shareholders of the cemetery corporation were unsuccessful. Cemetery

## Memorial Day moment of silence fails to catch on

By Martha Mendoza  
The Associated Press

A tiny White House commission has spent five years and \$1.5 million trying to bring a new American tradition to Memorial Day's barbecues, parades and sales: A moment of remembrance, a sigh, perhaps a prayer. Just a 30-second pause.

The results, so far, are mixed. The White House Commission on the National Moment of Remembrance does have a theme song donated by Charles Strouse, creator of the musical "Annie." There's a logo, pens and coasters, prewritten news articles, television spots and a commission Website, <http://www.remember.gov>.

There have been events, like a sand-sculpture display inspired by D-Day. And a few towns and organizations have paused silently at 3 p.m. on Memorial Day.

In general, though, the commission's executive director, Carmella LaSpada, has been frustrated by the lack of interest. "We're a little disappointed," she said.

"What has been the problem is that we haven't gotten the support that we would like to have from the media."

The act was signed into law by former President Bill Clinton and launched under President Bush.

Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., a longtime friend of Ms. LaSpada's who sponsored the legislation, said he's still committed to his mission, but laughs when he thinks about the logistics of pulling it off.

"You try and quiet down a country of 300 million," he said. "We're a busy people in a busy nation in a busy world. I think it is entirely appropriate to designate a special time to slow down and stop and think for a moment about the people who sacrificed to make this a great country."

Ms. LaSpada has been repeatedly criticized in annual federal financial audits for blurring the lines between her tiny federal agency and No Greater Love, a nonprofit agency that Ms. LaSpada founded 30 years ago, which operates right next door and has a similar mission.

In July 2005, an auditor with the Gov-

ernment Accounting Office, the investigatory arm of Congress, wrote that "the distinction between the two organizations could be misperceived." A new financial audit is under way, a GAO spokesman said.

Ms. LaSpada said she's learning to separate the two. "Personally, I'd rather play down No Greater Love because it looks like I'm still wearing two hats," she said. "I'm no longer affiliated with any No Greater Love. When you are director of an independent government agency, you can't be affiliated with any other group."

As executive director of the commission and White House liaison, Ms. LaSpada receives about \$185,000 in salary and benefits, according to federal reports.

Ms. LaSpada said that in addition to a lack of cooperation from the media, she's been stymied because her commission was supposed to be loaned six employees — one each from the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Veterans Affairs and Department of Education. But so far, she's only had one Navy staffer assigned on a six-month basis.

records cannot be found. There is no evidence of a perpetual-care fund pledged in the cemetery's articles of incorporation. And public notices sent out by McCandless officials were not answered. A firm currently holds thousands of dollars in liens on the property.

At one time, Allegheny County Memorial Park offered to take over the property, said Tom Roberts, president of Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville, who was called in several years ago to advise on the Duncan Heights situation. But no owners could be found to cede ownership, he said.

Another option that was tossed around involved going to court

and having the property declared abandoned, then having McCandless step in and take it over. The town was reluctant to take on the responsibility and liabilities of the cemetery.

"That's pretty much the bottom line," said Mr. Roberts. "The municipality was involved, there was a lot of good will there, but they could not determine ownership."

Town officials could not be reached for comment.

Last week, Mrs. Bigelow and her husband, George, a former Marine and Vietnam veteran, walked through the cemetery for the first time in a few years,

searching out familiar names on headstones, hopping streams and dodging thorny branches. Mr. Bigelow picked up dirty, tattered pieces of American flags that littered the ground and pledged to dispose of them correctly, by burning them.

According to Mrs. Bigelow's research, some of the veterans buried at Duncan Heights Cemetery played a role in liberating a German concentration camp.

"They did their jobs, and they did them well, and it's just not right," said Mrs. Bigelow.

The recent opening of the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies in Cecil might have given

the Bigelows some hope that the veterans of Duncan Heights Cemetery might be reintegrated in the national veterans cemetery.

There is no cost attached to opening or closing a burial plot at the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies, said director Gerald Vitela, and no cost for the installation or inscription of a monument, or for perpetual care.

The problem comes with disinterring the dead. Next of kin must be found. If there is no evidence of honorable discharge, research must be done to support that claim, said Mr. Vitela. The next of kin must also be able to pay a funeral home of their choice for

the disinterment.

"Disinterring people and moving them, you just don't do that lightly," Mr. Roberts agreed. "People have a degree of ownership, even in a Potter's Field type of situation."

Ronald Conley, director of Allegheny County Veterans Services, said the only involvement his department has with cemeteries is the purchasing of flags for gravesite distribution by veterans service organizations on Memorial Day. He was not aware of the problems at Duncan Heights, but promised to look into the matter.

Representatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs referred questions about burial matters to the National Cemetery Association, a division of the VA.

The National Cemetery Association administers the State Cemetery Grants Program, which helps states provide grave sites for veterans in areas where the national cemeteries "cannot fully satisfy their burial needs." The catch is, grants to establish, expand or improve cemeteries can only be given to states — not private organizations, counties, municipalities or any other government agency.

Bob Mumhall, a Vietnam veteran and commander of the American Legion's North Hills district, plans to check out the site with Mr. Bigelow and members of Westford's Post #1 and Ross' Post #0 this week. He has pledged to try to "make a difference" at Duncan Heights Cemetery.

"I am reasonably sure that resources are available to attack the problem," he wrote in an e-mail.

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