

Pillaged Parish Cemetery: 'We'd N ... 5 Watchmen

By Jeff Valentine

Howard Hoover still winces when he thinks about it. **MAR 20 1978**

The 70-year-old golfer was just approaching the ninth tee at Clifton Park golf course when he saw them. There, along the edge of the tiny, hilly cemetery, were the bodies of two men and a baby.

"They've been pulling bodies out of that graveyard for the last 30 years," he said. "You'd be moving along on your golf cart and you have to stop to put a body back into a casket. It's very upsetting."

Even so, the remains of the baby sickened him. **Eve Sun**

"She couldn't have been in there very long. She had a little mold on her face, but that's all. She had on white socks with a tag that said '100% Cotton,'" he recalled.

For years, vandals have wreaked havoc with the 5 1/2-acre cemetery that lies somewhat inconspicuously in the middle of the Clifton Park golf course.

The tract, purchased in 1853 by St. Vincent dePaul Catholic Church from John Hopkins himself, has been in its final death throes for years.

Even 20 years ago, vandals routinely tipped over gravestones and harassed the old caretaker who lived in a shack at the edge of the property. **Eve Sun**

Ten years ago, the pranks began to take a far more macabre twist when hundreds of stones were overturned and several ancient mausoleums were ransacked. **MAR 20 1978**

Several long-dead corpses yanked from the concrete crypts were set afire in one incident, leading St. Vincent's parishioners to petition Lawrence Cardinal Shehan to sell the cemetery and transfer the graves to a more dignified setting.

But extradition proceedings needed to initiate a cemetery move are long and complicated. And, inevitably, very expensive. **MAR 20 1978**

Ten years later, little has changed at the cemetery. **Eve Sun**

Few stones remain standing upright. The mausoleums, littered with beer cans, pornographic magazines and cigarette butts, are morbid "clubhouses" for youthful visitors to the cemetery.

Beside one open crypt, emblazoned with assorted graffiti, lies a metallic coffin, its lid askew and its once fine lining crumbled to dust. Nearby is fresh-turned earth, where the bodily remains from the casket were reinterred.

Further up the hill, beside an expensively carved monument, there is a hole dug but finally abandoned, apparently by some aspiring graverobber.

Many of the stones memorialize Italians, most of them buried in the years before the turn of the century. Names such as Bonanno, DiStefano, Costeri and Domenico predominate.

Those markers are intermixed with names of Spanish, Portuguese and Irish heritage. One stone is that of a soldier killed in action in the Civil War.

Many graves have long been obliterated by underbrush. A pile of granite stones is mute testimony to the mindless destructiveness of vandals. **Eve Sun**

The Rev. Richard T. Lawrence, priest at St. Vincent's since 1973, said his church at 120 Front street is too poor to maintain the cemetery, much less pay to transfer the 2,000 graves there to a more suitable burial ground. **MAR 20 1978**

It's been nearly 10 years since the church finally gave up trying to pay a part-time caretaker to watch over the grounds. And, Father Lawrence said, "To really police it, we'd need at least five watchmen."

Although the General Assembly authorized a transfer of the cemetery some years ago, the church lacks the \$100,000 to \$125,000 Father Lawrence says is needed to complete a transfer.

The archdiocese, although officially "concerned," has no immediate plans to help pay to move the cemetery.

Monsignor Porter J. White, at the Catholic Center downtown, conceded that the cemetery "has suffered as much, if not more, than most cemeteries in the city with vandalism. We try to do the best with what's available."

He referred all other inquiries to John C. Evilius, lawyer for the archdiocese, who emphasized that, "It is not an archdiocesan cemetery, it's a parish cemetery. There's a definite in-house distinction."

But does the archdiocese feel any moral obligation for the cemetery's state?

"The archbishop would be concerned about the problems by virtue of his office, but it is a local parish problem," Mr. Evilius said. Besides moral support, the archdiocese has promised space at its Woodlawn Cemetery if someone else pays for the move. **MAR 20 1978**

Father Lawrence said the church offered to sell the property to the city Parks Department several years ago but was offered only \$15,000 for the tract—less than a 10th of the money needed to transfer the graves. **Eve Sun**

"We'd be willing to sell the land to the city for \$1 if they will agree to move the bodies in a reverent manner. They aren't interested," he said.

Linda Bennett, executive secretary to Parks Director Douglas S. Tawney, said the city appraised the property to be worth \$15,000 to \$20,000 in 1971. The church wanted \$300,000, she said.

"We always wanted it, if we can get it cheap," she said. "We would like to get it out of there, but I don't see why we should pay to move the bodies."

However, city real estate officer Jer-

ome Goldfein said, "That's the first I heard of it. They sure didn't go through us." **MAR 20 1978**

Buying and moving a cemetery is "a very, very difficult and expensive thing to do," he said. "It takes a good bit of time and a lot of money." **Eve Sun**

The process begins with a petition filed with the Circuit Court. Notice of the proposed transfer as well as the names of all of the bodies buried in the cemetery must be published several times in local newspapers before the final move can be made.

Perhaps the archdiocese's reluctance to become involved in the situation at Clifton Park stems from its experience in moving old Holy Cross Cemetery at North avenue and Wolfe street nine years ago.

That move to Woodlawn Cemetery, to make way for a new elementary school, cost \$250,000.

Meanwhile, a fence has been erected along Rose street, in a generally unsuccessful attempt to make it difficult for students at nearby Lake Clifton Senior High School to cut across the golf course and past the cemetery on their way to Harford road.

For his part, Lake Clifton Principal John Mohamed said he isn't willing to concede that his students might be responsible for any of the damage at the cemetery.

"I don't know the extent of the problems there," he said, although he added, "Last year, I had to go over there to break up some pot parties." **Eve Sun**

A sudden flourish of bad publicity occasionally brings at least temporary results: Summer Youth Corps workers are brought in to hack away some of the weeds and brush; the police promise renewed surveillance; the city Health Department exterminates vermin. **MAR 20 1978**

This time, however, Father Lawrence may have an ace up his sleeve.

The cemetery, although landlocked in Clifton Park, has a 12 1/4-foot easement through the golf course. It also is zoned for apartments.

The priest has been authorized by his parish council to renew efforts to sell the tract to a private developer, possibly for a small apartment house. That possibility may be enough to spur the city to take another look at the property.

But, if that effort fails, the "golf course cemetery" in Clifton Park seems destined to continue its slow, inevitable decline.