

History buried under weeds

By LYNNE MARSH
The Herald-Dispatch

HUNTINGTON - A rusty padlock on a rickety gate is the only indication that something private lies beyond the view of passersby.

Bethel Cemetery rests on a hill about 150 yards south of where Bethel Road meets Norway Avenue. Heavy underbrush, vines and trees shield the 10-acre lot. They also hide a slice of Cabell County's black history.

The legacy of Bethel Cemetery, which dates back to the Civil War era, now lies in the thorns and overgrowth that deter saddened family members from finding loved ones' graves. Although some white people are buried at Bethel, for a time it was the only place where blacks were buried in the city.

"It's like throwing a person away and forgetting about them," said Joyce White of Cleveland, whose 8-month-old baby, John Alfred White, was buried in the cemetery in 1967.

She wants to have her son's grave cleared off and marked with a tombstone, but she hasn't been able to locate it.

"It's so painful," White said. "So many years have gone by and I haven't been able to visit it even to put one flower on the grave."

Spearheading a communitywide effort to get the cemetery cleaned up for Memorial Day, Delegate Arley Johnson, D-Cabell, agrees the once well-manicured site is deplorable. Crumbling tombstones barely peep over weeds other stones have slipped over the hillside. Some inscriptions have been worn away by weather.

"It's like those people are crying out for help," he said. "I'd like to see all of the graves decorated for Memorial Day."

Johnson is appealing to the state and community church leaders to help in a project to clear the brush and vines.

Scattered within the cemetery's boundaries are the final resting places for several veterans of World War I black units. Some tombstones are believed to mark the graves of Civil War veterans, but are impossible to read because of vandalism and decay.

The property has gone unnoticed for decades by all but a few. A squabble over the ownership has prevented even the most minimal upkeep, even though the cemetery holds historical significance and special memories for many members of the city's black community.

Theresa White of Huntington said when her mother died in the 1940s, all blacks were buried in Bethel Cemetery. That was just the way things were, she said. The cemetery's current condition breaks her heart.

"It's awful to know she's out there in the woods and I can't do anything about it," White said. "It makes me feel terrible that I can't go find her."

Blacks and whites couldn't be buried in the same cemetery in the days of segregation and those shortly following, said Arthur Williams, retired president of Williams Mortuary. His father opened the mortuary in 1933 to serve the black community, about a decade after Charles and Mary McClain started their family business.

The McClain Mortuary at 1644 9th Ave. was so successful they soon expanded their services to include burials. The site they purchased in 1935 was well-suited for its purpose. The property that was to become Bethel Cemetery was already a black cemetery with more than 500 graves, though most were unmarked because the people buried there had been poor.

The McClain business prospered through the 1920s, '30s and '40s until Mary McClain died in 1959. Her death led quickly to the downfall of the McClain business.

After a family struggle to gain control over the mortuary and cemetery, memories of families' deceased loved ones were lost, along with burial records for the cemetery itself. While tombstones indicate where some daughters, sons, mothers and fathers lie, others in unmarked graves seem to simply be forgotten.

While McClain family members contested their inheritance by filing lawsuits against one another, conditions at Bethel Cemetery deteriorated.

The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals finally intervened in 1971. It ordered the family to sell the estate, including the cemetery.

But it was never sold. It had already fallen into disrepair.

McClain family members contacted for this story declined to comment. Picking up the pieces and putting them where they belong is a task Johnson said he'll gladly see through.

"I'd like to buy the cemetery, find out where people are buried and make it active again," said Johnson, who recently bought Williams Funeral Home.

Herald-Dispatch, The (Huntington, WV)

Date: May 16, 1999

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